

# A Funny Thing Happened to Me ....

by Sue Evans

Catherine was late. She stood pacing outside her office building, hoping to catch a passing taxi, but so far none of the drivers had obliged. She knew Joe would be waiting at court for her to bring her hurriedly typed-up notes, which he urgently needed for the case they were tied up in and would be pacing, just as she was, or tapping his fingers impatiently on a desk and cursing under his breath.

No more than I am, Maxwell, she thought, irritated by her seeming inability to catch up over the past week.

And this morning she had inexplicably overslept. No, she corrected herself. I hadn't wanted to wake up. She had felt so close to Vincent last night.

The previous evening she had gone Below, to find Vincent, Mouse and the older children crammed into his chamber, watching a rather bashed up portable video that was running off an old car battery. It was showing an old gangster movie centred around pool halls and the illicit liquor trade, set in the prohibition days.

"What's going on?" she whispered to one of the kids. "I didn't think Father approved of television."

"Not TV," said Mouse. "Video. Old, broke, Mouse fixed it."

"Where did you find it, Mouse?"

"Garbage bin."

She looked over at Vincent; he seemed engrossed in the movie, but he felt her gaze and turned to look at her and, grinning in Mouse's direction, shrugged his shoulders.

"All we need is a fire," she murmured, wistfully, sitting herself next to him, on a footstool.

"A fire?" he enquired, puzzled.

"An evening at home with the kids," she whispered back, a little ruefully.

"Oh," and he put an arm around her. "I'm sorry, I'm afraid this is the best I can do."

She gave him her warmest smile and put her arms round his middle, snuggling her head into the comfort of his shoulder. "This'll do just fine," she whispered.

She tried to follow the movie, but found it difficult, having missed the beginning, and soon she was drifting off to sleep.

Of course, as far as she was concerned, she was still watching the movie. It didn't even strike her as strange that the characters in the film all seemed to be people that she knew.

There was an old man and his wife being held hostage by the Mob, as retribution for something; she couldn't immediately figure out what. She took this in her stride and didn't even do a double-take over Father being married to Mary; it seemed quite reasonable.

The man holding them at gunpoint seemed to be Elliot Burch; she noticed how friendly he was being to the hostages, even charming. Trust Elliot, she thought.

There was also a private detective with another face she recognized - Joe Maxwell, but in the film his name was Pete and his friends all thought it very funny to give him the nick-name 'Perpetually Puzzled Pete'. He was trying to find the whereabouts of the old couple and wasn't having much luck.

Back at the old warehouse, where Father and Mary were being kept by Elliot, he seemed to be

waiting for someone called 'The Boss'.

"And who precisely is this 'Boss' of yours?" enquired Father, testily.

A rather charming smile crossed Elliot's face. "Well now, I'm afraid that would be telling, wouldn't it? Besides, if you knew his name, it might just come about that you wouldn't live very long; so I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you. Now, please, rest yourselves. You've had quite a shock you know, and it might catch up with you."

Father looked very disgruntled, but he said no more.

Just then, there was a noise downstairs of a door being opened and Elliot backed up to the door of the office and, still covering them with his Thompson, even though they were tied up, opened the door and looked out and down, past the catwalk to the ground floor, to see who had come in. Then he turned back to Father.

"It's all right; the waiting is over. He's arrived. You know, you should be flattered; he's come here just to see you two. The Boss NEVER does that - hardly ever leaves his permanent address."

"And where might that be?" asked Father, hoping for some crumb of evidence. Elliot just grinned and stepped back inside the office, leaving the door open. A few moments later, the Boss walked in and Father and Mary both gasped.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Mary.

"YOU!" exclaimed Father.

"Yes, Jacob. Me." The sepulchral tones rolled around the room, making Catherine think of a very sad Father Christmas.

Good job he's not carrying a sack, she thought. ... 'cos there's no way he's ever going to say 'ho-ho-ho'.

It was Paracelsus.

"Why are you keeping us here?" demanded Father.

"Because of your precious son," Paracelsus replied.

