

Means, Gaston Bullock ^[1]

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by D. A. Yanchisin, 1991

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Gaston Bullock Means, detective, scoundrel, and swindler, was born on his family's plantation, Blackwelder's Spring, near Concord in [Cabarrus County](#) ^[2], the son of William Gaston Means, a lawyer and longtime mayor of Concord. His grandfather, W. C. Means, known as "the General," was a wealthy antebellum planter with ties to the Barringer family. The family fortune was considerably reduced after the [Civil War](#) ^[3], and the general's fifth son, William Gaston, "the Colonel," went to Memphis, Tenn., and practiced law with T. B. Chambers from 1872 to 1874. Before returning to the plantation in North Carolina, he married Corallie Bulloch of a prominent northern Mississippi family. After a short residence at Blackwelder's Spring, where his oldest son Gaston was born, William Gaston Means began practicing law in Concord, moving his family into a large three-story Victorian house on North Union Street. In time there were three more sons and three daughters.



Gaston B. Means, March 14, 1924. From the National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, Online Catalog.

^[4]Although they could be charming, the Means boys were described by more than one Concord resident as being "meaner than hell." Gaston, who apparently inherited the bad disposition of his father and grandfather, claimed that his first memorably satisfying experience was achieved not only by stealing money from his mother's purse but also in seeing the maid discharged for the theft. Yet the home in Concord was his haven, where throughout his life he returned for refuge and from which he attended All Saints Episcopal Church.

Gaston Means was a pathological liar; his activities thrived on complication, implication, and innuendo. His stories were unreliable even in the face of concurring testimony, which he always managed to taint in some manner. He maintained that he became interested in investigative work in emulation of his Uncle George Means, who had worked for the U.S. Secret Service, but his first practical experience as a detective was in trailing and occasionally suborning jurors for his father. In 1898 he entered [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5], where he took a pre-law curriculum. While he was sociable and in his second year won election to the Dialectic Society, he was not intended for the classroom. He did not complete his third year at the university, though many a biographer has repeated his claim that he was graduated. Although he had the capability to play football and turned out for the team, he was lackadaisical and was never more than a scrub. At that time he was nearly six feet tall, weighing about two hundred pounds. Heavysset, his normal weight in maturity was about two hundred and thirty pounds.

In 1900 Means became superintendent of the graded schools in Albemarle, where he remained for two years. Meanwhile, his father had become an attorney for James W. Cannon, the textile entrepreneur. During his college summers Bud, as Gaston B. Means was known, had worked in the [Cannon Mills](#) ^[6], and in 1902 he joined the firm as a salesman. While he initially traveled a good deal for the firm, he ultimately settled in New York City. In 1909 he apparently requested a transfer to Chicago because of a breach-of-promise suit brought against him by a former New York City girlfriend, Edith Catherine

Pool. But Means did not like Chicago and he went back to New York as often as possible. On one of his trips between the two cities, he was rendered senseless when he fell from a defective Pullman berth. A university classmate, Louis Graves, claimed the fall altered Means's personality. If that was so, then the change was immediate because Means tried to sue the Pullman Company in 1911 but failed in the attempt.

On 14 Oct. 1913 he married Julie Patterson, a twenty-three-year-old debutante from Oak Park, Ill. In 1914 Means quit his post with the Cannon Mills before he was dismissed and went to work for the New York detective agency of William J. Burns, formerly chief of the U.S. Secret Service. In 1915 Captain Karl Boy-Ed, a German naval attaché and the sub-rosa head of German espionage in the United States, became interested in Means because of his textile news reports in the *New York Journal of Commerce*. At the same time Means supposedly attempted to make a connection with the Germans for the Burns agency and enlisted in their service as "Agent E-13." In a typical act of Means flamboyance, Gaston used German money to rent an entire floor of a swank Manhattan hotel for himself. At that time Julie Means was recovering from the stillborn birth of her first baby.

In April 1915 Means first attracted the attention of the national press when his scheme to produce a propaganda scoop for the Germans, by showing that American captains were providing German sailing dates to British warships, failed. Means rationalized his work for the Germans by claiming that it was carried on before the United States entered the war; later he attempted to extort money from the Germans and, on the other side, more than once offered to trade his knowledge of German espionage activities in order to escape federal prosecution.

