

The Kidnapping of Lady Bundle: A Lisette Rivers Investigation

by

Brian Sands



Detail from cover illustration for *Ogni Cosa Ha Il Suo Prezzo* ("Everything Has Its Price") by James Hadley Chase, *Giallo Mondadori* N. 863, 22 February 2000

"It's a puzzling case and the police are making their enquiries, but we need to carry out our own investigations. Therefore we come to you and your agency as we have done in the past, Miss Rivers."

The insurance representative closed the file on the desk in front of him, smoothed out the cover, and raised his eyes to look frankly into those of the young woman sitting across the desk from him.

Lisette Rivers returned his gaze coolly and opened a second page of her notebook. "We know only what we've read in the papers and seen on the TV, Mister Melville,"

she said, "but we understand that a well-planned attack was made upon the establishment. The police are saying very little."

"That's right." Humphrey Melville the insurance rep shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I can brief you a little more fully on what happened. This," he tapped the file before him with a forefinger, "is only the official version and, as you say, is incomplete."

"Tell me what happened then."

"It was a dark and stormy night," the man grimaced at the cliché he had just committed and went on, "and all through the house the different staff members were stirring slowly in their preparations for bed. The intruders were well organized. From the victims' stories their movements through the place can be described with a high degree of certainty."

"Firstly, the French maid was waylaid as she left the building through the servants' entrance and was placed in the adjunct to the main garage. That area was used as a coalscuttle where one might have expected a cellar would have been more appropriate, but the unused area behind the main garage had been put to that purpose for some time. The maid was bound hand and foot and gagged."

"Secondly, the receptionist as she was just coming off duty was dealt with in similar fashion. She was placed in the Gallery that led directly to the Foyer. She too was bound and gagged, but she managed to get the gag off after an hour and it was her cries for help that alerted the security people outside."

"Thirdly, the first of the two administrative assistants, that is, secretaries," the man paused, Lisette nodded, "was found in the dining room adjacent to the Gallery. She too had been seized while on her way out. She was also bound hand and foot and gagged."

"Fourthly, the second administrative assistant was found in the master suite at the end of the gallery. She was intending to work back late. Like the others, she was gagged and bound hand and foot. That accounts for the four women on that floor of the house."

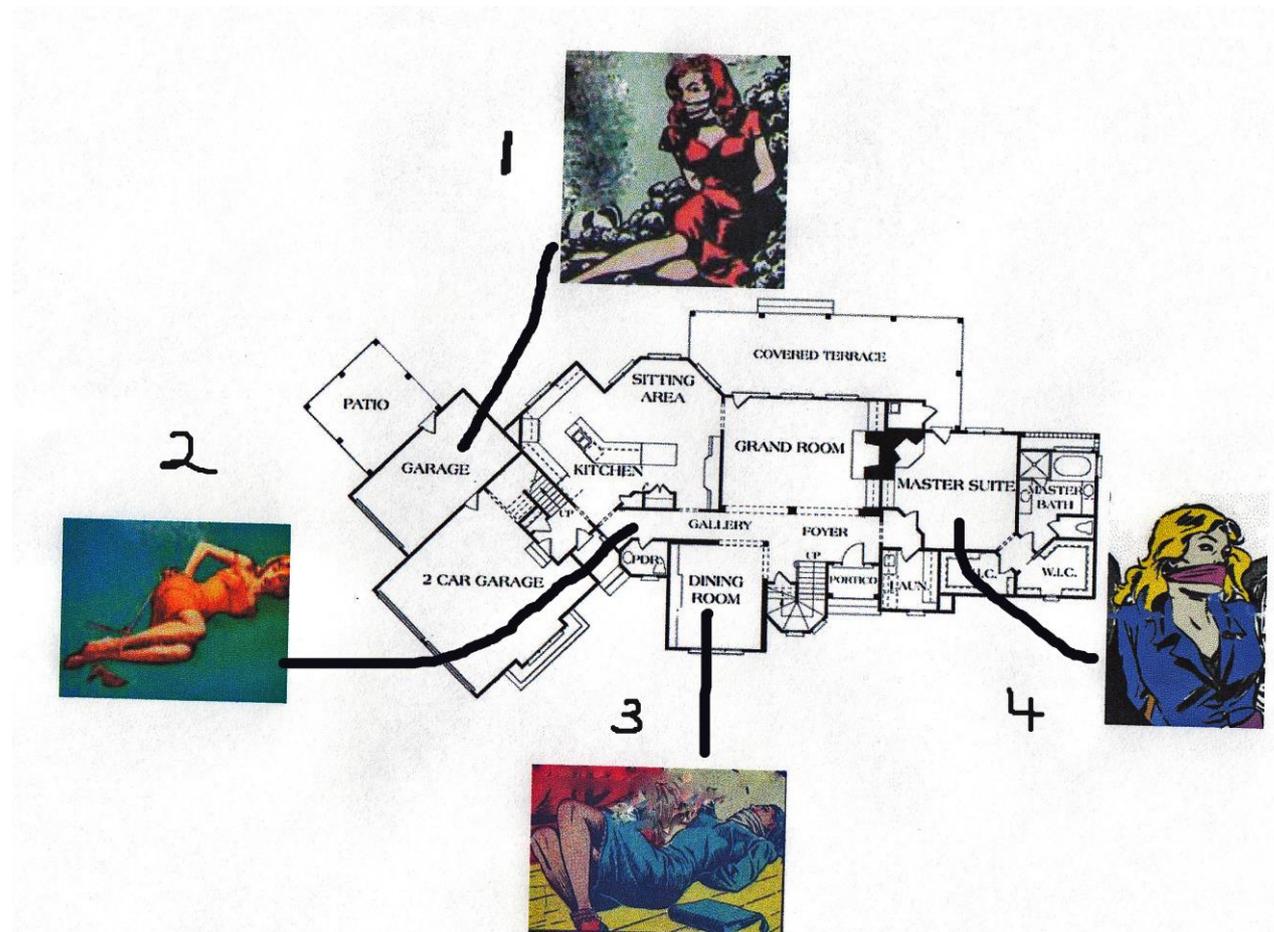
"It's strange that the intruders did not wait for everyone to leave but instead went to a lot of trouble to overpower them and tie them up," said Lisette.

The man shrugged. "Perhaps they were in a hurry and could not afford to wait."

"How were they bound?" asked Lisette who was taking careful notes of the sequence of events.

