

MURDER WITH MUD

Lawrence Treat

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There was a feud on the night shift, and the men were beginning to bet on who'd win out. Tony Bragg, who ran the big power tractor with the loading bucket, or Sam, who drove a truck.

They were big, both of them, but in different ways. Sam spread like a tree; he was all girth and slow solid muscle. But Tony was built like the Matterhorn, tall and rugged, with long sloping shoulders and a grayness to him. The gray of grimness and an inner resolve. You knew at once that there was something more to him than hard granite muscles.

Nobody knew how the feud had started. Each of the pair, it seemed, just naturally went out of his way to annoy the other. Sam, for instance, had stepped on Tony's dinner box and had splashed him with mud a couple of times. And when Sam had asked Tony to crank up the truck, he'd advanced the spark and almost snapped Tony's arm.

But Tony was nobody's fool. He didn't seem to get sore or excited, even though he was burning up inside. He slapped Sam on his broad, oak-like back and said: "Anytime you get your feet on my dinner again, I'll just twist the neck off you. If I can find it."

The "if I can find it" crack brought a laugh. Sam's head was set low and grew out of his shoulders. Sam reddened and doubled up his fist, but his fingers straightened out as he faced Tony. Something in Tony Bragg's gray eyes, eager and grim and aching for an excuse to get his hands on Sam, made the big truck driver turn away.

Round one, to Bragg.

Sam evened the count with the truck-cranking stunt, and then Tony went way ahead. In the lurid glare of the floodlights, he dumped a bucket of mud—the bucket on the power shovel that scooped up three quarters of a cubic yard of wet sticky mud. He dumped it neatly on Sam, the way you drop chocolate sirup on a mound of ice cream. Nobody was able to say it wasn't an accident.

Sam stood there like a great armored beast, or like a tar-and-feathers victim, and pulled gobs of mud out of his eyes and ears and his clothing. They had to turn the hose on him, while Tony leaned out of his cab and rocked with laughter. And yelled: "See if you can wash the smell off him, too. Something has been creeping up my nostrils the last couple of weeks, and I've got suspicions!"

After that, the showdown was bound to come!

But Bill Rentner, contractor in charge of the job, tapped Tony on the shoulder, and said: "I want to talk to you. Make it tomorrow night at Haggerty's Bar."

That was how they happened to be sitting on opposite sides of a table with a couple of beers between them, Tony, big and grave, and Bill Rentner, tall, too, but slender and almost fragile compared to Tony. His brown eyes were blinking under the intensity of Tony's stare.

"Tony," said Rentner, "this has to stop!"

"What has?"

"Don't try to kid me. This business with Sam. One of these days, something serious is going to happen and it'll jam up the whole works.

"That all you're worried about, Rentner?"

"Maybe yes, and maybe no. But what I want to know is, what have you got against Sam, anyhow?"

The lights in Tony's gray eyes flickered and deep fires seemed to flare up. "Nothing personal," he said. "But he's Cawthorn's man."

Rentner scowled. "What in hell do you mean by that?"

Tony laughed and blew the collar off his beer. "Maybe you don't know it, Rentner, but you're a marked man. Cawthorn's held this town in the palm of his hand for twenty years, and he knows his stuff. He knows you'll turn on him the first time you figure you can get away with it. He's got peculiar ways of doing things, and right now

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he's giving you enough rope to hang yourself. Sam gives him a report on you every morning."

Rentner slapped his hand on the table. "Who the hell are you, and what are you telling me this for?"

"I'm working out of the D. A.'s office," said Tony casually, and his gray eyes were steady and warm and friendly, as if he were saying the beer was pretty good instead of telling a stranger things that could mean a fusillade of bullets any one of these evenings. "I'm out to bust Cawthorn and his whole lousy, crooked organization. I want a case so tight he can't wiggle a big toe and so hot it'll burn the eyebrows off the people that read about it, and I hear you're the man that can do it."

Bill Rentner took a long time answering. His eyes were brown and somber—not scared, but dark with the consequence of Tony's words.

"I don't know how you found out," he said finally. "I've been keeping figures on construction jobs for years. What the city bought and what it got. The difference is straight graft, and I've got all the names and a couple of canceled checks. You seem to know, Tony, but why should I hand any of it over to you?"

