

THE VISIBLE

by WILLIAM P. MCGIVERN

OSCAR DOOLITTLE cleared his throat with a nervous, tittering cough as he stepped up to the cosmetic counter of Nat's Nifty Drug Store.

"I want fifty pounds of vanishing cream," he said to the professionally pleasant-looking young man, who regarded him from behind the gleaming array of bottles. "I hope you've got

that much," he added anxiously, "because it's very important that I have it today."

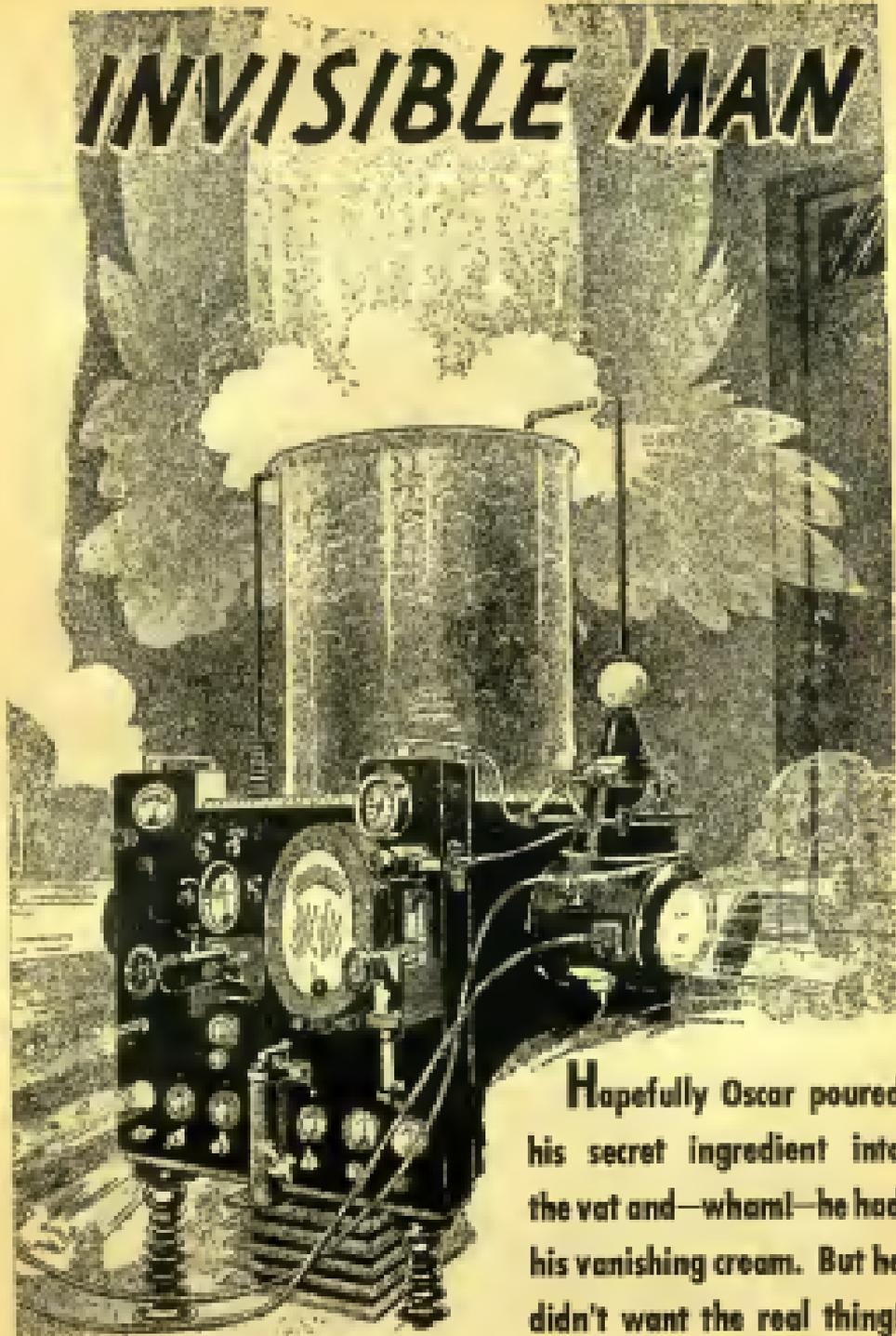
"Fifty pounds?" the clerk repeated incredulously. "Why, that—"

He broke off suddenly and peered closely at Oscar. He saw a wippy, slight individual, dressed in a limp brown suit that hung tiredly over bony shoulders. And large brown eyes gleam-



There came a tremendous roar and Oscar Doolittle was holed from his feet

INVISIBLE MAN



Hopefully Oscar poured his secret ingredient into the vat and—wham!—he had his vanishing cream. But he didn't want the real thing!

ing with hopeful excitement.

The young clerk's puzzled stare gradually changed to one of sympathetic understanding.

"Now, now," he said soothingly, "you just wait right here and I'll go and see about your—er—fifty pounds of vanishing cream. I'll be back in a jiffy and maybe you'd better fan yourself with your hat while I'm gone. It might help a little."

"Thank you," Oscar said, moved by this friendly solicitude. "Thanks a lot, but I'm really quite comfortable."

The clerk backed away from Oscar, smiling gently.

"Don't go away," he said coaxingly, turned and scurried off down the aisle.

At the end of the aisle he jerked open a door and stumbled breathlessly into a small office where a fat, red-faced man sat smoking a thin cigar.

"Quick, Mr. Natz," he hissed. "Call the police! There's a madman outside. He says he wants to buy fifty pounds of vanishing cream. He may be dangerous."

Mr. Natz digested this information in silence and then squinted upward through the wreaths of smoke at his trembling employee.

"Fifty pounds," he repeated thoughtfully. "Did he offer to pay for it?"

"Why, gosh," his clerk stammered, "I didn't think to ask him."

"Well," said Mr. Natz gloomily, "if he offers to pay for it, he probably is crazy. But if we don't take his money, we're crazy. I'll go out and talk to him."

With this he hoisted himself from his chair and waddled out of the office, followed by his fluttering clerk.

Mr. Natz approached Oscar from the side, like a man closing in on a skittish horse. Emboldened by Oscar's harmless appearance he stepped closer and asked:

"Are you the gentleman who wanted the vanishing cream?"

Oscar turned at the sound of the voice, blinking rapidly.

"Yes. Yes, indeed," he said, "I want fifty pounds of it." He looked from Mr. Natz to the bulging-eyed clerk anxiously. "Why," he said weakly, "is there something wrong about that?"

"Not if you've got the money to pay for it," Natz said hopefully.

"Oh, is that all?" Oscar's sigh was relieved. "Certainly I have the money. I've been saving it for weeks."

Natz shrugged resignedly. "Okay," he said. "You got the money, we got the cream."

"Oh, that's fine," Oscar beamed. "Will you wrap it up for me right away? You see, I have to take it home before I go to work and I don't want to be late. I haven't been late in eleven years," he finished proudly.

"All right, buddy," Natz said. "Far be it from us to interfere with a record like that. Willie," he barked at the clerk, "get a hamper from the basement and bring up the freight scales."

Willie nodded vaguely. With a final unconvinced look at Oscar, he hurried off. Within several minutes he was back, pushing a cumbersome scale on rollers and dragging behind him a spacious wicker basket.

He shoved the scale toward the cosmetic counter and placed the basket on its flat, wide weighing plate. Then, with the assistance of Mr. Natz, he began piling the heavy jars of white vanishing cream into the basket. Jar after jar was loaded into the basket, and Oscar hummed happily as it creaked protestingly under their weight.

"That just about does it," Mr. Natz said finally. He got down on his knees and peered at the indicator. "Yep, Fifty pounds, six ounces. We'll throw in the ounces for good measure."

"Gosh, thanks!" Oscar said gratefully. His large brown eyes beamed delightedly as Mr. Natz got out a pad of scratch paper and a stubby pencil and began figuring up the cost of the vanishing cream.

IT was a sizable amount but Oscar counted out the money cheerfully.

"Now, how are you goin' to get it home?" Natz asked.

"Well, I don't live far," Oscar answered, "and if you'll help me get it on my shoulder I think I can manage."

"Anything you say, friend," Natz said. Stooping, he grasped a handle of the basket and with Willie's help, he hoisted it into the air.

"All right," he pointed, "get under it."

Oscar took a deep breath and placed a narrow shoulder under the edge of the basket. He reached up and grasped the rim with determined fingers.

"Let go," he cried, "I've got it!"

