

***THORNE
SMITH***



***THE BISHOP'S
JAEGER***

Thorne Smith

The Bishop's Jaegers

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PROLOGUE

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Dealing in Drawers

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Before hoisting them over his sturdy, ecclesiastical shanks the Bishop contemplated his drawers with nonsectarian satisfaction. It was not the Bishop's wont thus to dally with his drawers. Far from it. As a rule the Bishop paid scant heed either to his own drawers or to those of his parishioners. He took it for granted they wore them.

And although, during the course of a long and active career devoted to good works, the Bishop had been responsible for despoiling the dusky limbs of innumerable South Sea aristocrats with drawers of surpassing unloveliness, he did not look back on his success in terms of drawers alone. Not at all.

To Bishop Waller drawers were merely the first move in a long, grim contest with the devil, a contest in which long, grim drawers served as the shock troops of righteousness. They were an important but unattractive gesture in the general direction of God—a grotesque but essential step in a complicated ritual of spiritual costuming.

Perhaps it was partly owing to the fact that none of the Bishop's so-called savage converts had ever turned to him and remarked in tones of mild complaint, "This Adam chap of yours never wore a pair of drawers in his life. Why should I?" that the good Bishop had so far failed to give due consideration to the rights of the vast anti-drawers-wearing

element still shamelessly thriving on this and probably other terrestrial globes. For Bishop Waller was above all things a fair man. It simply never occurred to him that a fellow creature could commune either with himself or his Maker with any degree of equanimity unless a great deal of his person was securely done into drawers.

For women the Bishop's program was a little more elaborate. Women were quite different. It was difficult to decide which half of their bodies needed to be covered first and most. Both halves were dangerous, both to be greatly deplored. Either one of them made virtually impossible a constructive consideration of a life beyond. Repeatedly he had been pained to discover that in the presence of unconverted island girls, men were quite content to risk the somewhat nebulous joys of the life beyond for the assured ones closer at hand.

Therefore it was the Bishop's conviction that all women should be all covered at all times. It was safer—far, far wiser. Men found out about such things quickly enough as it was without having them dangled before their eyes. For this reason religion for men began with drawers and for women with shirt and drawers—preferably with the addition of a voluminous Mother Hubbard.

This morning there was a special reason for the Bishop's rapt contemplation of his drawers—new, judiciously selected, upstanding garments. And if they could not be called things of beauty, these brave long jaegers of the Bishop's, they did without question represent the highest expression of the drawers-maker's craftsmanship. Not that the Bishop's jaegers were in any sense crafty. No franker or

more uncompromising drawers could have been devised to protect the modesty of man. Once they had been decorously adjusted, they made absolutely no weak concession to the curiously roving eye.

As Bishop Waller, forgetting for the moment his rather shocking condition, held his jaegers extended before him at arm's length, he presented a picture of innocently happy concentration. He was gratified by the chaste austerity of these drawers. They were the ideal drawers for a bishop. There was no monkey business about them. They pretended to be nothing more than what they were—simply and definitely drawers—long ones. Once a man had sought refuge behind or within their rugged embrace there was little likelihood that any woman no matter how optimistic would ask him to emerge from his unattractive concealment. The exterior view was far too depressing—too utterly discouraging to light dalliance and abandon. They had a numbing effect on the mind, those jaegers of the Bishop's. They reared themselves like a mighty tower of righteousness in a world of makeshift and evasive garments. No one could imagine their wearer leaping sportively in pursuit of a wanton nymph. The very beasts of the fields would have staggered off in horror to their lairs.

As he proceeded to plunge his vast nakedness into the even vaster reaches of his jaegers, the exact structure of the Bishop's thoughts is, of course, not known. However, it is safe to assume that as he stood appreciatively before his mirror conscientiously adjusting them to the last strategically plotted button—a formality seldom if ever

observed by the average run of laymen—Bishop Waller was saying to himself:

“I might have my faults as a bishop, but no one can say a word against my drawers. Not a bishop in all these United States can produce a finer pair than these.”

