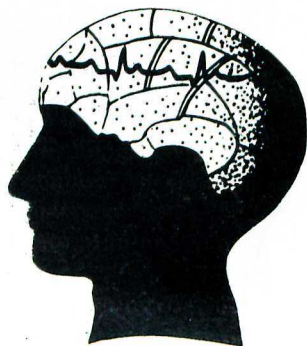


# The Shell Game

C. F. Hibbard



The undertakings of Niccolo Avelli, as you know, are celebrated in the canons of crime as models of delicate deception. Few of the historic figures practiced with comparable aplomb, and none with such mischievous subtlety. In consequence, it was likely to be an unwitting accomplice, protesting bewildered innocence the while, who paid the price for Avelli's ill-gotten gains.

He began in a modest way with smuggling. While the bulk of a substantial consignment of contraband was off-loaded at Southampton in a bale, the customs officials were preoccupied with the discovery of a handful of jewels in the luggage of Audubon Scone, a petty officer in the British merchant marine. Scone, a jovial Cockney, could offer no explanation for the presence of the jewels. As a result, he drew a discharge and three years in Dartmoor, which doubtless afforded him an opportunity for thought.

"It 'ad to be Mickey Avelli," he confided to a fellow inmate. "I'll 'ave 'is dickey for this."

Avelli, meanwhile, went on to greater challenges, for he was not one to rest on his oars. You may remember the express wagon for Tiffany's which overturned far from its scheduled route. The driver and the guard were found dazed on the site, their pockets stuffed with uncut emeralds, and both did time, though the more valuable articles of treasure were never found. Then, within the year, a bank official was convicted of embezzlement when his personal account bloomed suddenly by an amount three times his annual salary. However, an audit disclosed that the entire loss to the bank was many times the amount in question, and the official denied heatedly that he could account for the rest.

These whimsical examples are merely illustrative and not intended to comprehend the full scope of Niccolo's work. Suffice it to say that he established a clear pattern and, having found it successful, thereafter adhered to it confidently. The authorities should have an obvious culprit and a significant, if not princely, share of the proceeds, in order to establish their acumen, while Avelli himself remained at liberty to plan for the next conquest.

Perhaps the most gripping of his adventures arose from a scheme he devised to remove his illicit store of jewels to another country, where the market was better because it was safe, and to augment it along the way to afford entertainment and pay for the passage. Transportation costs, Avelli knew, could eat one up.

Having formed an attachment for a petite adagio dancer, a lithe creature who maintained an aristocratic bearing when not seated astride her own neck, he began at once to formulate the logistics of a veritable masterpiece of deception. Not one, but two, members of a ship's company would be caused to disappear at sea, while he, Niccolo Avelli, sailed through with his spoils in a duffel bag and a gay chantey on his lips, and none the wiser!

The dancer, a Contessa Almaviva Petrovna, of course, would be the culprit, though the more intimately he came to know her the more he regretted having to jettison her in the end, an outcome she must never be allowed to suspect. He cultivated her discreetly, in order to avoid giving alarm, making only the most seemly display of his considerable wealth, and she, in her turn, was clearly taken by the charm of his manner, not to mention the large bills in his wallet. In time, she took Niccolo into her confidence.

"Can you imagine a dancer named Birdie Pluckett?" she exclaimed with spirit. "Let alone a bloody contortionist! God, how I've struggled to gain position, and can scarcely draw a breath when I've done it, but my lawful name is Contessa Almaviva Petrovna, as you can see from my papers, and my life is no longer just an awkward pose.—Contessa's the first name," she explained with a winsome grin, "and changed legal as can be, in court, Mr. Avelli."

Impressed by her enterprise, Niccolo persevered patiently enough to learn that she had been born within the sound of Bow bells, had learned her curious art from her mother, a famous music hall entertainer, now destitute, and had a former lover, a tugboat captain out of Southampton, who could be counted on to do anything she suggested. The pieces of his plan soon fell into place, for he perceived that she could be useful to him aboard ship, by virtue not only of her clever title and her aristocratic air, but the unearthly faculties of her body. Moreover, the tugboat she could summon at the crook of a pretty finger rounded out the design by affording an avenue of escape from the customs.