"That's another puzzling feature," replied Humphrey Melville with a note of relish creeping into his voice. "All the women were tied up quite simply hand and foot. That is, their wrists were tied together behind their backs and ankles tied together

with short pieces of cord or whatever else lay at hand. They were gagged in a similar makeshift way. The maid was gagged with her own silk scarf. A large table napkin was used on the secretary found in the dining room. The woman bound in the master suite was gagged with a satin scarf. The receptionist was gagged with her two silk stockings. Incidentally, she was also hogtied but it was not stringent. Her knees were not bent back too far."

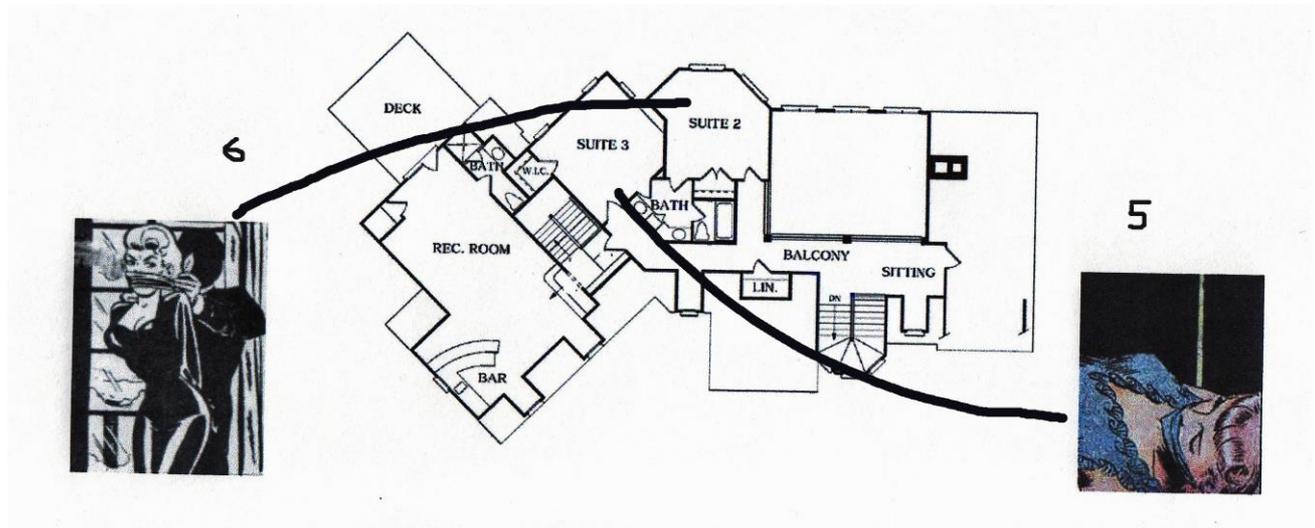


Details from (1) *Vic Flint*, 2008, (2) *Charlie Chan and the Chinese Parrot*, Earle Der Biggers Paperback Library 1963, (3) *Hit Comics* No24, p13, (4) French Comic untitled

"And on the upper level?" asked Lisette.

"Two women were there, Debbie Bundle the twenty year old daughter of Lady Bundle and the Lady herself. The daughter had just gone to bed. She was found in her nightdress tied hand and foot like the others and gagged with a large piece of silk material torn from her nightdress. The police think that Lady Bundle was the target in an almost military-style kidnapping because she has not been found. Debbie describes her mother as wearing a black satin evening gown.

"Lady Bundle had just returned from attending a reception for the Belgium ambassador. She put up no resistance for fear that the captors might harm her daughter, who describes seeing her mother standing in the adjoining room. Lady Bundle's room had to be reached through the daughter's room as well as by another entrance. A person in black and wearing a hood was binding a gag around Lady Bundle's mouth. The Lady's hands had already been tied behind her. Then, says the daughter, the door between the two rooms was closed. It is thought that they made their escape either by way of the other door or by the fire escape above the covered terrace."



Details from (5) *Flash Gordon*, 1943, (6) *Lucky Dale*, xx

"How many kidnapers were there?" asked Lisette.

"It is supposed there were three, two who actually carried out the raid and a third person who drove the getaway van. It was an electrician's van, stolen earlier that day. It was found abandoned some ten kilometres away. Tyre marks on the ground indicate that they transferred to another vehicle, a sedan of some sort. So it looks like kidnapping for ransom, going on the daughter's eyewitness account. But as yet there has been no ransom demand."

"Why is your company asking L and C Associates to get involved? Aren't the police enough?"

L & C Associates (Corporate Crime Our Specialty) was the private investigation agency managed by Lisette Rivers and her lawyer friend Chèrie Chalmers, ably assisted by their administrative assistant Sophie Brush.

"Our legal advisers think this might not be a simple kidnapping for ransom. They warn that there have been scams recently where a kidnapping is faked in order to get the insurance money."

"I see that tying up five women and kidnapping a sixth must surely bump up the insurance payments - deprivation of liberty and all that - when those women make their claims. But what makes you suspect Lady Bundle? A woman of her status in society must be almost beyond reproach."

Melville actually squirmed. "It- it's not my decision, Miss Rivers. That comes from higher up. They're acting on those two cases you might remember. Viscountess Werbly's Pekinese Long Spam last month, and that actress Merylyn Moneybanks and her collection of exotic scarves. I am, I'm afraid, merely a lowly messenger."

Lisette Rivers lightly bit the butt end of her pen with neat white teeth. "As it happens we are in a position to take up the case. I'll need to interview the five women."

"Thank you Miss Rivers. I have their addresses here."

The French maid Madeleine Aubergine lived in a rented flat in the provincial town some distance from the village attached to the Maison Palindrome. She was the only witness who lived that far distant from the mansion. Madeleine was a striking redhead, a feature suggesting that English or Scottish links had some genetic influence on her Gallic ancestry. The woman was young and attractive. She wore a simple blue dress with a sweetheart neckline. Her English was impeccable with only the trace of a lisp from her home language. Lisette was invited graciously into the young woman's flat. Over light cocktails Madeleine related her experience.

"I had just left the house," she began. "I always leave by the kitchen door. It's quicker and more convenient because I have a small, how you say ... office in the sitting area when it's not for visitors. Otherwise I stay in the kitchen. I had just stepped out the door and was walking along the little path when two men jumped out from the dark on each side of me. One of them put his hand on my mouth. The other held my arms behind my back. I was told not to cry out."

"Are you sure there were two men?" asked Lisette. "Not women, or a man and a woman?"