So much for the Bishop for the time being, now that he has at last got himself into his drawers and girded his loins with righteousness if not with romance.

2

The drawers of Josephine Duval were a different matter entirely. Accurately speaking, they were hardly drawers at all. They were more like a passing thought or an idle moment. Compared with the splendid new jaegers of the Bishop’s—if one’s chances of salvation will not be eternally damned by such a sacrilege—Jo’s drawers were as nothing. Not even a flash in the pan.

One is occasionally perplexed by the great quantity of different-looking dogs one meets in the course of a day or a week. One is given pause by the fact that such totally unrelated objects in appearance should be even loosely classified under the covering name of dog. Yet in spite of this, one seldom or rarely ever stops to consider how many different-looking drawers there are in the world either gracing or disgracing the limbs of humanity. Perhaps this is due to the fact that one gets more opportunity to look at dogs than at drawers, which is, no doubt, just as well for everybody concerned. However, the fact still remains that drawers can be so bewilderingly different and yet come under the general classification or family name of drawers.

Between the Bishop's drawers and Jo's drawers lay all the difference in the world—different aims and aspirations, a different philosophy of life—a gulf, in fact, which could never be bridged except under the most incredible circumstances with which there is no occasion here to deal. No good end can be served by further prolonging this rather questionable comparison.

Looking logically at Jo's drawers—an attitude exceedingly difficult to maintain when they were inhabited as only Jo could inhabit them—one could see no proper reason for their being in existence at all. To say that they were the direct antitheses of the medieval *ceinture de chasteté* is to state the case mildly. Not that this brief consideration of the young lady's even briefer garments is to be regarded as a plea for the return of the chastity belt. On the contrary. There are too many locks already in this world. As a matter of record the efficacy of the chastity belt has never been clearly established. Love has ever had the last laugh on the locksmith. Furthermore, the belief is now held by several eminent students of the question that the employment of the chastity belt was directly responsible for the rapid rise of a class of gentlemen extremely annoying to absent husbands because of their nimble and industrious fingers. As time passed and experience was passed along with it, respectable husbands found that not only were their women no longer secure but also neither were their treasure boxes and safe deposit vaults. This situation was just too bad. During foreign wars and crusades the activities of these notoriously home-loving picklocks became so widespread, in

fact so much in demand, that medieval locksmiths grew quite inured to the sound of ironical laughter.

But if conditions were loose in those days, they are running wild today. The time when women selected their nether garments logically has long since passed into oblivion. It is the regrettable tendency of the times for women to regard this item of their apparel not in the light of logic but rather in that of allurements. And men are just low enough to regard this change with approval. Even the name itself has fallen into disrepute, as if it suggested some humorous connotation. Whereas men with the utmost indifference still struggle along quite cheerfully with the old-fashioned and time-honored name of drawers—drawers plain and unvarnished—women have far outstripped them. Theirs must be known now by such frivolous and leading appellations as panties, scanties, briefs, fleshies, woolies, step-ins, dansettes, speedies, and other similar evocative terms. Bloomers, which at one time were considered no end daring, are today rarely if ever encountered in actual circulation, and then only after the most patient and exhaustive research for which the majority of men are constitutionally disqualified unless very carefully watched.

However, although these new underthings give rise to all sorts of nonsense, it must be admitted they are nice.

Jo's were, at any rate.

This morning, at about the same time the excellent Bishop was contemplating his equally excellent jaegers, Miss Josephine Duval, whose paternal grandmother still sipped her wine in France, rolled a body of the most disconcerting loveliness out of its bed. It was Jo's own body,

and she sat with it in lazy companionship on the bed's edge while she permitted several tremendous yawns to escape her recklessly red and rebellious lips. After this she stretched, and the effect was devastating. For a moment even the world must have paused in its revolutions. As the girl's small and not unbecoming feet sought with all their ten useless toes a pair of mules that were a sheer waste of time, her cool white arm automatically reached out and the hand on the end of it affixed itself to one of the garments under discussion. Whether they were briefs, scanties, or step-ins is an open question, but for the sake of this history they might just as well be called step-ins. Bending a dark red head of tousled hair over her trophy, she allowed her brown eyes to consider it none too favorably.

