

Partners

by
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Brown



ON a day following my weekly dinner at Tom Dessel's little bungalow in the suburbs I asked him about the roomer.

"He doesn't do anything," said Tom. "He has a little income that keeps him going, and he's too lazy to do anything except stall around. Good guy, though. I like him."

So did I, and had since he moved into the bungalow spare room some six months before. I shouldn't have been curious about him, but for a month or so Mrs. Tom had shown too plainly that she liked him, also. There was an intimacy between her and the roomer—Carl Jones he called himself—that set me to thinking.

Tom himself didn't notice it. He was a stolid, unemotional individual, honest and frank, and lacking in sentiment except where pretty little Mrs. Tom was concerned. He adored her, and had built a nest for her such as few men in the department ever hoped to boast. Jealousy is the last sensation I should expect Tom to experience.

Perhaps I had better begin with the days when Tom and I attended school together. We were pals then, just as we still are. And in those days, as now, I led and he followed.

When I left the farm and landed on the

city police force Tom did likewise. Finally I got up-stairs in the detective department, and a short time after he got his boost and became my partner. Ten years we had worked together at that end of the game, and in that time Tom never took the initiative in anything except marriage. I suspect that wouldn't have happened if Mrs. Tom hadn't set her heart on having him.

She loved him—and I never saw a more successful gamble, up to the time the roomer appeared. I was almost one of the family, and look as much interest in the chickens and flower garden, the graveled paths and the old oak at one corner of the lawn as they did.

Once a week I had dinner and played cards with Tom and his wife. And since Jones had rented the spare room I was aware of an ever-increasing change in Mrs. Tom's attitude toward my big, good-natured partner.

That made me wonder and worry—which brings us back to the day I asked Tom who Jones was and how he made a living?

"Where did he come from?" I persisted. "I don't see why a man with an income sufficient to live on moved out here."

"Lord, I don't know where he came from!" replied Tom. "I guess he could pick a

lot of darned sight worse places to live. Maybe he likes to breathe fresh air and hear the birds sing.”

The next time I went home with him I watched Mrs. Tom and Jones cautiously. There was nothing out of the way but an easy familiarity that caused me a lot of pondering.

The happiness of my big partner and his wife was about the only interest I had with which to concern myself; and I knew that Tom couldn't see. He'd probably murder me if I even breathed a suspicion.

So on my own initiative I started an investigation and succeeded in lining Jones up fairly well during six years of his life. For all that I could learn he originated just six years before he rented the spare room. There was nothing on him—except indolence and a disinclination to account for frequent trips away from the city. Finally I had him watched by a private “dick” that I knew well—and I got a report that made me grin with satisfaction. I went into session as a ways and means committee, but the blow fell before I could get action.

Tom didn't appear one morning, and the chief went up in the air; it was almost unbelievable. I rang up the bungalow, but couldn't get a reply, and the chief swore.

“Go on out and see what's the matter,” he barked. “He'd have sent word if he was living.”

I took a taxi and smashed the speed-limits on the eight-mile run. And before the taxi stopped at the gate, I sprang out, leaped the fence, and ran across the lawn.

The door was open and I walked in and looked around. No one was in sight and not a sound came to me.

“Tom!” I bellowed; and then: “Oh, Mary—where's everybody?”

There wasn't a movement, and I stepped across the room, traversed the dining-room—and halted in the kitchen doorway.

There sat my partner, a long way from

dead, for he looked up at me from the depths of a huge old wicker rocker back of the range.

That look made me shiver. It was as though a man long dead had opened his sunken eyes and stared out unseeing into the world he had once been a part of.

“What's the matter?” I asked jerkily, “why don't you phone when you're sick—or Mrs. Tom? Where is she, anyway?” Tom's eyes remained glassy, unintelligent; not a muscle of his body twitched—until he spoke.

“Gone!” he said thickly, with a ghastly grin that you'd expect to see on the face of an imbecile. “Gone, Joe. So has Jones. Gone-gone-gone—”

God! It was awful—like a resuscitated mummy monotoning an expressionless something that was all it could remember of existence.

“Gone—gone—”

I grasped him by the shoulder and shook him savagely.

“Shut up!” I snapped. “Get hold of yourself, man; you're going loony. Where's the brandy?”

I knew well enough; got it out and poured him a stiff drink. “Throw it into you,” I commanded.

He roused himself and drained the fiery stuff. Then I poured him another, saw that he swallowed it, and dropped into a chair, where I sat quietly for several minutes.