"*Bien sûr*. They were man. I could tell by their male smell though I could not see their faces. I was wearing a headscarf of best silk. The man holding his hand over my mouth took the scarf from my head and tied it over my mouth. They almost carried me off the path to the garage."

"That was the one they don't use for cars?"

"*Mais oui*. But there is a door where the autos are kept, and a patio on the other side. Mam'selle Ruisseau," the maid continued - in her excitement forgetting her carefully modulated English - "they put me there and tie behind me my hands. They tie also my legs, and around my body they put more rope so my arms I can't move. They go then. I struggle an' try to cry '*au secours*,' but the gag is too tight."

My pretty scarf is ruin. My lovely dress is ruin. The floor very dirty, very dust. *Mais peut-être* the dry cleaning."



Detail from *Brenda Starr*, Paper truck story, courtesy c3c Yahoo Group (Covers)

At this point Madeleine produced the dress from a Chanel shopping bag and held it up for inspection. It was of the same design as the one she was wearing except that its colour was a shade between deep orange and red. Lisette agreed that it was a lovely garment and hoped the black smudges and stains could be removed.

"You don't say that you were very frightened," she remarked.

"Ah, *ça va*. When they say they not hurt me I wait and the security they come an' I am rescue."

"Did the two intruders take anything?"

Madeleine thought a moment. "*Mon petite sac à main*, Mam'selle. *Mais*, it was found in the garden."

"May I see it?"

The maid fetched the handbag.

"Is anything missing?"

"*Je ne sais pas*. I have not looked."

"It might be well to look now, just to be sure."

At Lisette's request Madeleine emptied the bag's contents onto the coffee table.

"Is all here, Mam'selle ... *Mais non, le clé sont disparu.*"

Upon further questioning Lisette learnt that the missing key allowed entrance to the back door.

Madeleine could tell Lisette nothing further so she thanked the girl and left. Back in her little Renault she looked through her notes. The police investigators had taken photographs of boot prints in the coal dust on the garage floor. But there were no identifying patterns from the impressions of the soles. It was thought that the kidnappers wore ninja shoes or something similar. Lisette made a note to tell the police about the stolen key.

The next on her list was the receptionist who had managed to raise the alarm. This person, as well as the others on the list, lived in or near the village adjacent to the Mansion. Lisette returned to the countryside.

So, thought Lisette as she drove, it began with the overpowering of the French maid and the taking of her key. From that action the kidnappers gained access to the house. Lisette wondered whether it had been an inside job. That was one reason why she wanted to interview all the women who to all intents and purposes had been innocent bystanders. She could not rule out the possibility that Madeleine was an accomplice and had allowed the men to tie her up so as to divert suspicion from herself. It had been done before.

Quilla Scrivener described herself as a desk clerk. She had closed the guest register and switched off the counter lights for the day, and had just stepped into the gallery intending to leave by the main door when two masked people burst in upon her. She thought they had come from the access room connecting the main garage to the gallery.

She tried to run but in her panic a shoe came off and she fell. Before she could get to her feet she was seized and quickly overpowered. They tied her up on the spot. It was a hog tie, using a single tasselled cord from one of the heavy curtains in the dining room. One of the assailants removed her other shoe and peeled off her stockings. One stocking was bunched up and stuffed into her mouth and the other stocking was used to tie it in place. It was wound several times about her face and between her jaws.

At that moment Jade East the office assistant happened to step into the gallery from the Grand Room on her way out. She saw Miss Scrivener lying on the floor but could only let out a frightened "yip" before she was seized as well. Quilla Scrivener watched helplessly as the secretary was dragged into the dining room. She heard faint sounds of a continuing struggle, then there was a funny sort of hiccup and it became quiet. The two burglars reappeared and moved on down the gallery. They crossed the foyer and disappeared into the Master Suite.



Detail from *The Chinese Parrot*, A Charlie Chan Murder Mystery, by Earl Derr Biggers, Paperback Library

Miss Scrivener was so frightened that she lay still for a long time. But she managed after a lot of effort to get rid of her gag. After several minutes the security people patrolling the grounds heard her cries and she and the other victims were rescued.

When she was back in her car outside Quilla Scrivener's cottage, Lisette made a number of entries at the foot of her notes on the interview. (1) Nylon stocking stretches and it would have been almost impossible for the woman to push it out of her mouth if it had been tied tightly enough. But she did succeed in freeing her mouth, so the stocking could not have been impossibly tight. Why did it take so long for Miss Scrivener to work her gag free? (2) Why did it take so long for the security guards to respond to the woman's cries? That could be explained if they were on the perimeter of the grounds inspecting the gates and the wall that circled the place. But why then did those guards not see the two kidnappers, who appear to have moved about the grounds freely? Those questions could be explained if the woman and the guards were in league with the kidnappers. Or the security guards may have been the kidnappers themselves. Lisette added them to her interview list.

Amber Blue was the last member of the office staff to be interviewed. She was a pretty blonde with shoulder length hair, not unlike Lisette in appearance. Lisette found her in a small rented flat opposite the central village square.

"I had just settled down to my laptop and was hoping to finish the itinerary for next week's open day when there was a knock at the door," she began. "I'd closed it and locked it so as not to be disturbed. But of course if someone were to knock I had to answer it. All our assistant staff, myself included, must present a polite front to the public. I knew the other staff were leaving and thought that one of them may have forgotten something. Jade for instance is always forgetting an umbrella or a scarf. I've often had to reopen the place for her to retrieve such things. We're good-natured about it.

So I went to the door and unlocked it, and as soon as I opened it a man in a black leotard with a balaclava over his head pushed into the room followed by another,

who closed the door behind him. I was terrified and just stood rooted to the spot. I couldn't even scream."



Jane, by Chris, courtesy Filou, a site now gone

"And then the second person ordered me to turn around and not to cry out ... Miss Rivers, I wondered whether that person was a woman, although the voice was muffled by some sort of electronic device. I've heard of such things worn around the throat. All the same, I thought it was a woman speaking and not a man."

"Mm, that's interesting," said Lisette. She noted in her book that it was the first time either of the two kidnapers was reported as speaking. "What happened then?"

"Well, they- they tied me up. Told me to put my hands behind my back. They used a piece of cord from the window curtains to tie my hands and another piece of cord for my feet. They took my nice satin scarf – it was over the back of a chair with my raincoat – and tied it around my mouth. I waited it must have been fifteen or twenty minutes. I struggled of course but the ropes were too tight. I had just managed to slip the gag from my mouth when I heard people shouting from the foyer. I called out and one of the security guards rescued me."