They were far from being the step-ins of her choice. However, many a girl would have thought herself fortunate to have been caught in a gale in such a pair. In a nutshell, which would nearly have accommodated them, they were good, middle-class businesslike-looking step-ins without a great deal of foolishness about them, yet sufficiently attractive to do justice to their subject. Josephine's French blood cried for fairer step-ins, while her French sense of thrift assured her that for a hard-working secretary who spent most of her time sitting they were altogether adequate.

"If I didn't have to work so darned hard and scrimp so much," yawned Jo to herself, "I'd buy me some bang-up underthings, wouldn't I just. Regular knockouts. Black and very, very bad."

With a supple flexing of her body which should have been prohibited by an act of Congress, she shook off her nightgown and snapped on her step-ins. The movement combined the speed of a fireman with the deftness of a contortionist. Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she regarded her step-ins critically.

“Good enough for day-in-and-day-out service,” she decided, “but hardly suitable for occasions should they ever arise.”

To what occasions Jo was alluding, it would be better to leave to individual preference. Jo had her own clearly defined ideas about almost everything. For the most part they were uniformly unedifying. However, they enjoyed the advantage of having been dragged out into the open, where they operated in a state of healthy activity to say the least.

“Pay day today,” she gloated as she continued with her dressing. “A beggarly sum at that—a mere pittance. I’ll spend it all on underthings as soon as the office closes, see if I don’t. Even though a girl should be good, she doesn’t have to feel that way. Funny thing, I always feel at my best when I’m feeling thoroughly depraved. There’s no use of a girl trying to tell herself anything different, either. Women are born that way.”

Accordingly her thoughts veered to Mr. Peter Duane Van Dyck, who at that moment was very busy doing things about his own drawers, as were thousands of other New Yorkers of high and low degree.

Peter Van Dyck was of high. He scarcely realized the fact, and whenever it was forced upon him by his relatives he showed a decided lack of appreciation. His respect for the

traditions of his ancestors, those early Dutch settlers, had been interred with their bones. He was Josephine's employer—her boss. She was his secretary, and it would not have required much enterprise on his part to make her even more. As it was, he admired the young lady for her efficiency, but was alarmed by her bold eyes, which to his way of thinking, had a suspiciously bad look about them. They were not good for the coffee business, whose destiny he guided along well-established lines.

"He's an old stick," Jo decided as she tightened up her stockings so that they gleamed on her well-turned legs. "Doesn't seem to know I have these. Not an eye in his stupid head. I'll make him know, doggone it."

And Jo deftly curbed her abundance within the delicate web of a brazen brassière.

3

To Peter Duane Van Dyck drawers presented no difficulty. He never considered them at all. They were merely a part of the scheme of things. He disregarded drawers. Automatically he changed them. Not every day, like other nice men of his station, but whenever the idea occurred to him. Sometimes he lost his drawers; that is, misplaced them, forgot where he had seen them last.

This morning he was in this quandary. With exasperated diligence he searched for his drawers, completely blind to the fact that he had lazily left them crumpled in his trousers upon retiring the previous night. It was not a Van Dyck trait, this leaving of his drawers in his trousers. It was a habit characteristic of Peter—one of his little labor-saving devices

which would have been revolting to the long line of Van Dycks from which he had sprung without any great show of agility.

Abandoning all hope of ever seeing his drawers again, Peter put on a new pair and dragged on his trousers after them. The fact that the old pair remained untidily wedged in his trousers caused him no discomfort at the moment. He ascribed the slight fullness on the right side—a tendency to bind, as it were—to some inexplicable caprice of his shirt tail. He would deal with his shirt tail later if in the meantime it did not adjust itself of its own accord. Shirt tails usually did in the course of a day, he had found. He hoped this one would, because he hated to trouble himself with such matters. It would have been wiser had he done so.

