

# SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE



The New Sensational Comedy  
With a Laugh in Every Line  
by Earl Derr Biggers

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**CHAPTER III CONTINUED.**  
Mr. Bland walked calmly to the table, and picked up a popular novel that lay thereon. On its cover was the picture of a very beautiful maiden.  
"See that dame?" he inquired of the professor. "Sort of makes a man sit up and take notice, doesn't she? Even the frobbiest haberdasher here has got to admit that in some ways she has this Arabella person looking like a faded chrome in your grandmother's parlor on a rainy afternoon. Ever get any notion, Professor, that way a picture like that boosts a novel in the busy marts of trade? No? Well—"  
Mr. Bland continued. Mr. Magee leaned back, conveyed, in his chair. Here was a man not to be annoyed by the mere flitting of his story. Here was a man with a sense of humor—an opponent worthy his foe's best efforts. In his role of a haberdasher overcome with woe Mr. Magee listened.  
"I used to paint dames like that," Bland was saying to the dazed professor. He explained how his pictures had enabled many a novelist to "eat up the highway in a buzz-wagon." As he approached the time when the novelist besieged him, he gave full play to his imagination. One, he said, sought out his apartments in an airplane.  
"Say, Professor," he finished, "we're in the same boat. Both hiding from writers. A fellow that's spent his life selling neckties—well, he can't exactly appreciate our situation. There's what you might call a bond between you and me. I've known I felt drawn to you, just after I fired that first shot. That's why I didn't blaze away again. We're going to be great friends—I can read it in the stars."  
He took the older man's hand feelingly, shook it, and walked away, casting a covert glance of triumph at Mr. Magee.  
The face of the holder of the Crandall Chair of Comparative Literature was a study. He looked first at one young man, and then at the other. Again he applied the handkerchief to his shining head.

"All this is very odd," he said thoughtfully. "A man of sixty-two—particularly one who has long lived in the uninspired circle surrounding a university—has not the quick wit of youth. I'm afraid I don't—but no matter. It's very odd, though."  
He permitted Mr. Magee to escort him into the hall, and to direct his search for a bed that should serve him through the scant remainder of the night. Overcoats and rugs were pressed into service as cover. Mr. Bland bly assisted.  
"If I see any newspaper reporters," he assured the professor on parting, "I'll damage more than their derbies."  
"Thank you," replied the old man heartily. "You are very kind. Tomorrow we shall become better acquainted. Good night."  
The two young men came out and stood in the hallway. Mr. Magee spoke in a low tone.

"Forgive me," he said, "for stealing your Arabella."  
"Take her and welcome," said Bland. "She was beginning to bore me, anyhow. And I'm not in your class as an actor." He came close to Magee. In the dim light that streamed out from number seven the latter saw the look on his face, and knew that, underneath all, this was a very much worried young man.  
"For God's sake," cried Bland, "tell me who you are and what you're doing here. In three words—tell me."  
"If I did," Mr. Magee replied, "you wouldn't believe me. Let such minor matters as the truth wait till tomorrow."  
"Well, anyhow," Bland said, his foot on the top step. "We are sure of one thing—we don't trust each other. I've got one parting word for you. Don't try to come down-stairs tonight. I've got a gun, and I ain't afraid to shoot."  
He paused. A look of fright passed over his face. For on the floor above they both heard soft footsteps—then a faint click, as though a door had been gently closed.  
The innkeeper whispered Bland, "has more keys than a literary club in a prohibition town. And every one's in use, I guess. Remember, don't try to come down-stairs. I've warned you. Or Arabella's cast-off Romeo may be found with a bullet in him yet."

