SPICE

by Henry C. Rowland

SYNOPSIS.

Sydney Penfold Isham Chester Elting, whose initials won for him at school the obvious nickname, Spice, comes back to America expecting to find it a dull place after his adventures as an aviator in France. Before he has been home two days, however, things begin to happen. From the studio in which he has taken temporary quarters he sees three men breaking into the home of Bernardo Aria, a famous financier. He helps Aria shoot down the marauders, who prove to be emissaries of a band of anarchists against whom the financier is secretly operating on behalf of the government, and on volunteering his aid in the fight is engaged to pilot Aria on trips to Washington by airplane. Then Spice encounters Marcia Briggs, his newly acquired step-sister. His father, an admiral, married a widow while his son was in France, a proceeding which Spice resents bitterly, but Marcia's breezy camaraderie proves hard to resist. And to complicate matters further, Spice finds himself much interested in Aria's beautiful daughter, Esther. Meanwhile, the conspirators meet at a dive known as the 101 club and make new plans for the murder of Aria, delegating one of their number, a scoundrel named Johnson, to get a job as steward on the Elting yacht, which the financier frequently visits. Spice is invited to the Arias' country home near New York, where Dr. Adrian Isaacs, Aria's chief aide initiates him into the mysteries of an elaborate system of dictaphones by which every part of the house and grounds is guarded. While testing the apparatus for Spice's benefit, Isaacs hears one of the Aria chauffeurs tell of an attempt to get him to visit the 101 club. Some weeks later the Elting yacht arrives for a visit, with the Eltings and Marcia aboard.

FOURTH INSTALLMENT.

At the Hangar.

As Marcia was dressing for dinner at the Arias' Mrs. Elting came into her room. If, as maintained by some theorists, one may predict the future physical qualities of a girl of 20 by an inspection of her mother at 40, then Marcia's numerous suitors had no just cause for anxiety.

Mrs. Elting was a tall, handsome woman who in her youth had been the acknowledged belle of a tract of grazing country about the size of France. The fact that at that time its feminine population might not have exceeded that of Bordeaux or Brest would have made no particular difference. Leaving the matter of costume out of the question (which as every man and no woman will admit is the only fair viewpoint from which to judge) she could not only have held her own anywhere but even raided that of other women had it been her pleasure, which it never was.

From her girlhood she had been adept at all western ladies' outdoor sports. She could ride any eastern hobby imported and dismount when she chose without breaking anything, could throw the lasso with her eyes shut and walk through the loop, throw and hogtie and brand any rider of the plains without getting kicked or singed. At 17 she galloped away from the ranch of her millionaire father (who was under the wrong impression that she was too young to wed) to marry a penniless young prospector who justified her faith in his star by stubbing his toe almost immediately on an outcrop of rich ore.

Marcia had the singular experience of being born an heiress in a 'dobe hut. For a number of months events moved up so rapidly that the beautiful young matron whose father had refused to hear her name mentioned, and whose husband could scarcely leave her long enough to go down his burrowand whack off a few thousand dollars with a sledge, was washing her baby's clothes on the shady side of a dump assayed at about a quarter of a million. Eventually the railroad spur connected with it and conditions were radically changed. The little family made a running jump from the 'dobe hut to the most costly suite in the most costly hotel on the Pacific slope, and from that time on it seemed to Sylvia Briggs, by nature strongly domestic, that they were jumping most of the time. A theatrical stock company could scarcely have outskipped them. Briggs became a promoter of mining, railroad, irrigation, and other propositions, all money making concerns, and was kept constantly on the move, wife and daughter always accompanying him.

They lived for varying periods east and west and middle, in Canada, in England for three years at one time, and a little over a year at two others. The result of this was that the domestic life for which Marcia's mother had always longed never came to happen. Being never identified with any one place for any length of time, she scarcely knew what to answer when asked where she lived, and after a number of years had passed Sylvia Briggs realized with a pang of despair that she and her husband had entirely lost touch with their small circle of early friends while failing to replace them with any permanent new ones.