Oscar and Willie released their grip, and the weight of the basket dug suddenly and painfully into Oscar's inadequately padded shoulders.

His knees buckled, but with a supreme effort he managed to right himself and totter toward the revolving door, the basket swaying precariously with every step.

He squeezed into the revolving door and, with a contortion that defied all existing laws of gravity and balance, he wriggled through the spinning portal and staggered onto the sidewalk.

Natz mopped his perspiring brow as Oscar disappeared around the corner of the building.

"It takes all kinds," he muttered. "It takes all kinds to make a world."

BUT in spite of laboring breath and the increasing weight of the bulky basket, Oscar Doolittle stumbled along,

his soul singing with elation. He was blissfully unmindful of the curious and mirthful stares of the pedestrians he encountered.

"Let 'em laugh," he told himself optimistically. "When I introduce my new, revolutionary face cream they won't laugh—no, sir!"

Even now he could envision with ecstatic anticipation the huge headlines that would blazon his discovery to a grateful world.

DOOLITTLE DISCOVERS DANDY DREAM CREAM!

It was going to be wonderful. And when the money began to pour in, he and Ann could get married right away. That was the most wonderful thing of all.

When Oscar finally staggered into his small bedroom, he was dizzy with exhaustion. He set his burden down on the floor and sank into a chair. But not for long. There was work to be done.

He stood up and crossed over to a strange, complicated contraption that took up almost half the space in the room.

It was a box-like affair, sprinkled with rheostats and dials and wires leading from it to a storage battery in the corner of the room. The top of the box was grilled like an electric stove and on top of this, there stood a huge glass hopper, in which a strange dark-colored liquid bubbled noisily. Vapors and gases rose from the vat, clouding the room with a murky haze.

Oscar peered at the dials and inspected the bubbling liquid.

"'Bout ready," he muttered. "No time to lose."

Turning from the odd equipment, he picked up a jar of the vanishing cream and unscrewed the metal cap. Then with feverish haste he seized a knife

and began digging the pasty cream from the jar, allowing the lumpy wads to fall splashing into the boiling liquid.

In fifteen minutes the room was littered with empty jars, and the sticky compound in the hopper had risen to a bubbling white mess that threatened to overflow onto the floor.

"Maybe I got too much," Oscar thought. But no, he was down to the last bottle of cream and there was still an inch of room left in the vat.

"Good thing," Oscar mumbled. "I've still got to put my special formula in."

WITH trembling fingers he picked up a black bottle from a work bench next to the box-like mechanism. It was filled with an oily black fluid, and as Oscar removed the cork his heart hammered with pride. It was his own formula and it was wonderful. Or, he amended, it would be wonderful.

The gloey compound was frothing and seething as he tilted the black bottle and prepared to dump its contents into the vat. He knew suddenly how Franklin must have felt when he discovered electricity: a giddy sense of exhilaration and a throbbing pulse that sent the blood racing through his veins.

It was great, and with a smile on his lips Oscar closed his eyes and emptied his special formula into the bubbling cauldron.

The results were a thousand times more surprising than Oscar, in his nimblest flight of imagination, could have conceived.

A geyser of flame shot upward from the vat and the next instant, the floor trembled with the force of a mighty explosion. Oscar was hurled to the floor and before he could move again, a sticky suffocating blanket seemed to descend upon him.

Thrashing wildly, he beat at the cloying folds that draped about him and

finally managed to struggle to his feet. He forced his eyes open, and a despairing moan broke from his lips at the sight that met his stricken gaze.

His machine was utterly demolished. Parts of it were strewn from one end of the room to the other, and Oscar himself was covered from head to foot with the sticky paste that had bubbled in the bowels of the vat.

"Oh," he groaned, "something must have gone wrong."

And a moment later—"What are you up to in there, Oscar Doodittle?"

The shrill voice sounded from the hallway. Oscar trembled in panic and guilt as he recognized it. His landlady!

"It's nothing, Mrs. Spears," he quavered in terror. "I just blew a fuse. A big fuse."

"Fuse, nothing," Mrs. Spears screamed, "I'm coming in there!"

The words were slightly unnecessary, for by the time they had stopped echoing Mrs. Spears was standing in the middle of the room.

"Oh," she shrieked as her horrified gaze encountered Oscar's bespattered figure, "what have you been up to?"

"It was my invention—" Oscar began.

But Mrs. Spears' howl of anguish cut him off.

"Inventing again! This is the last straw. I've warned you before but this time I'm through. Out you go! Pack your duds and clear out of here."

She paused to stare wildly about the wreckage of the room.

"And remember," she snapped, "you don't get your trunk until this mess has been paid for."

With a final withering look at Oscar's paste-daubed figure, she marched stiffly from the room, hanging the door behind her.

The slam of the door seemed to Oscar to symbolize somehow the crash of his

own hopes and dreams. He slumped into a chair and stared moodily at the strewn remains of his machine. From his scornful eyes two large tears welled, trickled down the pasty substance that caked his cheeks, to fall with a tiny splash to the floor.

Finally he stood up wearily. Disappointments or no, he couldn't be late for work.

CHAPTER II

Oscar's Bad Day

FORTY-FIVE minutes later, disillusioned and disconsolate, Oscar Doolittle trudged through the portals of the Midland State Bank. Even the sight of Ann, hurrying to meet him, did not revive his spirits.

"I've got some bad news for you," he said, when she stood in front of him. "My invention is a flop. I guess what everybody has been saying about me is true. I'm a failure, a washout."

If Oscar was expecting sympathy and encouragement he received a rude shock. Although he might have been prepared for it, because of late Ann had been acting anything but the rôle of a starry-eyed bride-to-be.

Ann Meade was a cuddly, shapely blonde, but the words that snapped from her now seemed very much out of place with her sugary appearance.

"If that's what people are saying," she blazed, "they're absolutely right!" You're nothing but a spineless, weak-kneed jellyfish, Oscar Doolittle! A timid, helpless doormat that other men wipe their feet on. I must have been out of my mind when I accepted your ring, but thank goodness I'm sane now! Here!"

Oscar Doolittle listened dazedly to this unflattering summary of his negative virtues, and then his incredulous

eyes focused on the modest diamond ring that was thrust under his nose.

"But darling," he bleated hoarsely, "you can't do this to me! We've been engaged for five years, we've worked together here at the bank. What will Mother say?"

Ann Meade's neat little mouth looked like a steam-rollered roachud.

"To be blunt about it," she said icily, "I don't give a darn what your mother says. Let's call our engagement a case of mistaken identity. I thought you were a man—and what a mistake that turned out to be! If you were a man—a man like that handsome Lester Mercer, now—you'd realize that no woman can love a man she doesn't respect."

WITH this withering blast as an exit line, Ann dropped the ring into Oscar's trembling fingers and marched away, her heels clattering angrily on the marble floor.

Oscar stared after her trim, rounded figure as it swished through the long corridor of the Midland State Bank and finally disappeared with a flash of silken legs around the corner of the incoming-cash department.

As the realization of his loss flooded over him, a lump the size of an ostrich egg crawled up his scrawny neck, almost choking him. It was with an effort that he managed to get himself under control. He blinked rapidly and squared his thin shoulders resolutely.

"I'll show her," he said. "I'll show her, and then she'll be sorry. 'I'll—"

"What's that you're mumbling?"

The words cracked like a pistol shot next to Oscar's ear, dissolving his incipient daydream, jerking him about to face the horrible reality of Lester Mercer, chief efficiency expert of the Midland State Bank and chief fly in Oscar's ointment.

In spite of his panicky terror, Oscar

experienced a jealous twinge as he goggled at the roddy features and healthy bulk of Lester Mercer.

This was the man responsible for Ann's angry words. Ann had become completely captivated by Mercer's dominating bluster, his executive belligerence. Ann thought he was wonderful.

Lester Mercer, it may be said, quite agreed with her.

On top of that Mercer had been taking Ann to dinner for the past month, filling her head with the idea that she was wasting herself on an insignificant little twerp like Oscar Doolittle.

It was a situation to prompt an ordinary person to swift, drastic action. But Oscar Doolittle was far from being an ordinary person.

"I'm sorry," he stammered breathlessly. "I was just clearing my throat. No offense, I trust. I'll be getting on to work." He started away but Mercer's voice jerked him around again.

"Not so fast, Doolittle," Mercer snapped. "I can't say that I'm satisfied with the way you've been handling your work. It may be necessary to make some changes, relieve you of some of your responsibility. I'll see you about it later."

He flicked a glance at his expensive wrist-watch.