Tony's laugh was gay. "Not a reason in the world, except that you didn't collect all that just for the fun."

"You got me there," answered Rentner softly. "You see, it's on account of a girl. The girl I want to marry. She'll have me if I'm a hero and bust Cawthorn's machine, but sometimes I think of all the money I could get out of Cawthorn if I went to him instead."

"Money or lead," remarked Tony. "But you're not that kind of a rat, so let's have your evidence."

Rentner shook his head. "I got to think it over."

"Go ahead and think. I'm waiting!"

"It's too sudden, Tony. Here I figured you for just a good guy, and you turn out to be dynamite."

"TNT," corrected Tony. "And you can't leave it around loose while you make up your mind." Then he got up and walked out of the place.

He figured that that was the way to handle Rentner. Put the screws on him and he'd object; give him his head and he'd come through. And there was the girl, too—Mary Jocelyn. Tony had to see her.

The street outside was light, but as soon as he turned the corner he was in darkness. He walked with his head low and his hands in his pockets. He walked that way all the time, because otherwise somebody might recognize him and wonder why he wasn't back East, where he was supposed to have gone on leave of absence from the detective force.

But even with his head low, he saw things out of the corners of his eyes. He glimpsed the movement of a shadow in the doorway, and he whirled and met the great hulking body that charged out.

He grabbed at the arm and slapped a short bone-crushing blow at the assailant's wrist. The steel weapon hurtled down, but the aim was deflected and it just grazed Tony's shoulder. He lowered his head, charged forward and butted. Air shot out of those great lungs as from the released valve of an auto tire.

Tony pulled up and watched Sam stagger backward and crash into the brick wall of the nearest building. Tony's eyes, lidded streaks of quicksilver, flashed coldly and caught the movement of hands. He ducked and dived for the darkness of the building. A shot blazed out and lead whistled past him!

He sprinted like a greyhound, body long and low, legs flying. He hugged the wall to make himself difficult to find or to hit. He didn't have a gun, and if he'd had one he wouldn't have used it. He was a fugitive from men publicity would ruin his purpose.

Once more a bullet ripped past him. He had the ricochet to fear, and he feared it with a steady beat of his heart. It would get him or it wouldn't, but there was nothing he could do.

Then he reached the board fence. His long arm swooped up, his body clambered with a heavy desperateness and his feet pounded awkwardly, slipping on the boards and whacking them like a hammer. Then he was up and flinging himself to the other side.

A window banged open, a woman yelled. Behind him, feet scurried. Tony darted across the yard and took the next fence on the vault. The street beyond was quiet, empty. He strode down it confidently, with his head low and his hands in his pockets. You don't get shot at twice in a night unless the same man catches up with you, and Tony twisted down too many alleys to be followed.

It was about midnight when he reached his rooming house, kicked off his shoes and lay down in the bed. It was a hell of a way to spent your night off.

Tony breathed slow and deep. Throughout the State, Cawthorn had made East City a symbol for corruption. In

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ten years, the only break decent citizens had had was when Logan managed to be elected district attorney. And Logan had picked Tony Bragg, patrolman assigned to plain-clothes duty, because he was honest and clean, and because he knew how to run a power tractor.

Logan had it all figured out. Tony's leave of absence, his secret return, his job. Construction work stank with graft and all Tony had to do was keep his eyes and his ears open. And gamble his life!

"You know the risks better than I do," Logan had said. "Think it over for twenty-four hours, and then come back with your answer."

"Why waste twenty-four hours?" Tony had asked. "I feel about things pretty much the way you do."

So Tony had left East City; then he had returned and gotten an engineer's job on the sewer project. He'd started nosing around, and then accidentally he'd heard about Rentner's evidence. It was like drinks on the house the first time you came in. But it was true.

Sam's attack, however, worried Tony. Sam was part of Cawthorn's beef squad, but he was no gunman. Why the shots, then? Cawthorn's orders, or an attempt to even up for that bucketload of mud? It made a lot of difference which.

Tony reported as usual on the night shift the following evening. He kept his eye on big Sam every time his truck headed the line and loaded up, but Sam acted normally enough. Whatever else, he didn't suspect Tony had recognized him last night. Sam wasn't subtle enough to hide his feelings.