"We shall have a gay time of it, my sweet," he promised merrily, chucking her under the chin. "Though it is not easy to disappear completely aboard a ship at sea, I, Mickey Avelli, have conceived a most ingenious plan. You may call me Mickey."

"Dear Mr. Avelli!" Petrovna squealed, squirming in his arms. "How sweet of you! But surely you won't leave me alone, Mickey."

He scowled.

"On second thought, Contessa, you had best call me Niccolo. My



familiar name has already won some notoriety in the world.—But no, love, I shan't leave you. I shall only appear to disappear. We shall board the ship at dawn, you in first class as yourself, to take away the breath of the passengers in the grand salon, I . . ." his eyes dropped modestly, "as a humble waiter in the employ of the line. The arrangements are made."

"Shall I see you only at meals then, Niccolo?" she pouted.

He regarded her hungrily.

"I dare say we shall find the opportunity for an occasional meal together," he predicted.

"Only if you promise not to disappear," she murmured, falling limp on his breast.

Her weight was so slight she seemed unreal, and she hadn't a bone in her body.

"First, I must appear," confided Niccolo, shifting uneasily with a heightened sense of claustrophobia. "I shall use your cabin for a base, Contessa, since my own quarters will be confining, as befits my station. I shall adopt two additional identities during the crossing, one a blond cabin boy without this luxurious moustache, and one as a nondescript deck hand."

"Niccolo, dear!" whispered Petrovna, her voice muffled against his shoulder. "Your gorgeous moustache!"

"It must be sacrificed to the cause, I fear," said Niccolo, seeking feverishly to unwind her clinging limbs. "But it's easily replaced, as you shall see. It is the cabin boy and the waiter who shall disappear, once the thefts are discovered, and I, the deckhand, shall accompany you down the rope ladder at Spithead, while the ship's company searches in vain for the thieves."

The tiny dancer sat up abruptly.

"Down the ladder!" she wailed. "But, Niccolo, I can't swim!"

"No need," said Avelli, feeling about to be sure he was free. "The tug will be under the counter when we lie to, to pick up the tow."

She brushed her hair from her eyes, very businesslike.

"Then I must cable Audie at once, to make certain he knows his part."

"It is done," said Niccolo complacently. "I have dispatched a fond wire from you suggesting a reconciliation at that very place and moment."

Contessa Almagiva fell back with a sigh.

"You'll find the rope ladder in the ship's stores," she conjectured.

"We'll not chance it," Niccolo replied, grasping her cautiously. "The ladder shall be brought aboard in your luggage, my dear, together with the costumes and appurtenances essential to my deceptions. I, Niccolo, shall carry only a small valise to the servants' quarters in steerage, but it will contain a considerable fortune in currency and jewels, I assure you, and may be easily transferred to my duffel bag at the proper time."

The dancer slid pliant arms about his neck.

"Why not just leave it with me, dear Mr. Avelli? Won't it be safer?"

He detached himself with a stony stare.

"Will it?" he asked.

"Don't you trust me?" she lamented, making a moue.

He smiled paternally.

"Do you trust me, Contessa?"

"Let's pack," she said.

They boarded separately, of course, Petrovna at her haughtiest, thoroughly cowing the ship's officers and shooing her luggage to the luxurious stateroom Avelli had thoughtfully booked for her, while he skulked below, as befitted his station. For three days, Petrovna bemused the most hardened passengers with her languid contortions, which were the more spectacular owing to the meagerness of her costume, and Avelli, the attentive waiter, evaluated the most ostentatious displays of jewelry with avid eyes. Having identified the most desirable, and the staterooms of their exhibitors, he prepared for the bustle of activity which would render the passage worthwhile.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, having ascertained which passengers were lounging on deck, the clean-shaven, blond cabin boy entered a succession of staterooms with a linen cart containing the compactly folded body of Birdie Pluckett. In each case, he retreated at once to stand guard at the door until a shy knock from within informed him that she had completed a fruitful search. It was agreed between them that if the proper occupants approached while the plunder was under way, his own knock would warn her to conceal herself in the linen bag once more, after which he would enter, with profuse apologies, to remove the cart.

