

DAD ON DETECTION

Written for "The Listener"
by
DORIAN SAKER

MAYBE your family listens to thrillers the way mine does, but I'll bet that your old man doesn't sleuth you home after work and then say that you slouch like a homicidal maniac, or creep out on you in the kitchen after a dance and biff you over the head with his heaviest walking stick. But that's what mine did. The trouble with my old man is that he's too susceptible. He has to go the whole hog. A little while ago his craze was wrestling, and he went round pretending to be Earl McCready; now it's detection, mystery and horror, and he's Inspector Scott, Holmes, Poirot, Peter Wimsey and Mr. Reader, all rolled into one. And what's more, some fool crony of his has given him a revolver, and last night he hit the Jones's cat with it, and it squealed all night in the basement.

Our Aunt Emily

I'm fed up with it, but I admit it did us a good turn the other day when our Aunt Emily rang up to say she was coming to stay a couple of weeks with us. Now, Aunt Em's a dear old thing, but she keeps dogs—three cocker spaniels to be exact, and she carts them round the place like a toilet outfit. If you have Aunt Em you have those dogs, and she's as touchy about those dogs as Hitler is about the French fleet. You only have to spit on one of those dogs and she's threatening to ring up the S.P.C.A.



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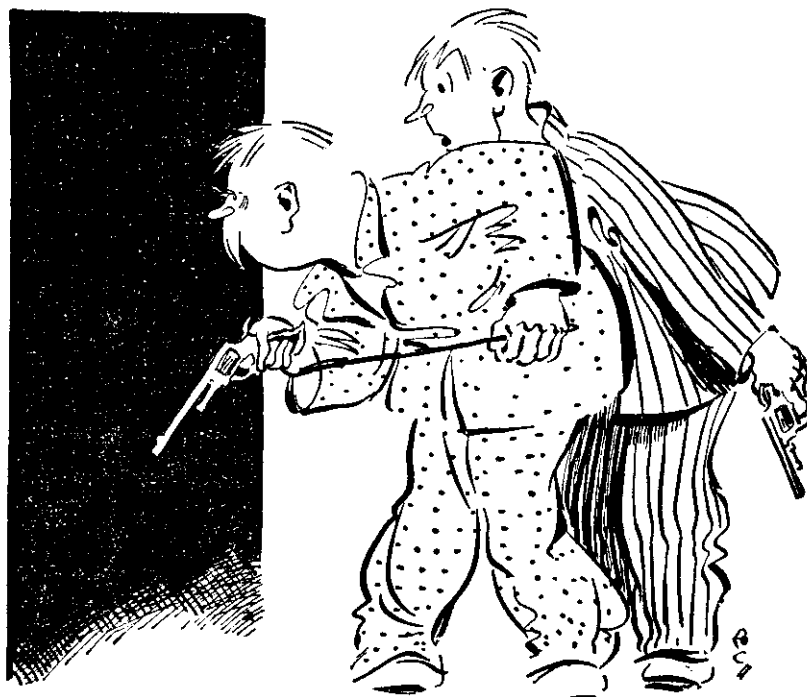
The first thing the old man said to Aunt Em when she arrived was, "Your bootmaker's blind in one eye and had the measles two years ago." But Aunt Em responded coldly that she mended all her shoes with stick-ons. This was bad because it deprived the old man of his pet phrase. Elementary, my dear Watson. After that he shut himself up in his den for the afternoon and wouldn't speak. But he bucked up at tea-time and asked if she'd read the latest Agatha Christie, because he thought it was darn good. Aunt Em said that she never read trash like that, and that she thought it surprising that anyone with a single grain of gumption could be so stupid as to imagine that *that* was literature. That finished it. They were at each other's throats and the old man kicked off by treading on the tail of Toto, the favourite of the cockers. Aunt Em leapt up from the table, knocking over a whole jar of salad dressing in the process, and tearfully accused him of "beastly cruelty" and "Hitlerish sadism," but the old man only grunted and said, Why weren't the damn things trained to get out of a fellow's way. Decent dogs weren't allowed inside. And he added sotto voce that they probably carried things you didn't like around, anyway.