Tony was thoughtful. He had a hunch that something was about to happen, and the scene impressed it self on his memory. The floodlights trained on the line of trucks and on the ditch itself. The ditchdigger, like a great metal grasshopper, plowing into the bowels of the earth, churning away and lifting dirt on the endless string of buckets to dump it in piles alongside. The ditch, four feet by seven, that it scooped out of the ground. The gang who lined it with boards and shored it up. The trucks stopping alongside the pile of earth deposited by the ditchdigger, and the big bucket on the end of a steel boom, dipping and grabbing, swinging and dumping and jerking, as Tony pulled on the levers and stepped on the pedals.

Bill Rentner strode through the circle of light and yelled at Tony. Tony couldn't hear, but he waved his arms, swung out the bucket and emptied it. He filled the last truck and cut his motor. He could rest a couple of minutes and have a smoke. Back on the road that the trucks took, he heard a car start with the singing sound of a motor racing in low. He cupped his match and dragged on the cigarette. Then he looked for Bill Rentner, but Bill wasn't around.

The putt-putt of the digger throbbed steadily. Lights winked on the road from the dump heap. Tony sighed, drew deep on his cigarette and watched the first truck turn and back and buck into position. Sam was driving it. Tony climbed back into the cab and reached for a lever. The trucks rumbled in and took their places. Sam, hunched like a gorilla over his wheel, didn't look at Tony.

Hours later, dawn was streaking the horizon and the floodlights were growing feeble. Everything was running like clockwork. Bill Rentner, who never stayed through the night shift, had gone home long ago to get some sleep. The day shift was almost due.

Tony let the tag line uncoil from the drum as the bucket dropped into the pile of earth and grabbed. He reached with his left hand to operate the closing line. He felt something stick on the bucket, he lifted it a couple of feet to get a new grip. It was still sticking. He raised it anyhow, glancing casually to see what the trouble was.

Instinctively, Tony shoved the swing-lever into neutral and held the bucket steady. He stared, while his heart humped and the pit of his stomach went cold. An investigation was the last thing in the world he could stand.

Tony looked at it again, steadily, to make no mistake. But it was there all right, dangling from the two halves of the bucket. A pair of legs!

Somebody yelled. Tony swung the load to a clear space and lowered it gently. He set the legs down carefully, kept them for a second or two just scraping the ground. He laughed somberly, as if this were the last laugh he was going to have for a long time. The thing reminded him of a picture of a mechanical man he'd seen years ago, in one of his kid books. A bucket with legs.

Then he opened the halves of the bucket and let the thing drop.

Everybody seemed to see it and came running at the same instant. Tony leaped out of his cab and sprinted. He yelled and knocked a couple of men aside. "Don't touch it!" he bellowed. "The police—"

He broke off with the word sticking gruffly in his throat. Police! That was a hot one. Some hobo died and got

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buried and Tony picked him up in a bucket, so the police would be around to say: "Hello, Tony. Thought you were East."

He'd have to explain that one. He was supposed to be hundreds of miles away, on vacation, and here he was working on a construction job that Cawthorn had farmed out. The big politician would be plenty dumb if he didn't see through this one. And, whatever else, Cawthorn wasn't dumb!

Nevertheless, there was nothing Tony could do. A corpse is a corpse, and you can't get rid of it by a wish.

Tony lowered his head and looked. The face was caked with mud so that the features were no longer recognizable. The pressure of the bucket had almost cut the body in half and it lay grotesquely, a torso and a pair of legs, twisted at an impossible angle, like a rag doll.

Tony bent down and wiped the dead features with a handkerchief. A couple of clots of mud dropped off and the features emerged slowly. Then Tony stood up.

"It's Bill Rentner!" he said in a hollow voice. "Better call the cops."

He glanced at the tense, shocked circle of faces. Eyes fidgeted and dropped away as they met his cold, fixed stare. Only big Sam glared back.

Tony said: "I saw him around ten. He walked across the circle of light and waved at me. Then I turned off my engine, lit a cigarette and waited for the next trucks. Anybody see him after that?"

Sam growled: "The trucks was away, so we're clean. But if you got out of your cab, you got a hell of a lot of explaining."

"I sat on the steps and smoked a cigarette. Anybody could see me."

"Sure," said Sam. "But who did?"

