

A Little Red Light

As he came down the front steps of the brown stone house for the first time in a month, Karl Langis reminded himself complacently that he was worth exactly thirty-two thousand dollars and nine cents.

"In my trouser pocket, nine cents." His plump little hand jingled a nickel and four coppers.

"Here—," a diamond flashed as he raised his hand to his breast and felt the outline of a slim wallet, "nine hundred dollars."

"And here—," he patted his protrudent stomach, whose girth was slightly increased by a leathern money-belt, "thirty thousand dollars."

"And the remaining eleven hundred—," the corners of his very red, very petulant mouth drew downwards, "on my head."

"There's no doubt about it, I'm good," he told himself. But Mr. Langis was not the sort of man usually described as good. He was a swindler, and even his fellow-swindlers called him rotten. But it was not through jealousy. For Mr. Langis there was but one object in the world which was worthy of any consideration—Mr. Langis himself. Money is an essential for self-indulgence. It was this fact that first placed Mr. Langis on the side of the fence opposite the law. About a month ago affairs had reached a crisis. All ways of escape seemed shut off. But there is always a loophole. Mr. Langis found it, assembled his earthly wealth, and slipped through. He found it impossible to leave the city. He accepted his lot with patient resignation, and went into hiding. A month's rest and many bottles of cod-liver oil had worked wonders with his figure. As he stepped down to the pavement he felt full of confidence. Now for the country, a touch of nature and a nice long rest.

Nobody observed him particularly, but if anyone had taken the trouble to do so, he would have seen a man the like of whom he might encounter ten times within the next hour. This characteristic Mr. Langis considered a great aid to escape. He was a short, tubby man, dressed neatly in dark blue. His face was a dull white, with light-blue, slightly protrudent eyes and an insignificant nose. He had white, hairless hands with stubby fingers, on one of which twinkled a small diamond. This

diamond appeared to be stuck to the skin, for no band was visible. During the past month the flesh of the finger had spread around and over it, hiding it from sight.

Mr. Langis drew in his breath with an appreciative little sniff. Gad, but it was good to be among the crowd again! Inflating his lungs, he stepped jauntily down the pavement.

He had gone perhaps a block and a half when he was momentarily arrested by a crowd gazing into a shop window. At first he began pushing the people brusquely aside, but he soon desisted and retired to the edge of the little gathering. Why should he lose his temper over a lot of cattle? He could afford to be polite. Let the law get to work and open a way for him. Yes, here was a policeman approaching purposely now.

As the swindler stood there on the fringe of the crowd, close to the stone wall of a building, he became aware of a quavering, whining voice by his side.

"Pencil, mister? Nice red pencil? Same color as my little red lights. Know my little red lights, mister? They winks, they do; off an' on, off an' on. Red pencil, sir?"

Langis stood there before the chattering idiot, lost in thought. Where had he seen this old man before? And what was this gibberish about red lights? He had had something to do with automatic red lights himself, and not so long ago, either. Surely he could remember.

"—Off an' on they goes, mister. You telephones—"

Ah, he had it! He recalled it all now. This pencil vender was old Tom Kringle. Used to be a nut on inventions, but now—Langis chuckled—he was nuts on everything.

Kringle, he remembered, had sunk every cent in some invention involving automatic red lights on telephone booths.

"And then I stepped in, and sold it for him!" Langis chuckled again at the memory. Of course old Tom lost everything—money, furniture, even a little white bungalow out in the suburbs. Well, what of it? It was business, wasn't it? Certainly it was. Yet here was this wreck of a man. Certainly a great change from that erect, cheerful old fellow who had painted in glowing colors the future of his invention. Wonder how that sick daughter of his got on?

"—And it's only a nickel, mister—"

While Langis was lost in thought, the vender had approached and grasped him by the sleeve. His weak old eyes looked pleadingly up at the other's face, as he held out a slim red pencil. With a shake Langis roused himself from his reverie. What on earth was he doing? Wasting precious time, standing here listening to a lunatic raving about pencils and red lights! It would never do. Suddenly he jerked his sleeve from the old man's clutch.