"I have to discuss a few details with Miss Meade at the present. I'll see you later."

He turned and strode away, head out-thrust, in the best executive tradition.

Oscar turned soddy and tottered toward his little cubicle, his mind reeling under the double-barreled kick in the pants he had received. His invention a flop. His girl gone—the work he had done for twelve years snatched away from him. It was too much.

There was a strange buzzing in Oscar's ears and his head floated with a

peculiar lightness, as he reeled past the long, barred row of tellers' windows. His whole world had gone smash, turned topsy-turvy. Nothing, he was sure, could ever shock him again.

In that he was tragically mistaken.

For as the strange buzzing noise hummed louder in his ears, things were beginning to happen, that promised to make the preceding events as commonplace and prosaic as the rest of Oscar Doolittle's entire existence.

Unaware of this, Oscar slouched dolefully along, until he reached the full-length mirror that glittered magnificently from one of the imposing columns that supported the dome-like ceiling of the Midland State Bank.

IT was Oscar's custom to pause here, adjust his tie and comb his hair, before he entered his tiny office for the day. And in spite of his benumbed, dazed condition, the habit of fourteen years was too strong to be resisted. Automatically, he moved closer, fumbling for his comb.

He was prepared to see reflected in the mirror his small, squinting, sandy-haired person, staring back at him. To his amazement, he saw nothing of the sort!

Instead, the mirror reflected the wide lobby of the bank, bustling clients and employees and the revolving doors that were spinning continuously as people surged in and out of the building.

The mirror reflected everything in front of it, everything but Oscar Doolittle.

Stunned, Oscar crowded closer to the mirror, until he was a scant six inches from its gleaming surface.

Still he was not reflected. Reason tottered.

"What's happened?" Oscar cried frantically. "What's the matter?"

With trembling fingers he felt the

surface of the smooth glass. He could see the moist impression where his hands touched the glass, feel its cool, smooth surface under his fingers.

Suddenly, with terrifying swiftness, he realized that at the spot where his hands touched the mirror, there was nothing. *Nothing at all. No hands. No reflection.*

He jerked his hands in front of his incredulous eyes, pressed them frantically into his face. His mind wavered giddily on the brink of insanity. For while he could feel his hands on his face, he couldn't see them.

He closed his eyes tightly and a despairing moan forced itself through his teeth. Then he opened his eyes and looked down at his feet.

His glassy orbs encountered the small squares of marble flooring. His shiny shoes, haggard brown pants were gone. His incredulous eyes traveled up his vanished nether extremities, widening in horror as they saw nothing but empty space where his body should have been.

*Oscar Doobittle had become invisible!**

"My God," he groaned, "what's happened to me? Where am I?"

A stout bank official who was hurrying past, paused and looked bewilderedly.

"Thought I heard something," he muttered. "Must be my imagination."

He turned and moved away, shaking his head and mumbling to himself.

Oscar stared after him, his mind

tossing about on a raging sea of despair and chaos.

"He didn't see me. I'm not just insane, this has actually happened," he told himself incredulously.

A rumbling noise grew in volume behind him. He wheeled to face a heavy refuse truck that was bearing down on him. Under the impetus of a beefy maintenance laborer it covered the distance between Oscar swiftly, menacingly.

With a breathless squawk, he sprang from the path of the heavy refuse truck, hugging the wall as it rattled past him.

Now that he was invisible, he wasn't safe. Others couldn't see him.

Panting and harried, Oscar fled along the corridor, like a hunted thing, his breath searing his lungs. His way was finally checked by the back of a large, thick-set young man, who was built like a wrestler. Driven by a frantic impulse to flee, Oscar ducked around him, lunged ahead.

His shoulder collided with a soft, yielding substance and a piercing scream split the air, shattering the tranquillity of the Midland State Bank.

RECOVERING himself, Oscar stared horror-stricken at the beautiful, angry features of the young woman he had knocked to the floor. Her escort, a tall, muscular-looking fellow, wheeled about and shook a large fist under the surprised nose of the thick-set young man with the wrestler-like build.

"What's the idea," he shouted beligerently, "of barging around knocking people over? I ought to bust you in the jaw."

"Listen, chum," the burly young man snapped, "nobody knocked your dame off her pins. She stumbled and fell, that's all. If you still feel like busting me in the jaw, why don'tcha try it!"

* While it would hardly seem possible that vanishing cream could make anyone disappear, it is conceivable that Oscar's special secret formula, which he mixed with the ordinary vanishing cream, contained an irritating property which was absorbed through his skin. It reacted by neutralizing skin, hair, eye and lip pigmentation and coloring, in a cycle of six periods. Therefore at definite intervals, Oscar became "invisible"—because changes within his system, influenced by the special formula, made him colorless, while at the same time imparting none of his faculties—Ed

An instant later a glorious free-for-all was raging in the normally peaceful domains of the Midland State Bank.

Shouts and catcalls filled the air as the quickly gathering crowd pressed forward hungrily to witness the spilling gore.

Women screamed at the top of their voices. Babies wailed in a shrill, ever-increasing crescendo. Terrified, completely bereft of reason, Oscar crowded back against the wall, staring wildly at the eruption he had caused.

A police whistle shrieked through the growing clamor. Forcing their way through the crowd, Oscar saw the grimly efficient, blue-clad bank guards. In their hands were long, vicious-looking night sticks.

"Who started this?" one of them roared. "I'll break the head of the man that started this!"

Oscar trembled guiltily. With pounding heart, he slipped and wriggled his invisible body through the crowd until he reached open space.

Then with a wild prayer of thankfulness pouring incoherently from his lips, he fled hysterically from the scene.

AN hour later, Oscar stood dejectedly in a secluded corner, staring moodily at the people streaming by him. For the past hour since he had become invisible, he had roved from one end of the bank to the other, distractedly attempting to figure out what had happened to him.

He sighed heavily, deeply. If only he could regain his visibility, take his place again with normal, visible people!

His bleak musings were disrupted by a sight that made him cringe back against the wall, his heart leaping to his mouth like a startled rabbit.

Two girls were heading toward him, toward the corner in which he had tak-

en refuge. And one of them was Ann Mendle, his fiancée until a few short hours ago.

Desperately he peered about for some avenue of escape, but it was too late. The girls had stopped in front of him, so close that he hardly dared breathe for fear of disclosing his nearness. He covered against the wall, a hot blush staining his invisible features as he realized that the girls were talking about him.

"Oscar is such a worm," Ann was saying. "I actually feel sorry for him. I couldn't respect any man who didn't do things!"

Oscar cringed deeper into the corner, the work biting into his very soul. He could never win Ann back to him now. How could an invisible man "do" things?

IT was as he was contemplating his bitter future that he became conscious that something was happening to him. His head began to reel with a peculiar lightness and a strange buzzing noise filled his ears. Puzzled and apprehensive, he peered down at himself. A second later, beneath his outraged eyes, his body had suddenly become visible again. Baggy brown suit, black shoes, thin hair—they were all back again.

His relief and happiness exploded in one jubilant shriek.

"Where," he cried, "I'm back!"

This ecstatic utterance had an astonishing effect on the two girls.

They wheeled about, their mouths dropping in amazement, their eyes widening incredulously.

"Sorry if I startled you," Oscar stammered jubilantly. "But I couldn't help it. It's so wonderful to be back again! Ann, don't you see? I'm back again. You can see me!"

Ann was the first to recover her composure.

"You little snoop!" she blazed, not at all composedly. "Sneaking around, eavesdropping on private conversations! Well, I hope you got an earful."

"But I wasn't snooping around," Oscar cried. "I was here all the time! Ann, you've got to believe me. Awful things have been happening to me."

"Awful things are going to happen to you," Ann returned grimly, "if you don't get out of my sight this instant."

Oscar backed away before her indignant gaze, futile pleading noises sounding in his throat. Sadly he turned and staggered off to his tiny cubby-hole, despair and gloom riding his sagging shoulders.

Reaching the comparative sanctuary of his office, he ducked inside and collapsed in his leather desk chair. His eyes traveled over the neat array of rubber stamps, inkwells and ledgers that adorned the top of his desk. Under the steadying effect of these prosaic objects, reason returned slowly and he began to mull, moodily and morosely, over the events of the morning.

And then suddenly, with the force of a backshot-stuffed otterkin at the base of the neck, the reason for his incredible transformation occurred to Oscar. Somehow the vanishing cream and his special formula had blended together into a weird compound that had the effect of rendering him invisible.

On top of this deduction came another horrible thought. Would it happen again? Would he go through life snapping on and off like an electric light bulb?