Nobody answered. Tony realized his alibi was a little too perfect. It was so damned good that nobody could back it up. He snapped out: "What makes you think he was killed, then? You, Sam—any of you drivers—you park and get off your trucks and who knows where you go then?"

"I wasn't off my truck," rumbled Sam. "Not once all night."

Tony's brain went taut and began buzzing like a power saw. Sam hadn't been off his truck and maybe he could prove it. Sam and all the other drivers always got off their trucks as soon as they parked them in line, but Sam had stayed on this evening. Tony tucked the fact in the back of his mind, where he held the memory of a car that had raced off in low gear.

Then he got busy with other matters. If he hung around till the cops came, they'd recognize him right off. They knew him, and though there wasn't a man in the department who'd assume he was a killer, they'd drag out the story of why he was here. That meant letting Logan down and giving up all hope of ever getting Cawthorn. Tony'd get his discharge from the force within twenty-four hours, and after that his life wouldn't be worth a nickel.

Against that, he could beat it, which would amount to a public admission of guilt. Guilt of a crime he'd never committed and would have given his life to prevent. Rentner, the guy who could sit in a witness chair and talk Cawthorn into prison. If Tony beat it, he'd be a hunted man and the world would go out to shoot him on sight. That would be Cawthorn's method. A nice legal murder, committed by an innocent man in uniform, obeying orders,

It took Tony a second to think over the alternatives and another second to decide. "Sam!" he commanded. "You stay here and see that nobody touches the body. Joe"—he turned to his assistant—"go down to the corner and phone the police. I'm going to look for Rentner's car. If you want me, you'll find me there."

He strode off without glancing behind. He walked slowly, with his head low and his eyes studying the ground. He almost went past Rentner's car without noticing it. He glanced up and saw the keys still in the lock. He climbed in, turned on the ignition and shot down the street. He glared at the grimy windshield and kept drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

He parked a few blocks away and tried to think things out. But his mind was still whirling, and he was worried about whether he was pulling a prize boner in slipping off like this. He sat there, his long, sloping shoulders heaving with his deepness of breath, his gray eyes glinting like wet rocks, his lips tightened and became white with compression. Then he heard the long wail of a police siren and knew that whether he wanted it or not, his choice was made. He was on the lam!

He drove fast in the direction of Bill Rentner's house. The door key was on the ring with the car keys, and

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there would be no trouble entering. Rentner occupied a large room at the back of a boardinghouse. Tony tiptoed in, rushed upstairs in a feverish silence and unlocked the door.

There was only the bureau, the closet and a battered suitcase to search. The records Rentner had been collecting, the evidence against Cawthorn, ought to be easy to find.

But Tony drew a blank! He didn't understand it. He'd counted on finding the stuff. Time was ticking away and the Police would pounce any minute. Tony gave himself fifteen safe minutes; thereafter he could expect a patrol car.

He used up the full fifteen going over again what he'd already searched. The evidence might be just a few thin papers, folded and hidden away. Tony lifted up the rugs and rined through books and tried the chairs and the picture-backs and the inside of the bureau, behind the drawers. He found nothing!

His watch told him he'd been here twenty minutes and his brain told him it was suicide to stay longer. He left the place topsy-turvey, locked the door behind him and slipped down the stairs. The car was on the side street where he'd left it. He drove crosstown and abandoned it. By dawn, every cop in town would be looking for those license numbers.

Tony took a street car to Logan's house and rang the bell for five minutes before a window opened and Logan poked out his head.

"Who the devil," he began, and then saw Tony. A minute later the district attorney, still in pajamas and dressing gown, let Tony in.

"Something happen?" demanded Logan

Tony nodded. "Plenty!" And he told briefly the events of the night.

"My guess is that Cawthorn knew about that proof, and it's up to me to get it before he does. But I need money and a suit of clothes. I won't risk getting in direct touch with you again. Anything I uncover, I'll send through the mail."

Logan measured Tony's big frame against his own. "Try a suit of mine and see if it fits," he remarked. "You can wash up and dress here. A hundred dollars enough for you?"

Tony nodded. Suddenly he felt good. With someone like Logan to back him, the fight didn't seem so hopeless any more.

He spent most of the day trying to arrange a meeting with Mary Jocelyn, and though he tried all the fake reasons he could think of, in the end he had to tell her the truth.