"Out of my way!"

He placed his right hand on the pencil vender's chest and flung him back to his corner. He watched the feeble old body strike the stone and cower there in the corner of the walls. The eyes watched him disinterestedly. There was no hint of either anger or reproach in them; they were just blank. Langis strode on.

Slipping his hand into his pocket, he encountered the loose change. A thought struck him and he stopped, irresolute. After all, why not give the old man a little pecuniary assistance? The poor old fellow had been cruelly cheated, why not start paying back the debt? Good, he'd start right away. He retraced his steps to where Kringle still slumped in his corner.

"Hère, you!"

The eyes lifted themselves to his. Langis picked his last nickel from the change in his hand, and flipped it towards the seller of pencils. But he had sent it a little too hard. It struck Kringle on the mouth and tinkled to the sidewalk. Slowly the old man bent down, slipped to his knees, and began searching the cracks for the lost coin. Langis continued on his way.

But he did not go far. He had almost reached the end of the block when he saw a man approaching him, a tall, lean, brown man with jet-black eyes and long, talon fingers. Quinn, hunter of men. Of all men, this was the one most likely to see through Langis' disguise. But he'd chance it. He'd walk right past him. He had an excellent disguise, he had been in hiding for a long time, surely the hunt must have died down by now.

But had it? Langis slowed down, eyes riveted on the detective. Quinn sauntered languidly along, slim body swaying, gleaming eyes flashing over every face that passed. Could he get past those eyes? After all, the shape of a head, the curve of an ear cannot be changed. And Quinn never forgot—nor forgave.

Besides, what was the use of being foolhardy? He'd just turn around and stroll off—but it was too late now. Only a few feet separated the men, in another instant they would be face to face. Langis' heart suddenly failed him; he couldn't go through with it. His hands were trembling violently, there was a deadly feeling at the pit of his stomach. His eyes darted about for some means of escape. He had it! Just two steps back of him was the entrance to a drugstore. He'd go in there.

With a show of nonchalance he was far from feeling he turned about and entered the drugstore. He did not want to buy anything, perhaps the best thing he could do was get a soda at the fountain. He sauntered over and was just about to sit down when his eyes were drawn to the door. Coming through the swinging door was Quinn, a lazy air about him, but with eyes continually darting from face to face.

A vague feeling of fear seized him. Could he never get rid of the man? With throat painfully dry, he glanced quickly around. Where to go now? Quinn was approaching.

Saved again! Along one wall was a line of telephone booths, seven in all. A little red light gleamed above the door of each one, all were occupied. But no, the light at the end winked out and the occupant left the booth.

Langis stepped hastily across and ducked into the booth, slamming the door behind him. Immediately in front of him was the telephone, with its black box and coin receptacle. On the wall beside it hung a small note book and pencil. To his left was a mirror.

He stole a look backward. The detective was at the fountain, a soda in front of him. He wasn't suspicious, anyway. Langis examined himself in the mirror. He looked fairly calm; hair slightly mussed, though. He remedied the defect with a pocket comb. Next he took down the note book and skimmed through it. A few pages of addresses and numbers, nothing more.

But surely there was a telephone directory. Yes, here it was, on the floor in a corner. Must have been knocked down. He bent over and picked it up, again examined himself in the glass, and again looked out at the detective. He was still there, the soda was almost gone now.

It was getting hot in the booth, not much ventilation, apparently. He was getting nervous, surely Quinn wouldn't be much longer. He stole another look. Still there.

Then he noticed that the soda-clerk was frowning at him. As the man in the booth caught his eye the clerk gestured towards him. What could he mean? Perhaps he meant him to hurry up. There was a man waiting to phone. The other booths must still be occupied.