Oscar was not a profane individual but under the stress of the moment, the floodgates of his soul broke, and the torment and exasperation that was dammed there overflowed in one bitter explosion.

"Oh, darn it," he groaned, "double-darn it all!"

CHAPTER III

Skulduggery

WORK was out of the question.

Oscar's eyes roved about the narrow confines of his office like a trapped rat. Some horrible permutation warned him that the surprises of the day were not over.

"What will happen next?" he sighed. "What will happen next?"

As if awaiting this cue, there came a sharp rap on the door. It was repeated again, loudly, authoritatively.

"Come in," gasped Oscar.

The door swung open and the ominous bulk of Lester Mercer, efficiency expert, moved into the room. It was followed by the still more ominous bulk of Phineas Q. Botts, president of the bank. This procession was followed by two stern-looking policemen.

Phineas Q. Botts was not in the habit of dropping in casually on his lesser employees to pass the time of day. When he "dropped" in, it was a sure sign something was stirring. Oscar scrambled to his feet, joggling the inkwell on his desk.

"What's the matter," he squeaked, "is anything wrong?"

Phineas Q. Botts cleared his throat in a series of *karrumphs!* that sounded like an engine gathering speed for a long grade.

"For your sake, Doolittle," he rumbled ominously, "I hope not."

He inclined his portly figure in the direction of the efficiency expert in a sort of "After you, Alphonse" gesture.

"Mr. Mercer has a few questions to ask you. If—" Botts paused and wagged a finger sternly. "Notice I say 'if.' If you answer them to our satisfaction, you have nothing whatever to fear."

Oscar's frightened gaze turned to

Mercer's sternly unpleasant features.

"Certainly," he said nervously, "I'll be glad to answer any questions I can."

"First of all, Doolittle," Mercer began with deceptive calmness, "you took a special, negotiable bond for the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars to the vaults this morning. Is that correct?"

"That's right," gulped Oscar, wondering what this was leading to.

"Then you locked the bond in a strong-box," Mercer continued blandly, "and left the vaults." He paused, and then added with suspicious politeness, "Is my reconstruction of the scene accurate, Mr. Doolittle?"

Oscar wavered. The conviction was growing in his soul that all was not well. His eyes traveled in a helpless circle to Botts, the policeman and finally back to Mercer.

"That's right," he quavered.

Mercer paused, letting the silence weave a cold blanket over the room.

"Then," his voice was suddenly harsh, "perhaps you will tell us where the bond is now."

Oscar's eyes popped open like a booked bass. His brain struggled to grasp the implication in Mercer's words.

"You mean," he gasped, "it's gone?"

"As if you didn't know!" Mercer snapped sarcastically. "It was a clever scheme you worked out, Doolittle, but it's not going to work. No one has entered those vaults since you left." His voice rose dramatically. "Oscar Doolittle, in the name of the Midland State Bank, I demand that you hand over that bond!"

"But I never took it!" Oscar wailed. "I don't know anything about it! It's all a terrible mistake!"

"Then you refuse," barked Mercer. He wheeled to the policeman, his voice rising to a scolding baritone.

"As officers sworn to uphold the laws and statutes of this commonwealth, I demand that you do your plain duty."

His arm shot out, pointed accusingly at Oscar's trembling figure.

"Arrest this man for grand larceny and embezzlement!"

Oscar staggered back, his mind reeling under the accumulated force of these indictments. Through the hysterical fog that swept over him, he could hear Botts speaking.

"Not so fast now. We haven't given Doolittle a chance to answer these charges. Come now, Oscar." Botts' voice had a kindly, mellow ring to it. "If you have anything to say in your defense, I, for one, will be happy to listen."

UNDER the effects of these encouraging words Oscar opened his eyes and cleared his throat. He realized that he was facing the supreme test of his life. Now, if never again, he must prove himself a man of character and dependability. If he could impress Botts with his honesty and integrity, he knew that Botts would stick by him. It was now or never.

His spirit rose to the challenge. He squared his shoulders, grimly determined to force Botts to recognize his sterling qualities. He glared around the circle of eyes. Oscar Doolittle, mouse turned lion!

He opened his mouth—but the words that he had chosen were never uttered.

For the strange buzzing noise was booming in his ears again, and with horrible clairvoyance he realized what was going to happen.

"I'm going!" Oscar cried. "I can't help it. I've got to go—but I'm not guilty!"

One of the policemen tugged at his gun.

"You're not going anywhere, bud-

dy," he said grimly. "Grab him, Charlie."

But he was too late. For before his astounded eyes the humble person of Oscar Doolittle melted into thin air for the second time that day.

He stood before them invisible, unseen to their eyes. A fine way to convince a man of your dependability, Oscar thought bitterly.

"Cripes," ejaculated the officer called Charlie, "did you see that? He disappeared right in front of our eyes!"

"Nonsense!" bellowed Phineas Q. Botts. "Drooling, drivelling nonsense. Expect me to believe a man vanished like a wisp of smoke? He slipped out of the room, right past you so-called policemen, that's what he did. I saw him myself!" shouted Botts, who had seen nothing of the kind.

"Well, what are you standing there for?" Botts demanded. "He's probably walking out of the building this minute." The banker banged a meaty fist on the top of the desk. "Get busy, do you hear? I want action, not talk about disappearing men! Now by thunder, clear out of here and find Oscar Doolittle!"

Oscar Doolittle at the time was standing not six feet from the wrathful Mr. Botts. The two policemen, looking rather dazed, backed out of the room and pounded off down the corridor. In a minute or so the alarm was sounding throughout the building.

"That'll fix him," declared Botts. "Can't say as I'm not a little disappointed, though. Didn't think Doolittle was that type. But his attempt to escape leaves no doubt of his guilt."

Oscar stifled a groan. He could never clear himself now.

Mercer looked uneasy. "Are you sure you saw him leave, Phineas? I can't say that I did."

"Certainly I did," blustered Botts,

who by now was certain that he had seen Oscar leave. "He ducked under the desk and slipped through the officers' legs." He chuckled heartily. "The old fox is getting along but he's still pretty sharp, eh, Mercer? Still sees a lot of things you youngsters overlook."

"Maybe you're right," Mercer said dubiously. "I hope so, anyway," he added under his breath.

Botts turned and waddled importantly from Oscar's office, Mercer bringing up the rear.

Oscar Doolittle was left alone in his invisibility.

He sighed and slumped into his chair, buried his head in his hands. This was the last straw. Branded forever as a common thief! And no way to prove his innocence. It would have been difficult under normal circumstances, but now that he was invisible it was utterly hopeless, impossible.

But was it?

THE thought bounced into Oscar's brain quite of its own accord. He was invisible; he could escape; or he could search for evidence to prove himself not guilty. The mere thought was enough to fan the fires of hope that blazed in his heart.

Excited, he scrambled to his feet. He was convinced that Mercer was connected in some way with the disappearance of the bond.

If he shadowed Mercer— Any chance, no matter how slim, was worth taking.

His heart fluttering with hope, Oscar hurried from his office, ducked through the stream of people and headed for the lobby.

Seconds later, entering the lobby, he saw clusters of uniformed policemen guarding every exit. Phineas Q. Botts stood in the center of the floor, his feet planted wide like an angry bull, his

rushing voice shouting orders to policemen, messengers and vice-presidents—anyone, in fact, that came within radius of the bellows.

Oscar spied Mercer talking earnestly to Ann Meade in front of the tellers' cages. Dodging the traffic, he scurried across the floor until he stood directly behind Mercer's broad back.

"I'm doing all I can for Oscar," Mercer was saying smoothly. "But it looks like an open and shut case against him."

Oscar felt a swift, hot surge of anger. Mercer, the lying hypocrite, was attempting to get in solid with Ann, by pretending to be helping him.

"I don't believe he did it," Ann returned stoutly. "He may be a timid, helpless creature, but he's not a thief."

"Certainly not," Mercer said beautifully. "I like Oscar and I'm proud to call him my friend."

"He was a nice little fellow," Ann said wistfully. "Even if he was so futile."

Mercer cleared his throat loudly. He could carry this thing too far.

"Ann, there's something I want to ask you," he said quickly. "The employees of the bank are holding their annual dance tonight and I want you to go with me." He added hastily as Ann looked indecisive. "We could probably get some more information about Oscar there."

"That will be wonderful," Ann said, smiling. "It was lovely of you to ask me, Lester." She glanced at her watch and gave a little cry of dismay. "Heavens, I'm late! I'll have to fly. 'Bye-bye until tonight."

