

The Build-Up

Detective Jim Durst Didn't Let the Grass Grow Under His Feet When He Was Ordered Out on the Mavis Pearce Snatch!

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JIM DURST stood in the dimly lighted hallway, his eyes narrowed, his face turned upward. Rickety stairs on his right led up into the shadowy-mantled upper stories. The whole place had an odor of putrescent filth and mildew that made him think of some vast organism slowly rotting away in foul darkness.

Durst squared his shoulders. No sense being squeamish. A job was a job. He did not hear the door of the lower floor apartment open behind him. Did not sense the added weight on the rickety staircase when the man, a mere clot of blacker shadow in the darkness, crept up with swift soundlessness after him.

Just as the blackjack struck down he had some last-second warning of danger, shifted his weight swiftly to one side. Wind rushed by his ear. The blunt, heavy weapon struck him on the shoulder almost at the base of his neck. The handrail of the stairs creaked sharply as he crowded back against it. A hard, tough body pushed against him. The blackjack fell again—and again with savage, methodical, uncontrolled violence. The man wielding it seemed to have gone suddenly mad.

Jim threw himself this way and that, groggily trying to avoid the full force of the punishing blows. There was a ripping groan from the rotted rail behind, a screaming of rusted nails torn loose from unsound timber. For an instant, Jim was leaning crazily on a black void, then he was hurtling down through air. Blackness rose and engulfed him—

“So you’re up for air, smart guy.”

Jim pulled his head to the right and wearily opened his eyes. Out of the bloodshot muzziness of returning consciousness he saw a flat-faced

man in shabby suit and checkered cap. Behind him, another man, stouter, with Mongoloid features and a slitted mouth that was a leer of cruelty.

“Yeah,” Jim said. “So what?”

Checker Cap grinned. “I don’t guess you was expectin’ nothing to happen when you came in.”

“Hold it, Snively,” the other man said. “I’ll do the talking.”

Checker Cap nodded. “All right with me, Hambler. You figured it nice so far. I didn’t think he’d be screwy enough to follow you here.”

“He had to, didn’t he? Whitefield’s been paying this phony dick for three years now for doing nothing but chaperoning the Margold stars out of scandal. Naturally when Pearce got herself snatched this evening and Durst was right there at the studio, they’d send him out on the case. Whitefield was warned not to call the regular cops. So when Durst starts checking up, he finds me gone.”

“It wasn’t bad,” Jim said. “Mavis Pearce kidnaped—famous character actor missing. It was worth looking into.”

“Sure. And when you saw me sneaking out of my house when you went there to check up, you just naturally had to follow me.”

Snively had been standing there, looking at Jim Durst, studying him. Suddenly he exploded into words.

“I don’t like this guy,” he said. “I don’t like nothin’ about him. I’m goin’ to fix his wagon for him, the dirty—”

Deliberately he struck Durst on the face, then he reached out and ripped open Durst’s collar and slammed his fist as hard as he could against the studio detective’s throat at the place where the Adam’s apple was a hard knob under the skin.



*Deliberately he struck the helpless
Man on the face*

Durst gagged, choked. Snively took him by the hair, jerked his head back, struck at his larynx again. The room reeled. Blood came into Durst's mouth. His lungs were going to explode.

Omar rested his pudgy hands almost affectionately on Snively's shoulder. Almost invisibly the deceptively flabby looking fingers

dug into the flesh.

Snively howled. Omar slapped him across

the mouth and pushed him roughly away.

“Quit it, you fool,” the fat man purred. Then, in a voice as smooth as butter, “You’ll have to forgive Snively, Mr. Durst,” he said. “He takes these sudden dislikes to people. He’s really very hard to manage.”

Blood drooled over Durst’s lips and his black eyes blazed. The fat man smiled apologetically.

“Come on, Snively. Let’s go talk with Baudino.”

When Durst was alone, he started struggling with his bonds. Before the Margold Studio had hired him as guard-detective, he’d been a stunt man in the movies and before that a circus escape artist. But as he cautiously tested the knots that held him to the chair he knew that they were going to be tough to get out of. Might take hours. And meanwhile lovely Mavis Pearce who couldn’t act but whose beauty sort of put a lump in your throat every time you looked at it, Mavis might be—. He wouldn’t think about that.