He turned to the phone and lifted the receiver. Must make a pretense of phoning, anyway. He searched his pockets for a nickel. Only four cents. He remembered now, he had given the last one away. He cursed the old man vehemently, and his own soft heartedness. Turning to the mirror again, he smoothed his hair, straightened his necktie.

It was getting terribly hot in the booth. His forehead and upper lip were beaded with sweat. His collar had begun to wilt. And the detective was still at the counter, talking to the clerk now.

Langis turned to the telephone and examined it inch by inch. Anything to fill in time. Surely Quinn was done now. The man in the booth turned his head and looked out.

Suddenly the hairs at the back of his neck sprang erect, his whole spine turned to ice. A moan of fright escaped him as he perceived Quinn coming straight for him, eyes fixed on his, claw-like fingers slightly bent.

Langis pressed himself into the very back of the booth, gibbering with terror. Those eyes and hands had impressed themselves indelibly on his brain. But this would never do, better fight than be caught like a rat in a trap. The fat man was galvanized into motion. He flung open the door and sprang out, face to face with the man-hunter. Quinn's vacant face twisted in surprise. He bent forward, tense as a coiled spring.

"A-a-h! Langis!"

And there they stood—the plump, trembling little rabbit hypnotized by the slim brown snake. There was a gleam of white as the detective's thin lips parted in a grin of triumph. With muscular fingers crooked ready to grasp, he made a step forward. The spell was broken.

Uttering a little mew of pure terror, Langis, with glassy eyes, scuttled along the line of booths in a desperate effort to escape. All in vain. The detective's long leg

shot out. There was a sharp crunching sound as his heavy toe met Langis' shin just below the knee. The fat man sprawled face downward on the tiled floor.

But he did not give up yet. Realizing the long years of imprisonment which stared him in the face, he made still another attempt at escape. Quick as lightning he rolled completely over and started to rise. In a flash the detective was upon him. Langis' body arched backward as a thin, bony knee was driven deep into his back. A shrill scream of anguish cut the air as his stubby arms were wrenched backward. A sharp click—the detective sprang up and jerked the swindler to his feet.

Langis swayed there, clothes rumpled and torn, face like wet ashes, veins leaping and throbbing in his temples, wrists fastened securely by a contraption of nickled steel.

"Over here 'til I phone," snapped the detective.

He entered the booth just vacated by Langis, keeping his right hand firmly clasped around the short chain of the handcuffs. The captured man was held there, half in and half out of the booth, and face to face with the mob of curious who had gathered to watch the arrest.

"It's Karl Langis, the swindler!" he heard a man whisper hoarsely.

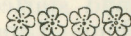
The crowd received this information with various degrees of interest. To some, Karl Langis was just a name. To others—and these were in the majority—his reputation was known only too well. One man he saw whom he had cheated. There was a low muttering among the throng. Several men advanced towards him. He could discern not a single friendly face. With a whimper of fear he pressed into the narrow booth, head lowered, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

The detective, annoyed by the movement, jerked the swindler's arms upward as an admonishment to keep still. Langis bent forward; tears of pain started from his eyes. Dimly he became aware of what the detective was saying.

"Spector Bowers? This Quinn—Olympia Drug Store. Just had great haul—Langis—swindler. I was in here getting soda. Know those red lights on telephone booths? Company decided people spent too much time in booths without using phone. Do everything—write notes—look at 'emselves in mirror—. Anyway, they put on little red lights. Flash on when phone is being used. Well, I was drinking soda when Bill—clerk—

noticed man in end booth. Red light not on—people waiting go in. He asked me step across and tell man hurry up. Man saw me coming—ran out—yeah, Langis. Send wagon——.

—R.S.W., '35.



To become an able man in any profession, there are three things necessary,—nature, study, and practice.—*Aristotle*.

Power can do by gentleness that which violence fails to accomplish; and calmness best enforces the imperial mandate.—*Claudianus*.

In time there is no present,
In eternity no future,
In eternity no past.

—*Tennyson*.

Faith is the pencil of the soul,
That pictures heavenly things.

—*Burbidge*.