Watching closely I saw the glaze disappear from his eyes and the color tint his cheeks. Suddenly he sat up rather spasmodically and shot me an agonized look.

“Tell me about it,” I said quickly. “I can understand better than you think I can, Tom.”

“I expect you can, Joe; better than me, perhaps. Why, there isn't much to tell. They were gone when I got home last night.”

“Together?”

“Yes. There was a note on the kitchen table. I can't show you that, Joe. It's—it's sort

of sacred, because—well, Mary wrote it. Everything seemed to go out of me then—like the world had been snatched out from under and left me hanging. I got into this chair, and I guess I haven't moved. No, I don't think I've moved, Joe—since then."

"You mean—why, haven't you slept any?"

"Slept? I don't know—maybe. I don't seem to remember just what has happened—since I found that note."

It was pitiful the way the big fellow took it. He couldn't tell me anything more than that Mrs. Tom and Jones had gone away together. They loved each other, and Mary was sorry, but life with Tom would be unbearable, and—You know how those things go—the same old tale, usually ending in the same old tragic way.

There was nothing for me to do except-get Tom back to normal. I did suggest that we find them and demand an accounting of Jones, but my partner wouldn't listen to it.

"No, no; we can't do that," he told me earnestly. "If Mary really loves him, Joe, I'd be the last man on earth to take her happiness from her. And if she doesn't love him—if it's just an infatuation—she hasn't had time to find it out yet. So you see we couldn't do anything that wouldn't hurt Mary. Maybe—some day—she'll find that she was mistaken. Then she can come back, and I'll try to make it up to her; I'll try to find out what she tired of—about me—and maybe—why, maybe this will be a good thing!"

He rambled on in that strain, with never a thought of blame for either Mary or Jones. They must have felt that they were in the right or they wouldn't have done it!

Perhaps you're getting an impression of the sort of man Tom is—and after years on a police force, at that. It's a pity more of us aren't built that way.

I phoned the chief, and he told me to stay with Tom and never mind duty for a

couple of days.

"Brace him up." was his gruff injunction. "I know his sort, the poor fool!"

Three days later we were back at headquarters, and there might have been no end to this tale if I had done as Tom wished. But, as I've said, I had looked up Jones on the quiet, and no one on earth could make me believe that a woman like Mary could remain in love with such a man.

Lots of God's best women make mistakes—and at that, not one man in a thousand is clean enough to reproach them for it.

For several days I did nothing; then I started my friend, the private dick, on the trail. I wanted Mary back in the bungalow, because Tom needed her, and she needed Tom, and the chickens and flowers were being neglected shamefully.

A week later I got a report.

"Chicago," said my friend, when he had buttonholed me. "Living on the south side—she is. He doesn't stay there, but he's making it blamed uncomfortable for her."

"Not staying with her?" I gasped. "You mean—"

"I mean that I overheard one conversation that made me think maybe she woke up before it was too late."

That was great news! In my room that night I digested thoroughly all that my friend had told me—and I realized that the situation was all-fired ticklish, at that.

Mary wouldn't think of coming back—even if she wanted to. And if she did, I reasoned from what I had learned of Jones that he would follow and make it unpleasant for her. He could do that easily; he could ruin her in the eyes of the folks she knew. And if that happened, old stolid Tom would kill Jones with as little compunction as he would a snake.

Then again, Mary probably knew by this time what sort of a man Jones was; and I

knew that she couldn't be happy with Tom and always have the consciousness that she had left him for such a man.

And if Tom knew what I had been told by my friend, and what I had learned by my own investigation, he'd hop the next train and strangle the life out of Jones, if he had to follow him for twenty years. Irrespective of what you hear, it does make a difference whether you've lost your wife to a decent man or to a crook.

I puzzled a good many hours, and finally reached a solution that may seem ridiculous to you. It didn't to me, because I knew the characters so well, and it was the only one I could think of that would make things right all around.

I must reunite Mary and Tom, eliminate Jones entirely, and make Mary think that, though she had made an error, it wasn't serious, because Jones was really a good sort—and she had realized her mistake in time, anyway!

And Tom must be made to feel the same way. I didn't care to see his life and Mary's ruined by a cold-blooded murder on his part, and I didn't want him to go through life with that gnawing thought that his wife had fallen for a man like Jones, even though she had been ignorant of his real character. The sting would lie bad enough without that to fester it.

The following night I dragged Tom home with me and made him listen to all that I cared to tell. I persuaded him that Mary had caught herself in time, probably, but wouldn't come back because of pride: and I told him that even if she did return. Jones, although a white man, was too much in love with her to give her up easily—that he would certainly follow and do his utmost to wreck the happiness of my partner and Mrs. Tom.

