

The Mysterious House

I. A Sure Sign

The Black Hand Gang had been sitting up in the Airport as quiet as mice for an hour while they did their homework. Ralph chewed his pen and gazed fixedly out of the grimy window. There was a sudden, sharp snap. Keith W.S. cracked a nut for his squirrel and spat the shell into an empty jam jar. Ralph frowned.

'How do you spell "pane"?' he whispered.

'It depends whether you're looking through it or feeling it inside you,' Angela replied, laughing.

'Looking through it, of course, a window-pane like that one there. . . Hey, what's that? No, there can't be!' Ralph scrubbed at the dirt on the window.

'What can't there be?' asked Frank.

'Anyone living in that house over there,' Ralph answered. 'It's been empty for three years.'

They all crowded round the window.

'We all know that only a couple of rats live there,' said Keith W.S. 'Look, the doors and windows are all barred shut.'

'Let me have a look,' said Angela, pressing her nose to the pane. After a few seconds she said, 'I think Ralph's right. There really is someone in the house.'

How did she guess there was someone in the mysterious house?



2. The Heel on the Wall

It was obvious to the Black Hand Gang that there was someone living in the house because the smoking chimney gave the game away.

They kept a constant watch, and five days later their patience was rewarded. While Angela was on guard one evening, she saw the figure of a man climbing over the wall near where the boats were moored on the canal.

Next day the Black Hand Gang met before school to inspect the wall thoroughly.

'Look, there!' called Keith W.S. suddenly.

'I can't see anything,' Frank said.

Keith W.S. took the squirrel from his shoulder and placed it on the wall. It scampered down a creeper and in a flash had seized something round.

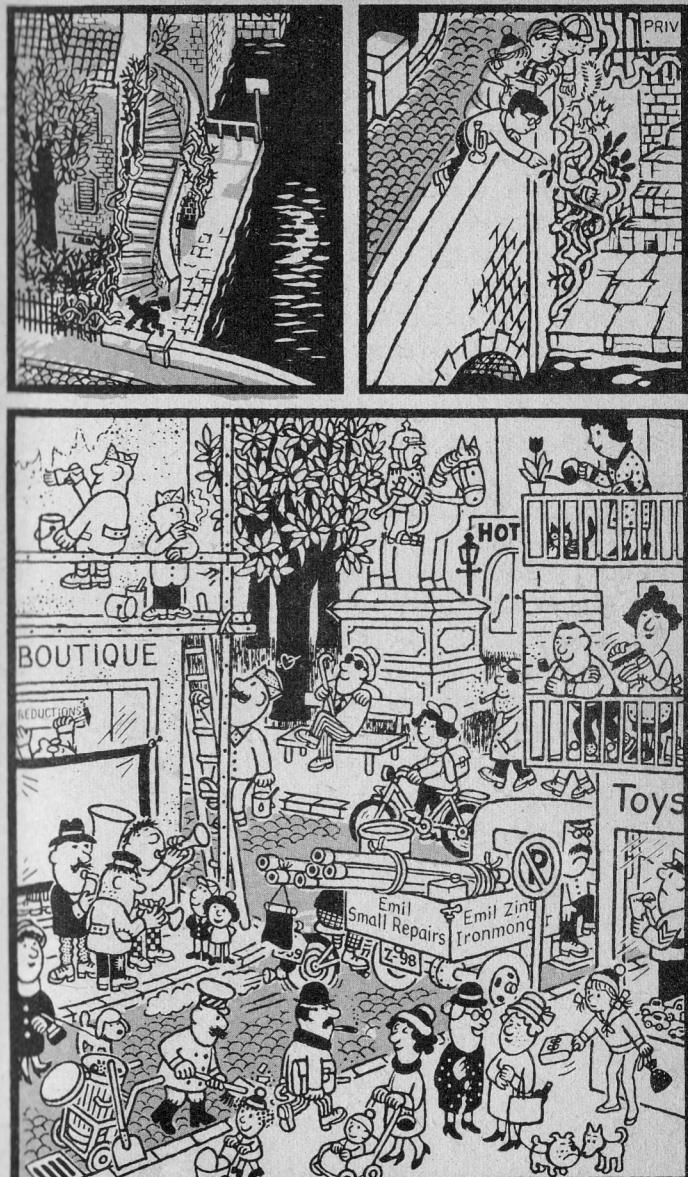
'Look at that!' Ralph exclaimed. 'It's the heel of someone's shoe.'