In order to speak with the daughter, Lisette had to go to the mansion. While Debby Bundle was unavailable, in consultation with the family lawyer, Lisette took the opportunity to inspect the grounds and the different locations in which the women had been bound. She retraced the maid's steps as described by her, observing the back yard where the young woman was seized and entering the garage cum coal scuttle where she had been concealed. As with the garage, the gallery, dining room and master suite were marked off with crime scene tape. Each place showed signs of the ordeal the different women had experienced. In the gallery Lisette saw pieces of nylon stocking cut where they had been removed from the victim, the original knots still in place. The floor of the dining room had two short pieces of cord and a table napkin folded and creased with an impression outlined in lipstick. Sash cord from the window curtains still lay in the master suite where they had been cut. All these items she knew would soon be retrieved and studied by the forensics people.

She took the liberty of matching the cut stockings with the triple knots, holding one against her own lips, and found that it appeared to be loose enough so that a gag held in the mouth by it would have been easy to work free. Her suspicion about Quilla Scrivener strengthened.

She noted that the silk scarf was missing that had been used to gag the maid as well as the satin scarf that had silenced the second of the secretaries and supposed that the women had kept those personal possessions. She knew from her own experience that this was a completely natural reaction. Lisette herself had kept scarves used to gag her, which were often among her best silks, having them dry cleaned later as a way of effecting closure to the unwelcome experiences.

Humphrey Melville the insurance man found Lisette in the covered terrace at the back of the building writing up her notes. "Miss Bundle is ready to see you, Miss Rivers," he announced pompously. "Please make the interview short. The girl is still in shock."

Lisette mounted the stairs and found Debby Bundle in a small sitting room. The girl did not look as though she was in shock. The chief emotion on her face and in her eyes was that of anger. Lisette soon learnt that Debbie Bundle's anger was not directed towards her.

"I don't like that man!" exclaimed Debbie Bundle.

"Who do you mean, that lawyer Humphrey Melville?"

"Yes. The gall of him - ." She broke off. "You're Lisette Rivers aren't you? He told me to expect you. I've heard about you of course. Maybe you'll be able to get to the bottom of this."

"I'll do my best," replied Lisette. "But what it is that's made you angry?"

"He- he said I was to expect a ransom demand any day now, and to have it ready, and when I asked him where the money would come from he said there was a large amount set aside for me, to be used as a dowry - of all things in this day and age - and that while I can't touch the money myself I could give him authorization. When I said that sounded hardly legal, he tut-tutted and said there were ways a good lawyer can manage, as long as he had my signature. I still can't see how someone can lay their hands on my money if I can't touch it. I refused point blank of course. He was not very happy. He told me, by the way, not to tell you or anyone, but the hell with him!"

Lisette agreed. "That does sound irregular. Look, Miss Bundle - "

"My friends call me Debbie."

"Very well. Debbie, I shan't take up much more of your time, but can you tell me whether anything unusual happened that night, apart from the tying up and the kidnapping?"

"I didn't notice a great deal. It all happened so fast. I had just prepared to go to bed when I heard my mother enter her room. It's next door to mine. It's my old room by the way. Just a funny chance I was visiting this old place. I have a little flat in Chelsea close to the repertory society where I'm learning drama. Anyway, I went to my mother's room to say goodnight. I was leaving early the next day and might not see her again.

"I opened the door at exactly the same moment two people in black leotards with balaclavas over their heads came in through the other door, following my mother. One of them seized her and held a hand over her mouth and the other sprinted across the room and grabbed me before I could make a sound. There we stood," continued Debbie dramatically. "We were helpless. We were told if one of us struggled the other would be hurt, so of course we kept still. The one holding me dragged me into my room and threw me onto my bed. The person had a knife in his hand- "

"Do you think it was man or a woman?" asked Lisette.

"I'm pretty sure it was a man. His fingers were very strong. Anyway he opened his knife – it was a pocketknife – and cut a strip from my nightdress. He folded it and tied it around my mouth. Then he took a long piece of cord from his pocket and tied my arms behind my back. Some of the cord went around my upper arms and my body just under my bosom, then it was tied around my wrists and it was all pulled tight.



***Liquid Death*, by Griff, colour change and gag by Brian Sands**

"If I tried to pull my hands apart the cord tightened around my arms and my body. He finished tying my ankles and then tightened my gag to make sure I couldn't get it off. I was left like that and could only watch helplessly as the two men bound my mother. She was already gagged. They closed the connecting door. I did not hear a sound after that."

"That's very descriptive," said Lisette. "I can see that training in theatre has made you observant."

"Oh well, it was just another of those funny chances," said Debbie with a rueful smile. "Only last week three of us were experimenting with damsel in distress scenes, taking turns at tying one another up. One of the girls had been reading a book on the subject, and when it was her turn she bound my arms and hands a bit like the way the burglar did it. I remember she was saying how there was a big difference between just tying someone hand and foot and trussing them up. She had the two of us trussed up as well as bound. We couldn't get free no matter how hard we tried. It was funny experiencing it this week for real - funny and pretty scary."

"Have you any idea how long you waited before rescue came?"

"It- it would have been a good hour. I tried to call for help but it was no use. My nightdress is - was - heavy good quality silk. The gag was thick and muffled my cries, and it was so tight it left marks on my face. Well that can happen after an hour can't it? When we played the game the week before we all had marks along our cheeks and at the corners of our mouths. We were gagged then too, you see."

Lisette took her leave of Debbie Bundle, stopping at the head of the stairs and writing quickly in her notebook. There was a time anomaly. Quilla Scrivener the desk clerk and Amber Blue the second secretarial assistant had both stated they were tied up from twenty minutes to half an hour. The Scrivener woman had been more vague about it, Amber more certain in her calculation. Was Quilla Scrivener lying? With all the women staff bound and gagged for an hour, the kidnappers had plenty of time to make their getaway. Lisette had a sudden insight.

What if the security guards were in on it? Maybe they took Lady Bundle somewhere not far from the mansion, secured her in a holding place - possibly a cottage or some other place in the village - then returned to free the women and raise the alarm. Was that how it was done? And why are my thoughts always returning to Quilla Scrivener?