He did things to his sandy-colored hair, decided after a quick scrutiny of his vaguely blue eyes that they had a peculiarly harassed appearance, wiped some dried soap off his right ear, and left the room wearing two pairs of drawers and carrying one towel. On the Van Dyck landing he became conscious of the towel still clutched in his hand. Draping it over the bare expanse of a statue of an Aphrodite seemingly seized with qualms or cramps in a near-by niche, Peter Van Dyck permitted his five feet ten inches of body to find its way downstairs unassisted by any mental effort.

He entertained hopes of filling it with coffee and lots of breakfast. Peter was thirty-four. Also, he was hungry.

4

An hour or so later it was Miss Yolanda Bates Wilmont's turn to deal with her drawers. Rightly speaking, Yolanda

Bates Wilmont seldom if ever dealt with her drawers in person. She had a maid to deal with them for her. And to continue rightly speaking, what the maid dealt with could not by the wildest stretch of the coarsest imagination be called drawers. They were creations—fragile poems done in gossamer and lace—real lace. In fact everything was real about them except the woman they adorned. She was too good to be true, but she did not realize this. She considered herself a young lady of the highest principles and the most unassailable morals. With the exception of herself and a few chosen members of her social standing she heartily disapproved of any unnecessary display of feminine blandishments. With herself it was quite different. Yolanda Bates Wilmont sincerely believed that she knew as no other woman, exactly what she was doing, that she was by the divine right of birth the arbiter of good taste and refinement, that she had limbs whereas the general run of girls merely had legs and far too much of them.

As she gazed at herself in the long pier mirror this morning, she was thinking quite unconsciously that it was a fortunate thing indeed so few girls could afford to wear such lovely step-ins as hers. The average woman could not be trusted in so expensively chic underthings. No telling what one of those lower-class girls might do if she suddenly found herself in possession of such a pair. Certainly she would not keep them to herself. No. The cheap, feminine display complex would get the better of what little scruples she had, if any. The modern girl was permitted to show too much of herself as it was. Take the beaches and the buses and the dance halls—disgusting. Such liberties should be enjoyed

only by members of exclusive house parties and by girls who knew how to be careless without being common—girls whose reputation needed no protection. The same held for drinking and all the other amenities of life. Her one regret was that when she should marry Peter Van Dyck, as had been ordained from the beginning of time, she could not have her baby in a different and hitherto unattempted manner. In a fleece-lined capsule, for instance, or a handsomely tailored cowl. The usual way was far too popular.

After the maid had done every possible thing for her, except think and breathe, Yolanda allowed herself to be helped into a ravishing negligee. This was negligent to the point of aggressive indecency, but was perfectly all right on Yolanda because she was so utterly different from other women, although, from the various samples of herself she so generously displayed, the untutored eye would have gained the impression that she was made very much in accordance with the usual specifications.

Also the eye—even the untutored one—would have gained the impression that these specifications had been most skillfully carried out. Yolanda was a good-looking girl, well-built, attractively colored, and perfectly finished. There were deep blue eyes, fine golden hair, vivid lips, and a healthy outer layer of pink and white satin-smooth skin.

Yet beneath the outer layer Yolanda was exactly like every other woman who had ever entertained the illusion that she was different from all of her sisters. Nor would Yolanda's highly refined reactions have been especially

cordial had anyone taken the trouble to supply her with this gratuitous piece of information.

No one ever did.

5

In quite another quarter of the city Aspirin Liz heaved her generous bulk out of bed and wearily dragged a pair of tent-like bloomers over enough body to make two of Yolanda's.

Grunting comfortably as she reached for the kettle sequestered in a dark closet, she proceeded to make herself some coffee. Also she found time to take a couple of aspirins, for which she was well named. These little duties being performed, and a shirt and flowered dressing gown added to her toilette, she collapsed in a chair and gloomily considered a hole that had but recently appeared in her bloomers. True, they were old bloomers, but still that hole had no right to be where it was. And it was not the first time either.

