

## Dark Corners

Edith Maxwell

When Dorothy Henderson visited Boston in July of 1926, she hadn't expected to encounter dark corners in the staid, historic city.

"Dot, dear, I daresay you've recovered by now from your long train trip from Pasadena." Etta Rogers sipped from a gin rickey in the parlor of her Beacon Hill townhouse. With a telegram hinting at some sort of help she needed, Dot's no-nonsense maiden aunt had summoned her all the way across the continent.

"I quite think so," Dot said. "It would have been more fun to drive, but not unaccompanied."

"Tomorrow I'll take you over to Denison House, introduce you around."

"What's your role at the settlement house?" Dot crossed her long trousered legs and tasted her own five o'clock cocktail, tonight a Mary Pickford. What a blessing Etta turned out to love liquor as much as Dot did. The last time she'd seen her aunt, Dot had been a child in Indianapolis, before her family moved to California.

"I volunteer doing this and that. We Wellesley women founded the place, and we Wellesley women keep it running." Etta leaned forward. "Now, about the—"

Georgia Hamilton, Etta's colored housekeeper, popped her head in. "Supper's in the oven, Miss Rogers. I'll be going now."

"Very good, Georgia," Etta said. "Thank you. I hope you have a lovely evening." After the sound of a lock clicking shut, she turned to Dot. "Your mother has kept me abreast of your investigative expertise. Yours and Miss Skinner's."

"I admit, Ruth and I have had some successes in assisting ladies and bringing their abusers—or murderers—to justice." Dot and her petite friend had opened the HS Ladies' Agency in Pasadena five years earlier.

"Excellent. Denison is nothing if not a place to help women of all classes and nationalities. But we suspect someone is sabotaging our efforts. I hope you can help us find out who. We need to stop him before more damage is done."

"It could be a common thief, or young vandals. Have you asked the police for help?"

"Boston cops? Dorothy, they'd laugh in our faces. No, this is a job for the ladies."

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Etta pulled her serviceable but boring Ford up to a row of wide brick buildings in the South Cove neighborhood the next morning at ten o'clock. The structure directly in front was three stories tall, with dormers peeking out of the roof, while the newer building to its left was four stories plus a rooftop garden, with gay vines blossoming along its railing. Neat curtains hung in the windows of the upper stories on both edifices.

“This is quite the establishment.” Dot smoothed down the skirt of her drop-waist dress in a muted, blue-sprigged lawn. She’d thought it better not to overdress for an excursion to a settlement house.

“So it is.” Etta’s proud tone shone. “We’re up to five buildings.”

With a beep of its horn, a bright yellow convertible roadster parked to Dot’s right. A woman about Dot’s age was behind the wheel, her short cap of chestnut-colored hair windblown from her drive.

“She’s our newest social worker and teacher.” Etta climbed out.

Dot did, too.

“Good morning, there, Miss Rogers.” The trousers-clad teacher beamed. “Have you snagged another instructor for us?”

“Miss Earhart, this is my niece, Dorothy Henderson. Dot, meet Amelia Earhart.”

Dot extended her hand, quite liking the look of the slender woman, who pumped her hand enthusiastically.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Henderson. I keep telling your aunt to call me Amelia, but she’s not having it.”

Dot laughed. “Well, Amelia, I hope you’ll address me as Dot. I’m not a new teacher, though.”

“She’s here on a vacation from her work in Pasadena,” Etta said.

“California? Golly, I learned to fly in Long Beach.” Amelia’s eyes lit up.

Dot gaped. “Fly?”

“Sure. It’s the best thing in the whole world. I go up every weekend.” She gazed at the sky with a dreamy look. “I’ll take you one day if you like, Dot. It’s swell.”

A clock nearby began to chime the hour.

“Criminey,” Amelia said. “I’m late to class. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Dot. See you, Miss Rogers.” She grabbed a satchel out of the auto and hurried inside.

“Kind of leaves one breathless, doesn’t she?” Etta asked.

“I’ll say.” Dot walked around the yellow motorcar. “A Kissell Speedster. She can probably fly in this if she gets a nice open stretch of road.” Dot knew of the Gold Bug’s flathead-eight engine but had never been lucky enough to drive one.

“That’s all well and good,” Etta said. “But we’re here with a purpose, remember.”

“Yes, Aunt Etta.” Dot tore her attention away from the vehicle and surveyed the building fronts. “Is there any sabotage evident from the outside?”

“No.” As the clock finished its tenth chime, Etta frowned. “Whoever it is has been wily enough to stay in the dark.”