'Listen, all of you,' said Frank. 'We must look for a man with a heel off his shoe.'

They started looking on their way to school. Angela sauntered along, swinging her bag and her satchel. Suddenly she exclaimed out loud. 'Hey, there he is! That's him.'

Later that day she described him to the rest of the gang and said, 'We'll recognize him by his trousers.'

What sort of trousers was the man without a heel to his shoe wearing?



3. The Rathole

The Gang sat up in the Airport listening intently to Angela's report.

'Well, now we know that the man without a heel wears [redacted] trousers,' Frank said.

'But no one's seen his face yet,' Ralph pointed out.

'We'll get a chance as soon as we see him go into that house. Each of us must cover an entrance.'

'And the windows,' added Angela.

'Of course,' Frank agreed.

Three minutes later they were all at their posts. Frank was watching the front door; Ralph, the gate by the canal; Angela stood by the garden gate watching the side road through two holes she had cut in her newspaper, and Keith W.S., disguised as a garden gnome, stood like a statue half hidden in a bed of nettles. Not even a mouse could have come in the back way without his seeing it. Two hours dragged by, but no one came near the house.

'Tailing a suspect is the most boring part of a detective's life,' Ralph thought, yawning.

'Oh, showers of nuts,' whispered Keith W.S. as the truth suddenly dawned on him. 'He's been inside the house all the time. No wonder. There's a hidden trap door, beautifully camouflaged, too.'

Under what was the secret entrance?



4. The Telegram

Keith W.S. had barely caught a glimpse of the man's face before the trap door snapped shut. The Black Hand Gang scuttled over to [REDACTED]

'It's really convincing,' he said.

'Lift up the trap door,' said Angela, firmly. 'I'm going in. I want to know where it leads.'

'What if something happens to you?' asked Keith W.S. Angela showed them her bag. 'I brought Isobel 13 with me in case.'

Isobel 13 was the best carrier pigeon the Black Hand Gang owned.

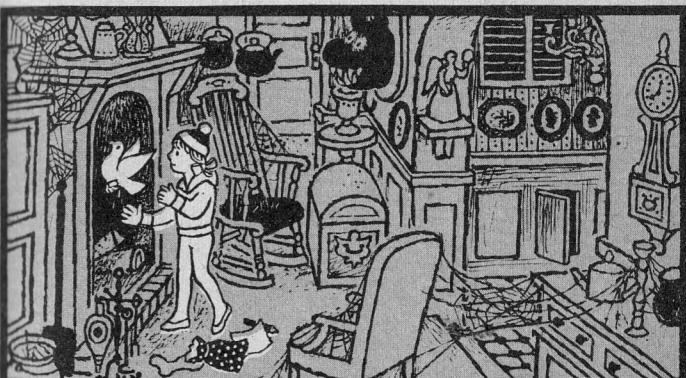
Angela vanished down the hole. She crawled quietly along the passage and emerged through a small door into a dark room. She began to look round, but before she could satisfy her curiosity she heard a noise. Quickly she scribbled on a piece of paper: 'Inside house. Going to hide in chest. Love, Angela.' Then she sent Isobel 13 off up the chimney with it.

'Where on earth is Angela?' said Frank, looking at his watch. 'She's been down there eleven minutes. I hope she's all right.'

Ralph said, 'Let's go up to the pigeon loft and see if there's any message.'

They ran off and climbed up to the loft. Frank said, 'There's Isobel 13, back already.'

Isobel 13 was covered with?



5. Mr X's Study

When Frank had read out Angela's telegram, Ralph suggested that they clean [REDACTED] off Isobel 13. Her flight up the chimney had made her black all over, but Frank said no.

'Let's just leave her. She'll groom herself.'

Keith W.S. agreed: 'Yes, she will. My squirrel always does.'