As Aspirin Liz regarded this new evidence of the bloomers' unworthiness her heart was filled with bitterness and indignation against the low-lives who had made the bloomers as well as the dirty dogs who had tricked her into buying them.

"Never put enough reinforcement into the damn things," she grumbled to herself, little realizing that hers was a figure that demanded more in the line of reinforcement than either the looms or sewing machines could profitably afford to supply. "Always busting out in a fresh spot like one of those all-fired Holland dykes."

Idly her mind drifted back through the years until she saw again a small boy thrusting some part of his body through a hole in a dyke. Just what part of his body it was remained a little vague to Aspirin Liz, but she was reasonably sure it was either an arm or a leg or a foot. It might even have been a finger to begin with, and later on an arm. She knew the little boy had not stuck his head through the hole, because her own common sense, of which she had a lot, convinced her that no little boy could have been as big a damn fool as all that.

She had always liked that story as a child. Game little beggar, that boy. As she had progressed through life, she had kept her eyes peeled for such a youth but had never come across one, although she had met many who had played games, and not very nice games at that. Even then they had cheated.

There was hardly anything Aspirin Liz did not know about men, and even less to their credit. They drank and cursed and treated women like hell and left the place all messed up. The more work you did for a man, the more things he could think up for you to do. If God had only made men more like animals, more like dogs, for instance, without any too much brains, things would be a great deal easier for women. But unfortunately men had brains, mean, bad-acting brains that kept interfering with the business of living. Women could handle their bodies all right, but the devil himself could not deal with a man's brains.

Aspirin Liz picked up last night's newspaper and broodingly considered a salaciously illustrated underwear advertisement.

“Wouldn’t have lasted a minute in my day,” she told herself as she studied the delicate lines of a pair of step-ins. “Yanked ’em clean off you, they would. Nowadays everything’s so fancy. Didn’t need all that nonsense when I was a girl. God knows nothing could have been more discouraging than those long, dangling, iron-clad, rock-girt flannels I grew up in, yet everybody seemed to do pretty well in spite of ’em. Drawers were drawers in those days. And when you took ’em off you knew you had ’em off. No two ways about it. Now take these makeshift bloomers....”

It does not really matter where Aspirin Liz took her makeshift bloomers. She was always taking them somewhere. This morning, as on every morning, she had a bit of a headache. Perhaps a spot of gin would help. She took one. If it did not help her head it did at least make her solitary existence a little more endurable. Another cup of coffee and a fag. Liz yawned and stretched her heavy frame.

Once she had been an artist’s model and very much in demand, very much in the front of things. Now ... oh, hell, a woman couldn’t keep her figure always. Use it while you have it and then forget it. So said Liz.

But she could never quite forget the figure of her heyday, for what it had once been was still hanging in several New York galleries she occasionally visited when all other comforts failed.

“Got to find a needle and thread,” muttered Aspirin Liz, “and do something about these bloomers before the whole damn dyke pours through. Game little nipper, that kid was. Must have been his leg.”

6

When Little Arthur exhumed himself from a disorderly pile of bedclothing and stood up, one of New York's most astute pickpockets was once more on his feet. But unlike Mr. Peter Duane Van Dyck, Little Arthur did not have to look for his drawers. He already had them on. Little Arthur had slept in his drawers, as was his invariable rule.

Gentlemen devoted to Little Arthur's profession frequently find it the wisest policy to sleep that way. Even a pickpocket has some qualms about making a surreptitious exit when clad only in nothing. The criminal classes are notoriously more modest, more observant of the little niceties of convention than those who remain smugly within the boundaries of the law. Little Arthur would have willingly faced arrest and long detention rather than to have presented an unadorned rear view to a callously jeering group of pursuing Irish minions of the law.