He was nervous waiting for her. She had agreed to see him in the back room of a small bar where he knew he was safe, but he kept looking at the partitioned booths to make sure no one was within hearing distance. Every time the door opened, his muscles went tight and springy. Maybe she'd come with a police escort. Maybe the police would come without her. Maybe some of Cawthorn's gunmen would arrive instead of her. There was no way of telling.

But when she finally arrived, he was reassured, She was a small solemn girl, pale and pure and strangely quiet. She was dressed plainly and she looked haggard in her dark clothes, but when she gave him her wan little smile, he knew that she was just dead tired and drained of all emotion.

"I was afraid you'd back out at the last minute," he said, "or that you'd bring the police."

"If you're not afraid of me," she answered simply, "then why should I be afraid of you? And besides, Bill told me about you. You're on the police force yourself."

Tony didn't know how to take that one. He put his big hand on the table and said: "Listen, there's one thing I want to get straight. Bill's life was the most important thing in the world to me, and not because he was a pal, either. I'm not trying to kid you. But it so happens that he was the one man in town who could get Cawthorn."

"Why are you so anxious to get him?"

"Because he's dirt!" snapped Tony. "It's kind of hard to say, but I want to see decent, honest people running this town. That's important. And the way things stand, my job is to clean up. And once you start a thing like that, it's tougher to give up than keep going."

"I wish Bill had felt that way," she remarked.

"So, the way I see it, Cawthorn heard I was trying to get this dope and so he cracked down on Bill. First Bill, and now I'm due."

Her eyes grew worried, then dreamy. Tony clenched his fists and thought of how lucky Rentner almost was.

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"I wanted Bill to be fine and strong and brave," she said. "I kept urging him to go to this new district attorney. But Bill could never make up his mind. He'd been gathering evidence for years, as a kind of hobby, with no definite purpose. Even yesterday he wasn't sure whether he'd have the nerve to come out against Cawthorn. If only I knew he'd decided on the strong and honest way, I wouldn't mind." Her expression was tense, bitter.

Tony gulped. "This evidence, if it has all the names and proof, like you say—well, it's what I've been looking for. Did you bring it along, like I asked? Because if you did, I want you to give it to me,"

"People think you killed him for it," she said levelly, "and you ask me to hand it over, just like that."

"Not to me. Take it to the post office and mail it—to Logan."

She started to answer, but her lips froze; her hand shot up to her mouth and her eyes widened in terror. Tony uncrossed his legs and pressed his knees against the table. He didn't turn around.

Sam's deep, guttural voice rumbled out. "Give it here!"

She still didn't answer. Tony shifted his head and saw Sam's face and shoulders reflected in the glass of a Jim Corbett photograph. Sam had a gun and it was trained on Tony.

Tony leaned back. The partitions of the booths were movable, and when he pressed against the table he could feel the planks give behind him.

He said, "What's the matter?" and moved his shoulders as if he were merely turning. But he wasn't. He put the full force of his legs in a sudden thrust. The bench and partition went ripping backward. Tony twisted his body low and whirled, grabbing for the gun with two frantic hands.

He caught the wrist and the barrel and forced it away from him. Sam's free fist coiled and drove out. The smack of flesh and bone was dull with the heaviness of two masses. Tony stopped the blow just below his ear and momentarily cold sparkling light lit up the room. He leaned forward, sank his teeth in the gun wrist and drove forward with his body. His legs pounded as if he were a halfback fighting for a last desperate yard.

Sam rocked back, smashed up against a partition and splintered it like matchwood. He clutched out to steady himself, roaring in pain as the teeth dug in and held, doglike.

The girl's black figure circled and darted like a rapier. She was holding a weighted metal vase. Suddenly she saw her chance and struck a sharp, whipping blow that broke the skin on Sam's forehead. He grunted. For a fraction of a second his grip weakened and Tony tore the gun loose.

Sam hit the wall, steadied himself and banged forward. Tony brought up the gun in a short, vicious blow. It crashed on Sam's jaw. He backed away and spread his hands. His eyes were glazed and his breath came short and rapidly, like a winded animal's.

The girl said, in a tense, excited voice, "They followed me. I didn't know, but I can recognize him now. They followed me all day."

"They?" asked Tony.

She nodded. "In a car. He and a tall thin man."