"I'll kill him if he does," said Tom quietly.

"Sure; and that won't make either you

or Mary happy," I retorted. "You can't scare Jones. You'd have to kill him, and that won't do."

"No, I don't want to do that, Joe, but I'd get mad, sure, and that's what'd happen."

"Listen!" I snapped. "I'll frame Jones so he won't dare show up."

"How can you?" demanded my partner. "He ain't a crook."

"No," I agreed, "but I can make him think that he is. He's a drinker—of sorts. You leave it to me and I'll guarantee everyone will come out of this without a scratch. Isn't it worth almost anything to get Mary back—good as she was when you married her? Why, man, that little house needs her; and the chickens, and all of those pretty flowers—and remember that little nook down by that mud hole you call a lake, where you and she can spoon just like you used to? And—"

Oh. I fetched him finally. His eyes filled up and he couldn't speak, but he nodded his head, wrung my hand, and hurried out into the night.

I phoned the chief at once and succeeded in getting a vacation: and before daylight I was aboard a train bound for Chicago.

My acquaintance with citizens of the so-called "underworld" was wide enough to enable me to locate the characters I needed wide of two days. I came upon them—Baldy Patts and White Charlie—in a resort on Armour Avenue, and as soon as they spied me they came to their feet.

"Sit down and let the gats alone." I said with a grin. "I don't want you—only for a job of my own that means 'cush' to you."

"I thought you was a straight fly." Baldy came back. "When youse toins crook deres somethin' rotten in Chi."

Neither he nor White Charlie made a move to resume their seats. They just squinted at me ugly, and I knew I'd have to go into particulars before they would come to the

rescue.

“You guys know Tom Dessel.” I declared.

“Bet yer life.” grunted White. “D’ squarest dick in N’ Yawk.”

“That’s him.” I agreed. “Now listen a minute and I’ll put you wise to the play, Give you my word this is on the level.”

So I dropped into a chair and gave them the whole story, adding that I wanted Jones framed and the reason for it.

“Not murder.” I concluded: “but he’ll fall for a bank blow or some such stunt that’ll mean some years in stir. It’s the only way to keep him safe from disturbing us, and maybe getting killed by Tom. Jones is that sort. You probably don’t know him because he’s a loner. He ought to be locked up on general principles, but I haven’t a thing on him to either put him in stir or scare him away.”

“Where do we get off?” asked Baldy, dropping into a chair, with White Charlie following suit.

“One hundred apiece, and my word not to touch you—if you keep out of it yourselves. How you’re going to put it across and stay out of it—make Jones the absolute goat—is none of my business. Just remember one thing, boys: You play square with me or the country won’t hold you.”

Baldy leaned across the table and glared at me.

“Gettin’ kinda low down yerself, ain’t yuh, Joe?” he purred softly.

I’m afraid I looked guilty, for to tell the truth I felt a bit that way.

“Perhaps,” I admitted, “but Jones would do it sooner or later, anyway—he’s inclined that way. He’s no good on earth, either to your sort or the other; and Tom Dessel is a white man. What do you say?”

“I say yes.” put in White. “The century looks good to me, and I got no use fer a moll-buzzer. Put me down.”

“Let ’er go double,” growled Baldy.

That settled, we agreed to meet again two days later, and I left the place.

I hunted up Mary and had a talk with her, and I saw that no matter what happened, Tom would have to be on the spot to take her in his arms and reassure her, or there would be no reunion.

So I wired him to that effect, not forgetting to state what Mary had told me: that she had come out of her trance before the train was six hours from New York, and that there was nothing to regret except her blind infatuation and the pain she had brought to Tom.

Jones, it seemed, had dropped the veneer and shown the grossness beneath as soon as he thought that Mary was irretrievably doomed. But Mary wasn’t that sort of woman, thank Heaven, and, of course, that aroused all of the man’s meanness. He swore to have her then, at all costs.

Tom arrived the morning after Baldy and White Charlie told me that the job had been delicate, but they had succeeded in putting the idea in Jones’s ear and getting him to “bite” while they acted as outside men.

It took no little dodging to duck Tom’s questions. He couldn’t understand how I could manage to implicate Jones, an “honest” man, and his conscience balked now at playing such a trick. But when I assured him that Jones would only get his desserts, and no more, and reminded him that he had left it in my hands, he gave in. I played on the love and happiness note, for Mary, a good deal, and that eased his conscience.