Dot waited until two women chattering in what she thought was Italian passed by. “What has been harmed?”

“Electrical wires clipped. Water pipes damaged. And small fires set.”

“Do you trust your janitors? Whoever is caretaker of the building?”

“We do.” Etta gave a firm nod. “One hundred percent.”

“Still, I’d like to talk with him, or them.”

“Very well.” Etta ushered her toward the double front doors. “Let’s go in and take a tour. Mark my words, this is the job of an insider.”

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Etta briefly showed Dot around. They stopped by the head janitor's basement office, but he wasn't in. "You'll want to come back to speak with Mr. Sweeny. I told him you'd be paying him a visit."

Back upstairs, they passed a room full of women bent over sewing machines. Another room had a teenage girl hesitantly reading aloud in English to a class, and a brightly decorated nursery was full of noisy toddlers playing with blocks, dolls, and toy trucks. Dot spied Amelia listing the parts of an airplane on a chalkboard next to a simple drawing of a flying machine. A cooking class for adults seemed to combine lessons in English, reading, mathematics, and using American-style stoves. The tour ended with Etta introducing Dot to the ladies in the front office.

Back in the hall, Etta said she had business downtown.

"That's fine," Dot replied. "I'll find my way home on the subway."

"You can always call a taxicab, dear. Do you need money?"

"No, thank you." Dot patted her handbag. "I have sufficient funds, and I like exploring new places." The first new place she was determined to explore was Mr. Sweeny's office.

She knocked on the door jamb. "Mr. Sweeny?"

A ruddy-cheeked man glanced up from a tool bench where he'd been peering through half-glasses at a piece of metal. "That would be me, in the flesh. What can I help you with, miss?"

"I'm Dorothy Henderson. My aunt, Miss Rogers—"

"Yes, yes. Have a seat." He gestured at a chair on the other side of the desk and swiveled to face her.

"I'm a private investigator. Aunt Etta told me about sabotage going on here. Would it be convenient for you to show me what's been damaged?"

He peered at her over his close-work spectacles. "A pretty girl like you is a gumshoe?"

Dot folded her hands in her lap and nodded without speaking. She knew she was not beauty queen material but was attractive enough. At twenty-six she was certainly no girl. Anyway, she was used to this kind of reaction.

"Sure, I'll show you." He laid his glasses on the desk, grabbed a flashlight out of a drawer, and led the way down the hall. Around a corner the light grew dim. "See here?" He shone the light on a network of wires overhead. Several had black tape wrapped around them.

"Is that a repair to clipped wires?" Dot asked.

"You're a smart cookie. That's exactly what it is. Those wires power all the classrooms."

"When did this happen?" She scanned the rough concrete floor.

"Last month sometime. Let's see. Yes, it was the last day of June. Payday, in fact. Somebody snuck in here at night to do the damage. I was able to splice the wires so the ladies upstairs had lights again, but it's a pity. This building ain't that old." He began to walk away.

Dot gazed up at the wires. The tip of a long nail protruded from an overhead board the wires were tacked to. She plucked a shred of cloth off it and tucked it into her glove. She patted her blue cloche. A tall person could cut their head on such a nail.

After he showed her the cut telephone cable, also spliced, and a now-repaired water pipe that had been severed, they returned to his office.

"Who do you think is doing these things?" Dot asked.

He sat and rubbed his sandy hair. "You'd be surprised at how many people look down on a joint like this. The ladies who run Denison welcome all manner of folks who are newcomers to our country, women with darker skin and not many words of English. A certain group of Bostonians – you know, the crooked-pinky set?" He mocked a dainty teacup hold. "They wish those recent arrivals would go back to where they come from."

"I'm sure they do, Mr. Sweeny, even though we were all immigrants at some point." Except the Indians. "Have you found evidence of locks being picked or outer doors broken down?"

"There's the rub, Miss Henderson. Hasn't been any of that."

This was certainly the work of an insider. She needed to look for a person who knew the building and, quite possibly, someone who had keys.

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Dot visited with the ladies in the office for a bit. She learned the office manager had a key, as well as the director, several ladies on the board -- including Aunt Etta -- and Mr. Sweeny.

"Does the board own the buildings?" Dot asked.

"No, they're leased," the office manager replied.

"The landlord must have keys, then."

"I expect so, Miss Henderson."

"Who owns the building?" Dot asked.

"I couldn't say. You'll have to ask the director, except she's out today."

Dot thanked her and wandered out into the summer sunshine where she stood, unresolved as to a plan. She'd rather like to walk all the way back to Aunt Etta's and had brought a map in her bag for that very purpose. Instead, she turned and stared at the settlement house buildings.