While he worked for the Germans, Means was in the midst of another swindle, which culminated in the death of his victim, Maude King, the widow of a wealthy Chicago lumberman, James C. King. Acting for the Burns agency, Means had rescued Mrs. King from a group of English confidence men who were robbing her. Means knew a dupe when he saw one, and through the family connections of his wife and with the assistance of his father-in-law, W. R. Patterson, and his brother, Afton, he gradually wrested control of Maude King's fortune. In 1917 Means was forced to bring forward a bogus will that was supposed to establish Maude King's right to the entire fortune of her dead husband. Finally, in need of money and faced with the possibility of losing his detective's license, he committed a desperate act. In August he persuaded Mrs. King to visit Concord, and on the twenty-seventh he purchased a gun. On 29 August Maude King was shot in the company of Means. A coroner's jury ruled that her death was an accident, but the news coverage given the event led to the development of suspicions against Means. The Northern Trust Company of Chicago revealed the bogus will, and officials in Illinois and New York began to investigate. Soon afterwards the dead woman's body was exhumed, while officials in New York City arrested Afton Means and searched Gaston's apartment. In September Gaston was arrested in Concord, N.C. He mounted a remarkable defense, claiming—among other things—that Maude King committed suicide and that the case against him had been engineered by German espionage agents. He was acquitted only because of local hostility towards the Illinois and New York attorneys and a rigged jury.

For a short time after his acquittal Means gave the appearance of settling into the life of a rural squire, but he quickly tired of the countryside near Concord, moving first to Chicago and then to New York City. He attempted to expose his former German employers to U.S. Military Intelligence, but his story did not sit well with that agency. When Means appeared before the Senate committee of [Lee S. Overman](#) [7], the committee denied his evidence. He also lost his last chance to collect from the King estate. In 1916 Means and his wife had their first live baby, a daughter called "Sister," and in 1917 they had a son, Billy, who was born in Charlotte. In the spring of 1921 Sister died and Gaston was nearly inconsolable. As in previous crises, he returned to his home in North Carolina. While in Concord he attempted to defraud the Southeastern Express Company of \$57,000, which he claimed was sent in a package to Chicago but when opened contained only a block of wood.

In 1921 Means saw an opportunity that must have made his larcenous heart swell when his former employer, William J. Burns, became head of the Justice Department's Federal Bureau of Investigation. Burns hired his former employee as a special investigator starting in November. Means seems to have been particularly well suited to what became known during the Harding administration as "the Department of Easy Virtue." He immediately hired a "paper" informer, pocketing the salary, and started to accept bribes from bootleggers. By January 1922 Means was broadcasting to the criminal world that he could fix federal prosecutions, but he had a setback and was placed on suspension. While on suspension from the Justice Department, he acted as a customs agent for the Treasury Department. Nevertheless, he continued to occupy his office at the Justice Department, which incensed honest officials including [J. Edgar Hoover](#) [8], who later succeeded Burns as head of the FBI. To avoid a confrontation, Burns sent Means to New York City in the spring of 1922, when Means began commuting between New York City and Washington, D.C. According to Julie Means, by October 1922 her husband had collected \$50,000 in bribes. In Washington, he moved his family from lodgings on Newton Street to a Georgetown mansion with three servants and a chauffeur-driven limousine.

At this juncture in his career, Means made some serious errors. Elmer Jarnecke, who handled his payoff monies, signed a receipt for Charles Johnson. Until then Means's criminal clients' only protection was to communicate indications of his untrustworthiness to one another, but in February 1923 Johnson took his evidence against Means to Justice Department officials. At the same time Means was employing the services of Thomas B. Feldon, an attorney in the King case, to negotiate bribes. The two men also conspired in "The Glass Casket Case," in which they fraudulently sold glass coffins through the mails. By May Burns was no longer able to protect Means from investigations by the Justice Department and the press. Finally, Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty hired Hiram C. Todd as a special counsel to prosecute Means. Indictments were brought against Feldon and Means in October 1923, but the two men were able to forestall prosecution for the rest of the year. Means thought he saw a way out of his troubles through the announced enmity of Senator [Burton K. Wheeler](#) [9] towards Daugherty. While Todd fumed over the delay, Means appeared before the select committee of the

Senate to investigate the attorney general. He even had the temerity to offer Daugherty a deal for his testimony, which was promptly refused. By June 1924 he was short of cash, despite the enormous sums he had pocketed. In his last attempt to evade prosecution, he tried to implicate not only his old friend, Jess Smith, but also President Warren G. Harding ^[10], Attorney General Daugherty ^[11], and Secretary of the Treasury Andrew W. Mellon ^[12]. His bid failed, and for the first time Means was found guilty in a court of law. He received a two-year prison sentence and a \$10,000 fine.