Mary shivered. "What has Vincent to do with you?" she asked, a little quivery.

"He's cut short a valuable source of my income."

"Whisky," snorted Father, disgusted.

"Yes, Jacob, whisky. My whisky."

First gold, now whisky, thought Catherine wryly. He's getting worse.

"You'll never catch him," stated Father. "Out there (meaning the General Public) they call him 'The Invisible Avenger'," he said (meaning Vincent).

"Oh, he'll come to save you." gloated Paracelsus. "Rescue you from my clutches," and he chuckled evilly.

Catherine was almost disappointed that he didn't rub his hands together as well.

All of a sudden, there was the sound of a scuffle on the ground floor of the warehouse and Elliot stuck his head out the door once more.

"Well, well, if it isn't 'Perpetually Puzzled!'" he exclaimed, cheerfully. "I wonder how he actually managed to find us?"

"I presume they have him?" asked Paracelsus. His voice had become positively midnight.

"Jock and Ugly? Sure, Boss; with a guy like Maxwell, whaddaya expect?"

Catherine thought that was a bit unfair. Joe wasn't ineffective, just a little bit ... naive.

"Get him up here."

"Yes, Boss." Elliot handed the sub-machine gun over to Paracelsus and left the office, clattering down the steps to the warehouse floor in his snazzy two-tone shoes. A fair amount of shouting went on - coming mainly from Joe, (or rather, Pete) - and then more clattering on the stairs, as the third addition to Paracelsus' little collection was brought up to the office to join the other two.

"How did you find me?" Paracelsus enquired. "By accident, I presume?"

"I was following a lead," replied Maxwell, defiantly.

"He was nosing around the uptown joint and was given one of our famous 'hot tips'," laughed Elliot. Pete glowered, but only said, "You won't get away with this."

Paracelsus just smiled.

"So what's going on here, anyway?" asked Pete.

Father opened his mouth to tell him, but before he could do so, Paracelsus put a question to Pete.

"Who actually hired you to find these people?"

"That's none of your business."

"I don't have to hurt you, Maxwell, to get an answer to my question." He pointed the gun - which he hadn't returned to Elliot - at Mary. Elliot, who was leaning with his back up against the door, twitched a bit, but said nothing.

"You wouldn't," said Maxwell.

"Wouldn't I?" threatened Paracelsus, silkily, leaning closer until the barrel was almost against Mary's throat.

"Stop this!" shouted Father. "We used to be friends, once."

"And what kind of friend did you turn out to be, Jacob?"

"You can't do this," fumed Pete, struggling to free himself from the ropes he'd been secured with.

Whilst Paracelsus' attention was distracted, Elliot edged away from the door and adjusted something in the back of the waistband of his pinstripes, suddenly aware that he might have to be ready for an unseen eventuality.

*Good for you, Elliot, thought Catherine. We might reform you yet.*

But meanwhile, Pete had had enough.

"All right, all right, I'll tell you; just don't shoot the old girl, okay?"

(Father looked a little peeved that Joe would have referred to Mary as an 'old girl'. Catherine found such seriousness a tiny bit amusing; after all, she was sure Mary didn't mind - just so long as she didn't get shot.)

Back at the film, Pete was about to spill the beans about his client, crossing his fingers behind his back (because that was where they were tied) and hoping that she could look after herself.

*Now how did she know that? Maxwell hadn't said anything in the film about his client being a woman, hmmm, interesting.*

Anyway ...

"The woman who came to see me ...

"Evening, everyone."

It was Vincent, standing in the office doorway, in an even snazzier pinstripe suit than Elliot's and his hair was swept back over his shoulders, also like Elliot's, but Vincent's was much, MUCH longer.

Elliot was jealous. The white of Vincent's two-tone brogues positively sparkled - much like his teeth, which he was flashing in what was, for him, a broad grin and his trilby was perched on his head at an even more rakish angle than Elliot's.

