

# The Perfect Crime

## C. S. Montanye

CARLTON STEVENS MONTANYE (1892-1948), an active writer in the early years of pulpwood magazines, appears to have had an exceptional fondness for criminals as protagonists.

Although he wrote for many different periodicals, he achieved the peak of any pulp writer's career by selling numerous stories to *Black Mask*, beginning with the May 1920 issue and continuing through the issue of October 1939. Most were about various crooks, including the Countess d'Yls, who steals a pearl necklace in "A Shock for the Countess," Monahan, a yegg, and Rider Lott, inventor of the perfect crime.

His most famous character is the international jewel thief, Captain Valentine, who made his *Black Mask* debut on September 1, 1923, with "The Suite on the Seventh Floor," and appeared nine more times in two years, concluding with "The Dice of Destiny" in the July 1925 issue. The gentleman rogue also was the protagonist of the novel *Moons in Gold*, published in 1936, in which the debonair Valentine, accompanied by his amazingly ingenious Chinese servant Tim, is in Paris, where he has his eye on the world's most magnificent collection of opals.

Montanye also was one of the writers of the Phantom Detective series under the house name Robert Wallace.

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Two men sat at a table in a waterfront saloon. One was tall, dark and thin. He had the crafty, malevolent face of a gangster or crook. His eyes were beady and set close to a hawk-beak nose. His mouth was loose and weak but his chin was square. The other man was also tall. He was blond and broad shouldered. He was healthy in appearance and youthful looking. He resembled a stevedore or a freight handler from the docks. The two men had never seen each other until ten minutes past.

The dark man absently reached into a pocket and drew out a small, round pasteboard box. He opened it and dipped a thumb and forefinger into it and pinched out some white stuff. This he placed well into a nostril and sniffed it up his nose.

He looked across at the blond, who regarded him curiously.

“Walk in a snow storm, brother?”

“It’s dope, isn’t it?” the other asked.

The dark man’s eyes began to sparkle.

“Happy dust. Have some? No. So much more for me, then. What’s your name, brother?”

The blond youth set down his beaker of near-beer.

“My name is Klug—Martin Klug.”

The dark man nodded.

“Martin Klug, you say? I knew a Klug once. He was a gay-cat, which means a blaster or a safe-blower, if you don’t happen to know. He was doing a stretch in a band-house in Joplin for a job in Chi. He was old and had big ears. Was he your father?”

“No!” the other replied curtly. “He wasn’t my father. My father was an honest man.”

“Which implies his son isn’t, eh? Now, let me see if I can guess what *you* are.”

He cocked his head on one side and looked the youth over.

“You’re too big and clumsy for a dip or a leather snatcher. You haven’t got enough imagination to be a flash-thief or a con. Your hands are too large for peterman’s work and you’re too slow to swing on a derrick. What are you? I see your shoes are full of rust and stained with salt water. I’ll put you down as a river rat, a rattler grab, which means you’re a freight car crook. Am I right?”

The blond youth smiled a little.

“More or less. And you—what are you? *Who* are you?”

The dark man twisted his lips into a grin.

“Me? Brother, I’m Lott—Rider Lott. I’m an inventor. I’m also an author. I’m the inventor of the Perfect Crime. That is to say I’ve

discovered how a job can be turned without any danger of a prison sentence. I'm the author of a little book I hope to publish some day. It's called a Primer of Progressive Crime. I hope you understand me."

"I don't," said Klug.

Lott raised a hand.

"Listen. Crime doctors and criminologists say it is impossible to commit a crime without leaving behind a clue. The law of Chance swings an even balance. No matter what is accomplished, so *they* declare, something tangible is always left behind. It might be a finger-print, a drop of blood, a lock of hair, a footprint, a bit of cloth—*something*. Do you get me now?"

Klug nodded.

"And you don't agree with them?"

Lott picked at his right cheek.