"I shan't forget what you say," answered Mr. Magee. Shall we look about upstairs?"  
Bland shook his head.  
"No," he said. "Go in and go to bed. It's the down-stairs—that concerns me. Good night."  
He went swiftly down the steps, leaving Mr. Magee staring wonderingly after him. Like a waft he merged with the shadows below. Magee turned slowly, and entered number seven. A fantastic film of frost was on the windows; the inner room was drear and chill. Partially undressing, he lay down on the brass bed and pulled the covers over him.  
The events of the night danced in giddy array before him as he closed his eyes. With every groan Baldpate Inn uttered in the wind he started up, keen for a new adventure. At length his mind seemed to stand still, and there remained of all that amazing evening's pictures but one—that of a girl in a blue corduroy suit who wept—wep only that her smile might be the more dazzling when it flashed behind the tears. "With yellow locks, crisped like golden wire," murmured Mr. Magee. And so he fell asleep.

**CHAPTER IV.**  
**A Professional Hermit Appears.**  
Every morning at eight, when slumber's chains had bound Mr. Magee in his New York apartments, he was awakened by a pompous valet named Geoffrey whom he shared with the other young men in the building. It was Geoffrey's custom to enter, raise the curtains, and speak of the weather in a voice vibrant with feeling, as if something he had prepared himself and was anxious to have Mr. Magee try. So, when a rattling noise came to his ear on his first morning at Baldpate Inn, Mr. Magee breathed sleepily from the covers: "Good morning, Geoffrey."  
But no cherry voice replied in terms of sun, wind, or rain. Surprised, Mr. Magee sat up in bed. About him, the maple-wood furniture of suite seven stood shivering in the chill of a December morning. Through the door at his left he caught sight of a white tub into which, he recalled, slept not even a Geoffrey could coax a glittering drop. "Yes," he was at Baldpate Inn. He remembered—the climb with the dazed Quimby up the snowy road, the plaint of the lovelorn haberdasher, the vagaries of the professor with a penchant for blondes, the mysterious click of the door-latch on the floor above. And last of all—strange that it should have been last—a girl in blue corduroy somewhat darker than her eyes, who wept amid the station's gloom.  
"I wonder," reflected Mr. Magee, staring at the very brassy bars at the foot of his bed, "what new variations on seclusion the day will bring forth."  
Agin came the rattling noise that had awakened him. He looked toward the nearest window, and through an unframed corner of the pane he saw the eyes of the newest variation staring at him in wonder. They were dark, eyes, and kindly; they spoke a desire to enter.  
Rising from his warm retreat, Mr. Magee took his shivering way across the uncarpeted floor and unfastened the window's catch. From the blustering balcony a plump little man stepped inside. He had a market basket on his arm. His face was a stranger to razors; his hair to shears. He reminded Mr. Magee of the celebrated doctor who came every year to the small town of his boyhood, there to sell a wonderful healing herb to the crowds on the street corner.  
Magee moved hastily back under the covers. "Well?" he questioned.  
"So you're the fellow," remarked the little man in awe. He placed the basket on the floor, and appeared to be filled with bromide pictures, such as the most subdued household carries home.  
"Which fellow?" asked Mr. Magee.  
"The fellow Elijah Quimby told me about," explained he of the long brown locks. "The fellow that's come up to Baldpate Inn to be alone with his thoughts."  
"You're one of the villagers, I take it," gressed Mr. Magee.  
"You're dead wrong. I'm no villager, and these are all in the other direction—away from the crowd. I live up near the top of Baldpate, in a little shack I built myself. My name's Peters—Jake Peters—in the winter. But in the summer when the inn's open, and the red and white awnings are out, and the band plays in the casino every night—then I'm the Hermit of Baldpate Mountain. I come down here and sell picture post-cards of myself to the ladies."  
Mr. Magee appeared overcome with mirth.  
"A professional hermit, by the gods!" he cried. "Say, I didn't know Baldpate Mountain was fitted up with all the modern improvements. This is great luck. I'm an amateur at the hermit business, you'll have to teach me the fine points. Sit down."  
"Just between ourselves, I'm not a regular hermit," said the plump bewhiskered one, sitting gingerly on the edge of a frail chair. "Not one of these 'all for love of a woman' hermits you read about in books. Of course, I have to pretend I am, in summer, in order to sell the cards and do my whole duty by the inn management. A lot of the women ask me in soft tones about the great disappointment that drove me to old Baldpate and I give 'em various answers, according to their bow. Speaking to you as a friend, and considering the fact that it's the dead of winter, I may say that I married early, and stayed married a long time. I came up here for peace and quiet, and because I felt a man ought to read something besides time-tables and tradesmen's bills, and have something over his head besides a first and second mortgage."  
"Back to nature, in other words," remarked Mr. Magee.  
"Yes, sir—back with a rush. I was down to the village this morning for a few groceries, and I stopped off at Quimby's, as I often do. He told me about you, I help him a lot around the inn, and we arranged I was to stop in and start your fire, and do any other little errands you might want done. I thought we ought to get acquainted, you and me, being as we're both literary men, after a manner of speaking."  
"No?" cried Mr. Magee.  
"Yes," said the Hermit of Baldpate. "I dip into that work a little now and then. Some of my verses on the joys of solitude have appeared in print—on the post-cards I sell to the guests in the summer. But my life-work, as you might call it, is a book I've had under way for some time. It's called 'Simply Women'—just that one word—but, oh, the meaning in it! That book is going to prove that all the trouble in the world, from the beginning of time, was caused by females. Not just say so, mind you. Prove it!"  
"A difficult task, I'm afraid," smiled Magee.  
"Not difficult—long," corrected the

