

HANS SCHERFIG

STOLEN SPRING

Translated from the Danish by Frank Hugus



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by Frank Hwaus*

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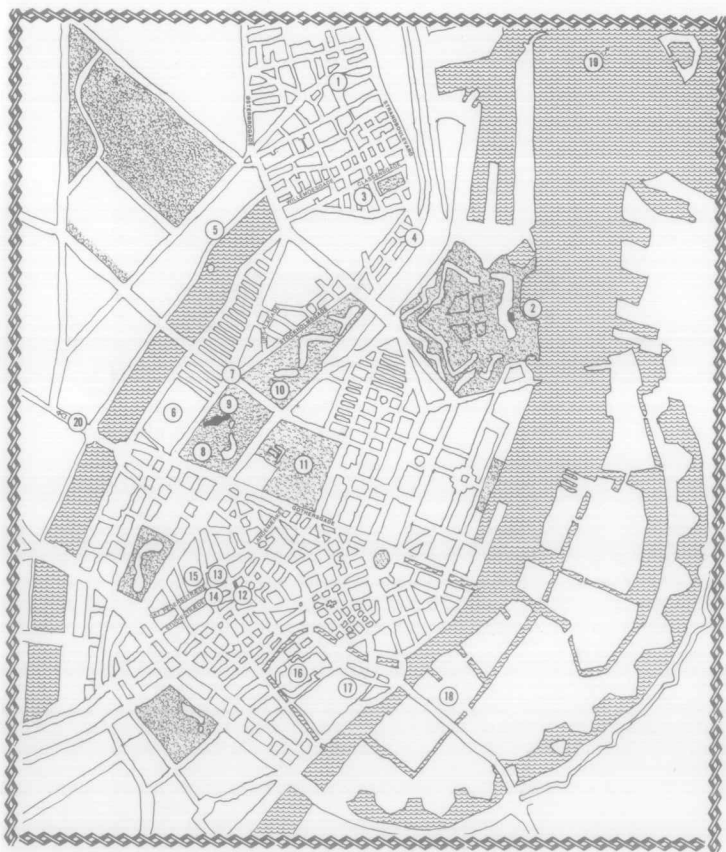
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Stolen Spring



Map of Central Copenhagen

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|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Østerbro district | 11. Kongens Have |
| 2. Langelinie & Langelinie Pavilion | 12. The gray school on Frue Plads |
| 3. Classensgade 44 | 13. University of Copenhagen |
| 4. Østbane district | 14. University Cafeteria & Studiegaard |
| 5. Sortedam Lake | 15. St. Peter's Church |
| 6. City Hospital | 16. Christiansborg |
| 7. Sølvtorvet | 17. Slotsholmen |
| 8. Botanisk Have | 18. Christianshavn |
| 9. Palm House | 19. To Øresund |
| 10. Østre Anlæg | 20. To Nørrebro district |

[I]

A NUMBER OF YEARS ago an elderly man died in the Østerbro district of Copenhagen after eating a malt drop.

He was very fond of malt drops. He had eaten them regularly for many years, and until that day things had been fine. He always carried a small oval tin of hard candy in his pocket. And when he felt a tickle in his throat or needed some energy, he usually ate one. He never chewed it; he just sucked on it and let the juice trickle slowly down his throat. And in all those years nothing had happened to him.

But then one day things went wrong, and that was the end of him. A beautiful, mild evening at the beginning of June when the lilacs and the laburnum were blooming along Langelinie, the promenade by the harbor. He had left his apartment on Clas-sensgade around 7:30 to take his customary walk at Langelinie. His wife was to have their evening tea ready at 8:30. But he didn't get any tea that evening. He never saw his wife again. He walked down the stairs for the last time, not knowing that he would never again count the marbled squares on the wall or breathe the apartment building's special smell.

The weather was mild, but still not warm enough that he thought it wise to go out without a coat. But he hadn't taken his wool scarf along. He sat down on his usual bench by the pleasure-boat docks and looked at the water and the people strolling back and forth. He recognized on sight most of the people who lived in Østerbro and knew them by name.