"No, I don't agree with them. The Perfect Criminal doesn't have to leave a clue behind. I said the law of Chance swings an even balance. He's not *compelled* to furnish the cops with clues, is he? All he has to do is—"

At this minute a girl came out of the shadows and sat down at the table. She was coarse, voluptuous but possessed of a flashy beauty. She was dressed in tawdry finery and reeked of patchouli. Under a large, dusty picture hat, Klug observed quantities of red-bronze hair. She had cow-like brown eyes, a milk white skin, a vermil mouth. She carried a black satin handbag and a pair of dirty white kid gloves.

"Well, well," Lott said, as the girl sat down, "we now have with us Beatrice the Beautiful Brakeman's Daughter. Where have you been keeping yourself, Beatrice? I haven't seen you in six weeks."

Klug watched the girl curve her painted lips in a smile.

"My name isn't Beatrice," she said, "and I never saw you before."

Lott chuckled.

"Your fault—not mine, then. Beatrice, meet my friend Mr. Martin Klug. He seems to be a nice boy in spite of his name. But he is wasting his youth and ambition robbing freight cars. Stupid occupation, isn't it? Now, if some day he should walk into a bank at twelve o'clock—when the bank cops go and get something to eat—and stick a gun through the wicket of the paying-teller's cage and dip a hand in after it and pick up a package of bills—"

The girl looked at Klug.

"I've got ten cents," she said. "Will they back me up a wash of phoney suds for that much?"

"Not while I'm around with a quarter!" Lott said quickly.

He lifted a finger for a lantern-jawed waiter's attention, gave the order and looked at the girl.

"Ten cents is your capital, you say? Beatrice, you surprise me. A swell looker like you and only a thin dime! What's the matter with you? Did you ever happen to fall out of a chair when you were a child? You should be riding around in your limousine. Ten cents! Are you laughing, Martin Klug?"

"I don't see anything funny in that," Klug growled.

"I was the upstairs maid in a private house," the girl said moodily. "Mrs. Cabbler was the madame. She's an old woman with warts on her face. She's about seventy years old, I guess."

Lott chuckled.

“Seventy, eh? Their necks crack easy when they’re that age!”

“I worked there three weeks up to yesterday,” the girl went on. “I only wanted to get some money together to buy a pair of long white gloves—the kind that come up to your elbows. I’ll never be happy until I get long white gloves that come up to my elbows. Look at these dirty things I own. They’ve been cleaned twelve times—”

“Never mind about the gloves,” Lott said. “Tell my young friend and myself what happened. You haven’t the gloves you yearn for and therefore it stands to reason you weren’t paid. You worked three weeks and weren’t paid. Why not? What was the trouble? There was trouble of some kind, wasn’t there?”

“Yes. Mrs. Cabbler left a ten dollar bill on the bureau in her bedroom. Someone hooked it. She called me in. She said I took it. She discharged me. She wouldn’t give me my wages.”

Rider Lott looked hard at the blond youth.

“You hear that, Martin Klug? Mrs. Cabbler said Beatrice took ten dollars from the bureau in her bedroom and discharged her without paying her wages. Clearly an unlawful act.”

“A dirty trick!” The youth said thickly.

“No,” Lott disagreed pleasantly, “a perfectly proper course to take. Beatrice took the money. But she was forced to give it back. Then her madame took her revenge by discharging her without pay. Only natural, isn’t it?”

“She’s a devil, that Mrs. Cabbler!” the girl said viciously. “She looked me in the eyes and seemed to know everything. I gave her back the ten dollars. I didn’t know what I was doing, hardly. Now I’ll never get those long white gloves that come up to the elbows.”

“I’ll buy them for you,” Martin Klug said, “when I get some money.”

Lott picked at his left cheek.

“You’ll never get any if you stick to robbing freight cars. No money in that, my friend.”

The girl pushed aside her glass.

“I wish I hadn’t given Mrs. Cabbler back that ten spot. She’s got more now than she knows what to do with. Once I was passing along the hall and her bedroom door was ajar. She was counting her money. The whole top of the bed was covered with bills. She keeps it in a trunk under the bed. It is a small black trunk.”

Rider Lott looked across the table again.

