



the evening stenographer

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"the evening stenographer"

She watched him with hopeless tenderness as he clicked shut his briefcase and put on his hat. "Good night, Mister Black," she said, picking up her purse and steno machine bag.

"Good night, Miss Dale. And thanks for coming on such short notice," he answered. "I'll let the agency know when I need you again."

Though it was past midnight he didn't offer her lift and it didn't occur to her to ask. They left separately, he walking to his car around the corner, she headed for the bus stop.

The new part of downtown where Mister Black had his office was all glass and steel, but just as quiet and deserted as the old part. The bus stop was in the old part, where the streetlights flickered when they worked at all. And there was a stretch between her and the stop where it was completely unlit, except by moonlight.

She walked quickly through the dark streets, loudly clacking her heels on the pavement to keep away any skulking hoodlums. Soon she was approaching an old familiar block, where she noticed that the only illuminating lights were from the barbershop on the corner which had been vacant for years. Even the barber pole was slowly spinning in the dark. Curious, she crossed the street, clacking her heels even louder on the cobblestones, went up to the window and looked inside. To her astonishment, she saw a myriad of couples...waltzing.

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They were couples of all types, tall with short, fair with dark, old with young, all in evening dress. It amazed her to see them weaving in progression around the barber chairs, turning and looping with graceful precision, rising and falling with the music like polished waves. How can so many people cram into such a tiny place? she wondered. As she watched them, the improbability of this feat, as well as the elegance of their evening dress, began to irritate her.

It wasn't right, she decided. A plain old barbershop, even a vacant one, ought to remain a plain old barbershop.

Spying a police box on the corner, she went up to it, and after a moment to summon up her determination, picked up the receiver.

"First Precinct," said a bored voice.

"They are dancing in the old barber shop on Pierce and Main," she said.

There was no reply on the other end.

"They're waltzing," she said, with emphasis.

"It is," she darkly intoned, "a fire hazard. At the very least it must be illegal. I doubt that they have a license." Again she waited a fruitless moment for response.

"We-ell, I don't know," the voice finally, lazily, drawled. "I guess we could send a squad car over. Can I have your name?"

Startled by his impertinence, she hung up.

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The sounds from the barbershop were getting louder. The dancers had now graduated from the delicate flouncing of Franz Lehár and Franz von Suppé to the wild allegros of Johann Strauss the Younger and the music from the orchestra was spilling out onto the street. She could see pins falling from the women's upswept curls and the men's ties loosening in their frenzy. The orchestra conductor himself was throwing back his head and shaking his unruly white mane with ecstatic delight. Suddenly she recognized him.

"Mister Martinelli!" she cried out, and went inside.

The music stopped; the orchestra and dancers stared at her.

The conductor broke into a wide smile. "Miss Dale, is that you? How wonderful to see you again. How big you've grown."

"Mister Martinelli, whatever are you doing here? Didn't you go out of business years ago? Didn't I hear you took to freelance barbering?"

"And so I did, Miss Dale. Even without my shop, I have continued to leave my mark on many a head in this city."

"But Mister Martinelli, for heaven's sake, you're a terrible barber. For twenty-three years you butchered my father's hair, yet he kept coming back to you."

"He appreciated the conversation."

"Your haircuts broke my mother's heart. She couldn't bear to take my father anywhere. It saved our family when you lost this place."

The aged man lowered his baton. "It's true," he said slowly, "I was not the most proficient with the scissors. But it was my father's trade, and his father before him..." He shrugged. "What could I do?" Members of the orchestra and several of the dancers nodded at this. He indicated them all with a sweep of his hand. "This is my way of making amends. Now I offer my best talents as recompense for my worst. Will you not join us? Ah, but we must find you a partner. Horst!"

A gleaming young man in white tie and tails smiled at her flirtatiously. She blushed; then, with only a moment of hesitation, she put down her things and accepted the young man's gloved hand.

And now," announced Mister Martinelli, "the [mazurka](#)!" He raised his baton to begin but was stopped in mid-count by the sudden flinging open of the door.

In stepped two policemen, looking around bewilderedly.

In deference to the elegance of their company, slowly, sheepishly, they removed their caps. Tufts of hair stuck wildly out from their crowns to behind their ears.

Mister Martinelli held out his arms expansively to them. "Gentlemen," he said, "I believe I owe you a dance."

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