

Again, many thanks to those who responded to my call for help in finding Mart canon scenes to write. This one is for those who responded that they love the idea as Mart as Miss Lonelyheart: Jo (daisyxduck), Julia, and Susan. There's also a reference to a Mart scene from *Headless Horseman* that Julie (macjest) loves, too. Another big BWG shout-out to Susan, last-minute editor extraordinaire!

As with every story in this miniverse, this Mart snippet is dedicated to the incomparable Mary Carey, whose friendship was a gift and whose Mart will live with us forever.

Mart Belden in: The Confession by Dana

Like I said during my meanderings about my magic show, I've been the center of attention many times in my life, and it hasn't always been good. And what happened the spring before I turned sixteen was probably the worst. It was horrible keeping a secret that not only did I find embarrassing but also came with more responsibility than a teenaged guy should have to handle. And then having people suspect me of being the Midnight Marauder on top of everything else? I just wish I could forget that whole mess, but since I can't, I've decided that maybe writing it down will help out some.

It all began when I joined Mr. Zimmerman's journalism class. It started out fine, except I couldn't seem to write the stuff old Zimmerman wanted to print. I finally had what I thought was a brilliant idea. I'd write an article about the Bob-Whites' adventures—all of them. In the end, it was just another article I'd slaved over, and Zimmerman didn't like it. He said I had a good imagination, but the whole article was unbelievable. Can you beat it? Our adventures *couldn't* have happened, as far as he was concerned.

Tool.

I kept on writing articles. And old man Zimmerman kept turning them down, so I tried to think of something he *would* accept. I got this idea of writing a regular weekly column. I got to thinking it could be something like household hints. But then I just had to go and get clever by expanding the column beyond household hints and into the field of romance.

Me and my bright ideas!

Anyway, Mr. Zimmerman approved the column—even the dumb name I thought up: Miss Lonelyheart.

What was I thinking? I mean, *really*?

The next thing I knew, the stupid column really caught on. The school's newspaper office was shortly flooded with heartrending missives. It soon became clear that lots of kids wanted advice about their love life. At first, I could handle it. But soon I began to getting other kinds of letters. Some of the kids had *real* problems, like an alcoholic father, a mother who just picked up and walked out on the whole family of six kids, stuff like that. I did my best to answer those, but my lighthearted household hints column had taken a very serious turn, and it began to weigh on me. A lot. It got so bad that I actually lost my appetite. Me! Mart Belden! Can you imagine? I was distracted, forgetful, and short-tempered, too. Like I said, not a favorite part of my life.

I knew Trixie had noticed I wasn't myself and was worried about me, but I just couldn't tell my almost-twin what was going on, as much as I wanted to. I was so preoccupied with the Lonelyheart thing that when Reddy disappeared overnight—the same night the Midnight Marauder struck for the first time—I didn't help her look for him.

Mart Belden in: The Confession

I even went so far as to tell her, “I think you’re worrying over nothing. Reddy can take care of himself. He’s always done it before.”

That was true, but I still should have helped her try to find him. Part of my reticence also may have sprung from my recent failed attempt to properly train the completely un-trainable Irish setter. Trixie and I had a bet that I could train him, which I won on a technicality, but it still gnawed at me a little that I hadn’t been able to get Reddy to follow the proper commands. Who could remember to say, “Roll over! Play dead!” when they really wanted Reddy to sit?

I’ll never forget trying to persuade the stubborn setter to come out from under a picnic table while Trixie and Honey were involved in that whole Headless Horseman fiasco. It was humiliating hearing Honey ask, in a voice tinged with shocked incredulity, “*What’s that?*”

Trixie’s airy response didn’t help my mood that day any. “That is my brother Mart giving Reddy obedience lessons.”

“But Mart’s underneath the table!” Honey had exclaimed.

Again, not one of my finer moments being the center of attention.

But back to the Lonelyheart situation, which got a lot worse, especially when I started to get a series of letters from someone who hated school, hated the teachers, and ranted on about how one day he was going to do something desperate. Some of ‘em were so bad I never showed them to old Zimmernan at all, and I threw them away.

The worst part was that that person threatened to make bad stuff happen. Right after I received that letter, the Midnight Marauder appeared, vandalizing the school and stealing some money on the very same day the last letter had said something would happen.

And that’s when I became a suspect. I had to do a lot of really sneaky things so that no one would find out that I was Miss Lonelyheart, and that included sneaking back to the school one night to get Miss Lonelyheart’s mail. As luck would have it, that was the same night the Midnight Marauder struck for the first time. I was to the school and gone before that happened, but someone must have seen me there and told the police. I was hauled in for questioning. So were some other kids, but everyone seemed to focus on just me and blame me for the vandalism and theft, from Lester Mundy to Vera Parker, a *Sleepyside Sun* reporter.