“You hear that, Martin Klug? Mrs. Cabbler is seventy years old. She has a trunk full of money. Money isn’t much use to a person seventy years old, is it? Young people should have money. You’re young—so am I, for that matter.”

He turned his beady eyes on the girl.

“I don’t suppose you have the front door key, the back door key, the side door key or any other key, have you, Beatrice? I mean to Mrs. Cabbler’s house.”

The girl moved restlessly.

“My name isn’t Beatrice. But I have the key to the basement door. Just for spite I wouldn’t give it back to her. She doesn’t know I have it.”

Rider Lott stretched out a thin, pale hand.

“Give me the key you have.”

The girl opened her satin handbag, fumbled in the depths and drew out a key. She gave it to Lott. He dropped it in a pocket and looked at Martin Klug.

“If a person who is an enemy to society works alone,” he stated, “it is excellent. If two people work together it is less excellent and yet it is not altogether foolhardy. But if three people go out on a job it is flirting with disaster. We are Three. Do you understand what I mean?”

Klug shook his blond head.

“No, I don’t.”

“Neither do I,” said the girl.

Lott made an impatient gesture.

“I see why you, Martin Klug, are a river rat. And I see why you, Beatrice, Jewel of my Turban, have never risen above the level of a maid servant. You are both handicapped by the lack of intelligence and imagination. Both of you together don’t own the intellect of a common, garden-variety spider. You disgust me.”

Klug scowled.

“Well, what the hell do you mean?”

“Do you mean we should rob Mrs. Cabbler?” the girl asked, breathlessly.

“Ah, a gleam of intelligence!” Lott said mockingly. “Certainly we shall rob Mrs. Cabbler. Seventy years of age and a trunk full of money! She is made to rob. We have our own particular desires. Beatrice wants a pair of those long

white gloves that come to the elbow, to replace the dirty ones she carries—”

“And I,” put in Martin Klug, brightening up, “need a new pair of shoes. These are all in.”

Lott smiled.

“While I am desirous of placing my books on the newsstands of the underworld. A thousand dollars will float my Primer. It will be of wonderful assistance to young, ambitious crust-floppers, grifters and heavymen. It will make me famous.”

The girl grew animated.

“I should love to rob that skinny witch. And, oh, those gloves—”

Lott picked at his chin with his nervous fingers.

“We shall rob Mrs. Cabbler, the skinny witch. But two of us only must go. Beatrice must be one. She must guide one of us to the bedroom and the trunk with the money. She knows the house. Who will go with her? Martin Klug or myself? We shall draw straws and see.”

He picked up a discarded newspaper, lying beside his chair, and tore two strips of unequal length from it. These he placed in his pale, thin hand and extended the hand toward the blond youth.

“Take one, Martin Klug. If you draw the long strip of paper you go with Beautiful Beatrice and rob Mrs. Cabbler. If you draw the short one I go.”

Klug hesitated a minute and then drew one of the strips of paper from the hand before him. It proved to be the longest piece.

“So be it,” Lott said. “Go with Beatrice and rob the skinny witch. And remember these things: Use no violence of any kind. Take no

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chances, leave no clues. Take great pains to cover every step and don't be in a hurry. After you have the money, if you will go back and check over every move you have made, in quest of suspicious or incriminating clues left behind, and then remove them, you will have accomplished the Perfect Crime. I hope you know and understand my meaning."

Klug inclined his head.

"I do."

Lott looked at a battered nickel watch.

"Twelve after one." He considered the two with a roving glance. "We'll spring this job on a share and share alike basis. We'll divide Mrs. Cabbler's money into three equal portions. But we must decide now on a place where we can cut the swag. It's bad business dividing in a public place. Where can we go?"

The girl stood up.

"I know the very place. I live with my sister. She has a flat up on Tenth Avenue. She's away now. You can both go there. You can stay there as long as you want."

Lott attained his feet.

"Fine. Let's start for Mrs. Cabbler's now. A woman of seventy sleeps as heavily at twelve o'clock as at three."