While Means was free on appeal, Todd was preparing other cases against him, and his former confederate, Elmer Jarnecke, who eventually was pardoned and became a Justice Department informer, agreed to testify for the government. Means took refuge in Concord and claimed he was too ill to travel, but in January 1925 he was arrested and taken to New York City. There he was again found guilty and given another two years in prison and an additional \$10,000 fine. Claiming to know something about the motives of Senator Wheeler, Means asked to see Attorney General Daugherty but settled for talking with investigators from the Justice Department. He stated that Wheeler intended to make Senator Robert La Follette president by attacking Daugherty, and without blinking an eye he made the outrageous claim that both senators were Communists. His final ploy to stay out of prison failed to convince the investigators, and on 20 May 1925 he was sent to the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, Ga. His sisters, Kate and Belle, got Julie a teaching position in Concord, whereby she managed to care for herself and her son Billy. Meanwhile, Gaston Means fared well in prison, where he became the warden's spy. Released a number of times to testify in Justice Department cases, he even spent a month at the beginning of 1926 in a Park Avenue apartment in New York City. In 1927 other cases pending against him were dropped because of pleas from his family. On 19 July 1928 he was released from prison and returned to Concord.

While in prison, Means had become acquainted with Mrs. May Dixon Thacker, a free-lance writer and the wife of a prominent evangelist, who developed an interest in his story and agreed to write it for him. In the spring of 1930 the scurrilous Strange Death of President Harding ^[13] was published and immediately became a bestseller. Mrs. Thacker repudiated the book in November 1931, but Means, who was then engaged in one of his most rewarding swindles, was unaffected by her denial.

After his release from prison, Means had convinced Ralph M. Easley of the National Civic Federation that he was just the man to investigate and expose Communists, which he accomplished with periodic reports made from reading the newspapers. In February 1930, while taking his family on a jaunt around the country at the federation's expense, apparently for no other reason than to keep in practice, Means smuggled \$4,000 in gold out of Mexico into the United States. Altogether, he defrauded the National Civic Federation of \$200,000, and by the fall of 1931 he had deposited over \$100,000 in his bank account. Despite his wealth and apparent well-being, he began to suffer from bouts of acute depression. His wife had to call the police more than once for protection, and on one occasion he struck an officer who was attempting to restrain him.

Brooding in his Georgetown mansion, Means began to consider how he might profit from the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby ^[14]. Through Julie's connections he managed to meet Mrs. Evalyn Walsh McLean, the estranged wife of the publisher of the *Washington Post* and a friend of the Lindberghs, and Captain Emory Land, a naval officer and a Lindbergh cousin. Means persuaded Mrs. McLean and Land that he could recover the child. In a fantastic scheme carried on throughout the country, Means extorted \$104,000 from Evalyn McLean. When he informed her that another \$35,000 was needed, her lawyers became aware of the hoax and informed the FBI. It was with much satisfaction that his longtime foe in the bureau, J. Edgar Hoover, arranged for Means's arrest. In June 1932 he was found guilty of "larceny after trust" and sentenced to fifteen years in prison; in April 1933 another two years were added to his sentence.

The federal authorities decided that neither the federal reformatory at Lorton, Va., from where he might be able to recover the McLean money, nor the prison at Atlanta, Ga., where he knew too many people, would be suitable for his incarceration, so they sent him to the Northeastern Penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pa. He was unpopular there, and in September 1934 he was transferred to the federal facility at Leavenworth, Kans. Although he continued his scheming, he seemed to lack vitality. In the summer of 1936 his application for parole was denied. By 1938 Means was in extremely poor health: he had suffered a number of gallstone attacks and had lost over forty pounds. In the middle of the year he was transferred to the U. S. Hospital for Defective Delinquents in Springfield, Mo. His condition was sufficiently serious in November 1938 for hospital doctors to operate without his permission. On 7 December his gall bladder was removed, but his heart began to fail and he died a few days later. Julie Means, who was working as a department store clerk to support herself and her son, visited Means before his death. She returned his remains to Concord for burial in the family plot at Oakwood Cemetery.

Photographs of Means abound in the nation's newspapers and magazines and in biographical accounts of the Harding administration. There is an unusually true likeness of him as he appeared before the Wheeler committee in the frontispiece of his book. While his numerous crimes attracted a number of journalists before and after his death, the definitive biography of Means was written by Edwin P. Hoyt in 1963. No one stated the inordinately difficult problems he posed for his biographers better than Means in his book, *The Strange Death of President Harding*, where he admitted to being a "consummate liar" but observed that "it is difficult for the lay mind to distinguish between trained dissimulation ^[15] and lying."

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