There were sailboats on the water and flags and pennants and rowing crews and the harbor ferries. And young girls with nice legs walked by in light summer dresses. He followed them through his gold-rimmed glasses and thought that they would

surely catch cold with so few clothes on. But people never learn. And he watched the rowers slaving away in their long, narrow boats while the coxswain shouted. Hairy, half-naked men. Sheer madness to be fooling around on the open water at this time of year with no clothes on. Those people will catch pneumonia. They're playing with their lives. He didn't know that his own life would be over in a few hours.

He watched with concern as the small ferries chugged their way across the blue water. And he figured that they must be recklessly overloaded. There probably aren't even enough life jackets for all the passengers, and that's downright scandalous. But they'll wait until an accident finally happens before they institute all sorts of safety precautions. Now nobody cares. That's the way it always is in Denmark.

He thought that the evening air was a little nippy here by the water. He already missed his wool scarf. And he cleared his throat and took the little oval tin with the malt drops out of his pocket. Selected a nicely regular rectangular one and popped it into his mouth.

He thought at once that it tasted rather bitter. But that's the way it is with malt drops—they can have a bitter taste at first, but it doesn't mean anything. It would pass. He sucked on it vigorously and arranged it in his mouth with his tongue and bit through it, even though he normally found it abhorrent to chew hard candy. It was a fatal decision. The bitter taste grew even worse. The candy tasted like metal, as if it were the tin box he had in his mouth. So he decided to sacrifice the drop; he spit it out and took a new one that had the usual taste.

Then he began to shake slightly and stood up to leave. And then he felt ill. Cold shivers. Feelings of nausea. The new malt drop didn't taste the way it was supposed to either, and he spit it out. He had cold sweat on his forehead and felt pains in his stomach. His glasses fogged up, and all of Langelinie grew blurry. The harbor and the ground and the hawthorn hedge and

the lilacs and the flags and the bicycles and the rowers were spinning around. He had to hold on to a tree. And people looked at the respectable gentleman with the gold glasses and goatee and were shocked that he could be drunk. He attracted a crowd. And a policeman in white gloves came up.

"What's going on here? You'd better see about getting home." But then the policeman discovered that the man was sick.

"I live on Classensgade — number 44 — I must get home."

But he didn't get home. Because now he was foaming at the mouth and began having convulsions. The policeman sent one of the curious onlookers to call an ambulance while he held on to the mortally ill man.

"It was the malt drop. I think it was the malt drop. It tasted bitter," the sick man said in the ambulance. The policeman made a note of it and remembered to put it in his report.

Shortly after they arrived at the city hospital, the elderly gentleman with the gold glasses died. His last intelligible words had been something concerning malt drops and the sentence: "*Agnosco fortunam Cartaginis*," which the doctor, who knew Latin, was able to translate as: "Now I behold clearly the fate of Carthage."

[2]

THE DECEASED HAD papers on him which indicated that he was the 63-year-old head teacher C. Blomme, Classensgade 44. His wife was notified, and everything that is supposed to be done on such occasions was done.

The doctors declared that death was due to poisoning, caused

by some form of alkaline toxin which had paralyzed parts of the motor nervous system so that a type of tetanus had ensued. Paralysis of the pectoral muscles had resulted in death by asphyxiation.

The autopsy conducted later showed that there was strychnine in the contents of the stomach. Because of the unusual circumstances surrounding the death, the homicide division was notified. The police began an investigation. The words of the deceased about malt drops were not forgotten. The little oval tin with the remaining malt drops was found in the coat pocket of the corpse. The box was opened with sterile utensils. Careful hands in rubber gloves sorted the drops. The tin box and its lid and every single drop were thoroughly analyzed, viewed under a microscope, and X-rayed. But no evidence of strychnine was found in a single drop. Not even a spectrum analysis could detect any toxin in the box or the drops.