Unfortunately, this is precisely what happened, shortly after the seventh entrance, and the embarrassed cabin boy made off toward Petrovna's stateroom, trundling the linen cart before him. All might have been well, for the dancer managed to escape into her room in her shocking pink chemise, with a pillowcase carrying the diamond.



necklace and matching tiara she had acquired, but the cabin boy was observed before he slipped through the door. Thus, by the time the chief steward and the purser got around to investigating, they were astounded to discover the nimble dancer unclothed in bed with the waiter, Niccolo Avelli, an employee of the line.

"Ere, here! What is the meaning of this?" cried Contessa Almaviva Petrovna. "Can't one enjoy a harmless bit of entertainment in the privacy she's bought so dearly? The ambassador shall be informed of your impertinence!"

She drew the rumpled sheets hurriedly to her chin, and Niccolo's moustache fairly quivered with indignation at her side. The officers explained the situation and, with no more than an envious glance at Avelli's sleek skullcap of black hair and the juxtaposition of his moustache to her ear, undertook a dogged search of the room. No trace of either the blond cabin boy or his rich booty was to be found.

"We're mustering them all within the hour, Avelli," snarled the purser as they left, "and you're to be on hand to help us pick out the odd one."

His gaze lingered wistfully on the delicate nudity of Petrovna, which the flimsy sheet did little to conceal.

"I fear I shan't be of much help to them, Contessa," grinned Niccolo, when they marched out, "but, as long as we're here, have you a moment for Mickey Avelli?"

Birdie exposed herself demurely, just long enough to remove the blond wig, and fluffed up the pillow.

"Can't we put away the evidence first, love?" she twittered. "The diamonds are scratching my neck, and this wig has been itching like sin."

Though the telltale clothing was found on the boat deck, it has been blown from one end to the other, and the cabin boy himself was never seen again.

"We shall raise the Isle of Wight by morning," said Niccolo later, patting a yawn, "Therefore, tonight is the night."

"But Niccolo, dear!" Petrovna whimpered. "Haven't we really enough, when it's put together with what you brought aboard?"

He returned her gaze thoughtfully.

"Not enough for two of us," he sighed at last. "There's one more stone, Contessa, a big one. The Colossus of Fountainbleu, it's called, and it would be lovely on your throat. I've had my eye on it throughout the passage, and the harridan who wears it simply can't carry it off."

"There's only tonight, sweetheart," moaned the dancer, coiling miserably. "You've pitched the cabin boy's clothing out the porthole. How are we to come by the solitaire?"

"We are not," said Niccolo grimly. "I shall acquire it myself, as Avelli, the waiter. It is time we made ready."

He sprang lightly from the bed, with a final peck for Birdie, and flipped open one of her stylish steamer trunks. Tossing a heap of her shimmering lingerie unceremoniously on top of her, he withdrew a fat coil of rope, which she knew to be the ladder, then carefully laid out the middy, the bell bottom trousers and the ribboned cap of the deckhand. Lastly, he produced the duffel bag, which he stroked affectionately.

"It's a bit large," he acknowledged, "But the best I could do on the spur of the moment. Now listen carefully. When I finish inspecting the cabin boys with the purser, I shall retire to my quarters and transfer the contents of my valise to this bag. When the Colossus of Fountainbleu battens down for the night, I'll drop the bag here. That will be about the time of your last appearance in the grand salon, so you won't have to worry about guarding the contents. It will take me but a moment to capture that solitaire—for you."

So saying, he departed, still as Avelli, the waiter, but with the duffel bag draped jauntily over a forearm.

As it happened, Contessa Almaviva Petrovna did not appear for her last performance that night, perhaps because she had experienced some difficulty in extricating herself from the grand finale of the previous revue. When she returned exhausted to her stateroom, she found the duffel bag tossed casually on the bed. Its contents, though they by no means filled it, proved on inspection to be more than enough for two. She bethought herself of the gems in her pillow, but found them gone. They were, in fact, in her purse, where Niccolo had put them to focus attention on her.

