

Page 41) smile. "What's Jump, but next 'ebl Ig." ge your name

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stopped looking ng my idea," he can put it over n't let you. You rished the gun. dn't r . . . " Nast . . . I wonderful idea." his face began to

ar to look at him. I discovered that ow I lay me down Two men named threshold W

The little man looked reproachful. "You didn't have to do that," he said. "I'd have given it to you if you'd asked." W. Postlethwaite was sitting on the floor. "You struck me," he said in a tone of unbelief.

BILL pointed out that he had merely been pushed from the line of possible gunfire; that, therefore, Bill had practically saved his life: that the arrival of the police was imminent; and that it would be best for him to transact his business and depart rather than to stay and become involved in notoriety. Several times in this discourse occurred the phrase "a man of your prominence."

W. Postlethwaite was not quick to be convinced. He leered experimentally in Romanie's direction.

"Police," Bill repeated. "And newspaper reporters."

"Not reporters!"

"Certainly. A man of your —"

"I'd better go," his namesake said regretfully. He wrote a check and gave it to Romanie. "Why don't you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked her. "That is, if I can get away."

"I'd have to bring my aunts along," she told him.

"Aunts?"

"My mother's older sisters. They like to go to the health-food cafeteria. And one of them has a poodle."

"Well —"

"I think I hear the squad car," Bill mentioned.

"I must go," W. Postlethwaite said quickly. "We'll dine together some other time."

Romanie didn't bother to answer.

AFTER the door had closed it was very quiet for a moment, and then there came a snuffle from the corner. The little man was weeping. It made Bill feel like a bully. He was so small and old and pathetic.

"You oughtn't go playing with guns. You might hurt somebody," Bill said angrily, trying to recapture the heroic feeling he'd had.

"It isn't loaded," the little man assured him earnestly. And it wasn't.

Then the police came and there were questions and explanations. Finally they took the little man away. Bill and Romanie were left alone.

"I haven't thanked you," she said. "You were wonderful."

"The gun wasn't loaded."

"But you didn't know that."

Silence. Bill sought to postpone the moment of departure. He picked up the little wooden animal. "It's afternoon," he said, "and he still isn't panthing."

Romanie shook her head. "I think he was scared out of his panths," she said soberly.

"Were you really frightened?"

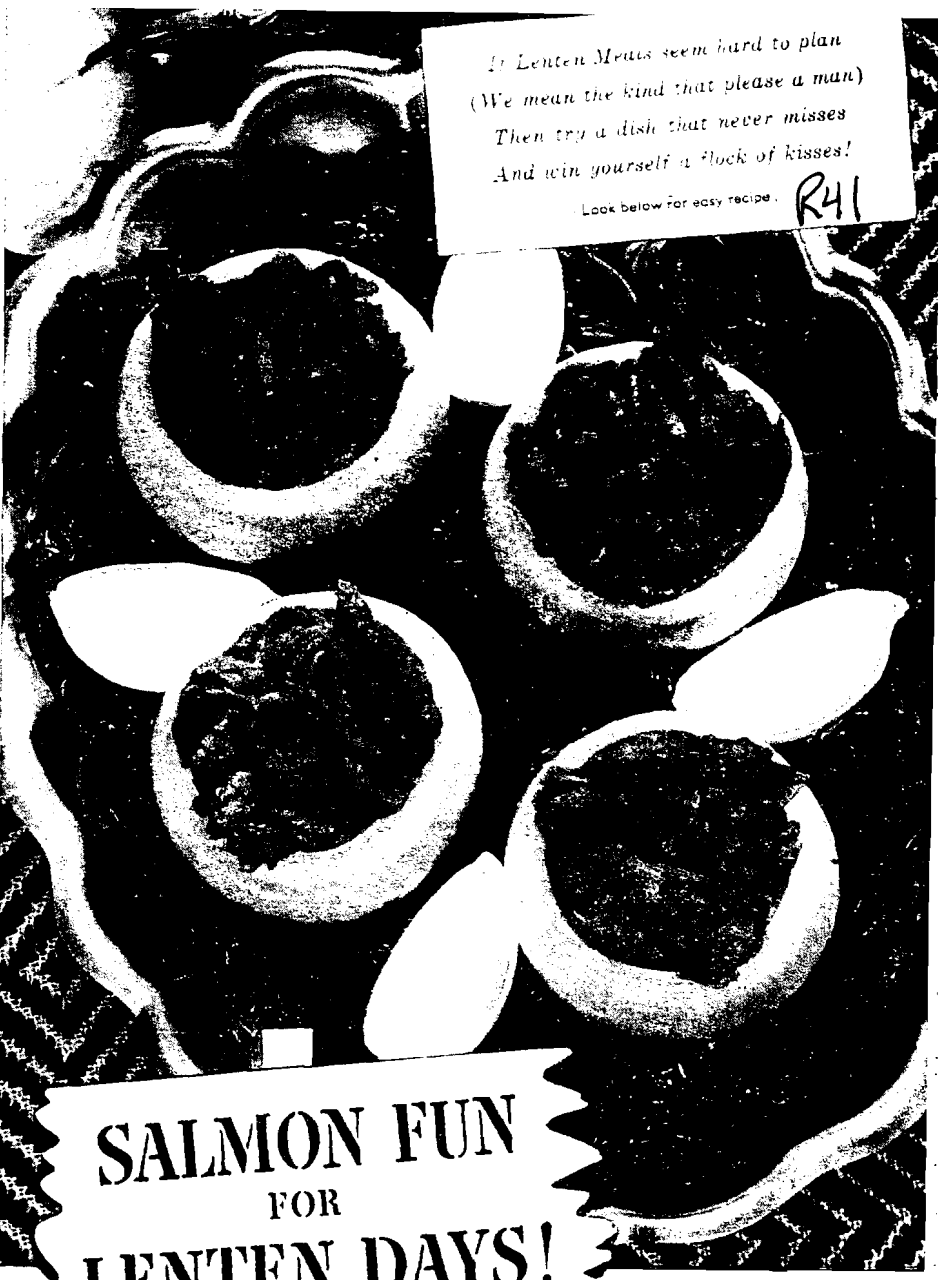
"I was terrified."

Another silence.

"Are you —" Bill began. "That is— must you have dinner with your aunts?"

"My aunts are in Skaneateles, New York."

"Oh." But she still wasn't looking at him. She still wasn't helping him any, and she certainly seemed to be an expert at turning down invitations. "I know it's early," Bill started out again. "But I didn't have any lunch, and I thought if — Perhaps we could — If you don't mind eating as early."



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