*God, he looks GORGEOUS,* thought Catherine. *No wonder Elliot's jealous. But how do I KNOW he's jealous? ... Well, he LOOKS jealous ... and how does Vincent get that hat to sit so well on top of all that ... LOVELY... hair ...?*

The whole effect was finished off by an M16 held lazily,<sup>1</sup> but no less menacingly aimed at Paracelsus, in his right hand.

*Eh? Where did he get an M16? This is an old-time gangster movie. Oh well ...*

"This M16 is MUCH faster than that Thompson," imparted Vincent conversationally. "I can still kill the old lady FIRST," gloated Paracelsus.

"NOT ... if I aim at your hand."

"DRAT you!" cursed the Boss. "Why don't you DO something, Burch?"

Elliot opened his mouth, but when Vincent reached out his left hand, in a seemingly quite friendly manner and thoughtfully tapped his claws on his shoulder - rather too near his neck for comfort - Elliot had second thoughts and decided that he rather urgently, wanted to change sides. After all, this guy wasn't stopped on the way up, so he must have dealt with Jock and Ugly as well.

"Where are my men?" asked Paracelsus, slowly lowering the gun from Mary's neck, then backing into a corner and keeping his Thompson loosely on Vincent.

"Erm ... Mouse is playing with them. Don't worry, he won't hurt them; but it took him quite a long time to make the net and he must have SOME fun."

"May I?" asked Elliot, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Vincent removed his hand from Elliot's shoulder and opened the door for him to look out. Elliot stuck his head out of the door.

Mouse had strung up the two thugs in the aforementioned net, in which he'd first caught them. They were now suspended from a thick beam near the ceiling and Mouse was, rather enthusiastically, using them as a swing.

Elliot gulped and felt a little sorry for the two hoods; one of them looked quite green. Probably can't stand heights, he thought. He stuck his head back round the door and, looking at the Boss, nodded his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"How did you find me?"

"That is for me to know and you to forever wonder about," replied Vincent.

"It was that busybody, Chandler, wasn't it? That girlfriend of yours sticks her long nose into everything; one of these days she's going to lose it, along with the rest of her pretty face," said Paracelsus nastily, hoping to goad Vincent into making a wrong move.

"You're just hoping to goad me into making a wrong move," said Vincent with a knowing smile on his face. "It won't work."

"No, it won't," came a woman's voice from behind Paracelsus. Whoever she was she must have slipped in through the other door behind him, while Vincent had been talking. Paracelsus jerked forward an inch or two, as if he'd had a gun stuck in his back.

*Is that me?* thought Catherine. *I can't see; let me just ...* and she moved to get a better look. But there seemed to be someone rather tall in front of her ...

*... And she seemed to be covering him with a .22 Beretta.*

**Whaddaya know, I finally made it into the movies,** she thought. *Well, this IS interesting.*

"Just drop the gun," she said briskly, "and move into the centre of the room."

Glumly, Paracelsus obeyed. Vincent descended on him and, tossing her the M16, which she caught with practiced ease and producing a length of rope out of nowhere - Well, this IS the movies, she thought - tied him up.

Once he was firmly bound, Vincent looked over at Elliot and asked, "You still with him?"

In reply, Elliot began to untie the other captives. Catherine smiled and tucked the Beretta back in the top of her stocking. When she looked back up, it was to find the eye of nearly every male in the place, on her - except for Father and Vincent, of course.

Father was too busy fussing over Mary, but Vincent was rather too conspicuously checking Paracelsus' bonds, and even though his hat was tipped down over his eyes now, she could see that he was blushing.

*Oh you big softie*, she thought wistfully. The others she just stared at meaningfully, until they remembered to mind their own business.

Catherine drove Paracelsus - Elliot covering him with the Thompson - to the Police Station, where she handcuffed him to a drainpipe right outside the door, then telephoned them to let them know of their latest addition to their growing collection of doormats. (All right, so she'd handcuffed him to the BOTTOM stanchion of the drainpipe, which meant that anyone entering the police station had to either step over him or use him as a doormat. Of course, there was a third alternative; they could just not go into the station at all, which was most likely, the way Paracelsus was probably reacting to his situation - he'd been cursing a blue streak when they'd left him.)