When she came down the stairs, Lisette found that one of the security guards was now in attendance at the reception counter although the building was closed to the general public. He was reticent, his replies to Lisette's questions monosyllabic. All he had to offer was the knowledge that when he and his associate walked close to the mansion they heard faint cries and found the first assistant in the gallery and freed her. Next, as they were freeing the other woman in the dining room, they heard cries for help from the master suite and found the second assistant. That was all. He did let slip, however, that it was one of the assistants who discovered the daughter bound and gagged upstairs. Lisette wondered why as security guards he and his colleague had not searched the upstairs wings as well. The man shrugged noncommittally. His partner would corroborate the story but he had gone home.

Too many loose ends, thought Lisette as she turned away. *I have to find that second guard.*

"Hey, Miss Detective," the man called after her, "There's a letter for you."

Bemused, Lisette took the envelope from the man. It had been in one of the mail racks on the wall. She ripped open the flap and read the message where she stood at the head of the front steps: "Com to Room 26 Hotel Sceptre if you wan to no where Lady Bundle is. Com alone."

There was no signature, hardly surprising considering the nature of the message. The spelling was not impressive either. Lisette knew, however, that she should not underestimate the kidnappers on the basis of their literacy. So far they had got away with their crime without leaving a trail until now. Again Lisette wondered whether one of the women who had been overpowered on that night knew more than she was willing to divulge, or the security guards.

And why would the kidnap gang take the risk of getting in touch with one of their pursuers when all they had to do was to leave a ransom note and avoid contact with the family or the police? If she went to the address in the note she would be tempting fate. But she had taken similar risks before.

Lisette cut her investigations at the crime scene short and returned to the city. She left an email message for Sophie giving the address of the hotel, with instructions to notify the police if she was not back within twelve hours. Smartly dressed in a blue jacket and skirt over a crisp white silk blouse, Lisette caught a taxi to the Hotel Sceptre in the West End. Using a taxi was another conscious move to leave a trail for others to follow. The taxi driver would remember her.

At the reception desk she enquired for a fictitious guest and, when the bored desk attendant shook his head sadly and returned to his racing form, she left by the front door. Now that she had an idea of the ground floor layout, she slipped back in through a side door in the lane between the hotel building and a massage parlour. She knocked at the sixth room on the second floor and when there was no reply she tried the handle. The door opened easily. Lisette stepped through and paused uncertainly in the darkened room.



Detail from *Wonder Woman*, March

In the time that it took for her eyes to adjust to the semi-darkness, Lisette became aware of a figure standing at the far end of the room.

"I've come," she announced simply. "Who are you and what do you want to say?"

The figure seemed to move, but in the shadows it was difficult to tell. When it spoke the sound was distorted and metallic. The person was using the same sort of electronic device that Amber Blue had described. Intuitively Lisette agreed that it was a woman speaking.

"You don't imagine we're foolish enough to tell you who we are, Miss Rivers."

"Very well ... But I don't understand why you haven't been in touch with the family or the police with a ransom demand?"

"There are reasons."

"Then tell me. I can bypass the police and relay your demands direct to the family ... if that's your concern."

"Not here."

"Not ...?"

"The longer we stay here talking the more dangerous it is for us. Oh, we know you weren't followed. We made sure of that by following you ourselves."

This information gave Lisette a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"But your people will know where you have gone and they're sure to follow-up," the person continued. "So, with your agreement, we'll bring you with us to a more secure place – secure for us that is – where we can explain all."

"If I refuse?"

"If you refuse then you are free to go."

"If I ... go with you, I'll be putting myself into your hands."

"You are already in our hands. If we wished, you would not leave this room. What we're offering is a chance to talk without interruption. Then you have our word that you will be set free."

"It seems that I don't have much choice."

"Exactly ... There is a formality. We ask you to accept a blindfold. The reason is obvious."

"Very well."

"We need to move quickly."

Two dark figures emerged to either side of her from the shadows. Involuntarily she raised her hands. One quickly held her arms from behind. She knew it was a man by the strength of his grip. The other pulled a hood over her head and face. She made a sharp intake of breath.



Detail from *Mandrake*, 1944, courtesy Covers at the c3c Yahoo Group

"Don't be alarmed Miss Rivers," said the spokesperson, the distorted speech now close to her ear. "The hood is of course a blindfold, but a lot more difficult to interfere with." Lisette felt drawstrings being fastened around her neck, but not too tightly. "You will be able to breathe satisfactorily."

At the same time her arms were being gathered behind her. She tried to struggle.

"I repeat - we are not going to harm you. But you must be restrained as well. We will untie you, and remove the hood, when we have reached our destination."

Lisette was taken from the room by the way she had come. She knew this because the two people holding her simply turned her about. She was led to her right and guessed that they were taking her along the corridor away from the main stairwell and lift. It felt as though they were passing through a doorway. Cool air buffeted her, chilling her neck through the thin blouse. Their feet rang upon metal. *We're descending the fire escape.* Her feet encountered uneven paving consistent with a laneway, perhaps the one she had used to gain entrance to the hotel.

They walked several paces and stopped. She heard a metallic sound dulled by the thick silk covering her ears, a car door opening. A hand was placed upon her head and she was gently assisted into what must be the back seat. Her two escorts sat on either side of her as the vehicle moved off, driven she guessed by the leader.

She asked: "Do we have far to go?" her voice muffled by the hood. But her captors heard her.

"Not far." It was one of the men at her side.

"I don't want to complain, but it's stuffy in this thing."

"You'll be all right." This time the voice came from the driver in the front seat. It was still distorted by the electronic gadget. "My men have orders not to speak to you. If you insist on speaking again they will gag you."

Lisette kept her peace and tried to calculate where they might be travelling. As the minutes grew and the car took many turns, first to one side then another, she quickly lost all sense of direction.

Eventually she felt the vehicle dip and guessed they were entering an underground car park or perhaps the garage of a private house. They came quickly to a halt so Lisette decided it was the latter. They went through movements that were the reverse of their departure. She was helped out of the car and walked across a hard concrete floor to a short flight of steps - she counted five - and on a little further. Here she was pushed down onto the floor and her legs tied together with a length of rope. Through her stockings the fibres felt coarse, like the bonds that held her wrists together behind her.

"You must wait here. Be patient," said the leader's metallic voice.



Detail from *Lancio Story*, "Voodoo," courtesy Covers at the c3c Yahoo Group

Their footsteps echoed distantly in the concrete passageway. Lisette had no choice but to sit still. The cement floor and the wall against which she was leaning chilled her and she hoped the gang members would soon return so that the interrogation might continue.

Perhaps ten minutes elapsed when she heard returning footsteps. This time there appeared to be one person. Her legs were freed and she was helped to her feet. She guessed it was one of the accomplices, for the person conducted her along the way without speaking. Lisette's mouth was dry against the tight fitting hood that to some extent served as a muffling gag. She did not attempt to speak.