The police succeeded in establishing where head teacher C. Blomme had purchased the fatal malt drops, or malt-extract barley-sugar, as they were officially called. The entire shop was turned upside down, and the owner and saleslady were practically subjected to a chemical examination. But not a trace of strychnine was found. The investigation continued at the candy factory and at the tin box factory, and it branched out even further in the most improbable directions. But it failed to turn up any strychnine.

No strychnine was found in head teacher Blomme's home either. And it didn't appear that he had ever been interested in poisonous substances, beyond what was related in the histories of the Roman emperors. Suetonius, Tacitus, Juvenal, Petronius filled his bookcase; the quiet head teacher delighted in those gruesome stories in a language his family didn't understand.

A peaceful little man with gold glasses and a goatee. A man of moderate habits and a calm way of life. A man educated in the classics whose home was decorated with brown reproductions of

the statues of antiquity. He liked to visit the collection of castings at the art museum on Sundays and explain the white plaster figures to his family. He liked to take walks along Langelinie in the evening. He conscientiously taught Latin grammar to his pupils. He looked after his fragile health with anxious care. His only vice was a penchant for malt-extract barley-sugar. And in the evening he sat in his little room on Classensgade, reading the Roman historians in Latin. The Latin language opened up another world for him. The world of Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and Messalina. Intrigues and murders by poison and bizarre perversions.

But no strychnine was found in his apartment. No one had any reason to believe that he would poison one of his own malt drops or take it into his head to commit suicide in any other way. And no one could be suspected of wanting to take his life.

His wife was sorry that he was dead. His three grown daughters were also saddened. His colleagues and his acquaintances showed genuine sympathy.

He had no debts. He had no secret mistresses. He cultivated no expensive vices. He had no frustrated ambitions. He had not been the victim of extortion or threats or loan sharks.

His death at Langelinie was mysterious and puzzling. No police investigation, no matter how thorough, could provide an explanation. So head teacher C. Blomme was buried.

[3]

MANY YEARS AFTER head teacher C. Blomme died at Lange-linie, a number of gentlemen assembled in a meeting room. A beautiful, warm evening in June, with lilacs and laburnum blooming just as they had done then.

The gentlemen walked up red-carpeted stairs and checked their coats and scarves and umbrellas in the cloakroom. Some of them even had overshoes to check despite the fine weather. They were people who were circumspect about their health.

Most of them came in automobiles. Some came by streetcar. One came on foot.

They had come from all over the country to meet on this summer evening, even though they really didn't know each other. It had been so many years since they had last been together, and they had changed considerably in the interim. They had acquired eyeglasses and potbellies and mustaches. They had grown bald and the color of their hair had changed. They had grown thin and angular and fat and round. They had become totally unrecognizable to one another.

They shook each other's hands with the greatest cordiality, until their cufflinks rattled. And they addressed one another in familiar terms, somewhat shyly, because they didn't always know who they were talking to; first they had to tell each other who they were and introduce themselves.

They were all exactly 43 years old. Men in the prime of life. Mature, experienced men at the pinnacle of their careers. They were men who had responsibility and authority and power over their fellow human beings. Busy men whose time was precious. They had had to set many things aside in order to be able to be together that evening.

The gentlemen were in evening dress. Elegant and flawless with white shirtfronts. One or two of them had small medals in their lapels.

Only one of them came dressed in an everyday suit. A shiny, threadbare suit with sleeves and pantlegs that were much too short. He had a strange-looking, narrow, overly long red necktie and strange-looking worn-out boots without heels. And he had a full black beard and needed a haircut. He greeted the others gloomily and peered at them myopically through tiny old-fashioned glasses. He didn't look like any of the others. But he belonged with them. They had insisted that he come. And they were friendly and cordial to him and protected him solicitously from possible insults by the serving staff.

The meeting room was done in pink with silk wallpaper and golden sconces and bronze-colored lighting. It was a place that combined the comforts of home with the elegance of social life.

In a side room a table had been set with candles and flowers and Danish flags and artfully folded napkins. The headwaiter bustled about the table and inspected it to make sure that everything was as it should be.