hermit. "When I started out, four years ago, I thought it would just be a case of a chapter on Eve, and honorable mention for Cleopatra and Helen of Troy, and a few more like that, and the thing would be done. But as I got into the subject, I was fairly buried under new evidence. Then Mr. Carnegie came along and gave Upper Aquewan Falls a library. It's wonderful to think the great works that man will be responsible for. I've dedicated Women to him. Since the new library, I've dug up information about a thousand disasters I never dreamed of before, and I contend that if you go back a ways in any one of 'em, you'll find the flutty little lady that started the whole rumpled. So I hunt the woman. I reckon the French would call me the greatest chercheur la femme in history."  
"A fascinating pursuit," laughed Mr. Magee. "I'm glad you've told me about it, and I shall watch the progress of the work with interest. Although I can't say that entirely agree with you. Here and there is a woman who more than makes amends for whatever trouble her sisters have caused. One, for instance, with rozen hair, and eyes that when they weep—"  
"You're young," interrupted the little man, rising. "There ain't no use to debate it with you. I might as well try to argue with a spom at sea. Some of 'em keep the illusion to the end of their days, and I hope you're one. I reckon I'll start your fire."  
He went into the outer room, and Mr. Magee lay for a few moments listening to his preparations about the fireplace. This was a comfort, he thought. And yet, something was wrong. Was it the growing feeling of emptiness inside? Undoubtedly. He sat up in bed and leaning over, looked at it in the morning light, I am inclined to return Mr. Bland's Arabella, and no questions asked. He is again the lovelorn haberdasher. I am inclined to believe, implicitly, your story. That is my proposition. No doubts of one another. We are here for whatever reasons we say we are."  
The professor nodded gravely.  
"Last night," went on Mr. Magee, "there was some talk between Mr. Bland and myself about one of leaving the inn. Mr. Bland demanded it. I trust he sees the matter differently this morning. I for one should be sorry to see him go."  
"I've changed my mind," said Mr. Bland. The look on his thin face was not a pleasant one.  
"Very good," went on Mr. Magee. "I see no reason why we should not be friends, as you say. Mr. Peters has agreed to cook for us. He can no doubt be persuaded to attend to our other wants. For his services we shall pay him generously, in view of the circumstances. As for Quimby—I leave you to make your peace with him."  
"I have a letter to Mr. Quimby from my old friend John Bentley," said the professor, which I am sure will win me the gracieous treatment Mr. Peters has agreed to cook for us. He can no doubt be persuaded to attend to our other wants. For his services we shall pay him generously, in view of the circumstances. As for Quimby—I leave you to make your peace with him."  
"I'll get Andy Rutter on the wire," said that gentleman. "Quimby will listen to him, I guess."  
"Maybe," remarked Magee carelessly. "Who is Rutter?"  
"He's a manager of the inn when it's open," answered Bland. He looked suspiciously at Magee. "I only know him by sight, and he's a very good fellow. These matters you will arrange for yourselves." Mr. Magee went on. "I shall be very glad of your company if you can fix it to stay. Believe it or not—I forgot, we agreed to believe, didn't we?—I am here to do some writing. I'm going up to my room now to do a little work. All I ask of you gentlemen is that, as a favor to me, you refrain from shooting at each other while you are here. I am trying to keep crude melodrama out of my stuff."  