Mercer watched her out of sight, his face beaming smugly with the assurance of a man who has made a good impression and knows it.

Oscar walked around in front of Mercer, scratching his head. He was puzzled about what to do next. Suddenly

he noticed Mercer start violently and turn pallid. He followed the direction of Mercer's eyes and saw a slim, stylishly furred brunette approaching. She smiled brightly, displaying dazzlingly white teeth, as she stopped in front of Mercer with a swish of her short pleated skirt.

"Hello, ducky," she said. "Didn't forget me, did you?"

"Celeste, I told you not to come here!" Mercer hissed. "This might spoil everything, you little fool."

He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes roving the interior of the bank fearfully. Finally he turned back to the girl.

"Luckily we haven't been seen. Follow me to my office. You can talk to me there."

He turned on his heel and strode off. Celeste shrugged her slim shoulders and strolled after him at a more languid pace.

Oscar dogged her steps. Some instinct warned him that she was connected in some way with the disappearance of the twenty-five thousand dollar bond. In spite of her glamorous appearance, she looked as cold and business-like as a pearl-handled revolver.

With pulses hammering excitedly, Oscar followed her eagerly. It was his first experience at amateur sleuthing, and to his surprise he found himself enjoying it.

CHAPTER IV

In Durand Vile

LESTER MERCER was pacing the floor of his sumptuously appointed office when they entered. Celeste opened the door, but before she closed it Oscar had slipped in as unheralded as a well-behaved ghost.

"What is it you want?" Mercer burst

out. "You took a chance on spoiling the whole game by coming here."

"First of all," Celeste said coolly, "did you get the bond?"

Oscar started violently as the import of these words crashed into his brain. His suspicions had been correct! Mercer was the culprit!

"Quiet, you little fool!" Mercer hissed at Celeste. "Suppose someone overheard you. Certainly I have it. But I wasn't able to slip out and give it to you as we planned. We had a little slip-up here."

"Slip-up?" There was an anxious edge to Celeste's voice.

"Yes. The little dope we pinned this job on managed to escape. I still don't know how he did it. Anyway, it created a lot of excitement and if I had left then, it would have looked rather suspicious."

"Well, give it to me now," Celeste told him. "I can slip out of here without being searched."

Mercer stuck a hand into his inside coat pocket.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "I'll give it to you; and then for Pete's sake, clear out of here."

Oscar trembled with excitement as Mercer's hand emerged from his pocket holding an oblong piece of crisp, gilt-edged paper. The missing bond! Oscar wavered indecisively. Should he make a desperate lunge for the bond, the evidence that would clear him of any possible guilt? He knew that if Celeste got her hands on that gilt-edged certificate, left the bank with it, his last chance would go glimmering. He tensed himself, determined to risk everything on one frantic gamble.

Mercer was extending the bond, Celeste's slim hand was reaching greedily for it. . . .

Oscar crouched, gathering his muscles—and then the door banged open

and the hearty voice of Plineus Q. Botts boomed through the room.

"Been looking for you, Mercer. Thought I might find you here."

Mercer wheeled toward the door, stuffing the incriminating paper into his trouser pocket as he faced his employer.

Oscar's shoulders sagged dispiritedly. His moment for vindication was gone. Anything could happen now.

Botts looked from Mercer to Celeste. "Not interrupting anything, I hope?" he rumbled jovially.

"Not at all," Mercer said hastily. "As a matter of fact, Miss—er—Miss Summers was just going."

"That's right," Celeste smiled coyly. "I simply have to dash off." She turned slightly to look straight at Mercer. "It's a pity you didn't have that snapshot with you," she murmured. "Perhaps I can arrange to see you tonight and pick it up. I'm so anxious to have it!"

"Excellent idea," Mercer agreed quickly. "The bank employees are holding their dance tonight at the Grande Arms Hotel. If you could arrange to meet me in the lobby I'll have it for you then."

"You can expect me," murmured Celeste, "at nine. There's a sentimental value to that particular snapshot—and I wouldn't like anything to happen to it."

SHE turned, her bright smile turned incandescently on the partly personage of Mr. Botts, and swished enticingly from the room.

"Lovely creature," Botts breathed gustily. "Charming! Reminds me of a girl I knew once in France. I was younger then, but—"

Botts broke off suddenly, coughing in embarrassment.

"As I was saying," he rumbled on, "we can't find hide nor hair of this fellow Doodittle. He's not in the building;

there's not a trace of him anywhere."

Oscar felt a comfortable glow warming him. He was safe, secure at last! Why, he could walk right out of the bank this minute and nobody would be the wiser. Along with this feeling of security came a sudden rush of confidence. He wouldn't run like a scared chicken. No, sir, he'd stick.

Mercer had the bond. He'd follow Mercer until an opportunity presented itself to grab the precious paper. With this evidence he could clear himself. For the first time that day, Oscar's course of action seemed simple and uncomplicated—

And then suddenly the smug, complacent smile that adorned his invisible features was wiped away by a horrible noise—the strange buzzing noise that accompanied his miraculous transformations.

In a few seconds he would be visible again. Goodness, this was terrific!

In fact, it was positively catastrophic. Because Phineas Q. Bots and Lester Mercer showed no signs of leaving the room. Mercer was trying to get on the good side of his boss, always a splendid idea if it isn't done too obviously.

"Ahem!" Mercer coughed. "I didn't recall that you had been in France, sir." He winked slyly. The two policemen, sensing the drift of things, stood around grinning.

Bots' pink-jawed face colored pinker, but he took the innuendo in good stride.

"Ah yes, Mercer. Lovely country, France, lovely country! Before the Nazis got hold of it, of course. Why, I was only a young man when my father sent me to Paris before the World War to—er—paint. Ah yes, great artists, those Parisians, great artists! Good red wine, attractive—harrumph!—young ladies—" Bots fairly glowed at the reminiscence.

"I trust, sir, that you did considerable painting," Mercer said with a Grandpa-you're-an-old-devil grin.

"Paris has never been the same since," Bots breathed in a gust of frankness. Then he remembered what he had said, and blushed furiously.

Meanwhile, Oscar's bovine eyes were flying frantically around the room, searching desperately for a place of concealment. They lighted on the huge desk that stood in the center of the room. He moved quickly—but even as he took the first steps, he knew he was too late.

For it had happened again. Oscar was suddenly as plain as a light snapped on in a dark room. Every inch of his unprepossessing body became as glaringly obvious as the Lindbergh Beacon.

Phineas Q. Bots spotted him first.

"There he is!" he shouted. "Grab him!"

Bots obeyed his own command by lunging across the room, crashing into Oscar's slight form. His fat arms wrapped around the wasp-like waist and his booming voice roared into Oscar's ears.

OSCAR felt a pair of strong hands on his arms. A bulky uniformed figure loomed before him. There was a metallic click as handcuffs were snapped around his thin wrists. Through the cloudy fog of hysteria that blanketed his brain, he could hear his own voice, shrill and incoherent, pleading his innocence.

"How did he get in here?" Mercer said wonderingly. "It's incredible, amazing!"

"Nonsense!" heated Bots triumphantly. "I saw him as he slipped in the door. They have to get up mighty early in the morning to steal a march on Phineas Bots!"

"You've got to listen!" Oscar began

to plead hysterically. "I've been framed! I'm innocent! But I know who the real thief is. You've got to believe me!"

"What's that?" Botts said instantly. "You know who the thief is? Well, speak up, man! Who is he?"

"I'll tell you!" Oscar panted.

He shook himself free from the clutch of the policeman and advanced belligerently toward Lester Mercer.

"There's the real thief!" he shouted, pointing both mangled fists at the efficiency expert. "He's got the bond on him right now! Search him," Oscar concluded triumphantly, "and see whether or not I'm telling the truth!"

Mercer licked his lips as all eyes in the room focused on him. He looked nervously about, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"That's absurd!" he protested weakly. "The man's insane. Take him away before he goes berserk and hurts somebody."

"Now just a moment, Lester," Botts interposed. "Seems to me we ought to give Oscar every chance to clear himself. If you have nothing to fear, you shouldn't object to being searched."

"I don't," Mercer gasped nervously. "It's only that . . ."

"He's stalling," Oscar cut in. "He's got the bond on him. He knows he's guilty!" he added confidently.

Oscar folded his arms nonchalantly as the policeman, at a nod from Botts, started toward Mercer. It was just then, as he was tasting the premature delights of vindication and vengeance, that the buzzing noise started again in his ears.

A look of horror soared over his features.