The gentlemen offered one another cigars and knocked their ashes into stylish porcelain ashtrays and ceramic pottery with Biblical motifs. They laughed and talked loudly about old times and old memories. And they spoke a curious secret slang that could not be understood by the uninitiated.

A committee of several gentlemen walked around busily crossing names off lists as more gentlemen arrived.

And finally their number was complete. Nineteen gentlemen. Lawyers, doctors, scientists, businessmen, teachers, a judge, a clergyman, a military officer.

There was also a murderer among them. A man who, a number of years before, had poisoned head teacher C. Blomme's malt drop.

[4]

THE CHANGING OF the guard was advancing through the hospital. A grandiose scene which transpired every day with marvelous precision.

The chief of staff strode along in review with his retinue, and the procession of grand rounds swung into action. The procession's arrival was announced from one ward to the next by the ringing of bells so that everything would be ready for the solemn occasion.

The ward's nurses were lined up with smoothed aprons. The young student nurses stood at attention. The patients tried, to the best of their abilities, to lie straight in their beds. The sheets were smoothed out, the blankets arranged in regulation fashion. Nothing was allowed to be wrinkled or to deviate from the prescribed methods of folding. Patients were not permitted to ask for their bedpans at this time. Restraint was the order of the day for the duration of the procession. And patients were even forbidden to die during the solemn hour of the hospital rounds.

The chief of staff wore a calm and dignified expression. Even as a young intern he had studied his predecessor's demeanor with great care, and he knew that the young interns in the procession were now paying attention to his facial expression. He kept one hand in the pocket of his white coat. He used the other for slight gestures which were understood and obeyed by ward matrons and the other trained nurses.

No patient dared to address the chief of staff directly. Questions and answers were relayed through intermediaries. Misunderstandings could arise in this way, but it was absolutely improper to attempt to correct them.

The chief of staff's name was Thorsen. But one does not call a

chief of staff by name. Uneducated elements among the patients were taught that he was not to be addressed as "Doctor" or "The Doctor" and that to address him as "you" was inappropriate. Any use of pronouns in connection with a chief of staff is proscribed. When speaking to or about him, it is always simply "the chief of staff," and a breach of this etiquette could result in very grave consequences.

When the hospital rounds are over, the chief of staff withdraws. The spell that had been cast on the wards is broken. The hard-pressed stomach patients ring their bells feverishly, and the student nurses dash off with the bedpans.

But the work of the chief of staff is not over. He rushes by automobile to his private clinic, where other patients are waiting. They have the same diseases as at the hospital. And they receive the same treatment. But the etiquette and social conventions are different. The chief of staff can be addressed directly. And his face is remodeled into a more smiling expression, as if he were among his peers.

Chief of staff Thorsen has a busy day. He is also a professor and has students and lectures to take care of. He doesn't dare show signs of fatigue. His lectures have to be animated and peppered with witty anecdotes, and his students are interested and careful to laugh when he tells a joke.

But the chief of staff also has his private practice, which demands time and patience and long conversations and tactful understanding. Here a new expression is required. Confidence in one's doctor is the most important thing of all, Professor Thorsen once declared in an interview. Sometimes it helps to grasp both the patient's hands and adopt a mild and sympathetic look. The doctor should be a friend and confidant. He should be the discreet father-confessor.

Added to all of this are his numerous professional obligations and his honorary duties. Board meetings, conferences, speeches, *Domus Medica*, the editorship of the weekly journal, newspaper

polemics, etc. And a doctor also has a private life. A wife and children and social duties.

Perhaps the profession of chief of staff alone would be enough to fill up one man's life. And perhaps Professor Thorsen will die early from overwork. But his numerous activities are voluntary. They are merely the requirements for a career and a high standard of living. The professor is a man with a national reputation. Admired and envied by his colleagues.

He is still young. He is 43 years old. And he is one of the nineteen formally dressed gentlemen who meet one evening in June.