Dogs Not Allowed!

Unfortunately Aunt Em, whose ears are pretty long at hearing things they shouldn't hear, caught his last words, and stammered that her dogs had never had "one" in their lives, that they were bathed scrupulously every Friday morning, and that you could even sleep with them if you wanted to. The old man remarked that other people could turn their house into a dog kennel if they liked, but no dogs were going to sleep in his bed, or even in his house for that matter.

This was where Aunt Em started to cry, and said that if she couldn't have the dogs in her room she'd have to go somewhere else for the night because she couldn't bear to leave them on their own, even for one night. She would have to go to a hotel. Then Dad accidentally kicked Rosalie, who was smelling the cuffs of his trousers, and all three of them started yelping at once. Then Dad said that he'd shoot the lot of them if they didn't shut up. What with the dogs barking and Aunt Em having hysterics in a corner, and Mater trying to pour oil on the troubled waters, and Dad trying to get Daventry, the neighbours must have thought us a madhouse.

Finally we put things straight by means of a compromise. The dogs were to sleep in the wash-house on an old pair of Dad's trousers, and Aunt Em was to have the back bedroom adjoining them so that she could hear them if one had a tummy-ache or whatever else temperamental cocker spaniels get in the middle of the night.



"What did you hear?" I whispered

Sounds in the Night

Then after a good deal of bickering on both sides we all got off to bed, and when I had read another thirty pages of the latest Wodehouse I sleepily turned out the light and started dreaming of goodness knows what. Whatever I was dreaming about was knocked on the head pretty suddenly by someone saying in my ear in a deathly whisper, Take this. Come quick and don't make a sound! There's someone downstairs. Before I knew what had happened I felt something cold in my hand. I nearly died with horror. It was a revolver, and probably loaded. Cursing inwardly at the old man's histrionics and at thrillers in general, I followed him to the door. He looked all ghostly in his white pyjamas with a revolver in one hand and a poker in the other.

What did you hear? I whispered as we halted in pitchy darkness at the head of the stairs.

A sound like someone opening a safe, he whispered back.

It must be the cat at that leg of mutton, I said.

A money safe, you fool.

I didn't know we had one, I said. But he couldn't hear. He was already creeping down the stairs.

Put 'Em Up, You Hound!

Tensely I followed; I had completely forgotten Aunt Em, and I was only dead scared that Dad would fire at something, and do some damage, to say nothing of plugging either himself or me. I was so scared I stumbled on the carpet and pulled the trigger, but apparently Dad had forgotten to load the thing because the only result was a click.

But Dad heard it and yelled out, Put 'em up, you hound! I began to think there was something, that it hadn't been

my revolver clicking, because there were shuffling sounds at the foot of the stairs.

Put 'em up, Dad yelled again, or this time I fire! I was praying that he had forgotten to load his gun too, when there was a flash and an awful roar.

Put on the lights, Dad yelled delightedly, I've got him. Quick, he said, or he'll get away. I crept over and switched on the lights. The gun was still smoking in Dad's hand, and from the foot of the stairs to the kitchen door stretched a long trail of blood. Dad was at the door in a second.

Come out or I fire through the door, he roared in his best Edgar Wallace manner.

Meanwhile the Mater in her dressing gown had crept fearfully to the edge of the stairs to see what all the disturbance was about. I told her to keep out of the way or something terrible might happen, and crept behind Dad. Apparently he had decided not to fire through the door because he gave it a shove and switched on the lights.

All's Well

Then I looked at Dad and Dad looked at me, and we both looked back to the centre of the linoleum where Toto stood feebly licking a paw in a pool of blood.

There's the burglar, I said. Give me that gun, or you'll go and shoot someone important. You're not safe to have around the house.

What will Aunt Em say, Dad said.

What won't she say, I said. I'm glad I didn't do it.

I could swear I heard a real burglar, he said.

It'll take more than that to convince Aunt Em that you didn't do it on purpose, I said. Ring up a vet.

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