The big night came around, and for the first time in my life I was secretly on hand at the scene of a huge robbery, for the purpose of seeing that it succeeded. And it did—immensely!

Jones carried it through alone and unaided—as expertly as the cleverest cracksman in the business. I didn’t attempt to apprehend, nor to follow him. I knew that the

success of the coup would make him daring, and I knew enough of human nature to feel certain that he would follow his daily program of calling on Mary.

So I hurried to the hotel, schooled Tom in his part, and together we took up our watch opposite the house in which Mary roomed.

Jones didn't appear that night, nor the following day, but about nine o'clock in the evening, just as I was beginning to wonder if I had miscalculated, he descended from a taxi and entered the house.

"Now," said I to my partner, "it's up to you. Play the game, old man, for both your sakes; I'll scare him so far away that he'll never get back."

And I stayed where I was while Tom crossed the street, rang the bell and disappeared. I can only give you what occurred there as he told it to me.

The landlady showed him to Mary's room, and he opened the door and stood facing her and Jones for a moment in silence.

Jones's face went pasty-white and his hand crept to his pocket.

"Don't murder me on top of the other," said Tom quietly. "I'm not here for trouble, Jones. I'm going to forget my duty, and that I'm her husband—straight goods."

"What do you want, then?" snarled Jones. "Tell it quick, or by—"

"Gosh, you're a real bad man, ain't you?" Tom appeared mildly astonished. "Well, I'll tell you. Seeing that Mary here is my wife, and having heard that she didn't cotton to you worth a cent. I thought I'd ask her if she didn't want to try it over again."

A huge sob broke in Mary's throat.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, and held out her arms appealingly.

Jones stepped in front of her, a gun in his hand.

"Look here, Dessel!" he growled. "Mary's mine, you understand that? She—"

And right there he stopped, for a look

appeared on Tom's face that had sent shivers through better men than Jones.

"That'll do," he said. "Don't tempt me too far, or you won't get your chance. Listen to me! I'm going to give you a chance to make a getaway: twelve hours, and not another minute, y' understand? And you might as well know that I know that you're the guy who cracked the Mutual Loan box last night. They're after you for that. If they don't get you, and you ever cross my path again—I'll tear your wind-pipe out with those." And he held out his huge hands and took a step forward.

Jones didn't stop to argue the question. A wild look crept into his eyes, and without a glance at Mary he leaped past Tom and disappeared.

"A moment my partner and his wife gazed after him, then Mary dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, Tom," she sobbed, "and I—I thought—thank God I awoke in time!"

"Amen!" echoed Tom, and he crossed the floor and patted her bowed head awkwardly. "Now, don't take on that way, honey. It's all right. You—you like me best, don't you, Mary?"

"Like you?" She sat upright and brushed away the tears. "Tom, I love everything you touch, every word you utter, every look in your eyes. I—"

"Then that's fine and dandy," he interrupted. "And the little old bungalow and chickens and your flowers—why, they're being neglected something awful. Mary, and they just need you, like I do, to sort of brighten 'em up a bit."

He leaned over, got his arms about her, and stood her on her feet; and she buried her face in his coat and cried until she felt better. Finally she looked up and whispered:

"A thief. Tom! A crook! Oh, I can't scourge myself of that—ever! To think that I imagined myself in—in—attracted to—a

thief!”

To her surprise her husband chuckled. “Lord bless you, honey,” he said, “that’s the joke of it. He ain’t a thief! That’s just Joe’s method of getting him out of our way so he can’t pester you, and I won’t lose my temper and maybe kill him.”

“But you said—”

“I know; that’s the joke. Jones ain’t a bad fellow, but he does drink a little. So Joe, who’s been here a week, frames it up to have a couple of fellows get Jones to drinking last night. They dope the stuff—a little—and it just happens that that big Mutual Loan robbery comes off, and they see it in an extra and dump Jones near the place. Then when he comes to they happen along again, swear they were in on the deal with him, and demand their share, they were so good they made him believe he did it, I guess—while he was soaked—and that somebody must have beamed him outside and robbed the robber—see? I don’t just understand it myself, but Joe engineered it, and he swore he had put the fear of God in Jones. It’s the uncertainty, you see. He don’t remember what he did.”

A peculiar look crossed Mary’s face.

“Aren’t you afraid, Tom.” she said softly, “that what you have told me will make me want to go back to—to him? It wasn’t right.”

For a moment Tom looked puzzled; then a chuckle broke from him.