"I am sure," remarked Professor Bolton, "that the use of firearms as a means of social diversion between Mr. Bland and myself is unthought of."  
"I hope so," responded Magee.  
"There, then, the matter rests. We are here—that is all." He hesitated, as though in doubt. Then, with a decisive motion, he drew toward him the New York paper. With his eyes on the headlines of the first page, he continued: "I shall demand no further explanations. And except for this story in the newspaper, to the effect that early yesterday morning, in a laboratory at one of our leading universities, a young assistant instructor was found dead under peculiar circumstances. He glanced keenly at the background of a picture on the wall. 'Nor shall I make conversation of the fact,' he added, 'that the professor of chemistry at the university, a man past middle age, respected highly in the university circle, is missing.'"  
An oppressive silence followed this remark. Mr. Bland's eyes sought quickly the professors face. The older man sat staring at his plate; then he raised his head and the round spectacles were turned on Magee.  
"You're very kind," said Professor Bolton evenly.  
"There is another story in this paper," went on Mr. Magee, glancing at the haberdasher, "that, it seems to me, I ought to taboo as table talk at Baldpate Inn. It relates that a few days ago the youthful cashier of a bank in a small Pennsylvania town disappeared with thirty thousand dollars of the bank's funds. No," he concluded, "we are simply here, gentlemen, and I am very glad to let it go at that."  
Bland sneered knowingly.  
"I should think you would be," he said. "If you'll turn that paper over you'll read on the back page that day before yesterday a lot of expensive paintings in a New York millionaire's house were cut from their frames, and that the young artist who was doing retouching in the house at the time has been just careless enough not to send his address to the police. It's a small matter, of course, and the professor will never mention it again."  
Mr. Magee threw back his head and laughed heartily.  
"We understand one another, it seems," he said. "I look forward to pleasant companionship where I had expected solitude. You will excuse me now—there is the work to which I referred. Ah, here's Peters," he added as the hermit entered through the dining-room door at the side of the

stairs.  
"All finished, gentlemen?" he asked, coming forward. "Now, this is solid comfort, ain't it? I reckon when you get a few days of this, you'll all become Benjamins, and burble of yourselves, shacks on the mountain. Solid comfort. No woman to make you put on overshoes when you go out, or lecture you about the effects of alcohol on the stomach. Heaven, I call it."  
"Peters," said Mr. Magee, "we have been wondering if you will stay on here and cook for us. We need you. How about it?"  
"Well—I'll be glad to help you out," the hermit replied. "I guess I can manage to give satisfaction, seeing there ain't no women around. If there was, I wouldn't think of it. Yes, I'll stay and do what I can to boost the hermit life in your estimation. I—"  
He stopped. His eyes were on the dining-room door, toward which Mr. Magee's back was turned. The jaw of Peters fell, and his mouth stood wide open. Benjamins, and burble of yourselves, shacks on the mountain. Solid comfort. No woman to make you put on overshoes when you go out, or lecture you about the effects of alcohol on the stomach. Heaven, I call it.  
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