Were all the women on the board trustworthy? One of their keys could have landed in the wrong hands. Or had Mr. Sweeny missed evidence of a break-in? Perhaps the landlord, whoever that was, had other designs on these buildings and wanted the settlement to fail.

Amelia breezed through the front doors. "Say, Dot. How about getting a bite to eat with me? I'm famished, and there's a nifty new lunchroom nearby."

Dot's stomach grumbled at the suggestion. "Lead the way."

Amelia swiped a speck of dust from the Kissell. "Ain't she a beaut?"

"I'll say. I adore motorcars. She runs on, what, seventy-five horsepower?"

Dot tucked her arm through Amelia's elbow, and the two chatted happily about cars all the way to the lunchroom. They found a table in the front window and ordered coffee, clam chowder, and a sandwich each.

"What do you teach besides the structure of an airplane?" Dot asked.

"Science of all kinds. I like to talk about flying, of course, but it's really a math and physics lesson." She wrinkled her nose. "I wanted to go to MIT, but Mum and I couldn't swing the tuition." She sipped her coffee and brightened. "Tell me about yourself. What were you doing in there all morning?"

Dot cocked her head. She decided to trust this intelligent, energetic aviator. "Have you heard about the sabotage to the Denison House?"

“Who hasn’t? They had a flood when a water pipe was damaged, and we’ve had to work without lights more than once.”

“I’m a private investigator.”

It was Amelia’s turn to gape. “You’re a lady PI?”

“I am. My partner and I run an agency in Pasadena with a mission to help women. My aunt asked me out here to figure out who’s behind these attacks.”

“Because all of Denison House helps women.”

“Precisely. It appears the culprit might have keys. Would you have any thoughts on who it might be?”

They talked through the possibilities Dot had come up with.

“Sweeny seems like a good egg.” Amelia spooned in a bite of chowder. “What if there’s a tunnel nobody knows about?”

“A secret passageway.”

“That tall building with the garden is new, but the original one is pretty old.”

Dot made a mental note to find out who built the main structure, and when. She fished the scrap of fabric out of her glove and laid it on the table in the sunlight. “I found this caught on an overhead nail near where the electrical wires were cut.”

Amelia leaned closer to study it. “Looks like tweed, doesn’t it?”

“If it’s from a cap, our villain must be tall.”

“Or a coat sleeve could have caught. But I daresay you’re right.”

“What about the landlord?” Dot asked. “Do you know anything about him?”

“No, but I know somebody who might.” Amelia pushed away her bowl. “Do you like to dance, Dot? I mean, like at a club?”

“Dancing’s the bee’s knees!”

“It’s settled. I’m taking you to my favorite speakeasy tonight. We’ll cut the rug, have a couple of drinks, and maybe talk to somebody who knows something.” She winked at Dot. “You look like a stylish girl. If I had to guess, I’d say you brought a dress for just such an occasion.”

“You already know me, my friend.” Dot smiled, thinking how teetotaler Ruth would roll her eyes if she knew Dot had found a pal to carouse with. And a temporary sleuthing partner, too.

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By nine thirty, Amelia and Dot sat happily drinking at a small table at the edge of the Lambs’ Club dance floor. Teetotaler Amelia had a Ward’s Orange Crush, while Dot enjoyed a gin rickey. With them was James Colby, a fellow also in his twenties. Before Aunt Etta had left to attend a lecture at her alma mater, she’d insisted the ladies have a male escort and had drummed up this son of a friend of hers. After Georgia learned of Dot’s plans, she’d mentioned that her brother played in the jazz quartet here.

“I hope you girls don’t mind my being foisted on you,” James now said. He crossed his legs and leaned his chin into his hand, tilting his head in a feminine gesture. “And I hope you’ll call me Jamie. James sounds so old, really, and Mr. Colby? He’s my father.”

“Jamie it is, darling.” Amelia took a drag on her gasper. She wore a silky dress in a yellow to match her car, a garment that barely cleared her knees.

Dot had donned her green fringed dancing frock, no longer than Amelia's. She'd added four strands of long beads, plus a glittery green headband crossing her forehead. She liked dressing up and dancing almost as much as she loved driving.

"When will the music start?" Dot asked. "My aunt's housekeeper said her brother plays saxophone in the group."

"Adam?" Jamie's eyebrows rose above luminous blue eyes with dark lashes indecently long for a man.

"Yes, that's the name. You know him?"

"I do." Jamie gazed with a dreamy expression at the platform empty except for music stands and microphones.