Lisette's heels clicked upon a flight of wooden steps as they mounted upwards. Her captor moved soundlessly, on rubber soles she thought. Then they were upon a soft carpet and standing at what was no doubt the entrance to a room. She was led through and left so abruptly that she almost lost balance. A moment later she became aware of someone moving close to her. Hands unfastened the drawstrings and the hood was peeled off her face. It came away with difficulty. Sweat had bonded the silk to her cheeks and brows.

She blinked in the light cast by a desk lamp. As her eyes cleared, the cord was untied from her wrists. She stood swaying a little with a mild onset of shock and massaged her wrists and forearms. They were in an office equipped with a large desk, a desk lamp and an old-fashioned typewriter that did not look as though it had been used for years. Two heavy chairs wood-framed with broad seats and arm rests stood arranged about the desk. They were of dark stained wood and looked of antique quality.

There were only two people present, the man who had brought her there and the leader who stood at the further end of the small room, partly concealed by the shadows. Without needing to be told, Lisette's guard pulled one of the chairs away from the desk and set it in the centre of the room.

"You may sit," said the still distorted voice of the leader. "Now we can talk without fear of interruption."

Lisette took her cue and sat in the chair that had been offered. She was feeling shaky from the journey deprived of liberty, sight and freedom of movement. She wondered what was coming next.

The leader dismissed the henchman and, as the door closed behind him, walked across to the desk and sat in the other chair.

"Now we can talk ... Miss Rivers, some of our motives I think you will approve of, but others I'm sure you will not approve."

"I'm listening," Lisette replied cautiously.

"Very well. We snatched Lady Bundle with inside assistance. I'm sure you figured that out."

Lisette nodded.

"The original plan was a straight forward kidnapping for ransom. The ah, inside person ..."

"A relative," stated Lisette categorically.

"Um, yes. The inside person as far as we were told stood to gain by Lady Bundle being prevented from closing an important business deal. That was no concern of ours. We would be paid twice over, once for the kidnapping and later for the ransom."

"A ransom that other family members would fork out."

"Ah, quite so." The speaker shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

Lisette was now almost certain that she was speaking to a woman in spite of the dark clothing and the electronic gadget.

"As I said, our original agreement was to kidnap Lady Bundle, without hurting her you understand. We were prepared to work through you or any other person nominated by the family as go-between. Now ... The reason for all the melodrama of bringing you here, aside from making sure we're not followed, is that there has been a very disturbing development. Our, hum, employer has asked us – offering more money of course – to dispose of Lady Bundle."

"Dispose of?" repeated Lisette in a shocked voice.

"Yes, I'm afraid so ... Miss Rivers, we are kidnappers but we have standards. In fact, there is an organisation that requires all persons practising our line of work to adhere strictly to a code of practise."

"I've heard of that organisation," said Lisette.

"Quite so. You will know then that we do not harm our charges. That is part of the Code. We snatch them, hold them, and return them to the fold when we have been paid. We are not murderers."

"You could let Lady Bundle go free."

"We could, but you can see ..."

"Oh yes. Lady Bundle will still be in danger from the relative who wants her disposed of."

"Exactly. Lady Bundle will be safe once the family member is behind bars. We can't do that, for obvious reasons, but you can."

"What's your bargain?"

"We will give you the name of the person who hired us. Once that person is arrested we will hand Lady Bundle over to you. We will not ask for a ransom. Our interest has become one of cutting our costs. Murder is not our game. We are delicate souls."

Lisette took the last statement with a large grain of salt, but she said, "That's acceptable. In the meantime, is Lady Bundle safe?"

"Yes. She's being held somewhere else, locked in a secure room, not bound if that's what you're thinking. So, I'll tell you. Our employer is ..."

She was interrupted by an urgent knock on the door.

Lisette watched as the woman crossed the floor. There was a hurried conversation in the hall outside with one of the henchmen. Lisette could not make out the words. The woman re-entered followed by her masked assistant. She stood awkwardly before Lisette.

"Miss Rivers, we are forced to change our plans. Our, hum, employer has just entered the premises. Don't worry, this room is hidden, part of a secret wing

attached to the building. I will be conferring with the employer in another part of the building. In the meantime I regret that we have to tie you into the chair."

As she spoke the henchman uncoiled a length of rope which he cut into several pieces.

"The door is insecure and we can't risk having you free to move about," continued the woman. "This won't take long. Don't struggle. We can easily overpower you."

With a sigh Lisette sat still as the Leader and her henchman tied her securely into the chair. A long piece of rope was used by the woman to fasten Lisette's arms to her sides, ends first twisted several times about her wrists over the cuffs of her jacket. When this had been done with one wrist, the rope was stretched to the other wrist and anchored in passing to the central frame of the chair. As this was done, the henchman tied Lisette's ankles separately to the front legs of the chair using shorter pieces of rope. Lisette's wrists were bound over the arms of her jacket so that the rope would not chafe them.

Taking the remaining length of rope the woman wound it four times about Lisette's torso just below her breasts and around the frame of the chair to entrap her arms above the elbows. The rope was then passed down to the seat of the chair and connected to the points where the rear chair legs attached to the seat. When pulled tightly, the arrangement made a sort of cinch that prevented the coils about her torso from slipping.

Lisette stirred and tested her bonds. "This is ingenious, I have to admit," she said. "I'm bound fast but you've made me more or less comfortable."

"That's because of the Kidnappers' Code. We are at all pains to make our captive as comfortable as possible under some circumstances. However, a little discomfort has to be endured."

The woman opened Lisette's small clasp bag that had miraculously survived the car journey and took from it a plain white silk scarf. She shook it open - it was a large square - and refolded it along rectangular lines to form a thick band.

"This way is simple but quite effective at reducing noise. It passes between your jaws to fill the front of your mouth and holds them open at the same time."

She brought it over Lisette's head and stuffed the centre of the band into her mouth. Lisette tried to catch the gag on her teeth but the woman with a quiet chuckle pushed the silk deeper and tightened the ends around her head, thwarting Lisette's ploy. The gag was then knotted firmly at the back of her head over her hair. It was so tight that Lisette could not push it out with her tongue. She sat still with her head inclined a little to ease the pressure of the knot. It held her jaws open as the woman said and already she was beginning to drool uncomfortably from the corners of her mouth.

"We'll soon get back to you," said the woman reassuringly as they quit the room.