Tony hesitated. There were two doors to the bar. One, at the side, through which Sam had come, and the main entrance to the bar, around the corner. If they could get to Sam's car and beat it before the other gunman realized anything had gone wrong, they'd win out. If not they—

Tony looked at the girl. "Listen," he said. "I think I see a way. It may work, if you just do your part."

"I'll try," she said faintly.

Tony raised the gun and leveled it at Sam. "All right, get out to your car!"

Sam swayed. He was dazed, but he was used to taking orders, and he took them now.

Tony watched the door from the bar bang open. The bartender and a couple of customers yelled, and Tony waved the gun at them. They threw up their hands and froze.

Tony barked at Sam, "Snap it up—fast!" Then he walked through the door and glanced down the street. Sam's partner, the second gunman, was rounding the corner at a fast walk. At sight of the trio he whipped out an automatic and began running.

Shots rang out and the hood kept coming at Tony. Tony recognized him vaguely, knowing he'd seen the photograph somewhere—probably in the criminal files.

Tony's brain kept flashing and an idea was forming in the back of his mind, but his movements were deliberate. He leveled the gun, aimed it, squeezed the trigger. He might have been on the pistol range instead of standing there unprotected, with an automatic blazing away at him and lead singing past his ears.

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The gunman's legs buckled suddenly and his body pitched forward and skidded on the concrete. He lay quietly, face down, with his weapon a few inches beyond his reach. The shoulder of Tony's coat had a slight rip, and he felt moisture oozing at the tear. But it wasn't important. A skin rip and a dribble of blood. And a man lying on the sidewalk with a bullet in him to even the count. Two seconds in time and an eternity in its effects.

Sam's eyes were clearing and he was sidling toward the rear of the car. Tony stopped him with a sharp, explosive order. He fingered the gun.

"Get in there and drive!" he barked. "To your own place."

Sam crawled behind the wheel and started the car. The girl got in the rear and Tony in front. To Mary Jocelyn he said, "You know what to do." She nodded her head doubtfully. She hadn't caught onto his plan yet, but he felt sure she wouldn't give it away.

Sam grunted. Tony couldn't see his eyes, but he thought he'd taken the fight out of Sam.

Sam stopped across the street from his own house. Tony pushed open the door. "O. K.," he said to the girl. "You know where to take it." She got out and crossed the street. Tony raised his gun and let it tickle Sam's ribs. "Next stop, railroad yards."

On the way he told Sam what he figured Sam ought to know. "So far," he said, "the story is that a tractor engineer named Tony Bragg beat it right after they found Rentner's body. Tomorrow they'll forget all about Tony Bragg, because the man the police'll be after will be you. It'll turn out that Rentner was killed back on the street and his body dragged over to the dirt pile. I saw the marks of that. It'll turn out that your truck was the first to leave the dump heap and that you had plenty of time to stop on the way and commit the murder near Rentner's parked car. The motive is the evidence of graft that Cawthorn wanted and stood ready to pay for, and that evidence will be found in your room. The girl just went there to plant it.

"I'm putting you on the first outbound freight. After bumping Rentner, you better clear out."

Sam burst out laughing. "Hell, that all you got? Then take me down to headquarters and book me. I ain't scared! An innocent conscience, see? That's plenty protection." His big shoulders were shaking with merriment.

Tony didn't get the joke. Here he'd played his trump card and it was no good. Sam figured he could top it without even trying. Well, what did that mean?

That Sam hadn't killed Rentner, after all. And that Sam felt sure of Cawthorn's protection because—

A siren screamed down the avenue, and the dark streak of a speeding sedan bore down on them. Not a police car, either. It was Cawthorn's special siren. Cawthorn, on his way to the scene of the shooting at the bar.

Tony thought fast. The way things stood, he had nothing that he was sure would stick. Some documentary evidence without corroboration, and some suspicions without proof. If Sam had broken down, everything would have been different. But Sam hadn't, and Tony was sunk. Sunk, unless—

He grabbed at the parking brake and wrenched hard. The car swerved and skidded sideways. Cawthorn's chauffeur jammed on his brakes. Rubber screamed as three tons of metal slid wildly toward their terrific impact.

Tony punched at the door handle and tried to throw himself clear. He wasn't fast enough. He saw Cawthorn's long, heavy sedan leap at him, Metal ripped like paper, and the heavy engine plowed with a grating, rending shriek. He gripped his gun. The half-open door slammed him like a falling rock, and he went out for the count. A cold white light exploded in his head, and from a great distance he heard voices yelling.