Amelia winked at Dot. "They'll start any minute now, I'd say. Adam Hamilton is the gent I mentioned to you at lunch."

Dot stared at her. A colored jazz player knew about the Denison House building? This was going to be interesting.

"He's an architect during the day," Amelia murmured. "He might know about a tunnel." Even more interesting.

"Here they come!" Jamie pressed his palms together at his mouth, his eyes shining with excitement.

Four men emerged from a dark corner to thunderous applause. Three were of African heritage. The only Caucasian, who carried an upright bass, had skin paler than bleached linen. The fellow with the sax searched the crowd. When he spied Jamie, the sweetest smile spread over his face.

The trumpeter started them off with "The Charleston," the most popular song of the year. Dot and her friends joined the crowd flocking onto the dance floor. They cut the rug -- and then some -- for a full hour. During the "Twelfth Street Rag," a couple of gents lit tiny firecrackers, which made the ladies dancing near them jump. The men laughed -- until they were thrown out of the club.

Amelia and Dot returned to their table after the bandleader said the musicians would take a thirty-minute break.

Dot fanned herself. "Wasn't that the most fun?"

"Sure." Amelia leaned closer. "Looks like we can ask Adam about the fellow who owns Denison House." She gestured with her chin toward their so-called escort nearly pulling Adam to our table.

After introductions were accomplished, Adam took a long drink from his ice water and gazed at Dot. "I understand you're staying where my big sis works."

"Yes, I'm visiting my aunt. Your playing was absolute berries."

"Thank you, honey. I love doing it." He beamed his sweet smile again, under lashes as long as but curlier than Jamie's.

"I'm curious how you know these two?" Dot asked.

"Jamie did a story on the band," Adam said. "He's a reporter for the *Boston Herald*."

Jamie, blushing, reached over and squeezed Adam's dark hand with his own pale one.

"Miss Earhart, now?" Adam continued. "We met while I was walking my dog along the Mystic River in West Medford, where I live."

“I live in Medford, too, Dot,” Amelia said. “Adam, our new friend has questions about who owns Denison House.”

The musician’s happy expression slid away. “You don’t want to be tangling with him.”

“Why not?” Dot asked.

“Have you heard of our former mayor Honey Fitz, or of Joe Kennedy?” Adam asked.

Dot shook her head. “No, can’t say I have.”

“They’re what they call the “lace curtain” Irish. But there’s another crew of Irish in this town, the ones who lurk in the dark corners.”

Dot waited. Amelia sipped her drink. Adam drummed his fingers on the table.

“Let’s just say you should keep your distance from Mr. Bulger and his gang. They’re bad news, Miss Henderson.”

“This Bulger is the owner?” Dot asked.

“Yes,” Adam said. “Among other enterprises -- legal and otherwise -- Rowan Bulger also owns the Pickwick Club and the property next to it. Or what’s left of the club.”

Amelia gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. “The one that collapsed on the night of the Fourth?”

Adam nodded. “He never repaired the roof after that conflagration in April, after the firemen poured all that water on to put it out. Then he goes and excavates right next door, piling dirt against the Pickwick’s wall.”

The band leader appeared on the platform. He made a little circle in the air with his index finger. Adam drained his water and stood.

“Thank you, Adam,” Dot said.

He nodded, tousled Jamie’s already mussed hair, and strode away.

“What was the Pickwick Club?” Dot asked Amelia.

“A speakeasy and dance club like this one, except bigger and more popular.”

“The second floor was crammed with dancers having an Independence Day party,” Jamie whispered. “At three in the morning, the top two floors collapsed on them.”

Dot’s breath rushed in. She’d celebrated her twenty-sixth birthday on the Fourth just prior to traveling east.

“It took everyone down into the basement.” Amelia took up the story. “They almost all died.”

“The papers are blaming the collapse on colored people exciting everyone with their wild tunes. They claim it was all those people dancing that caused the collapse,” Jamie added.

“Adam obviously thinks differently,” Amelia said.

The music started up. Dot glanced at the ceiling. What if Bulger owned this building, too? Would the Lamb’s Club also collapse from poor construction and management? She lit a ciggie and slouched in her chair. “You know, I don’t think I feel like any more dancing tonight.” She gazed at her companions. “But I think we need a plan.”

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It was after eleven the following night before any action got underway. Dot and Amelia had met Jamie an hour earlier in a dark corner on the side street bordering Denison House. They’d all dressed in their most muted garments, with both women in trousers and flat shoes.

Amelia had a man's cap pulled low on her brow, and Dot wore her navy cloche. Jamie had a camera slung around his neck.

