Tall Story

London was having one of her days. Outside, the streets glistened dully with half-frozen sludge and the air was thick and dark. But inside the Platelayers’ Arms, W.2, there was still civilization and comfort.

Charlie Luke, at that time the Divisional Detective Chief Inspector of the district, was sitting at the table, his hat pulled over his eyes. He looked like a gangster, and with his live dark face and diamond-shaped eye sockets, he lent a touch of theatre to the rest of us. We were about half a dozen I suppose, no one of staggering distinction but all friends, resting for an half an hour before making the effort to totter off home.

Mr Campion, owlish behind his spectacles, was chipping Luke affectionately. "You put your success as a detective down to your height, Charles?" he was saying. "Really? You astound me."

"I wasn’t talking of my success. I simply said that it was my height that got me into the C.I.D. I was on the beat - see?"

He adjusted an imaginary helmet strap under his chin and strained his Adam’s apple against an imaginary tunic collar. He was away. You could see him fifteen years younger, with pink satin cheeks, loping along, bright and eager. It was his great gift: as he spoke whole pictures came alive and people one had never heard of seemed to step into the room. Mr Campion settled back, grinning.

"It was a night just like this, cold and thick, and my little beat, which was usually quiet at night, had come alive for a change. Old Everett, our D.I., was expecting a burglary.

"News had come through the grapevine that Slacks Washington, who was one of the slicker practitioners, had run out of money and had been taking sights round a little bookmaker’s office in Ebury Court. From information received, they’d learned that tonight was the night. The bookie kept his cash in a safe which wouldn’t keep out a child and he was careless. He relied on the position of the office."
There was a square whisky bottle on the mantelshelf. Luke lent forward and, stretching out a long arm, took it up to demonstrate.

"This is about the shape of Ebury Court," he remarked, placing the bottle on its side. "There’s a tunnelled entrance off the Commercial Road, two thirty-foot walls made of soot-blackened brick, smarmed with posters, and, at the end, here at the bottom of the bottle, a little nest of offices. A small printery on the ground floor, the bookie above and a commercial art studio above that. All deserted at night.

"Everett wasn’t taking any risks. Slacks was tall and thin and dangerous and used a gun. A bad crook. So it was decided to take him with the stuff on him just to make a nice clean open-and-shut case which no smarty legal-eagle could muck up.

"Talk about a police-net! There were police in the entrance, police on the tiles, police disguised as drunks, police disguised as postmen. But I was the only man allowed to show myself.

"There never were many people around Ebury Court at that time of night, and the rain and the fog seemed to have cleared the district. By midnight I’d given up hope, but at a quarter to one Slacks showed up. He got off a bus on the corner, and came striding down the pavement with his raincoat flapping and his long legs making shadows on the pavement under the street lamp. I recognized him at once from the pictures I’d been shown. He saw me and said, ‘Good night, officer!’ as he passed. He was so much at ease that it was me that gave the guilty start. I made a police-like noise and strolled on. The D.D.C.I. rubbed his cheek and miraculously we saw him as he must have been then, skin like pink satin and the kitten-blue still in his eyes.

"Slacks went into the trap. Walked straight into the Court like a man in a hurry; the dark mouth of the tunnel through the houses swallowed him up and after that you could have heard a cat cough.

"It had been arranged that the arrest should be made as he came out of Ebury Court. The whole thing was to be done like the book, neat, swift and with the minimum danger to all present. Since I’d done my little bit, I crossed the road to see the performance.

"There it was, set out like a stage set. There was a man on either side of the entrance waiting to step forward and pin him. There was a car twenty paces up the road and another one thirty paces down, stationary but with engines running. Opposite, there was a borrowed G.P.O. van with two fake postmen in attendance.

"We waited. We waited. We waited some more. People began to get windy. There had been time for Slacks to open twenty safes and count the money as well. I could feel our D.I. part this document...
shaking although he was forty yards away. And then quite suddenly, a revolver shot rang out from inside the Court. There was a yelp like the cry of a lost soul and someone came staggering out into the street.

"I saw him and I recognized him and had the shock of my life. The men on the tunnel caught him and he collapsed in their arms and died there, poor chap, with a bullet through his windpipe.

"I was one of the first to get there, although there was soon a big enough crowd round the three of them.

"The D.I. charged up spluttering. He turned to me. 'Who is this, constable?' he demanded. 'Know him?'

"I said, 'Yessir!' smartly, and told him. It was a little runt called Church – some relation to the proverbial mouse, I think – a crank who spent all his spare time flyposting for some society he was interested in. I always remember those little posters of his, they were printed in emerald on yellow and he stuck them wherever he could on the hoardings, quite illegally. They said: 'YOU'VE GOT A RIGHT TO IT,' and then, in some very small type: Society of Humanity. Meeting Tuesday. Somewhereorother Hall. That was all. The most innocent little chap alive.

"We could see what had happened. Church had surprised Slacks and got the full benefit. Strewth, I was riled!" Even at this distance in time the D.D.C.I's diamond-shaped eyes grew narrow at the recollection. "I was all for charging in like a hero and getting the next bullet, but mercifully I was restrained. We all waited there till morning. Finally, old D.I. Everett himself went in. God bless him, he was a brave old boy. He had four of his own boys behind him but I got there next, there being no great competition.

"We found Slacks sitting on a packing-case outside the printery, smoking and admiring the view. He was quite affable, all things considered."

Luke paused and eyed Campion.

"You ought to have been there," he said. "The crib was cracked, the cash was gone, Church's paste-pot and posters were lying in the yard, but Slacks hadn't a bob on him and nor had he a gun.

"Everett's men took the place apart. It was the first time I'd ever seen a full-dress C.I.D. search and it opened my eyes. They took up the drains, they took the offices apart, they tapped the stones and the walls and they emptied the paste-pot. Meanwhile Slacks sat
placidly in a nice warm room overlooking the river and swore he had never heard a shot and couldn’t think what they were all talking about.

"No one told me to go off duty so I stayed around. When they were all exhausted and the place looked like the scoured inside of a well-kept saucepan, the C.I.D. boys were called off. The old D.I. was nearly out of his mind. The bookie and the printers and the commercial artists were all besieging the entrance behind us and he knew that sooner or later he’d have to let them in and lose the proof for ever.

"Since there was no one else there he spoke to me.

"'Where did he put it, constable?' he said. 'Where in the name of God did he put that gun – the gun and wad of money as big as a brick?'

"I cleared my throat – I was a bit husky when speaking to D.I.s in those days. 'Slacks is a tall man, sir,' I said. 'Church was a little man,' and I pointed to one of the 'YOU'VE GOT A RIGHT TO IT' posters, which was a good two feet higher than the rest. The D.I. went over and reached up. He wasn’t tall enough but I waited for orders and saw the look on his face when he gave them."

Luke sighed and on his dark face there was a gleam of remembered triumph.

"It was there," he said. "Under the poster, in a hole made by the erosion of a couple of bricks. Slacks, looking round wildly after the shot, must have guessed that he was trapped. He saw the hole, shoved the loot and the gun out of sight, and then spotted the paste-pot and the bills.

"I remember the D.I. holding the stuff in his handkerchief. He was grinning all over his face, like this" – Luke’s smile was wonderful to see. "'You think I’m going to take the credit for this, my boy, don’t you?' he said. I said, 'Yessir,' and he laughed. 'How right you are,' he said. 'You’d better report to me.'

“And that’s how I joined the C.I.D."