It was a peculiar situation and one typically of western America, where one rarely finds a family living in the habitation of its grandparents. Here was an affectionate domestic triangle, father, mother, and child, homeless, practically friendless, scarcely known in any general locality, and which had lived for the last fifteen years at the rate of somewhere between fifty and a hundred thousand dollars a year, which was well within Briggs' income. He was a natural born money maker and perhaps Destiny, recognizing this fact, thought that he might as well have it first as last and unkindly let him stub his toe against his gold mine.

Behold the result. If they had spent a quarter of their yearly revenue in two places, a summer and winter home, they would have established kinsmanly and social relations and no doubt political ones, for Briggs was magnetic and masterful, with the gifts of a leader. Probably there would have been other children. Sylvia Briggs could have acquired some actual social finish instead of the superficial travel polish which a courier might gain, while Marcia's education must have had a sound academic basis instead of the joblot, fragmentary sort which it actually was. As Sylvia was wont to say, she would have felt like a real person instead of the fly by night adventuress which she was often forced to feel herself.

Thus when Briggs, a hard liver in a steady sort of way, succumbed to pneumonia in New York, his widow felt almost a sense of relief at being finally able to settle down. She had always hated the roving life which had been the breath of her husband's badly treated lungs. During this time her father had died and left the bulk of his millions to Marcia. There had been a reconciliation of sorts, and Marcia had visited him upon the big ranch which he would never leave. Then the war had come and they had gone to Washington, where in the suddenly augmented population of "floaters" they had found themselves curiously at home. Mrs. Briggs had set her teeth and purchased a handsome residence on Massachusetts avenue near the Sheridan circle. She had by this time reached a frame of mind where the purchase of a plot in the cemetery would have been a comforting investment, but shortly after meeting Admiral Elting she felt rather differently about it.

The admiral represented precisely what her soul craved. This courtly and distinguished gentleman with his honored name, quiet, polished manners, erudition, and solid social foundation looked to Sylvia Briggs like the capitol or the monument or the Metropolitan club or such other long established national institution, and she knew that to him she herself did not look like the mint, as she had to a good many other men. Briggs had been then four years deceased. And so they were married.

Then came Spice, who acted much as his father had foreseen, though rather more so. It was his anticipation of this which had kept the admiral from writing of his prospective marriage. He had discovered that Sylvia was extremely sensitive about her lack of identification with any particular place and people and knew that while Spice's unfriendly attitude might not actually prevent her marriage it was still bound to hurt and rouse her resentment. The admiral had hoped that his dearly loved son might cheerfully make the best of what was already accomplished.

This Spice had actually done, though it was rather a poor best. On his first air journey to Washington with Mr. Aria he had duly paid his respects, dined with his father and stepmother (Marcia had gone to a dinner party), and left at 10 o'clock on the plea of not knowing just what moment Mr. Aria might wish to start on the homeward flight. On three subsequent trips he had called each time at the house, but declined to spend the night, and by some strange hazard Marcia had been away from home each time.

From being hurt, Mrs. Elting had grown angry at his behavior. The kind treatment received from her husband's family and friends was reassuring her and she thought Spice an insufferable young snob, though she had not said so to anybody, not even to her daughter, who had made no secret of the boy's attraction for her. Liking Spice or disliking him, Mrs. Elting would have been glad to see the two make a match of it. Her horror of an unattached existence was almost an obsession. The poor woman with all her wealth had been starved of intimate human intercourse. One can thus understand her willingness to remarry the kindly Admiral Elting, who when all is said was really young for his 60 years and very much of a man.

"Well, my dear," said she to Marcia, "you seem to be getting on pretty well with the spoiled child of my old age."

Marcia powdered the tip of a nose which like the eye of an eagle could look undaunted at the sun. "Don't bother about Spice, Mammy. He's going to pay for all his youthful Alexander airs. I haven't grown up a hotel pest and steamship disturber for nothing."

"Is that what he calls you? He ought to have his ears boxed."

"He has." Marcia teased an auburn curl into a flirtation with a pink ear tip. "It wasn't for calling me that, though. He asked me to remember that we were dining tonight with people whose ancestors had been paying the income tax when ours were dragging their women into their caves by the hair."

"Well, did I ever hear the like! Sydney had better not try to give you any tips on polite behavior. His sisters have told me what a young rowdy he was before the war."

"His sisters make me tired," Marcia said. "The meanest thing a woman can do is to knock her brother."