Yet even though Little Arthur habitually slept in his drawers, he was not altogether unmindful of them. This morning as he moved round his room he was thinking in a dim way about the state and efficacy of the miserably shabby garments he was wearing. They were unpicturesque, to say the least. Little Arthur felt they did not do him justice. The things he had on had never been intended to do any man justice. However, they were amusing, assuming one recovered from the shock of seeing them in action.

Nevertheless those drawers meant everything to their wearer. That is literally the truth. Yet, truthfully speaking, they were not drawers at all. They were a complete costume, a sort of overall arrangement that concealed the

facts about Little Arthur from his scraggy neck to his pipe-stem ankles. A visitor from Mars would have found it difficult to believe that the body within was human.

However, the parts of Little Arthur that one was permitted to see were not entirely unprepossessing. He had a brisk little face, hardly any hair to speak of, and a devouringly alert pair of mild blue eyes. Frequently Little Arthur took those eyes to the movies, where they wept copiously over the sad parts and sparkled with pleasure when virtue triumphed and won its own reward.

Little Arthur's thoughts were now toying with the subject of drawers. He was discontented with his present ones. He felt that he deserved a new deal.

"Can't very well snatch a pair of drawers off a customer's legs," he regretfully observed to himself. "Funny thing, that. Easier to steal a man's purse than his drawers."

Second-story men were lucky. They could steal all the drawers they needed—more drawers, in fact, than a man could reasonably use, although second-story work probably was exceedingly trying on drawers. Take a pickpocket now. A pickpocket was by the very nature of his calling entirely cut off from drawers as a source of loot. Oh, well, a dip should not expect to have everything. He was better off as he was. Climbing had always made him dizzy even as a boy. A man should stick to the job he was best fitted for instead of drifting from pillar to post. Never establish yourself that way. Little Arthur felt grieved over the fate of rolling stones. If he had a good day today, Little Arthur promised his legs a new pair of drawers.

With this promise in mind the weird-looking little man retrieved a last night's edition of the morning's paper from the floor and ran a professional eye over the list of public events.

CHAPTER ONE

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An Embarrassing Situation

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Van Dyck Coffee had been responsible for keeping more generations of New Yorkers awake than had the product of any other importer in lower Manhattan. In the early days of the company's activities the Van Dycks had endeavored to popularize the beverage among various tribes of the less homicidally inclined Indians. However, finding that these original Americans seemed to prefer gin almost as avidly as Americans do today, the cannily hospitable old Dutchmen promptly broke out the square bottles and prospered greatly thereby.

With this phase of the business the current generation of Van Dycks habitually dealt with commendable vagueness. Inasmuch as the Van Dycks had been fairly respectable even before they took up the New World in a big way, it never occurred to their descendants that their present exalted state was established on the hang-overs of a great multitude of red men.

Peter Van Dyck knew far less about coffee than had any of his predecessors. He was somewhat less backward where gin was concerned. Peter found it difficult to break himself of the habit of regarding coffee in the light of a personal indulgence rather than as a commercial asset. Some mornings it tasted better than others. That was about the

extent of Peter's knowledge. This morning, he decided, it did not taste so good.

As he left his house in the West Seventies he was wondering vaguely why his eyes had such a harassed expression and his coffee such a comfortless flavor. The season of the year was propitious—late spring with summer lounging among the buds. Business not too bad when compared with that of his competitors. As a matter of fact the morning paper had announced the untimely end of one of his closest rivals, yet even this gratifying occurrence failed to lend zest to Peter's day. Something was radically wrong with him.

Then, suddenly, a thought rose bleakly from his subconscious mind and flopped down heavily on his conscious one, where it lay like a dead weight. This afternoon his Aunt Sophie, his statuesque and painfully modern Aunt Sophie who presided over his household, was giving a cocktail party for Yolanda Bates Wilmont. And at this party the cat which had long since been out of the bag was obligingly going to crawl back into it again to permit itself to be officially released. After today he, Peter, would no longer be a freelance in the courts of light dalliance. He would be irrevocably engaged to Yolanda with all her beauty and wealth and firmly rooted convictions. This knowledge somehow failed even more lamentably than had the sudden departure of his business rival to add zest to Peter's day. Yes, there was no doubt about it. Something was radically wrong with him. His responsive faculties seemed to have become strangely atrophied by the thought of life and Yolanda Wilmont.