His feet moved automatically. His stomach was turning slowly inside him. Outside there was a great silence. He put out his hand to balance himself. The metal was cool to his touch. He shook his head and narrowed his eyes. Slowly the scene focused, the wrecked front of Sam's car, the telescoped nose of Cawthorn's. Sam stood next to him, swaying on his feet, punch drunk. Cawthorn snapped: "The hell with your hand—get the cops!" Cawthorn's chauffeur held his bloody wrist and said: "Yes, sir. Soon as I can." The chauffeur walked like a drunk and headed for a phone.

Cawthorn's shape steadied. A big man with a sallow face, his yellowish skin drawn tight as a drum and his mouth a hard, lipless slit, and a pair of polished flints for eyes. And in his hand, steady and trained on Tony, was a gun! Tony's own.

The political boss spoke coldly, barely moving his lips. "You been giving me plenty trouble, but you're through now. You poor dumb punk! You could have drove right past me if you hadn't scared and tried to stop!"

Tony shook his head. His eyes were clear, but his brain wasn't working yet. He had to stall along until he thought of something. Had to stall—

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"Not so easy," he said. "Were you going to a fire? Or going to see whether Sam messed things up again?"

"Cut it," snapped Cawthorn. "You're Tony Bragg, fugitive from justice. Tried to beat it and got in an accident. Tried to escape, and I had to shoot." The thin lips stretched. You couldn't call it a smile because there was no humor and no warmth. But they stretched.

Tony's mind flashed, groped at an idea and tried to hold onto it. When he spoke he was partly acting and partly repeating what he hoped was the truth and wanted to get into words.

"Sam just confessed his part in the murder of William Rentner," said Tony thickly. "Signed a confession ten minutes ago. Just an accessory. But the guy who killed Rentner was you, Cawthorn! You're under arrest!"

He nudged Sam. Sam didn't know what it was all about, but he'd learned it was best to agree with Tony. So Sam nodded his head and said, "Sure, that's right. All he says—sure!"

For a fraction of a second Tony's stomach went soft and he seemed to feel the hole the bullet was going to make. The gun was four feet away and dead center on his stomach.

"Signed confession," he repeated doggedly, "and ready to back it up. Bump me and you still face a murder rap!"

Cawthorn had decided Tony was on the spot anyhow, and that Sam was the danger point. That was Tony's hope, the flash he'd had a few seconds ago.

"You dirty squealer!" snarled Cawthorn. "Messed everything up and then went ahead and squealed!"

Sam didn't budge. He saw the gun swing and level at him, but he didn't believe. Cawthorn, the boss, plug him? What for?

A gray, rocklike figure whipped forward and slashed. Tony's hand smacked at the gun as the detonation boomed forth. Cawthorn careened backward and jarred his hip against the wreck. His back bent and he couldn't aim the gun, but he still had his fingers on the trigger and he kept pulling it. Bullets circled outward and pinwheeled in a wide, aimless arc.

Then Sam charged. His one arm was limp from that first slug, and his shoulder pained him, but there in front of him was Cawthorn, the man who'd double-crossed him.

Sam dived and cut him down, and then he pounded his feet at the leering, tight-skinned face.

"Cawthorn!" he yelled. "Cawthorn done it himself—killed Rentner! Wouldn't trust me, so he done it himself! All I done was drag the body to the dirt pile afterward, and now the dirty double-crosser wants to kill me so I won't talk! Geez!"

His foot raised up again and Tony clipped him on the jaw. Tony was so tired he wasn't even sure that his fist carried a wallop, but it was the only way to prevent mayhem. Sam didn't fall; he staggered backward, weaved, and sat down heavily on the running board.

Tony was sitting next to him, gun in hand, when a patrol car arrived.

"Detective Bragg reporting," he said. He got up groggily. "I got the Rentner murder case here, complete. Prisoner, Cawthorn. Accomplice and State's witness, Sam. Corroborating testimony, me."

He burst into a broad grin and his mind began working again. Convalescent leave—leisure. Leisure—Mary Jocelyn. And Mary Jocelyn—

But at that point he stopped thinking, and his mind had nothing to do with it.