"Well, they don't mind doing it. Muriel is jealous of Spice's war record because her own husband sidestepped. He was just above draft age and makes steampipes or something. When we were lunching at the Ritz the other day Mrs. Howard asked her what Spice was doing, and she answered: 'Oh, he's chauffeur or sky pilot or something for some rich people down on Field Point.' A nice sisterly remark, wasn't it? I've no reason to be crazy about Sydney, but I did think that was pretty raw."

"Their trouble is that their tongues and their brains are not on the same circuit. Anyhow, it would take an expert rifleman to shoot Muriel through the brain at ten paces. Any fool could guess what Spice's job amounts to."

"Don't be so sweeping dear. Do you mean

Marcia had the singular ex

that he's in love with Esther Art

"The God of Israel forbid. H
for all I know. If he is, though
not only Jehovah but Mr. Aria
with. But that's not his job."
the effect of a jeweled side-comb
carded it. "Can't you put two
gether, Mammy? Just at this
is the David that's gone up
bolshevik Goliath. They mean
if they can before he lets dri
sling. Spice is riding herd ov
is Ben-Hur, I imagine."

Mrs. Elting's blue eyes op
"Good heavens, Marcia—you
a bodyguard?"

"Of course he is. You d
Spice would take an ordina
flies Mr. Aria down to
week and then does a sen
while there. That's the r
staying over night at the ho
you were to run your hand o
son tonight at dinner you'd
two—and Ben-Hur, too."

"Mercy me! Do you think
in danger?"

"I don't believe so, Mamm
have wanted him they'd have
before this." She turned her
listen. "Who's that out there?

There came a discreet rap u
and a smooth voice said in the
ascribed to those born within
Bow Bells: "The h'admiral's
m'lady, and the launch is waitin

"Very well, Johnson. Say
"Thank you, m'lady."
Through the skylight they h

born an heiress in a 'dobe hut.

rtermaster: "Eight bells, sir," and
tones of Admiral Elting: "Make
moment later the bells were struck:
ding-ding, ding-ding, ding-ding.
threw a tulle veil over her ruddy
ked at her mother with a smile.
his with the exception of one
she.
hat's that, dear?"
at steward, Johnson. Somehow the
ives me the creeps. He's got such cold,
eyes, and the way he goes slithering
d. He's like a bad genie. You don't
m anywhere and the first you know he's
ur elbow with his nasty whine and
hing you don't want. It gets on my
."
nsense. You haven't any. I find him
good servant and he came highly rec-
nded."
ell, you'd have to go to heaven or some
to look up the recommendation. Oh,
pose he's all right. Come along,
y. We're under navy discipline now."
y got into the launch, followed by Ad-
Elting, who, according to etiquette,
ways the last to leave his vessel and
rst to go aboard her. Dr. Isaacs and
were waiting for them at the landing
ey walked up to the house where they
net by Esther and Mr. Aria.

Elting approved of the Aria house-
nd felt its charm, especially when she
ed to observe a large framed photo-
of a group in which she recognized
Edward VII, a royal princess, a lady
ting, and her present host in conversa-
a superb sweep of lawn with a stately
in the background. It was an in-

formal picture and the portraits were excellent. Mrs. Elting commented on this fact.

"Yes," said Mr. Aria, "the king was kind enough to send me that souvenir. I had the honor to be his guest for several days at Sandringham."

A manservant approached Mrs. Elting and offered her a small object wrapped in tissue paper. It proved to be her lorgnette, which she had overlooked.

"Your steward brought it, madam," said he, and Mrs. Elting happening at that moment to glance at Dr. Isaacs wondered at the expression of intense annoyance which crossed his handsome face.

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Aboard the steam yacht Sylvia, Steward Johnson found himself in considerable perplexity of mind, and when a week had passed with no developments of any interest to himself this potential assassin grew almost desperate.