Lisette's arms were tied in such a way that she could move her hands a little. Given time, she was confident about getting free. The question was how much time? On the other hand, if she stayed put she would learn the identity of the kidnapper's surprise visitor. Was that safe, or wise? She was sharing a building with a person who would wish to dispose of her. The kidnappers might be followers of a strict code of etiquette towards their victims, but they might become victims themselves.

With these thoughts crowding her mind, Lisette tested her bonds and found to her chagrin that she was more securely fastened than she had thought. She might still be able to work free, but it came back to that question of time. Her choice of a smart business suit did not help. The sleeves over which the ropes were tied impeded her searching fingers and the slim-line skirt had no belt. That had been left at home, and with it the hidden blade that she usually wore.

Despite her earlier remark about the kidnappers' ingenuity in tying her neatly Lisette was growing more uncomfortable as the minutes passed. She worried uselessly at the gag. It hurt the corners of her mouth and she soon stopped struggling and sat still, her heart pounding.

She guessed that a little more than half an hour had passed before light footfalls were heard in the passage outside and the door opened to admit all three kidnappers. One of the henchmen set to work to free Lisette. He untied the knots instead of cutting them and, when that was done, rolled each length of rope into a neat coil that was stowed away into a small brown kit bag. The other minion untied the cloth knotted at the back of Lisette's neck and gently eased the gag from her mouth. He held a small bottle of water to Lisette's lips and she drank gratefully as the last of the ropes came away.

Lisette climbed shakily to her feet assisted by the two men.

"We'll get you out of here," the woman said hurriedly. "We- we had our, hum, interview with the employer, and there's not much time. We, uh, agreed to 'rub out' Lady Bundle. Of course we won't," she added hastily as Lisette gasped. "We'll hide her away instead. Your job is to please trap the person before more harm can be done."

"You have to tell me who it is," said Lisette as her arms were drawn behind her and her hands tied, but not too tight this time. "Otherwise I'm in the dark. Ohh ..." He voice trailed off as the hood was drawn once again over her head.

"Oh dear yes," said the woman as Lisette was led from the room and down the corridor. "Miss Rivers, you must stop him. There's no evidence to convict him. We prepare profiles of all the people we, ah, have business dealings with and he's hidden his tracks better than we do. It's up to you to stop the man who wants Lady Bundle out of the way."

"Then tell me," repeated Lisette as they helped her into the car, her voice muffled by the hood.

"Of course, well," the woman cleared her throat, a particularly strange sound coming through the distorting device. "The person behind it all is ..."

"Remember," said the woman half an hour later as the car pulled up in the street opposite Lisette's apartment block. "He doesn't know you're aware of his identity. I don't know how *you* might go about it, but I'm sure you can lay a trap and get him put away. Now, we're out of it!"

Lisette's hands were quickly freed and the hood removed. The door of the car swung open. She lost no time in scrambling out. The vehicle with its three erstwhile kidnapers swung out into the road and disappeared rapidly up the concourse. Lisette stood dazed, blinking in the light of the late afternoon.

So, it was Humphrey Melville all the time, thought Lisette as she stood beneath the warm spray of her shower. But where does that leave the other suspects? Have I been wrong in thinking that Quilla Scrivener was in on it? Then there are the security guards. Are they the same two who kidnapped me, minions of the lady with the voice box?

These were uncertainties. What was clear, however, were several points. (1) The gang wanted out. (2) As soon as they knew it was safe they would release Lady Bundle. (3) Lisette knew the identity of the person behind the kidnapping.

She dressed quickly in a smart business suit – grey striped jacket, white silk blouse, short black skirt and a polka dot silk scarf - laid out a bowl of food and water for Rasputin (the big Persian watching intently from the bathroom door, a pained expression on his face), and phoned Sophie to say that she was home safe, the case almost solved. She now planned to confront the man behind it.

"It's all right, Sophie. I'll have the police for backup. I'll phone them on my way."

She had just left the apartment block and was considering whether to take a taxi or fetch her little car from the residents' parking below the building when a short wheel base limousine drew up to the curb behind her and Humphrey Melville stepped from the rear passengers' seat.



Detail from *Martin Mystere*, No. 199, Sleepy Comics

"I'm glad I found you, Miss Rivers," the man stated breathlessly as he came to her. "There's been a development. Someone with new information I think you should meet. We can use my car." Lisette hesitated. "It will be quicker," he added, "the informant is not far from here."

Melville took Lisette firmly by the arm and reluctantly she walked to the limousine with the lawyer close at her side. She was in the back seat with the man beside her before Lisette knew the danger she was in. She recognised the chauffeur at once as he leered at her over his shoulder. He was one of the two security guards she had met at the Maison Palindrome, the one at the reception desk who had been uncooperative.

"What's this?" said Lisette sweetly. "Moonlighting?"

"I told you she was trouble Boss," said the driver, scowling.

He turned back, the car started, and they cruised smoothly down the road, gathering speed as they went.

"Oh yes," said Humphrey Melville through gritted teeth. "The main question, however, is how much you know, Miss Rivers."

"I was going to give you my report in the morning," Lisette extemporised.

Melville snorted. "I'll accept your report *viva voce* now we're face to face."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a place where we can talk uninterrupted. You may recognise it."

Melville lapsed into silence and Lisette settled back and watched as the limousine turned onto the M2 and passed beyond the outskirts of London. It was growing dark when an hour later they entered the village not far from Maison Palindrome. In the gloom Lisette was unable to recognise the cottage where the limousine pulled up but she had a keen intuition where they were.

They disembarked and walked towards the low building that seemed in the twilight to crouch menacingly before them. The two men held Lisette firmly by an arm on either side, making it impossible to break and run for it. In silence she was conducted around the side to the back door. A key was extracted from beneath a plaster gnome by the path and they passed through the kitchen to a dingy living room. The chauffeur switched on the light while Melville continued to hold Lisette. A chair was placed in the centre of the room and at the lawyer's bidding Lisette was pushed into it.

"What now?" It was the first time the young woman had spoken since leaving the city.

"My employee will prepare you for interrogation," said Humphrey Melville with a faint smirk.

Lisette saw that the chauffeur was uncoiling a length of rope.

"There's no need ..." she began.

"Oh yes," snapped Melville, angered by the young woman's apparent calm. "We begin by depriving you of movement. Chuff here is very good with rope. He will make sure that you are uncomfortable. You should know that the first step in an interrogation is to make the captive uncomfortable."