It was after Sergeant Molinson dragged me in for questioning that I knew that I had to come clean with the Bob-Whites. Actually, I think I decided to come clean with them the second I saw the huge spray-painted black letters across the face of the school building:

THE MIDNIGHT MARAUDER WAS HERE!

The problem had officially become way too large for “Miss Lonelyheart” to handle.

So, after a run-in with Margo Birch, an antique dealer who had strong opinions on child-rearing, and Vera Parker in the small, old-fashioned dining room on the second floor of Crimper’s department store, we all settled down in Di’s sumptuous family room. The looks on all my friends’ faces indicated how eager they were to hear my tale, but I was not eager to tell it.

I stared out of the large windows as I began to speak, telling them pretty much what I already said above, that everything had started with that blasted journalism class.

Mart Belden in: The Confession

I kept my gaze fixed on the wide expanse of green lawn that I could see outside of the windows, as I slipped into what I now call “Miss Lonelyheart lingo.” I said, “You might say that ‘Some people are born great, others achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them.’ That’s a famous quotation.”

Even as Trixie didn’t want to hear any quotes and grew impatient to hear my story, Di, who is really good at noticing things, giggled and observed, “That quotation sounds as though it came straight from the school newspaper. Miss Lonelyheart is always quoting stuff like that.”

Leave it to Di, who is so beautiful that no one ever gives her the credit she deserves for her mind, to notice the similarity between my quote and that stupid monster of a column I had created.

As Trixie wondered anew who was responsible for Miss Lonelyheart, I turned from the window at last and faced my friends. “Haven’t you guessed?” I asked miserably. “Miss Lonelyheart is *me*.”

As I had expected, there was stunned silence at first—and then bedlam reigned as everyone began talking at once.

It was my best friend, Dan, who realized the gravity of the situation as everyone was pondering whether or not I was joking.

Joking? Ha! I *wish*.

I will forever be grateful to Dan for saying, “But he’s not joking. Look at Mart’s face.”

There was another silence, and I could feel my face and neck turning beet red as I wallowed in my shame and embarrassment. At that point, I couldn’t take it anymore, and I burst out, “Go ahead! Why don’t you all laugh? I know you want to. If it were me listening, I’d be falling on the floor in hysterics by now. Don’t you get it? I’m Miss Lonelyheart. I’ve been Miss Lonelyheart all along. Me, Mart Belden!”

Jim’s mouth was twitching, but he managed to say solemnly (because he is Jim and filled with so much honorableness it can make a lesser guy feel ill sometimes!), “We’re not laughing, Mart. Honest!”

“Of course not,” Brian, Jim’s partner in honorableness, added, but I noticed that he couldn’t quite look at me.

It was Trixie, natch, who finally got us all—including me—laughing.

“No,” she said, obviously trying but unable to stop her voice from shaking. “We wouldn’t laugh over anything like that, would we?” Then all at once, she started to giggle. “Well, would we?” she demanded, and as I watched, her eyes began to water. Then she answered her own question. “Yes, we would!”

At that, she threw back her head and shouted with laughter. I glared across the room at her, to no avail.

Of course, my sister’s laughter was contagious, and everyone began laughing with her.

I did my best to hang onto what dignity I could, repeating over and over, “It’s not funny.”

Mart Belden in: The Confession

As their laughter continued, I started to see the humor in the situation. I amended my statement to, “Aw, come on, you guys. It’s not *that* funny.”

The more I protested, the more the Bob-Whites howled with laughter—the traitors!—until I had to join in and finally laugh, ruefully, with my friends. When Harrison, the Lynches’ reserved and solemn butler, appeared in the doorway and raised a disapproving eyebrow at our hilarity, we all laughed harder than ever.

“Lunch is served,” he was finally able to announce as our mirth subsided.

And just like that, those three magic words made me realize something. I was hungry again! Not just hungry but positively starved. Ravenous. Famished. Times a hundred. Times a *thousand*. Weeks of missed eating opportunities had finally caught up with me.

I knew right then that I would be okay. It wasn’t just that I had my appetite back. It was that I had shared my burden with the six people I was closest to in this world. And even though they had laughed, I could trust them absolutely.

It’s what allowed me to demolish three bowlfuls of soup, half a dozen ham and cheese sandwiches, and two huge wedges of cake when we sat down to lunch that day. (Yes, I know, I’m talking about food again. I should probably just refer you all to my food blog and be done with it!)

After lunch, I told my fellow Bob-Whites the full story—about the seriousness of some of the letters, about the series of hate letters, *all* of it. And, as I knew they would, the Bob-Whites kept my secret and helped me prove that I was not the Midnight Marauder.

I really am a lucky guy to have the adventures that I’ve had and to share them with the six most wonderful people in the world. I know what a truly precious gift I’ve been given.

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Last note: Another thanks to Susan for making me realize that Mart absolutely must have a food blog!