Dot was on lookout, peering around the edge of the building. A streetlight and a lamp over the building's entrance illuminated the street. She put a finger to her lips and gestured to the others when a black Lincoln Model L with its headlights off purred to a halt parallel to the settlement house. Amelia peered over Dot's shoulder, with Jamie next to her. Out of the corner of her eye, Dot spied him scribbling in a small notebook. In case he wasn't writing down the car's license plate number, she committed it to memory.

A scruffy-looking fellow in a tweed cap climbed out of the vehicle carrying a can with a pouring spout. Dot's eyes went wide. The tall man began to pour liquid along the perimeter of the building, walking slowly toward them as he did. She sniffed, detecting the acrid odor of kerosene. Her heart hammered. She glanced at her companions. Jamie had his camera up and ready. Amelia gave her a nod.

The man set down the can. He pulled a box of matches from his pocket and extracted one stick, ready to strike it. Jamie stepped out of the shadows and took a photo. The man startled and dropped the match. Jamie took another picture.

The vehicle started up. Dot and Amelia rushed the man from both sides. They each grabbed a hand, as they'd planned. The matchbox hit the sidewalk. They twisted his arms behind his back. A rip in his cap matched the shred Dot had retrieved from the nail. The man struggled, but they held on.

Jamie stepped in front of the Lincoln. The camera clicked as he captured its occupants, illuminated by the streetlight slanting in. A gent in the back seat glared. He aimed a gun at Jamie. The driver revved the engine.

"Jamie!" Dot cried.

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Wearing a dressing gown, Dot yawned as she joined Etta at the breakfast table at eight the next morning. Etta, fully dressed and finished with breakfast by the look of her plate, glanced up from the newspaper open on the table.

She raised a single eyebrow. "You were out late, my dear. Did it have anything to do with this?" She closed the paper and pointed to the screaming headline.

*Bulger Gang Caught in the Act!*

Jamie's photograph of a furious Rowan Bulger filled most of the top half of the *Boston Herald*.

Dot had never read such a satisfying lede as the one that accompanied the picture.

*Intrepid reporter James Colby nabs Irish gang in horrific attempted arson on settlement house. Two valiant girl heroes apprehend arsonist, hold him until police arrive.*

The story went on to say that the authorities later detained Rowan Bulger. The arsonist sang like a canary, claiming his boss wanted to raze Denison House and construct profitable office buildings on the site. The brave girls had refused to give their names. Below the fold was Jamie's photo of the startled saboteur, match in hand, fuel can at his feet.



Dot smiled. She poured herself a cup of coffee before responding. “As a matter of fact, yes. Miss Earhart and I are the ‘valiant girl heroes.’ Which is entirely the wrong adjective for two respectable ladies in their twenties.” Well, mostly respectable.

“I hope you didn’t put yourself in harm’s way, my dear.” Etta frowned. “When I asked you out here, I thought you would be using your superior brain to find our saboteur, not doing late-night surveillance and grabbing criminals. Your mother would never forgive me if you were hurt – or worse.”

“Aunt Etta.” Dot patted her hand. “My friends and I are three healthy, intelligent young people. We had a plan, and it succeeded. That’s all you need to know.” She sipped the rich black coffee.

Except Jamie had certainly been in danger. Between Bulger’s weapon and the powerful motorcar racing at him, Dot had feared the jig was up for her new friend. But he’d leapt out of the way just in time. The single shot Bulger fired as the car raced away had gone wide.

Mr. Sweeny, who had hurried out in coat and nightcap, took over guarding the arsonist. The lady who was the resident director offered them the use of the telephone and a place to wait inside. Dot called the police. Jamie telephoned the *Herald*, telling them to stop the presses, and summoned a taxi to take him and his photographic evidence to the newspaper offices. He tore out the slip of paper with the car’s license number and handed it to Dot before he left.

She and Amelia had urged Jamie to omit their names from the story, but they’d been obliged to give their identities to the officers who appeared next.

“So, you just happened to be passing by?” A carrot-topped copper scrunched up his face in disbelief.

Amelia mustered a bright smile. “Miss Henderson and I like to go for evening walks. It’s so much quieter at this time of night.”

“Indeed,” Dot agreed. “Usually.”

Now she gazed at her aunt. “I think Denison House will be safe for the time being.”

“We are ever so grateful, my dear.”

All’s well that ends well, as Ruth was fond of saying. Dot and her pals had vanquished one dark corner, for now, and she could make her way back west with another investigative success in her pocket.

“Please pass the pastries,” Dot said. “I’m famished.”

The End