“Great Scott, no!” he said. “I’ve lived with you long enough to know you’ve got good sense. It’s just a little mistake, Mary—the only one you ever made. Anybody’s apt to do it, but they ain’t apt to swear by the mistake once they’ve woke up; that is, if they’re like you, honey.”

Unconsciously he had given it the very touch that was needed. Only a minute Mary looked at him, with something in her eyes that was meant for Tom and that only he could read. Then she snuggled closer to him and let

the tears come again.

That story of mine was full of holes, but they fell for it. They were interested in each other and they didn’t bother to analyze the thing—which was another phase of human nature I had taken into consideration. I hadn’t been able to frame up a better lie, anyway.

From their standpoint everything was lovely, and that was as I wished it to be. But from my standpoint—

Well, when Jones rushed from the house I crept from my hiding-place and followed. And here is where the ugly part of the affair came in. Of course I was really responsible for Jones’s crime, but, knowing what I did of the man, I felt that I shouldn’t let him escape. I knew that he was a criminal, and that he should be locked up—or killed, and if he was jailed the story of Mary’s mistake would be revealed.

That would be pretty hard on them; it would be apt to blight the two lives I was most interested in.

Jones led me a merry chase, and it wasn’t until he had turned up a dark alley that I let him know that I was after him. Then I yelled at him to surrender.

As I had expected, he shot at me and kept on running. And that was just what I wanted so long as he didn’t hit me. Again I shouted and again a shot rang through the alley. And then I did what any officer of the law would have done. I pulled my own revolver, stopped dead-still, drew a bead on him as he flashed into the gleam from a street light—and let him have it.

Again I felt a slight qualm as I stopped for a moment above the insensate form; but it was only slight, and I searched and found a patrolman, who rang for the ambulance.

Jones was still breathing, and after taking him to a hospital, we went on to the station, where I established my identity. I told them that I had accidentally discovered the man sneaking from the scene of the Mutual

Loan robbery, and had lost him, only to pick up the trail again, with the running fight as a result.

“Why didn’t you report this to us yesterday?” growled the desk-sergeant.

“I did,” I grinned. “Your chief is an old friend of mine, and as a favor to me he authorized me to go to it.”

The following morning I appeared at headquarters, broke in on the chief, and grinned at the expression on his face when he looked up and saw me.

“Know who you got?” he grumbled. “I’ll bet you do, at that.”

“I don’t know,” I denied, “but I have my suspicions. For several years you Chicago guys have been trying to get him with the goods. Am I right?”

“You are,” he acknowledged. “He was the master cracksman of the bunch, Joe. He’s never been mugged. We knew who he was—or thought we did—but we couldn’t hang a thing on him—not a thing. We even knew that he lived in your town.”

“Yes—with a partner of mine.” I amended. “I was quite well acquainted with him. It wasn’t hard to get a line on him: but, of course, like yourself, it was all suspicion—and horse sense.”

The chief nodded.

“Sure—that was easy. Well, we were all right on the dope. He died early this morning—and he played square at the finish; he confessed to a lot of ‘em, Joe, and put us wise to where he kept his effects so we could see for ourselves. There was something else that apparently disturbed his peace of mind, but, fortunately for Tom, he died before he could be persuaded to give it out.”

I thought I knew what that something was, and mentally I thanked Jones for his silence.

“I’m glad he came across,” I said. “Funny I happened to run across him that way, just in the nick of time—and out here.”

The chief looked up and scowled at me intently.

“Yes—wasn’t it?” he said dryly. “Nothing personal in it, Joe, but I wish we had had brains enough to ‘frame’ him. Do you suppose that would have worked? Oh, well, there’s a few hundred in it for you.”

“I know that, also,” I retorted, and left the office.

Of course Tom saw the inevitable newspaper story, and it happened while I was with him.

He turned to me with a peculiar gleam in his eye.

“Joe,” he said tensely. “I don’t just understand this.”

“Don’t you?” I grunted. “Neither do I. I stumbled on it by accident.”

“Blamed lucky accident. Did you—did you ever see this crook before? Know who he was—or anything?”

“Never saw him before in my life, and don’t know anything about him,” I lied earnestly.

And why shouldn’t I lie—for Mary is my sister, and Tom is about as good a brother-in-law as a man ever had the good fortune to be acquainted with.

Anyway, the chickens are well cared for, the flower garden is a sight for weary eyes, and the couple in the bungalow, who seem very much in love with each other, always have a place for me at the dinner-table. And if, now and then, they regret just a little, that it was necessary to frame and make a semi-outcast of an innocent man for the sake of their happiness and peace of mind, isn’t it better so than that they should know the truth of the matter?