Martin Klug stood up.

"Are you coming, too?" he inquired, as if surprised.

Lott turned up his coat collar.

"Certainly. I shall wait outside for you both."

Two men and a girl sat at a table in the living-room of a cheap Tenth Avenue flat. It was the night following. A gas jet flickered garishly. An empty whisky bottle was on the table. The odor of booze mingled with that of cigarettes.

"Are you sure," Lott said, "you left no telltale marks behind you, incriminating evidence? Did you follow my instructions to the letter? Did you make it a Perfect Crime?"

Martin Klug shifted about in his rickety chair.

"I'm sure. I remembered what you told me. I went over the ground carefully. I even picked up the burnt matches."

"Robbery," said Lott, "means anywhere from five to twenty years. But murder means the chair. You made a mistake, Martin Klug. You shouldn't have killed the old woman."

The girl laughed.

"What else could he do? Just when we pulled out the trunk the old witch opened her eyes. She began to squawk."

Lott shook his head soberly.

"You could have tied her up. You could have gagged her. You didn't *have* to kill her!"

Martin Klug drew a breath.

"I was excited," he confessed. "I'm used to freight cars, not bedrooms. I pulled out the trunk. Then I looked up and saw the old woman's eyes looking at me. They were eyes like a fish's, cold and dead looking. Then she began to squawk. So I took her skinny throat between my hands."

“Bad business,” said Lott. “Well, there’s no use of shedding tears about it. It’s over and done with. Get the coin, Beatrice. We’ll split it up.”

The girl went to the corner of the room. She pulled aside a couch and drew out a package wrapped in newspaper. She brought this to the table and laid it before Lott. He opened it and drew out three packages of money.

“Nine thousand dollars,” he said. “Divide it by three and it equals three thousand dollars apiece.”

“I don’t see where you come off to get any of it,” Martin Klug grumbled. “What did *you* do?”

Lott twisted his lips into a grim smile.

“I suppose you want my share because you croaked the old lady? What did *I* do? Nothing, not a thing, except plan the robbery. This three thousand is my royalty on the idea. Get me? What do *you* say, Beatrice?”

“My name isn’t Beatrice,” the girl replied. “And I don’t say anything at all. Take the dough—it’s yours!”

“You’re a droll humorist, my young murderer, if you know what that is,” Lott said to the blond young man.

“Here, take your share of the stuff and keep your mouth shut. Beatrice, Pearl of Price, put your mitts on your three thousand. Take it, my dear. Heaven is witness you earned it!”

The girl grabbed up her package of money and hugged it to her full breast.

“Mine! All mine!” she exulted. “And that’s not all either! No, that’s not all! Wait—look! I want to show you something!”

She jumped up, went to her wrap and dug something out of a pocket—something long and supple as a white snake. She held the objects up before Lott’s eyes.

“Do you see ‘em? *Gloves*—long white gloves that come up to my elbows!”

Martin Klug chuckled.

“She saw them on the dresser in the old woman’s room. She made a dive for them. She seemed to want them more than the coin. Women are funny.”

The girl pressed the gloves to her face.

“They’re just the kind I dreamed about! It’s a joke. I worked there three weeks to get the money to buy them and all the time the old hag had just the gloves I wanted. Well, they’re no use to her now. Won’t they look swell with that big hat of mine? I’m terribly lucky. When Martin Klug lit the match they were the first things I saw!”

Lott picked at his chin.

“You should have heard the old dame squawk,” Martin Klug said suddenly, with a laugh. “Then you should have heard her gurgle when I got hold of her windpipe. It sounded like water running out of a sink!”

He sighed.

“We’ve divided up the stuff, Lott. Let’s get down to brass tacks. Let’s divide up the girl. You want her. I want her. Who gets her? That’s what I want to know.”

The dark man took a deliberate sniff of snow and stretched his long arms.

“I’m in a drift. But don’t dig me out! Who gets the girl? Who gets Beatrice the Beaut? Ask her? Who does get you, sweetheart?”

The girl ceased admiring the long, new white kid gloves in her hands.