"No!" Oscar prayed desperately. "Not now, not now!"

But despite his pleas, the buzzing sound grew in volume and Oscar knew

that in another instant, the inexorable transformation would occur. He gazed wildly about him and his eyes lighted on the desk. With a speed born of desperation, he lunged across the office to the haven it presented.

"After him!" shouted Mercer, taking immediate advantage of Oscar's break. "He's trying to escape! There's your guilty man!"

Mercer, Botts and the policeman wheeled with these words and raced to the desk under which Oscar had disappeared.

"I'll get him!" Mercer cried. He dropped to his knees and peered under the desk. The triumphant shout died on his lips and an incredulous, baffled look passed over his face. When he straightened up and climbed groggily to his feet, his face was pale.

"He's not there!" he gasped. "He's gone. He got away."

These words fell on Oscar's despairing soul like rain on parched ground. There was still hope for him! If he could remain invisible long enough to escape, there was still a chance to prove his innocence. He crouched under the desk, hardly daring to breathe, listening to Botts' angry voice.

"Are you going crazy?" Botts was shouting. "I saw him dart under this desk myself, and there's no human way that he could get out. Are you trying to tell me my eyes are lying?"

[It was at that crucial moment that a stray particle of dust drifted upward into Oscar's nose. It selected a soft spot on the tender membrane and proceeded to raise hell. Oscar's eyes began to water. Frenziedly, he clapped both hands over his mouth and nose. But it was no use, for nature suddenly ejected the offending bit of dust—with a loud, snorting sneeze.

"Hear that?" stormed Botts excited-

ly. "He's under there, all right. I'll drag him out myself!"

The sneeze had done more than merely betray Oscar's position to the enemy. It had also heralded the sound of a slow, horrifying buzzing in Oscar's ears. Gripped by terror and impending doom, Oscar shuddered as his body suddenly became visible again—at the precise second that Phineas Q. Botts' moonlike face stared in at him.

Botts' full-throated bellow sounded like the baying of a bloodhound.

"Hah," he bayed, "bah!"

Despite Oscar's desperate struggles Botts managed to secure a grip on one of his thrashing ankles. Then, puffing and blowing triumphantly, he dragged him forth into the circle of grim, unfriendly faces.

"Please," Oscar moaned pitiously from his humiliating position, "I can explain everything. You've got to listen!"

"That's what he said before," Mercer sneered. "It's just another trick to try an escape."

"He won't get another chance," Botts puffed. "Grab him," he barked at the hovering policemen, "and see that he doesn't get away this time."

Bewildered and gasping, Oscar was jerked to his beamstalk feet and dragged to the door by the two burly cops. With a supreme effort, he twisted to face Mercer.

"There's the real thief!" Oscar shrieked. "I've got proof . . ."

The sentence was cut short as he was jerked through the doorway by the impatient policemen.

CHAPTER V

Oscar's Fatal Plunge

SEVERAL hours later, Oscar stared moodily through the barred windows of his cell, his mind a hopeless

cesspool of despair. It was eight o'clock. In another hour Mercer would slip the bond to Celeste and she would vanish forever. With her would go Oscar's last and lone chance of ever clearing himself.

With a shuddery sigh he collapsed on the narrow cot and buried his head in his hands. He remained in this position for several minutes and then he raised his head, listening.

An unmistakably familiar sound was buzzing in his ears. Oscar was not surprised. That elusive quality in his soul that provided surprise for him had taken too much of a beating in the last twelve hours.

With a moody, jaundiced eye he watched his body disappear for the third time that day.

"So what?" he muttered bitterly.

He sat there on the edge of the bunk, frowning at the floor. Unconsciously his hand found a tin water cup that was lying on the cold stone. Absent-mindedly he began to tap the cup gently against the iron frame of the cot, keeping a doleful accompaniment to his gloomy thoughts. As he thought of Mercer holding Ann Meade in his arms, swaying to smooth music, Oscar's tempo and temper increased until he was pounding out a miniature facsimile of the "Anvil Chorus."

"Cut that racket in there!" a heavy voice shouted. "What do you think this is, a steel foundry?"

Oscar stopped guiltily as other voices joined the protest. He heard the footsteps of the guard pounding in his direction.

"It's Doolittle," he heard the jailer say. "I'll fix that little twerp so he don't feel so gay."

Oscar paled. He thought of crawling under the bed but he knew it would do no good. He was in for it, all right. He stared helplessly about—and then

he smiled. A malicious, cunning smile spread across his face as he looked down at his still invisible body and recalled that to all intents and purposes, he had vanished.

"I've been pushed around all day," he muttered. "It's about my turn now."

The guard, a large, glowering young man, appeared suddenly before Oscar's cell.

"Cut that rumpus," he growled. "Or I'll—"

He broke off, the words fading on his lips as he peered incredulously into the empty cell. He shook the door, tried the lock, his face a ludicrous mask of painful amazement. And then, as if realizing for the first time what had happened, he sprang into action.

"Escape!" he howled. "The guy from the bank broke loose! Send out the alarm!"

Oscar had a slight pang of remorse as he heard this. His nervousness increased as he caught shouted questions, footsteps pounding along the old stone floors. He hadn't planned to escape. Nothing that daring had occurred to him. Still—why not?

The guard stuck a key in the lock, swung the door open and stepped into the cell. Oscar cringed away from him and then, his heart threatening to pop from his mouth, he edged past the man's burly form and crept into the corridor.

His lips twisted in a peculiar smile as he looked back at the guard standing perplexedly in the middle of the cell, his back to the door. Very gently Oscar swung the cell door shut. Stilling the laughter that bubbled up in his throat, he turned the key in the lock and then tossed the ring of keys into the middle of the corridor.

THEY fell with a metallic jangle. The guard wheeled about, his face mirroring rage, amazement and a half

dozen other emotions too difficult to classify. He lunged at the door, gripping the bars in barn-like fists.

"Help!" he bellowed. "Lemme out o' here! I been tricked! They jumped me from behind."

He lapsed off at that point into a stream of highly imaginative and picturesque profanity that surpassed anything Oscar had heard since he eavesdropped on a faculty meeting in high school.

He listened with wistful admiration until he heard footsteps pounding in his direction. Looking up, he saw a half-dozen guards racing toward the cell that housed the bellowing jailer. Retreat, Oscar decided, was the strategic move. Turning, he scurried away in the opposite direction, his invisible features set in a grim, determined mask.

He had no clear idea of what he was going to do, but he knew that he must recover the bond before Mercer passed it on to his sly accomplice, Celeste.

If he failed he would be branded forever as a thief and a criminal. With this thought bolstering his courage, Oscar crept down the corridor toward the door, beyond which lay freedom. His destination — the bank employee's dance at the Grande Arms Hotel.

OSCAR hesitated in the lobby of the Grande Arms Hotel, his determination wavering in the face of its imposing splendor and dignity. Throngs of formally attired couples surged past him, their faces mirroring the anticipated delights of the gala evening. From the ballroom adjoining the lobby, the strains of smooth, sophisticated music could be heard, inviting the revellers to romance and glee.

Everyone but the nervous, invisible figure crouched forlornly in the middle of the lobby was unhappy.

Oscar recognized with envy his fel-

low employees scampering through the lobby, their dates clinging to their arms, drinking in the pearls of wisdom that dropped glibly from masculine lips. Oscar even had a glimpse of Phineas Botts, resplendent in white tie and topper, striding through the lobby, waving genially to his employees.

Botts' wife, a sharp-looking, middle-aged woman, who somehow gave the impression of being freshly lacquered, marched beside him, obviously proud of her position.

"There goes Mrs. Astor's horse," Oscar heard an underpaid clerk snicker.

"Looks to me like she's been having too many oats," his girl friend agreed in a stage whisper.

Oscar was mildly horrified at such impertinence, but there was nothing he could say about it at the moment. His invisibility was the important thing now. Besides, Mrs. Botts did look somewhat overstuffed. Oscar wondered vaguely if she wouldn't be useful at a picnic where there weren't any benches around to sit on. . . .

He saw something then that made him forget his thoughts, jeked him to attention.

Through the arched doorway that led to the ballroom, Oscar saw Lester Mercer whispering to Celeste, saw him hand her something quickly, surreptitiously.

He was too late!

The horrible thought burst upon him, blowing away his caution like a straw in a gale. He ran toward the ballroom, toward Mercer and Celeste, leaving a breeze in his wake that rustled the tulle skirts he passed.