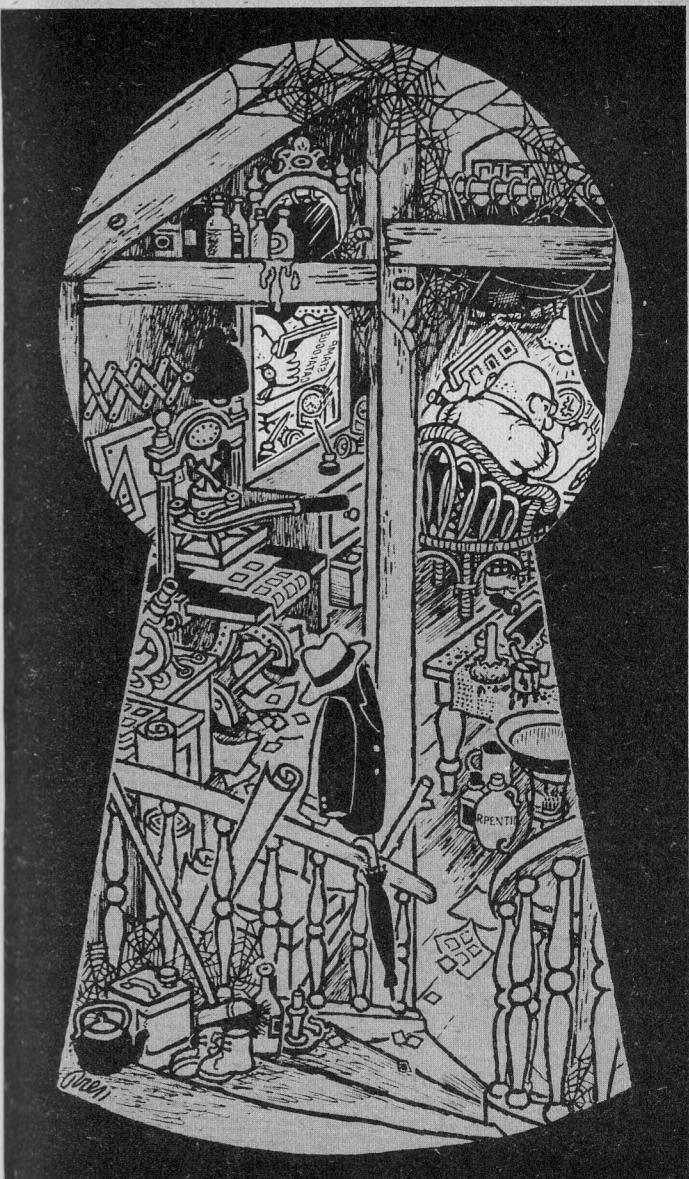
'What do you suppose Angela's doing now?' asked Ralph.

Angela was still inside the mysterious house. Raising the lid of the chest in which she had hidden, she peeped cautiously out. Everything was quiet. Suddenly she noticed the door. A thin ray of light shone through the keyhole. In a flash she was across the room to the door and, breathless with excitement, pressed her eye to the keyhole. Mr X sat only a few feet away, his back to her, bent over something on the table in front of him, examining it minutely.

A few minutes later the Airport door burst open. The Black Hand Gang leapt up, shouting: 'Thank goodness you're safe, Angela.'

'I'm all right!' she exclaimed. 'I've found out what Mr X is up to.'

What was Mr X looking at?



6. The Golden Cigar Band

'That's extraordinary,' said Frank. 'You're quite sure he was looking at [REDACTED]?'

'I saw him with my own eyes,' Angela replied, 'and I've brought you something else.' She opened an old cough sweet tin.

'Wherever did you find that old cigar stub?' cried Ralph in surprise.

'I picked it up in the secret passage,' Angela said proudly.

The gang examined the stub. Frank remarked thoughtfully, 'It must be a good brand, my father smokes cigars with a gold band only on very special occasions.'

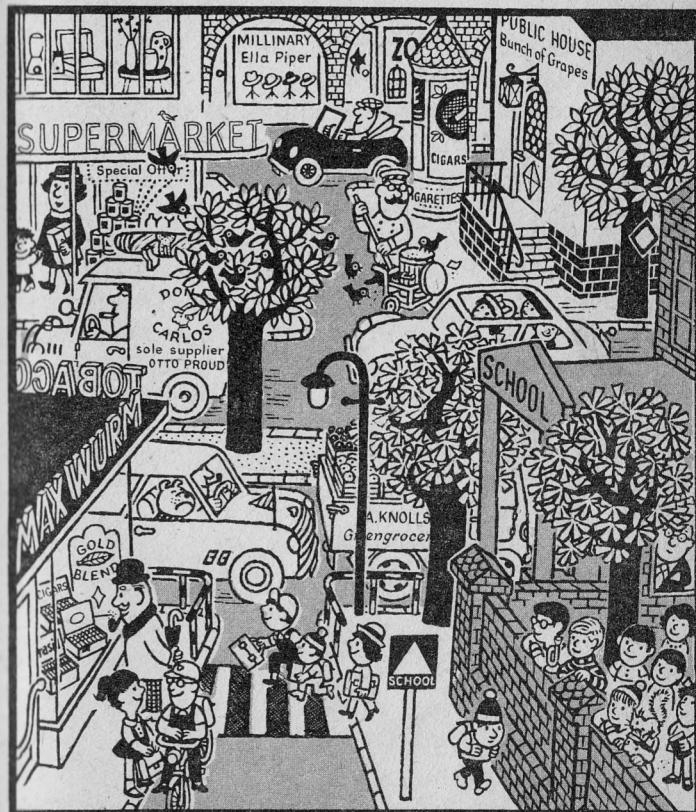
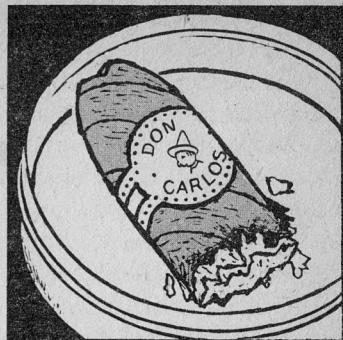
'But does he smoke Don Carlos?' asked Keith W.S.