For a few brief moments Peter's troubled blue eyes dwelt on the lines of a well-formed girl sitting opposite him in the downtown subway express. Little suspecting the highly improper trend of his thoughts, Peter felt that he would like to lie down quietly somewhere with that girl and talk the situation over. He felt the need of a female confessor as well as entertainer. There had been too few women in his life. With a sense of panic he began to realize this as the imminence of his official betrothal confronted him. Quickly he averted his eyes. The girl was chewing gum. This girl, in spite of her lines, was definitely out of the picture. Well, was not life exactly like that? At its most alluring moments it suddenly began to chew gum in one's face. Revolting, Peter shrank slightly and returned to his paper.

It was not until he had reached the seclusion of his private office that the extra pair of drawers he was unconsciously wearing began to manifest themselves. Even then he was not aware of the exact nature of his difficulties. He experienced merely a sense of unwonted fullness—a growing sensation of insecurity. Suddenly, however, as the drawers gathered headway his alarm and discomfort became acute. In his anxiety forgetting that his office though private was not quite impenetrable, Peter allowed his trousers to descend several inches, the better to deal with the perplexing situation.

Miss Josephine Duval, armed with the morning mail, entered the room quietly and closed the door behind her. For a moment she allowed her cool but curious gaze to dwell on the orange and black stripes decorating all that could be

seen of the southern exposure of Mr. Peter Van Dyck's shorts.

"Looks like summer awnings," she observed more to herself than to her employer. "And to think I never suspected!"

With a low moan of distress Peter's body went into a huddle as only a body can when plunged into such a situation.

"Haven't you got sense enough to get out?" he demanded, twisting a strained but indignant face over his shoulder.

"I have the sense, but not the power," Miss Duval retorted calmly. "Your condition has robbed me of that."

"For God's sake," the man almost chattered, "hurry! Suppose someone should come in and find you here?"

"I'm all right," said Miss Duval. "It's you who would give rise to comment."

Something was slipping farther and farther down the right leg of Peter's trousers, slipping stealthily but relentlessly to the floor. And the trouble was that Peter, not suspecting the presence of a stowaway, visualized the worst. What a fearful picture he must be presenting from the rear, yet the front view would not improve matters any. How could such a demeaning thing happen to a man in this day and age?

"Won't you please go away?" he asked in an agitated voice. "What would people think?"

"Well," replied Jo with dispassionate deliberation, "from the trouble you seem to be having with your trousers,

people might get the impression you'd asked me in here to watch you do tricks with your shorts."

"What's that!" exclaimed Peter, more upset by the girl's attitude than by her words. "Oh, you're fired. There's no doubt about that. This time you're through for good."

"Do you realize that I could play you a decidedly dirty trick?" Jo inquired lightly.

"What do you mean?" asked Peter, his fingers furtively fumbling with various buttons.

"If I should scream now——" began Jo, but was interrupted by Peter's heartfelt, "Oh, my God!"

"If I should begin to shout and rush about," she continued, as if savoring the idea, "there's not a jury in the world that wouldn't convict you of at least breach of promise."

"Swear to God I never knew there was such a woman in the world," Peter Van Dyck replied in an emotional voice as if appealing to some unseen audience. "If you'll only go away and let me finish what I'm doing you'll not be fired."

"How about all this mail?" she demanded.

"Am I in a condition to go into that now?"

"I should say not," said the girl. "You don't know how awful you are."

"Then don't trouble to tell me. I can very well imagine."

"Before I go," Josephine continued, placing the letters on the desk, "would you mind explaining what was in your mind when you got yourself into this terrible condition?"