“They are just my size. It was good to shake the old ones. Now these—”

“Answer the question!” Lott said briskly. “Who gets you?”

She looked slowly from one to the other.

“Well,” she murmured, “you’re both nice. I like you both.”

“Make a choice,” Lott said brusquely. “Don’t beat around the bush. We both can’t have you. That’s polygamy; against the law. It wouldn’t do to run afoul of the law—that way. So—which?”

The girl let a scowl creep across her beautiful face.

“I think,” she said, after an interval, “if you would stop calling me Beatrice, I’d like *you* the best!”

Lott picked at his lips.

“Good. Then I get you, eh? Is that it?”

Martin Klug lurched heavily to his feet.

*“Like hell you get her!”*

He made a swift lunge at Lott. But the dark man was too quick for him.

Lott jumped to his feet and threw back his head with a quick, feline motion. The blow glided harmlessly over his shoulder. He seized the whisky bottle by the neck as the blond youth sprang at him like a tiger. He sidestepped and brought the bottle down with all his force on the skull of the other.

Klug stopped short, moaned faintly, groaned, and sank in an odd, limp heap on the table.

Then he rolled off it and sprawled, stirless, on the dirty uncarpeted floor.

Lott laughed a little.

“Poor fool! Now we have three thousand more than we had two minutes ago. I guess I’ve killed him. A tap on the façade is always like that if you use force. Maybe it’s just as well. He was only a river rat. Get on your hat and coat, Beatrice. Put the cash in a bag. We’ve got to get out of here now in a hurry.”

While the girl hastened to obey his orders, Lott took another sniff of dope and prodded Klug’s body with his foot.

“No imagination,” he said under his breath. “It’s just as well—”

The girl loomed up before him. She had a satchel in her hand and wore the large, dusty picture hat.

“Wait until I put on these new gloves. They’re soft. I love them. I always wanted them.”

She began to flex her hands into them while Lott pushed Klug’s body under the table.

“What did you do with the other gloves—the dirty ones?” he asked.

The girl held out a rounded arm and inspected the new glove.

“What did I do with ‘em? What do you think? I just naturally chucked them away. What do I want with rotten old gloves like those, that have been cleaned twelve times?”

Lott drew his brows together and glanced at his nickel watch.



“Where did you throw them?”

She began donning the second glove.

“Oh, in the trash basket in the old witch’s room. What difference does it make?”

Lott grasped her arm. His face had changed.

Color had crept into it. His eyes burned queerly.

*“In the trash basket! You threw your old gloves in the trash basket in that room!”*

The girl sought to wrench her arm from the tight grip he put upon it.

“What’s eating you!” she said sibilantly. “You’ve got too much snow on board—”

Lott drew his lips over his teeth.

*“You fool!”* he cried. *“You little fool! You’ve—”*

He stopped and dropped her arm. The lids fell over his gleaming eyes. He moved his head to one side as if listening. Something in his attitude caused the girl to listen, too. For a long, tense minute she heard nothing. Then, on her strained ears sounded a footfall on the stairs outside... another.

She heard Lott draw a quick breath.

At the same instant the door burst open and two men stepped in, drawn revolvers glinting in the gaslight. Both wore derby hats and an air of authority. One motioned her to fall back against the wall; the other man jammed his gun in Lott’s face.

“I’m Davis of Headquarters!” this second man snapped. “You and the moll are wanted. Case of murder—croaking old Mrs. Cabbler the rich widow! Out with your dukes and let me jewel you!”

Lott, against the table, hands trembling over his head, looked at the cowering figure of the girl.

*“In the trash basket”* he whispered. “Oh, God—”

The detective, adjusting steel handcuffs, grunted.

“In the trash basket is right! It was a careful job and neatly turned. Not even a burnt match or a fingerprint. But no crime is perfect. We fished the dirty gloves out of the trash basket. They were full of numbers and those ink marks the cleaners put in them. We spent the day getting a line on the numbers in them. An hour ago we found the establishment that had cleaned them—”