'No, why?'

'Well, we must find out where Mr X bought them.'

The Black Hand Gang spent the whole afternoon looking for a shop that sold Don Carlos cigars, but without luck. The following day they kept looking. Ralph even examined the stub that their teacher, Mr Smith, whom they nicknamed 'jellybelly', had thrown out of the classroom window. Suddenly they heard Frank's trumpet which he used to signal the Gang. The Black Hand Gang crowded round him and Frank whispered softly: 'I've found out where you can buy Don Carlos.'

Which shop stocked Don Carlos cigars?



7. The Shop Window

'Don Carlos - sole supplier [REDACTED]' was the advertisement Frank had seen on a passing van.

That afternoon the Black Hand Gang settled down in the Airport with a telephone directory to look up the address. There were an incredible number of Prouds listed, even a Eulalia Proud, painter of fine porcelain.

'Here it is,' exclaimed Frank. 'Otto Proud, tobacconist, 12 Frederick Street.'

'Let's go,' said Ralph.

'Wait a minute.' Angela shook her head. 'What are we going to do when we get there?'

'Look for a clue,' said Frank.

'Yes, but what sort of clue?' Angela asked. 'We already know that Mr X smokes Don Carlos. Is there anything special about that? Probably lots of people smoke them.'

'Well, we know that Mr X also likes stamps.'

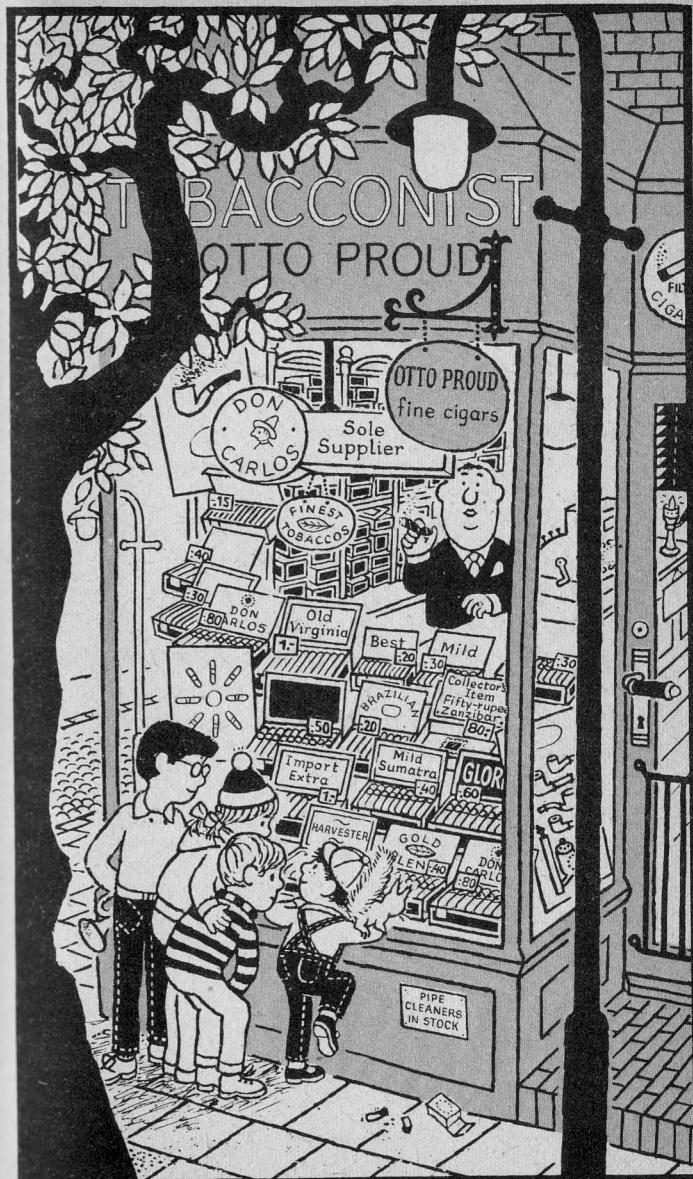
'Where does that get us?' said Angela.