The chauffeur-cum-security man, identified for the first time as Chuff, fulfilled Melville's threat to the letter. When he had finished, Lisette's arms were bound tightly behind the chair, her ankles tied together, and her upper body trussed.

"Now we can begin," said Humphrey Melville. "Chuff, fetch wet towels. An old schoolboy game," Melville continued as the factotum left the room. "Flicking with a wet towel.

"You- you wouldn't dare!"



Detail from *Martin Mystere*, No. 199, *Sleepy Comics*

"Oh yes I would. You will see."

Chuff returned far too quickly for Lisette's liking, an anticipatory smirk on his brutal face. In one hand he carried two ragged hotel towels already soaked. In the other hand he held a mop bucket that slopped greasy water over its side as he planted it upon the floor near Lisette's bound feet.

Humphrey Melville took one of the towels and flicked it experimentally against the wall. The knotted end superimposed an interesting abstract pattern onto the faded wallpaper before rebounding and catching Melville on a plump thigh.

"Does that sting to your satisfaction?" asked Lisette sardonically as the man hopped up and down on one leg and rubbed his injured member.

"You- you'll," spluttered Humphrey Melville at a loss for words, "r-regret ..." He cast his eyes wildly about the room. "We'll soften her up," he went on, addressing Chuff. "F-find something to gag her."

The henchman did the job ruthlessly using Lisette's own white handkerchief and a white chiffon scarf found in her handbag. The young woman did not resist, knowing that if she did so she would succeed only in having the gag tied tighter if the man had to wrestle against her struggles. Humphrey Melville clucked his tongue in satisfaction.

"There!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "When you're gagged no one can hear you scream." He laughed hoarsely and a nervous tic played across his cheek.

Lisette looked up into his distorted face, her eyes wide with apprehension. *He's mad! Completely Demented.* She shrank back in the chair as the lawyer raised his arm, focussed upon the knotted end of the towel held in his hand as if mesmerised by it.



Detail from *The Avengers*, "The Gravediggers," (1965-1966 series), htf vidcaps (returned)

Humphrey Melville flung back his arm so vigorously that the towel whipped behind and wrapped around his neck, its business end neatly smacking him in the jaw. The man reeled and cursed. Melville disentangled himself from the towel and swung

it to and fro experimentally. But he had become dazed and scarcely able to keep his feet. Chuff, who was standing by the door, rolled his eyes at Lisette in a mixture of sympathy and exasperation, his earlier gloating leer having left his face.

Melville prepared to try again. He had removed his jacket in order to deliver the beating without hindrance and was now drenched in sweat, the shirt sticking to his rotund body, not a pretty sight.

This time Lisette's beating seemed inevitable. However, at the precise moment that Melville carefully trailed the towel behind him in readiness for the blow the door flew open and a woman appeared, her outline thrown into silhouette by the lighted hallway behind her.

"Stop that you fool!"

She stepped into the room, her features now lit by the ceiling lamp. It was Quilla Scrivener the receptionist. *Another suspicion confirmed*, thought Lisette.

Humphrey Melville dropped the towel and stood deflated, his head bowed.

"You've ruined everything," Scrivener continued. "Not only kidnapping the lady detective but bringing her to this place. What on earth were you thinking?"

"Uhh ... uh," said Melville unhappily.

"He's mad," said Chuff the henchman.

"Mad? Mad!" agreed the woman.

Quilla Scrivener swayed on her feet her face suffused with anger. "Get her out of here. Take her somewhere else. I don't care where. She'll have to remain bound of course," she added as Melville and Chuff moved to do her bidding.

"Not so fast," cried a voice.

The heads of all in the room turned. Their eyes rested upon a strange sight. Several people were crowded in the narrow space of the doorway. The first person Lisette recognised through the dim light was Debbie Bundle, daughter of the kidnapped Lady Priscilla Bundle. Close beside her stood Amber Blue, the assistant who held a vague resemblance to Lisette, and pressed behind her was the French maid Madeleine Aubergine. It was Debbie Bundle who had spoken but it was Madeleine Aubergine who launched into action.

"*Cochon!*" shouted the maid as she surged violently between the other two women, squeezing Debbie against the doorframe and pushing Amber back into the hall. "We have you now you, you, ah, *c'est insupportable! Ma robe. Le soie. All ruin. Mais ... mais, maintenant I have revenge!*"



Detail from *Glory Forbes*, possibly a Rangers Comic, courtesy c3c Yahoo Group

With those words Madeleine Aubergine hurled herself upon Quilla Scrivener. Her momentum carried the woman and herself past Lisette where they collided with the hapless Humphrey Melville. All three landed on the floor at the far side of the room in a tangle of arms and legs. When the combatants parted, Humphrey Melville was out of the contest, crumpled against the wall and groaning faintly. The two women, however, threw themselves upon each other and continued the affray, rolling over and over upon the floor at Lisette's feet.

By the time they had been separated by a policeman and policewoman who had come upon the scene, Quilla Scrivener was sporting a fine set of scratches on one cheek and her eye was beginning to close up. She would have a startling shiner by the next day. She stood silent, staring down with growing astonishment at the metal cuffs now adorning her wrists. Debbie Bundle and Amber Blue were solicitously untying Lisette and gently easing the gag from her mouth. The henchman Chuff had been led away by the police, chuckling quietly and shaking his head. Neither had Madeleine Aubergine been untouched by the fracas. Her silk dress was torn down one shoulder and her hair stood out like that of a scarecrow. There were, however, no marks upon her aside from light bruising around the upper arms and on the shoulder, revealed by the torn dress. She had come off best in the fight.

DI Hereward Fysshe balanced a steaming cup of coffee in both hands and sighed deeply. "I should have known when I was seconded to this area I wouldn't get away from you, Miss Rivers. Your crazy exploits seem to follow me everywhere."

He sipped his coffee pensively and a slow smile of pleasure spread over his face. DC Poppy Chipps, who was sitting in the background taking notes, positively glowed. They were sitting in the office of the district police station.

"However," Fysshe continued, "Your investigations flushed out the kidnap gang. The victim in question, ah, Lady Bundle, was found safe, locked in the cellar of the house where we followed you."

"As soon as we knew that you were on the case, Miss Rivers, it was only a question of following you," said Poppy Chipps. "You so often lead us to the criminals, and we so often have to rescue you," she added as an afterthought.

"I can't say that I'm not grateful," said Lisette, "but I'll try not to get caught next time."

A smile flitted across Hereward Fysshe's usually harassed countenance. "With all due respects, Lisette Rivers, I shan't hold my breath.

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