A mild, quiet summer evening with lilac and laburnum blooming at Langelinie as they did many years ago, when an elderly head teacher was brought to the city hospital and died because he had eaten a poisoned malt drop.

[5]

A PIMP AND ASSAILANT has been sentenced to four years in prison. A stubby, coarse-looking individual who declared himself satisfied with the sentence and bowed with exaggerated politeness to the judge, who shuddered. And the newspaper account reported that he smiled impudently to the spectators as he was being led out. Flabby with pomaded hair and padding in his shoulders. "A really abominable type," Judge Ellerstrøm says to his secretary.

Judge Ellerstrøm is 43 years old. Very tall with a longish face and blond, brushed-back hair and a little mustache.

He metes out his prison terms according to the letter of the law and dictates his decisions in a thin, uncertain voice. His long

hands fumble nervously with the penholder. He never knows what to do with his hands. But he doesn't bite his nails anymore. His mother broke him of that habit. "Now that you've become a judge, you'll really have to get rid of that repulsive habit," she said. "Why, a judge can't sit in court biting his nails. What would the criminals think!" And the judge showed enough strength of character to comply with her admonition.

His mother lives in a rather large apartment in the Østbane district. She was divorced from her husband when her son was a little boy in a sailor suit and knee socks. And she kept the son. She still has him. She shelters and protects him from every bad influence. She watches over his health and well-being with touching care. "It's time to eat now. And now it's time to take a rest. I've put out clean underwear and a handkerchief for you."

The two of them have a tender relationship. People look kindly after them when they take an evening walk at Langelinie. She is short and heavy-set, and he has to stoop slightly as he walks so that she can manage to lean on his arm.

And he tells her about his work and about the strange people he gets to see on the other side of the bench. Like that pimp and assailant today, for example. Really a sinister individual. Capable of anything.

"Horrible!" says his mother. "It's a wonder that a person like that doesn't take it into his head to assault you. You must promise me to be careful, Edvard. Don't get too close to them!"

"But we do have the bench between us. And the police officers. There really isn't any danger. Even though you do hear stories about judges being assaulted in court." But Edvard isn't a man to be afraid. And his mother is willing enough to admire his courage and harbor uneasiness about his bold occupation. And he teases her a little as he vividly describes what a violent criminal is capable of.

It is probably a little difficult for Edvard Ellerstrøm to understand what it's like to be a pimp. But on the other hand he does

have his degree and knows the law. He attended lectures on jurisprudence for seven years, and tutors trained his memory and drilled him in catchwords and mnemonics. He knows the current penalties for procuring and for assault, and if he should forget them, he can get help from his law book.

He sends young prostitutes to prisons and institutions. He gives thieves and hoodlums what they have coming to them. You can't really expect a judge to have tried being a hoodlum himself, can you?

It's just that Mrs. Ellerstrøm is a little unhappy about all the horrid things he has to deal with. He, who has known only fine, upstanding people.

But she has no idea what he learns when he reads the *Supreme Court Journal*. And she doesn't know anything about the strange books her son reads secretly in bed at night. He lies there reading under the covers with a flashlight so she can't see that he has a light on and won't catch him in the act.

He is 43 years old. And he is supposed to meet several other gentlemen of the same age this evening.

The maid has laid out his starched dress shirt on the bed. And Mrs. Ellerstrøm is tying his necktie. He has to bend down toward her so she can reach it. "Don't tickle me like that!" he giggles.

"But it has to look nice," she says. "A crooked tie looks terrible. Did you wash the back of your neck properly? Here's a clean handkerchief. Don't come home too late, now! And remember, you have to be in court early tomorrow, at nine o'clock. And you know you just have to have your sleep or else you'll get that awful headache again."

She sprinkles a little eau de cologne on his clean handkerchief. "Here are your shoes. The maid polished them. Of course you nearly forgot them and went out in your slippers. Do you have your front-door key? Isn't it in your other pants? Goodbye now, my boy. Have a good time. And please take care of yourself."