'Perhaps Otto Proud is interested in stamps.'

Half an hour later they all stood outside Otto Proud's shop. Hundreds of different brands of cigar were on display in his window, but there were no stamps.

'Just a sec,' said Keith W.S. 'Look, there's a stamp!'

What was the value of the stamp?



8. The Forged Zanzibar

The solitary █ Rupee Zanzibar puzzled the Black Hand Gang for a long time.

'Why has Otto Proud only one stamp for sale?' Ralph wondered. 'Perhaps he bought up a whole batch cheaply? What do you think?'

But at lunchtime next day Angela raced into the Airport.

'Look, it's impossible!'

'What is?' asked Frank.

'For anyone to have lots of █ Rupee Zanzibars. They're rare.'

'Who says so?'

'My father. His hobby is stamp-collecting and he's an expert.'

'She's right,' said Ralph, who had just come in, brandishing a newspaper. 'Here, read this.'

The Black Hand Gang read: 'Stamp forgers operating in Newtown.'

Seconds later the Gang stood outside Mr X's house. Smoke was billowing out of the chimney and they noticed fragments of charred paper whirling about in the air. Keith W.S. picked up one of the bits. It was singed, but it was clearly a █ Rupee Zanzibar.

'Just a minute,' said Angela, pulling a catalogue out of her bag. 'There's a photograph of it in here.'

Keith W.S. compared it to the singed stamp.

'Our's is different. It's a forgery.' Ralph exclaimed.

What was missing from the forgery?



9. Escape by Canal

'But if the [redacted] missing, he can't sell it,' said Frank.

'Of course he can't,' Angela replied. 'That's why he's burning them. They're imperfect copies. He'll keep the perfect ones and make his getaway.'

'We must stop him,' said Ralph.

The Black Hand Gang took up their posts all round the house and watched the exits. The minutes went slowly by, but nothing happened.

Suddenly there was a trumpet fanfare. Angela, Ralph and Keith W.S. rushed to the bridge.

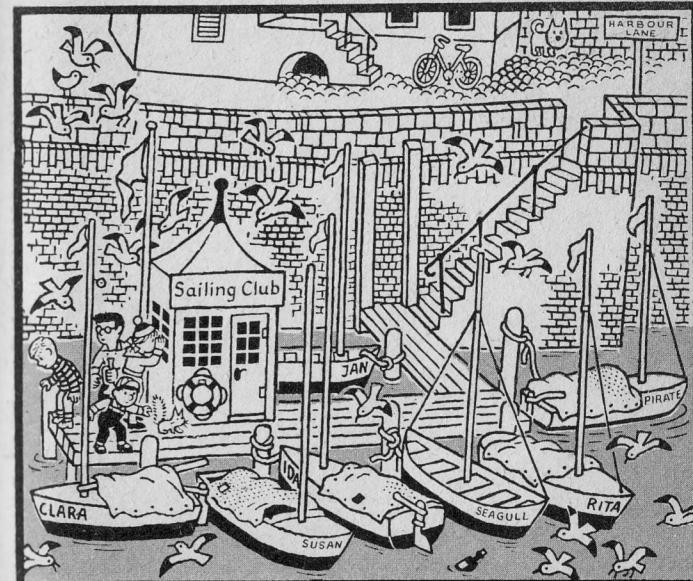
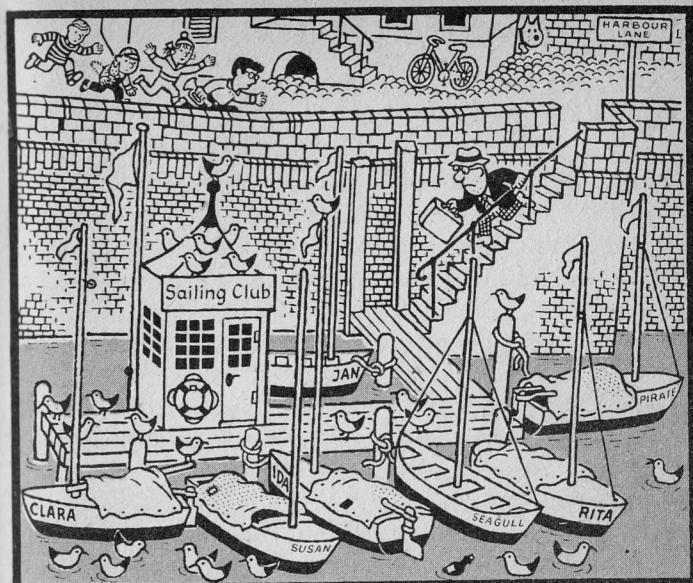
'He's off,' shouted Frank. 'He came out of the cellar with a metal case and ran off down the canal bank.'