WHEN Oscar entered the brilliantly lighted ballroom, Mercer and Celeste were separating, walking off in opposite directions. Oscar wavered, torn by indecision. Which one to follow? He hesitated frantically until he remem-

bered that Mercer had slipped something to Celeste. What else could it have been but the bond? Even as this thought came to him he was hurrying excitedly after Celeste.

The rambunctious brunette was dressed—or rather undressed—in a breathtaking number of flaming red as easy to distinguish in the crowd as a lighted torch. Oscar followed, hope blazing in his heart, until he realized with paralyzing, icy horror that Celeste was headed toward a cream-colored door, which was opening and closing continually as women streamed in and out.

His stricken eyes read the next sign lettered on the paneling—Women's Powder Room.

Oscar stopped, aghast. He realized despairingly that he was beaten, for Celeste's red dress had already disappeared into these sacred precincts.

The mere thought of following her turned his blood to a stream of ice water, started him trembling uncontrollably. Miserably he hovered about the entrance to the powder room. He would have to wait.

But what if Celeste passed the bond on to another conspirator—one whom Oscar didn't know—and that party left the dance? His last chance would be gone. The thought fired him with a frenzied, desperate courage. He must follow Celeste beyond these portals of doom.

He moved closer to the door, his heart thumping against his ribs. The door opened suddenly as two women emerged. Oscar's chance had arrived. He took a step—and then his courage melted like ice on an August day. He couldn't do it. His spirit quailed and his brow became feverish at the mere thought of invading that sanctum of inviolate femininity.

But underneath Oscar's timid exterior lay stern, gritty stuff.

It rallied to his aid now, forced his unwilling feet to carry him to the door, to wait another chance.

It came almost immediately. The sacred portals swung open, displaying long mirrors, cushioned benches and women, women by the dozen. Oscar took a deep breath and shuffled his feet nervously, like a sprinter preparing for the hundred yard dash.

"May the best man win," he whispered to himself; and then with a slithering motion of his hips, he slipped through the door into the outer lounge of the Chamber of Horrors.

It was a utterly new experience for Oscar Doolittle. He looked about, fearful and uncertain, at the females standing in chattering groups; at the women, young and old seated before the gleaming mirrors, repairing school girl cheeks and droop-chinned features that were anything but romantic.

He spotted the beautiful Celeste instantly. The furnished brunette had just deposited her purse on a long table and was moving with feline grace to an unoccupied seat in front of a mirror.

Oscar's eyes riveted on the velvet purse, the purse that contained the precious bond, his passport to vindication. He moved cautiously through the scads of women, his eyes centered on the purse. As he circled around the post side of a hefty dowager, his eyes lifted and he saw Ann talking to another girl.

Ann, lovely and beautiful, was wearing a frilly something or other that made her look like a visitor from heaven. Oscar stood still, gazing impassionedly at her while a bump crawled up his throat.

He had lost her. Lost her to that scheming crook, Lester Mercer. A hot flash of anger seared him, redoubling his determination to expose the efficiency expert, prove his own innocence. He had to, he must, if only for Ann's sake!

Oscar was close to the purse now, so close that he could reach out and touch it. His trembling fingers felt as clumsy as bananas as he tried to unsnap the tiny silver clasp that guarded the contents of the bag.

FINALLY it opened—and Oscar's fustery fingers probed into the interior, met crisp, smooth paper.

He had succeeded! The thought fired him like a strong elixir. Exultingly he prepared to remove the bond, his brain racing ahead of him with triumphant visions of Mercer's consternation when the previous paper was returned.

And then his hand began to tremble. Nervelessly it fell from the purse, as his whole being was swamped with stark, icy terror.

"No!" Oscar gasped, "Not here! Not again!"

But this protestations were futile. For in his ears, faintly at first, and then with increasing volume, was booming the sound that heralded his return to visibility.

Oscar gazed about distractedly, panic and hysteria mounting in his breast. He would rather have stalked into a cageful of lions than face these women. Bereft of reason, stunned to the core of his soul, he could only stand helplessly by as his thin body suddenly resumed its normal condition and became visible.

He was not noticed immediately.

A fat matron to his right turned to him.

"Can I borrow your lipstick, dearie?" she asked sociably.

"I don't use it—" Oscar began, but it was as far as he got.

The woman's shrill, piercing scream ripped through his woods, blitzkrieged through the room, shattering its comparative quiet. Women wheeled about, saw Oscar, and began shrieking. They

crowded back from him, their cries of terror crescendoing into an unbelievable clamor as their imaginations began to work overtime.

Oscar threw wide his arms in a gesture of entreaty.

"Please," he shouted above the din, "please listen to me."

"He's mad!" a woman screamed. "Just look at him!"

"A moon!" another yelped hopefully.

Pandemonium took charge. Pandemonium that would have paled into insignificance a 4-11 fire.

Women fled screaming. They fought and struggled as they forced their way out the small door, their voices shrill and hysterical.

It was worse than a shirt sale at a bargain counter!

Oscar cowered numbly against the wall, unable to move or speak. The last woman fled through the door. No—one remained. One who stepped quickly to the door, turned the key, locking it.

The girl turned and Oscar uttered a surprised squeak.

"Ann!" It was all he could think of.

"Don't 'Ann' me," she said grimly. She glared at him, hands on her hips, an incongruously business-like position for a lovely girl in a French gown.

"How did you manage to break out of jail?" she asked, and before he could answer she rushed on. "Have you gone mad, Oscar Doolittle? Stealing that bond, breaking jail, and now sneaking in here like a despicable Peeping Tom!"

"Ann, you don't understand!" Oscar cried desperately. "I—" He broke off as a furious hanging started on the door.

"Ooooh," he moaned, "oooooh!"

Ann looked about quickly, her manner brisk, decisive.

"Oscar," she whispered, pointing to

a small door on the far side of the room. "Quick, maybe you can get away through there. I . . . I" her voice was suddenly uneven, "I can't turn you over to them no matter what you've done."

Oscar hesitated, but as the outer portal trembled under a renewed assault, he turned like a startled fawn. With a last frightened glance over his shoulder, Oscar Doolittle bolted through the other door, jerking it shut behind him.

He stood trembling, enveloped in the stygian blackness of a corridor. Suddenly from the room which he had just vacated, he heard a rending crash and then masculine voices shouting threats and curses.

CHAPTER VI

True Confession

WITH the bounds of terror nipping at his heels Oscar fled through the dark corridor, his breath rasping his throat in shuddering gasps. His heart thumped wildly against his ribs, filling his ears with a roaring river of sound. Hysterically and blindly he dashed ahead, oblivious to all else but the mad impulse of a soul in torment—flight.

But within twenty feet his headlong scramble was rudely checked by a painfully solid door. He staggered back, and then his fingers were fumbling for the doorknob. A split second later he was stumbling into another room.

It was lighted; and when his eyes focused to the sudden illumination he looked around—and froze to panic-stricken immobility.

The room was occupied. Standing in its very center, gazing straight toward him, was Lester Mercer.

Oscar quailed. But then the realization that he was facing the man responsible for his present predicament put new steel in his backbone. A fran-

tic accusation sprang to his lips—but Mercer's next move so astounded him that his mouth opened and closed wordlessly.

Mercer was staring at the open door behind Oscar.

"Must've been the wind," Oscar heard him mutter. "Nobody there." Mercer strode past Oscar to the door, slammed it shut.

It was then Oscar realized what had happened. He stared helplessly down at his body, invisible again. He recalled the humming noise that he heard as he fled through the dark corridor. His body had vanished again during that mad flight.

Mercer had turned now and was walking toward another door, one that led evidently to the ballroom. It came as a surprise to Oscar that his own legs were moving, carrying him swiftly after Mercer. Without design or conscious volition he was slipping in front of Mercer, hurrying to the door. His hand reached out, twisted the key. The tumblers fell with a dry, metallic click.

Mercer stopped abruptly and peered at the lock.

"I'll swear I heard. . ."

His voice choked, his mouth dropped foolishly. For before his stunned eyes the key to the door was emerging from the keyhole. A whumpering noise sounded in Mercer's throat as the key floated across the room toward the open window. He watched glassily as the key passed through the window, then suddenly dropped from sight as it fell to the street below.

"I need a drink," Mercer moaned shakily. "I need a whole damn bottle. I think I'd better get pie-eyed."

"But you're not going to."

Oscar's voice, grim and invisible, sounded to the left of the efficiency expert. Mercer wheeled, eyes popping.

"Who said that?" he demanded fran-

tically. "What kind of a joke is this? Who are you?"

