

Clothes Make the Man

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“I don’t like it,” Tango complained again. “I won’t feel right, walking up and down in that.”

“Shut up and put it on.” Mireault told him, and so, of course, Tango obeyed. Mireault was half the size but he was clever. If they had given Tango a tail, he would have put it between his legs when Mireault spoke.

“Now, see?” Mireault said. “What did I tell you? Looks good, doesn’t it? See, you’ve even got a whistle.”

“Not bad.” Tango had to admit, surveying himself in the mirror. He pushed out his mighty chest and threw back his broad shoulders. Even the Eel, the quick silent one who was Mireault’s working partner and who rarely opened his mouth, was stirred to speech. “Boy, ain’t he handsome!” he said.

No doubt about it, Tango made a noble sight. The policeman’s uniform might have been cut to his measure by the best tailor in Paris. His little eyes looked brighter beneath the visor of the jaunty cap; they almost looked intelligent.

“Stop gawking at yourself and wipe that dumb grin off your face,” Mireault said impatiently, “and listen. This is so simple a half-wit could do it, so maybe if you try hard you can too.”

With regret Tango turned away from the mirror. His broad forehead wrinkled in the painful expression that meant he was concentrating.

“All you do is walk up and down the street,” Mireault said. “Easy and slow, like a real cop on his beat. Then if anyone hears us working in the house they won’t get suspicious, seeing you. Keep walking until we come out, then hang around a few minutes covering us. That’s all there is to it. We’ll meet back here. Now you understand?”

“Sure,” Tango said, his eyes straying to the mirror.

“Then get going!” Mireault snapped.

Tango was a little nervous walking to the street. Mireault and the Eel had picked out, but nothing happened. It was a prosperous section, and in the dim glow of the shaded corner light Tango could see what handsome houses they were – sober, solid, well cared for. The house where the job was to be pulled was in the middle of the block, behind a garden wall. Mireault and the Eel had cased it thoroughly; there was a tin-can wall safe upstairs with a very comfortable load inside. Apparently the old-fashioned family didn’t believe in banks. Maybe they would, Mireault had said, after tonight.

Tango wondered what it would be like to live in so fine a house, but the effort of imagination was beyond him. He had seldom ever seen a street such as this one. He worked in the shabby quarters of Paris- a little purse-snatching, a little shoplifting; he even panhandled. Yes, he was good at panhandling. Timid businessmen usually came right across when Tango’s huge shoulders towered over them; they looked fearfully at the massive hands and dug for whatever change they had.

He sauntered down the pavement, turned at the corner and came back. Halfway, he saw the two shadowy figures slip over the garden wall and disappear. Mireault and the Eel were at work.

Tango fell to thinking of how he had looked in the mirror. With the impressive image vivid in his mind, he straightened his shoulders and threw out his chest again. Standing erect, he tried a salute. It felt good. He grinned, oddly pleased, and walked on.

It was while he was turning at the other corner that he saw the police lieutenant.

Such a sight was usually enough to send him traveling as rapidly as his feet would move. He stared in horror. He fancied that the lieutenant, approaching, was gazing at him curiously. Tango's body was rigid; his palms were sweating. With a tremendous effort he restrained the wild impulse to plunge away. He shuddered. Then, stiffly, with the lieutenant no more than a few feet from him, he raised his arm and saluted.

The lieutenant casually acknowledged the salute and passed by.

Tango stood peering after him. After a moment, he felt a peculiar gratification. "Say!" he said to himself. "Say, you see that? I salute, and he salutes right back. Say, that – that's pretty fine!"

It was extraordinary, the pleasure it gave him. He almost wanted to run up to the lieutenant and salute again. He threw back his shoulders straighter than ever and, erect and proud, walked down the pavement. At the corner he paused and rocked on his heels a moment as all policemen do.

"I guess I looked good to him," he told himself. "I guess he don't see many cops looking so good."

After a few more trips, he found an old lady hesitating on the corner. He saw her make two or three false starts to get across and each time nervously come back.

Tango did not even notice the plump-looking purse in her hand. He poised in front of her, saluted, and offered his arm. She looked at him with a sweet smile. "Oh, thank you, officer!" she said.

There was no traffic visible, but Tango held up his other arm majestically, as if halting a horde of roaring trucks. With infinite dignity they crossed to the other side. It was a pretty picture indeed.

"Thank you so much, officer!" she said.

"Please madam," Tango said, "don't mention it." He paused. "That's what we're here for, you know," he added. And, gallantly, he saluted again.

He stood proudly watching her retreating figure. Before she had quite disappeared, she glanced back to regard him with another smile. Tango stood so straight the cloth strained across his chest. With a flourish, he saluted once more.

He went down the block, saluting at intervals. An indefinable emotion was stirring in him. In all Paris there could have been no more perfect an example of the calm, strong, resourceful guardian of law and order.

A disheveled figure came weaving toward him out of the shadows. It was a man, waving his arms aggressively, shuffling his feet and muttering savage but unintelligible epithets. His glazed eyes fell upon Tango and he scowled, "Yea!" he cried. "Lousy cop!"

A deep sense of shock ran through Tango. "Here! Here!" he said. "Get along, get along."

"Big cowardly cop!" the drunk yelled. "Big bag of wind in a uniform! Beat up the little fellow and let the big crooks go. Thass all y' good for – beat up the little fellows an –"

A mingled emotion of outrage and anger grew in Tango. A flush rose to his face.

"I spit on you!" the drunk declared scornfully. "Bah! There!" And he suited the action to the words.

Something popped in Tango's head. His face was purple. He seized the other with one mighty hand, shook him ferociously and, without any clear idea of what he was going to do with him, dragged him off down the street.

Overawed, shaken out of his wits, the drunk was now passive and silent. But Tango was beside himself, and when, halfway down the block, two figures came skimming over the garden wall and landed on the pavement near him, he was in no mood to stop.

"You fool, what are you doing?" Mireault said in a furious whisper. "You want to ruin the whole job? Let go of him. Blockhead!" And he struck Tango across the cheek.

Indescribable emotions swirled in Tango's head. He remembered the lieutenant answering his salute; he remembered the old lady's look of gratitude and admiration; he remembered the splendid figure of himself in the mirror. And he remembered what the drunk had said.

He arose to the full pitch of a mighty furor. While Mireault and the Eel stared at him in sheer paralyzed horror, he stuffed the shiny whistle in his mouth and blew a salvo of blasts loud and long enough to bring all the police in Paris.

"Crooks, robbers!" he bellowed. "I arrest you. I arrest you in the name of the law!"