Angela thought quickly. 'He's planning to escape abroad,' she said. 'Let's go to the harbour.'

As the Black Hand Gang raced toward the harbour they saw the man with the metal case running down the steps to the jetty. They sprang after him, but arrived too late. The jetty was deserted and so was the little kiosk. Mr X had vanished.

'Perhaps he's dived under water,' Ralph suggested.

'If he had, we'd see his hat floating,' said Keith W.S., smiling. 'I think he's taken cover quite near here.'



What was the name of the boat?

10. Trapped

Keith W.S. knew which boat Mr X, the forger, had hidden in because it lay lower in the water than the others. His friends realized it too, but not until Mr X cut through the mooring lines and sped off.

Frank blew another fanfare, 'Tallyho', on his trumpet and they gave chase. They charged along the harbour wall and over the bridge to the other side of the canal. Their quarry had left his boat and was disappearing at top speed round the corner. Ralph saw him dart into a building site on Bridge Street and then he vanished again.

The Black Hand Gang climbed up a heap of sand.

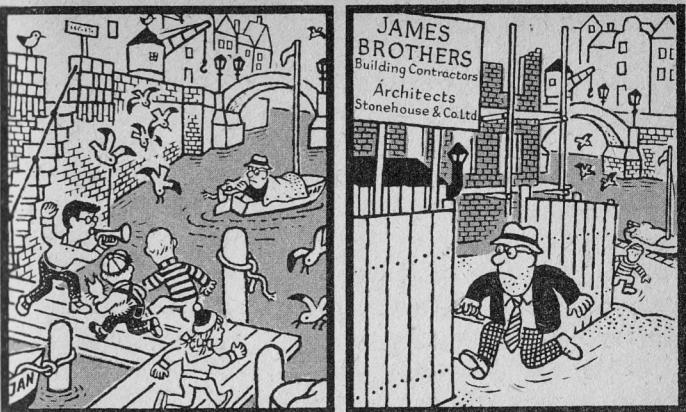
'Even if we've lost him, we can give the police his description,' said Keith W.S.

'That's something, at least,' Angela agreed. 'Check trousers, black jacket, striped tie....' She gasped, then whispered urgently, 'Ralph, dash off to the phone box and call the police - Emergency, 999.'

'999,' Ralph repeated. 'Tell them to send three cars. All right, but why?'

'Because we've got Mr X in a trap. Hurry up!'

What gave Mr X's hiding place away?



11. Bellyflop

If the police sirens hadn't made such a row, the forger would probably have stayed hidden in the cement mixer. As it was though, the Black Hand Gang saw the [REDACTED] with Mr X attached, and still holding his metal case, erupt from the mixer and disappear head first over the wall.

'He'll kill himself!' Angela exclaimed.

But Mr X didn't hurt himself at all. He made a belly landing in a manure heap.

'What a stink,' said Sergeant Shorthouse, as the three cars screeched to a halt in the farmyard. They arrested Mr X despite his protests.

'It's not against the law to smell of manure. If I want to, that's my business. Release me at once.'

'You are a forger. Where are the stamps you've printed? Show us where they're hidden.'

The man said nothing.

The police searched the whole area without success. They were just about to let their prisoner go when the Black Hand Gang jumped down from the wall.

'Who are you?' asked Sergeant Shorthouse angrily.

'We are the Black Hand Gang,' Frank said, politely. 'May we show you where he's hidden the metal case with the forged stamps?'



Where was the case hidden?