Vincent and Mouse had simply melted back into the night - as was their wont - and a, by now, totally bewildered Joe (sorry, Pete), had been left to make his own way home with few words of explanation.

Cathy had agreed to say nothing of Elliot's involvement in the matter and he, in turn, had agreed to mend his ways.

He'd also tried to be VERY friendly with her, but a swift thump in the ribs had soon put him straight.

"One day, Chandler," he promised her.

"I'm afraid you'll have an almost interminable wait," she told him, firmly. They shook hands and parted company.

Catherine got back in her old Packard and drove round to the back-street Pool hall where Mouse like to play Pool (he didn't really understand the game, but by sheer force of genius he very rarely lost) and went in, hoping to find Vincent there. Mouse himself was playing on one of the back tables. As usual, he was winning. He went round the table like a mad thing, potting the balls any old how, but they nevertheless went where they were supposed to.

"Good game," he chortled, as Catherine came up to him.

"So I see. Mouse, are you sure you're not cheating?"

"How can he CHEAT? He doesn't even seem to know what the heck he's doing!" complained his opponent, leaning on his hardly-used cue and scratching his head.

Mouse grinned innocently and Catherine left them to it. She went on through to the back office and was greeted by pile after pile of suspiciously dinky cardboard boxes. Vincent was in back of them, with a docket sheet in his hand and was counting them.

"Vincent! What are you doing?"

"Counting."

"I can see that! What for? They're all going to be dumped down the drain, anyway."

"Father wants to make sure that we haven't 'lost' any."

She laughed. "He would."

"Where's Mouse?"

"Out in the hall, beating the pants off some poor sucker."

"Beating the ... oh, winning. Well, I need him to help me load all these boxes."

"I'll get him in here."

By now, Catherine had completely forgotten that this was supposed to be a movie and was beginning to really enjoy herself.

Once the boxes were loaded, they drove the lorry two blocks downtown to a deserted back alley and, uncovering a sewer pipe, proceeded to pour every bottle of whisky down its awaiting throat. It took them quite a long time, once or twice they were noticed by some wandering tramp or other, who couldn't believe it when they saw what Vincent and the others were doing - in fact they were more shocked by the disappearing whisky than they were by Vincent - but even in their normal befuddled state, they could see the RATHER long nails on Vincent's hands, (which he obviously didn't use to pick his teeth with) and decided to let the matter ride.

Once our intrepid heroes had finally completed their task, they all went to the movies.

It was one of those weird, fantastical stories, about some people who lived in secret tunnels under some city somewhere ...

They sat there, eating popcorn and just when they got to the romantic bit, with the Cinderella heroine and the ragged hero, Vincent turned his head to kiss his best girl; Catherine leaned forward to meet him halfway ...

... and woke up to find his nose about half an inch from her ear, snoring (purring?) very gently. He was fast asleep.

*I wonder ...*, she thought.

She contemplated for the tiniest, weepiest time, really, honestly - (well about twenty seconds) - waking up her sleeping beauty with the kiss she'd almost gotten; but finally decided against it. (She would have loved to have seen his reaction though.)

Instead, she tickled him under the chin and he lazily opened one eye and blinked at her. He looked a little surprised to find that he'd fallen asleep.

"Dreaming were you?" she asked gently.

"Well yes, so it seems. But I thought I was still watching the film."

"What happened?" she asked innocently.

"Well, Father and Mary were being held hostage by Elliot Burch - does he really look like that?" he asked, unthinkingly. "And there was Paracelsus peddling illicit whisky and I was stealing his stockpile, and you were there ..."

Catherine just smiled.

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"What's the excuse this time, Radcliffe?" Joe asked her, with exaggerated patience, when she finally rushed into the court house, holding out the papers.

"For what?" she asked, still preoccupied with her thoughts of the previous night.

Joe looked at his watch.

"Joe," she laughed, remembering his name in the dream, "You'd never believe me."