After the peremptory order issued by Admiral Elting that none of the yacht's personnel was to set foot on the Aria estate, Johnson took to studying the grounds surreptitiously with strong binoculars through an open porthole. The result of this espionage was such as to render the idea of a nocturnal visit extremely distasteful. He observed the watchman Connors and the police dogs circulating the premises in the gloaming, and Johnson knew enough about these canine protectors to realize that a prowler could not get far unmolested. He was also well aware that their appetites were not susceptible to temptation by any choice tidbit, however succulent—that the first important detail in the training of a chien policier was to inhibit their touching any article of food or drink not tendered them by the hand of authority. He had read in an article on the subject that many of them were so highly intelligent, one might almost say imaginative, that from early adult life they actually required no instruction whatever in this respect.

Johnson's cunning brain suggested the well known French apache trick of luring the dogs away from their beat through that almost irresistible instinct, the mating one. He thought also of having a confederate enter the grounds under pretext of selling a brace of fighting bull terriers and accidentally loosing their leashes, when they might manage to kill or maim the police dogs. Both of these schemes had to be dismissed, partly because the canine guardians were a pair and partly because it was by no means certain that the bull terriers could make away with them.

Being no fanatical devotee of anarchy with unselfish though mistaken ideas nor a sinister soul ready to run any risk for the lust of killing, but merely a low grade brave of whom the sole motive was money, Johnson had no intention of taking any chances with his own hide. First and last he was in the murderous business for himself. He would not have hesitated to betray the plot to Mr. Aria and sacrifice his confederates but for two inhibiting reasons. The first was that in so doing he doubted that he would ever die of old age, and in the second something told him that Aria's policy was based on that of Pinckney, "millions for defense but not a cent for tribute," and the steward did not believe that he would be richly rewarded.

Then came fresh disappointment. Johnson had been sure that sooner or later Mr. Aria would lunch or dine aboard the yacht and had his poison mushrooms in readiness. But nothing of the sort occurred. The cautious Dr. Isaacs had been most unfavorably impressed by the steward's general type and although unable to discover anything positively incriminating about the man had told Admiral Elting in frank confidence that as lifeguard-in-chief he had decided on a sweeping régime that Mr. Aria, until his work was finished, should not partake of any food except that subjected to close examination or eaten in some place where his refreshment was unanticipated.

Johnson may have suspected this precaution and despaired of carrying out his murderous design. But in the meantime something had happened which set him on a different train of thought. Studying the grounds through his glasses late one evening, he observed a sudden activity about the hangar. Then the swift chasse machine was wheeled out and rolled across the lawn to its farther and upper limits. Almost immediately two figures, which he identified as Mr. Aria and young Elting, appeared, both despite the heat being bulkily costumed and hooded and masked as for a lofty altitude. They quickly took their places when the pilot Oakes started the motor and the light machine sped down across the wide declivity of sloping lawn, rose easily, planed off across the water toward the Long Island shore, where it took a quick ascent, banked, and skimmed swiftly away to melt in the haze to the southward. It returned in about an hour and a half, just before dark, and the steward overheard the admiral telling the sailing master, Larsen, that Mr. Aria had been suffering from an attack of asthma and gone up into the high air in search of relief.

But two mornings later, just before the dawn, Johnson heard again the thrum of the departing airplane and this time it returned shortly after daylight twenty-four hours later. Said the steward to himself: "'E's been tykin' the 'igh air of the Potomac valley this time." And set himself to study ways and means which had no relation to toadstools.

Johnson's brain was tricky rather than ingenious, but he was useful with his hands and he had heard described and read in a treatise on sabotage issued to members of the 101 club the simpler methods for making a death trap of an airplane in less than five minutes. Such procedure, in fact, whether applied to aircraft, motor cars, boats, or any other form of conveyance, would scarcely need any explanation to the person of ordinary intelligence equipped with a few simple tools.

The idea struck the steward like a flash from hell, making his toadstool scheme appear clumsy, inexact, diffuse, and altogether medieval. It would be the easiest thing in the world to put in execution if he could only get access to the machine. But while the proposition was simple the preposition loomed appalling in size. It often does.

In the first place, the pilot, Oakes, had his quarters in the hangar, which in the daytime was visible from all about, while at night there were also the watchman and his dogs. It might be quite possible to evade these long enough to do the job, as the hangar was on the edge of the rocky bank, opening in front to free the hydroplane which descended on a slide, or set of ways, and in the rear to release the airplanes on the lawn. One could go directly up to it by boat.