At the same time, Niccolo himself was busy not far away. He had knocked at the door of the stateroom which contained the Colossus, together with its elderly exhibitors, and cheerfully announced:

"Compliments of the Captain!"

When they opened to him, he had presented an ice-bucket containing a costly champagne. He was not in the least concerned that he could be easily identified as a familiar figure in the salon, because the waiter, Avelli, in his turn, was soon to disappear.

Once within, he bullied the startled old couple into sullen submission while he tied them securely, back to back, and stuffed their



mouths with towels, thereafter gleefully departing with the solitaire.

"I fancy this one's worth as much as all the rest," he gloated. "I shan't leave it behind with Birdie, for it's too great a price to pay for a few nights' lodging with a coiling serpent."

He was relieved to find that she was not in her stateroom, since her absence would assuage the grief of parting. Verifying that the jewels which implicated her still gleamed in her handbag, which was open to catch the eye, he folded the solitaire into a pocket of his mess jacket, removed his trousers and stuffed the apparel of the discarded waiter into the duffel bag. If it now seemed to be straining at the seams, he chuckled with pleasure at the realization that the best part of it all, if not the most voluminous, was bunched cosily at the very bottom.

With a gay chantey on his lips, he pulled on the close-fitting attire of the deckhand, complete to the ribboned cap, buttoned his sleeves at the wrist and examined his image in the cabin mirror with an approving eye.

"Niccolo, my man," he leered, sidling this way and that and cocking his head, "you've turned the trick again, and what a trick this time!"

He went out with the duffel bag over one shoulder and the fat coil of rope over the other, exclaiming at the combined weight of the two, but the gay chantey sprang again to his lips because he had more than paid for the passage.

The ship's company was in full alarm, for the elderly couple had been found trussed in their cabin, and both had unhesitatingly pointed the finger at Avelli, the waiter. Unhappily, Avelli did not appear to defend himself, but it turned out that the dancer, Petrovna, who had been in bed with him, was also missing, and that she herself had been up to some mischief. Her purse had been discovered to contain jewels stolen by the cabin boy, and there was a great hue and cry for her as well.

"Look sharp, mates!" cried the purser. "The little serpent can hide herself in a very small space!"

It was concluded, you see, that the contortionist and the cabin boy were one and the same, and thus it had been an easy matter for the cabin boy to slip into bed with Niccolo. The purser could scarcely be blamed for failing to identify him with a woman of such exquisite proportions.

The report came down that the police were waiting on the docks at



Southampton, and word was passed that no one was to leave the ship, but Niccolo Avelli was not perturbed. When the great liner hove to off Spithead to await the pilot and the tow, the first tug to come up was waved off, because it was not a vessel of the line, but he knew this was the last leg of his voyage. The tug drew up under the lofty counter with an air of disgruntlement.

Niccolo deftly affixed his duffel bag to the bottom of the ladder and lowered it with great care to the deck of the rolling tug, where it was swept up in the arms of a jovial English master. Reassured to see that the man's battered cap bore the insignia of the British merchant marine, Avelli himself started gingerly down, but was no more than half way when the duffel bag sprang open to reveal the cramped belly of Birdie Pluckett amid a welter of waiter's clothes.

"Back to smuggling again, is it, Mickey?" roared the master. "But see 'ere wot you've laid on me this time!"

Birdie unwound herself from the duffel bag and flew into his embrace with cries of "Audubon! Oh, Audubon!"

The captain waved up cheerily as he cast off.

"You put me in Dartmoor right enough, Avelli," he shouted, "but this time I'll come visit you, with Contessa Scone!"

Niccolo dangled disconsolately as they chugged away with his treasure.

"Alas," he wept, "it was the work of a lifetime."

"Avelli! It's Mickey Avelli!" cried the purser over the rail. "Come up here, Avelli. We know you!"

"I must make a fresh start," observed Niccolo to himself.