"I don't know," Peter answered. "And I fail to see how it's any of your business."

“Well, it’s a sight a young lady doesn’t see every day of her life,” replied Jo. “Especially in an office building and at this time of day.”

“I don’t make a practice of it,” Peter retorted, with an attempt at dignity.

“I wouldn’t,” Miss Duval assured him. “There’s an unpleasant suggestion of senility about it. And by the way, if you’re looking for an extra pair of drawers you’ll find them sticking out of the right leg of your trousers. Although why you want two pairs I can’t for the life of me understand. The ones you have on are giddy enough.”

As the door closed quietly on his tormentor, Peter Van Dyck reached down and, seizing the offending drawers, hurled them furiously in the general direction of the waste basket, upon the edge of which they sprawled unbecomingly.

“Damn my absent mind,” he muttered, “and damn that woman’s impudence. What a decidedly unpleasant occurrence! She actually seemed to enjoy it. These modern girls....”

A few minutes later Jo briskly followed her perfunctory knock into the room and found her employer wearily seated at his desk. He was gloomily scanning a letter.

“Oh,” exclaimed Miss Duval amicably. “Quite an improvement. All tucked in, I see.”

Before Peter had time to think up a fitting retort, William, the office handy man, entered the room and cast about for something on which to exercise his talents. Spying the drawers dangling over the waste-paper basket, he held them aloft admiringly.

“Fine pair o’ drawers, these,” he observed in a conversational tone of voice. “A real fancy pair. Begging your pardon, sir, but are they yours, Mr. Peter?”

Mr. Peter preferred not to notice William’s polite inquiry. Jo saw fit to bring it to his attention.

“William wants to know,” she said in level tones as she seated herself in a chair with her dictation pad open on her knee, “William is anxious to find out if those—if that florid object belongs to you.”

“Tell him they don’t,” Peter mumbled unhappily.

“It would be more manly if you spoke of such things yourself,” the girl replied. “However—he says they’re not his, William.”

“Well, I’d like to know how they got here, then,” William continued stubbornly. “All spread out like that. They must be his.”

If William had not emptied many a waste-paper basket for Peter’s departed father, the man would have been fired on the spot. As it was, a friendship of many years now stood in serious danger of an open break.

“Is there any reason why you should doubt my word about those drawers?” Peter asked the man coldly. “Someone might have left them here as a sample.”

At this William shook the drawers playfully and chuckled his incredulity.

“Not these, Mr. Peter,” he declared. “We’re in the coffee business.”

“Well, even coffee merchants are supposed to have some self-respect,” replied Peter.

“Not the coffee merchant who wore these,” asserted William with a wise shake of his head. “Couldn’t keep much self-respect in them things. They’d suit my Alf to a tee. He’d go crazy about them drawers with their funny little pink dots.”

“I’ll damn well go crazy myself if you don’t get them out of my sight,” Peter assured his handy man.

“Yes, William,” put in Jo Duval. “Why not take them through the office and inquire of the gentlemen if they have lost a pair? We might be able to find a home for them that way.”

“No need to do that,” said Peter hurriedly. “Take ’em home to Alf with my compliments. Do anything with them you like so long as you let me hear no more upon the subject. I’m completely exhausted by drawers.”

“Thanks, Mr. Peter,” the grateful man replied, giving the garment a possessive flirt as he made his way to the door. “As neat a little pair o’ drawers as I ever laid eye on. All full of funny pink spots, they are.”

“William is getting old,” observed Peter Van Dyck, to break the pause following the man’s departure. “I’ll have to lay him off with a pension one of these days.”

“Wouldn’t mind a little bit of that sort of thing myself,” replied Jo, carelessly crossing her legs and fixing her employer with a level gaze. “Why don’t you pension yourself off, for a change? You’re not interested in business.”

“What makes you say a thing like that?”

“Well, obviously a man who has such playful ideas in drawers can hardly be expected to keep his mind on work.”