But knowing the vigilance of Isaacs, or, rather, suspecting it, Johnson doubted that the hangar was ever left unguarded except at mealtimes, when Oakes went to the "non-com's mess," as Isaacs not ineptly called it. The steward had observed Oakes leaving the place every day at 12:30, sometimes returning within the hour, sometimes remaining longer absent. He surmised that the young man must be making a course of study along the lines of his profession, as light shone from his window, which was on one side, often until late into the night. This was indeed the case, Mr. Aria having advised Oakes to prepare himself for such a position as he might offer him later in the air transportation scheme in which he was interested.

All of this was infuriating to Johnson, especially as he expected any day that the yacht might leave for a short cruise to the eastward, Newport, and Bar Harbor. The steward could not see how merely waiting was going to get him any nearer to his object, his imagination not being quite up to suggesting how this might be brought about. The committee of which he was at that moment the active agent was getting impatient and spurred on none too gently from headquarters had given Johnson but another week in which at least to make some attempt. He had reported his plan and its difficulties and been exhorted to get around these latter in some way or other, or else tender his resignation as inefficient. And with that went all hope of a fortune which might set him up for life.

But that "everything comes to him who waits" applies also to the criminal, and the opportunity for which Johnson might have waited if he had been foreminded came most unexpectedly in a day of dense white fog. Still better (though he might have got leave on some pretext) there was no cabin luncheon to be served that day, the admiral and Mrs. Elting having gone to one of the admiral's daughters, while Marcia was lunching at the Arias'.

Johnson decided to act. He had already provided himself with the requisite accessories and going to the sailing-master he asked permission to take the dinghy and go ashore, saying that he would like to row himself. This was of course accorded.

"Take care you don't get lost," said the skipper, jokingly. "It's t'ick as pea soup."

"No bloomin' fear, sir," Johnson answered. "I'm a Londoner."

He went over the side and got into the boat wearing a long raincoat which hid his bulging pockets. The fog was a dense white fluff such as the sun usually burns up by noon in midsummer. But this one persisted as though it might last out the day and so heavy was the vapor that it blotted out objects at a distance of a hundred yards.

Johnson had timed his departure a little after Oakes' dinner hour. Picking up the oars, he pulled away in the direction of the yacht club until the Sylvia had disappeared, when he changed his course to a little less than a right angle, heading for the shore close to the hangar. His calculation was accurate and he made his landfall presently so closely that he could see the vague outline of the big, low structure. The tide was on the ebb, about half out, and Johnson, making fast his painter to a rock, stood for a moment listening. Hearing no sound in the immediate vicinity, he made his way as silently as possible over the broken stones and shingles and approached the hangar from in front.

As the steward had feared, the place was securely locked. Going cautiously around to the side, he found that the two windows of the pilot's room were secured by the ordinary fasteners and one of them, the new sash swelled by the dampness, had refused to close entirely so that the clamp had no purchase. This struck Johnson as a bit of luck, as he dared make no noise for fear of the dogs, and also it would have been fatal to his plan to leave the slightest evidence of forcible entry.

Even as it was, he had some difficulty in opening the window. The conscientious Oakes had tried his best to jam it snug, though he had not carried this precaution to the extent of sawing a window-stick when he found it impossible to turn the clamp. No doubt he reasoned that nobody could force it open anyhow without smashing the sash. The steward achieved it, however, with his crate opener and managed not to sear it noticeably. A moment later he was inside.

As a thief of some slight experience, his first act was to open the small door, which fastened by a spring lock. In the event of a surprise he meant to say that while rowing ashore he had got off his bearings in the fog and fetching up at the hangar and seeing the door ajar he had stepped in to ask if he might borrow a compass—a flimsy pretext, perhaps, but with plausibility enough to save him rough handling or arrest.

Standing for a moment to listen and hearing nothing, the steward got to work, choosing as the object of his first attentions the chasse machine which showed signs of recent usage. With a fine file he had just started to nick a forestay close to the turnbuckle when the faint light from the open door was obscured and he straightened with a start to find himself facing a square figure in flannels and looking into the muzzle of an automatic pistol.

"Hands up, Johnson!" said the vibrant voice of Dr. Isaacs.

[To be continued.]