"Your number is up, Mercer." Oscar tried to make his words sound ominous. "I want the stolen bond and a signed confession, or I'll beat the living tar out of you."

Mercer listened as a gleam of recognition dawned on his face.

"So it's you, Deadlittle," he sneered. "You can't bluff me with some ventriloquism trick!" His eyes swept around the room. "You're hiding in here somewhere, trembling in your shoes. Come out and fight like a man or I'll come after you and drag you out!"

"All right," said Oscar. "You asked for it. Put up your hands and defend yourself."

HE would have rather shouted "en garde!" as he had heard it done once in a movie, but he wasn't sure how to pronounce it.

"En garde, then!" shouted Mercer, who did. "Show yourself and get ready for a beating."

He assumed a classic pose, left arm and foot extending, right arm cocked under his chin, weight balance on the balls of his toes.

"I did a bit of this in college," Mercer said grimly as he circled slowly, waiting for his opponent to appear.

Oscar stepped around in back of Mercer, a malicious smile twisting his lips. He rubbed his hands together in gleeful anticipation and drew a bead on Mercer's plump posterior anatomy. His foot drew back like a pendulum, stopped, and then swung down and up, describing a swift, vicious arc. Behind Oscar's swishing foot traveled all of his accumulated anger, all of the ignominy and shame he had received at the hands of Lester Mercer.

It was a bull's-eye.

Mercer jumped a foot in the air, a

pained howl tearing from his throat. His hands clasped the seat of his pants as he pranced about, his screams filling the air.

"Where are you?" he shouted. "Fight like a man!"

But in his eyes as he glared about the room, fear and doubt were gleaming.

"All right," said Oscar, "I will fight like a man."

He stepped in close to Mercer. His right fist lobbed out, drove between Mercer's guard, sank into Mercer's paunchy stomach.

Mercer gasped and doubled up, his face turning a peculiar shade of green. All of his assurance dissolved before Oscar's invisible onslaught.

"Don't hit me!" he cried weakly. "Don't hit me again!"

"Will you confess stealing that bond?" Oscar demanded.

Mercer rallied desperately. "You're mistaken, Doolittle. I don't know anything about that check," he moaned. "I haven't the faintest idea—"

Fists, hard invisible fists, battered into Mercer's face like an attacking swarm of hornets, starting a trickle of blood from his mouth and nose, driving him to his knees.

"Don't lie to me!" Oscar panted. "Now, what about that confession?"

Mercer collapsed on his face, his fingers clawing frantically at the floor.

"Keep away from me!" he shouted hoarsely. "Keep away from me, you damned ghost!"

His voice rose to a babbling, hysterical scream.

"I stole the bond! I stole the bond, got it away. Framed you. Bribed a guard."

The words poured out in a frenzied scream, blasting through the room, filling it with their wild sound . . .

"Open this door!" Oscar started, turned to the door. The words were

followed by a furious banging that rattled the portal violently. "Open up in there or we'll smash this door down!"

Oscar looked about helplessly. He had his confession, but what good would it do him? Already shoulders were splintering into the door, cracks were splintering in its surface. But then a hopeful, anticipatory smile crossed Oscar Doolittle's invisible features. For as the door sagged inward, he heard the strange buzzing noise humming in his ears . . .

POLICEMEN, bank employees poured into the room. Behind them stormed the pot-bellied, shouting figure of Francis Q. Botts.

"What's going on here?" he shouted. He elbowed through, stopped when he saw Oscar.

"There's your man!" he bellowed at the policemen. "Grab him! He's dangerous!"

"Hold your horses," Oscar snapped, as a minion of the law started for him. "If you want the real thief, there's your man." He pointed down at the prone figure of the efficiency expert. "He's just confessed to me."

"Impossible!" snorted Botts. "That's Mercer, my right-hand man. Expect us to believe another lie like that, Doolittle?"

"It's true," Oscar said firmly. "Mercer stole the bond, arranged things to look as if I were the thief."

"Nonsense!" bellowed Botts. "Incredible!"

"You stupid blockhead!" shouted Oscar. "You can't see any farther than the nose on your face!" The words ripped out of their own accord, startling Oscar as much as they did his boss.

"Well," Botts said truculently, "have you any proof?"

"Watch," said Oscar. "Just watch." He bent, shook Mercer's shoulder.

"Tell Botts that you stole that bond, Mercer," Oscar said harshly. "Tell him that you framed me—me, Oscar Doolittle."

At the mention of the name, Mercer's body jerked convulsively.

"For God's sake, leave me alone," he moaned. "I'll confess everything. I stole the bond, bribed a guard, framed you." His voice rose to a babbling shriek. "Get away from me, leave me alone!"

Oscar straightened up determinedly.

"Satisfied?" he asked Botts.

Botts sputtered, for once in his life incapable of speech.

The two policemen jerked Mercer to his feet. His eyes widened dazedly as he saw Oscar, now very much in the flesh.

"It was a trick," he burst out savagely. "Well, you've got me but you'll never get the bond!"

"Bond?" echoed Botts blankly. Then his face reddened. "Look here, now, we've got to have that bond! Can't send you to prison without it. It's the same as—as—" he groped for a word—"as the *corpus delicti*. Yes, that's it—*corpus delicti*."

He bellowed the Latin phrase with obvious relish.

"Can't hang a man without a body!" thundered Phineas Botts, who by now was completely confused. "Same things with bonds! Can't do a thing without the bond. *Corpus delicti*."

"Well, you'll never see that bond again," snapped Mercer.

"Don't be too sure about that," a feminine voice warned him.

Oscar and Phineas Q. Botts wheeled simultaneously, almost colliding as they turned to stare at the doorway, in the direction of the voice.

Ann Meade was standing there. Ann, a pleasant smile on her face, holding the gilt-edged bond in one slender hand!

"Holy smokes!" Oscar said trade-quietly. "If I hadn't seen it, I wouldn't believe it."

Botts waddled across the room, snatched the bond from Ann's hand and examined it eagerly. His round face flushed happily. He seized Ann suddenly and planted a hearty kiss square on her lips.

"Perfect, my dear," he wheezed, "perfect!"

Whether he referred to the check or the kiss was doubtful. Botts himself couldn't tell.

"But how," stammered Oscar, "did you manage. . ."

"SIMPLE deduction," Ann cut in.

"One, I knew that you must have been looking for something in the powder room. Two, when a slinky brunette came rushing out, screaming for her purse, I had a hunch that she had what you were looking for. Anyway, I followed her. To make a long story short, I got the bond and Celeste is now locked up in the mop closet outside the powder room."

"Perfect again," wheezed Botts. "I had it figured somewhat like that myself." He turned to the policeman. "Get the girl and take 'em both to jail. Ha, ha," he rumbled, "old Phineas is still pretty sharp, eh, Mercer?"

"*Corpus delicti*," sneered Mercer. "Bah!"

Oscar took a deep, happy breath as Mercer was dragged from the room. With him he hoped went his own troubles.

"Had my eye on that fellow for some time," Botts was saying loudly. "He's got a fishy eye, never did trust him. I was ready to spring a trap of my own, if you two hadn't—"

He stopped suddenly, noticing that Ann and Oscar were not listening very

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were going to be different.

"Well, that's interesting," he said casually. "Glad you do."

"Oscar," Ann's voice was shocked, "do you mean you don't care any more?"

"I wouldn't say that," Oscar said off-handedly.

He rubbed his fingernails vigorously on his sleeve, looked at them critically.

"I think you're a nice enough girl, Ann."

"Oh, Oscar!" Ann cried, "Something has happened to you. You've never talked to me like this before."

She looked at him, a new respect in her eyes.

"I know what I'm going to do," she said decisively. "I'm going to marry you right away! We're not going to wait another instant. Someone has got to look after you, Oscar Doofittle, and when we're married I'm not going to let you out of my sight a minute."

Oscar smiled, a lingering secretive smile. He knew then that he never need worry about becoming a hen-pecked, jealously watched husband. Not while the secret formula that made him van- ish held out. Even if it didn't produce a brand-new miracle cosmetic to bolster up flabby muscles on the honey features of nose-tilted society matrons.

Oscar smiled even more secretively, because the strange buzzing noise had started up again.

"Don't be too sure about that," he said slyly to Ann. "I mean, about your keeping a careful eye on me all the time. I might up and disappear, you know."

The buzzing grew louder in his ears.

"You'll do no such thing," Ann said stoutly. "Not while I'm around."

She looked at Oscar fondly. Oscar—wasn't there.

"Oh, good heavens!" Ann wailed. "I'm engaged to a phantom!"

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