Durst’s eyes crawled slowly around the untidy room, not missing anything. He pushed against the floor with his feet and gradually edged his chair closer to the table. There was a bottle of liquor and two glasses on that table.

When he was close enough, he shoved the chair back and over. It flung him against the table, knocked that over, too. With the sound of the crash dying away in his ears, Jim lay getting his breath back. His cheek was bleeding where the side of his head had struck one of the glasses and smashed it.

It took a long while for him to feel around until he could get his fingers on one of the pieces of glass. By the time he’d finally gotten it fixed in his hands so that he could use it to saw the rope with, it was slippery with the blood from his torn finger ends.

He was pretty much of a mess. His head still rocked with pain. Every breath he took was like somebody setting off an acetylene torch inside his throat. And his whole body was a mass of sore places and bruises. For a scene in a serial one time he’d fallen from the back car of a freight train and rolled down a rocky mountain slope. But he’d felt dandy after that compared to the way he felt now.

All the same, his heart was doing an elated bump-a-bump in his chest when he got that sliver of glass just the way he wanted it in his fingers.

Then it took a sudden dive. The door opened.

DURST blinked his eyes, and didn’t believe what he saw. A carrot-topped, pale-faced man with glittering, idiot eyes, and a foam of saliva on his gibbering, colorless lips.

“I found you,” he said, eyes dancing. “I knew you would be here. Anton Baudino knows everything. They were fools but I wish I hadn’t let the lions eat them.”

Slimy coldness sluiced down Durst’s spine—the clammy sweat of uncontrollable fear. *This guy was crazy. Kill-mad.* His hands sawed frantically at the ropes behind him. He had to get free. In a hurry. The crazy man came and stood close to him.

“She was too beautiful, Mavis Pearce.” His voice was a mad singsong. “Her beauty hurt me”—his hands fluttered over his bony breast—“here. Beauty is evil. Beauty kills. But none of them shall be beautiful any more. Mavis Pearce first—then the others.”

He couldn’t finish now with the ropes. Baudino was too close. He thrust the bit of glass between belt and waistband of his trousers, and prayed that it would stay there.

Baudino was kneeling beside him now, his fingers caressing a length of rubber hose that he’d taken from his hip pocket. Durst tensed involuntarily. The hose lashed down over his skull and once again darkness shattered over him.

When he came to, he’d been taken to another room, fitted up like a laboratory. There were large jars and bottles everywhere. And there, in a chair close to him, wearing the flame-colored dress that she’d put on for the scene that night, was Mavis Pearce. Her arms were tied behind her and her corn-golden hair was undone.

“Jim,” she whispered. “He’s mad. He had those other two men bring you in here. He said something about using you as a witness.”

“Then he didn’t kill them. I thought that stuff about the lions was just raving. Look, kid, hold everything. I’ll get you out of this—I swear I will.”

A wet sheet had been tied around him, hampering his movements as effectively as a strait-jacket might have done. Wet, cold sheets. Strait-jackets. Insane asylums. Jim shuddered. This was a maniac’s nightmare.

UNDER the constricting folds, he wriggled his arms until his fingers clutched once more at that precious bit of glass. Patiently, face blank and glistening with sweat, he began to work on the ropes again.

Then Baudino appeared. Jim cursed under his breath.

"Too beautiful," the red-headed man snarled. "But Baudino will fix that." He reached for a bottle marked "Nitric acid." He poured some of it into a beaker. It fumed.

Mavis screamed as Baudino caught her by the throat and raised the beaker over her face. Jim's eyes traveled downward. They fastened on Baudino's shoes, on the floor, anywhere rather than look at what was going to happen when the acid dropped on Mavis' face.

He felt the rope strands giving, one by one. He worked faster, more frantically, like a runner putting forth the last, unbelievable effort to thrust himself against the tape.

He looked up quickly. The beaker was tilted, the acid slowly traveling to the open end. The girl tried to turn her face away. Little anguished sounds were spilling from her mouth. Durst felt the last strand snap. Then he slashed up with the bit of glass and ripped through the tightly plastered sheet, took a deep, exultant breath. He reached out one arm through the gaping tear, snatched up one of the heavy jars from the table beside him and flung it with all his force at Baudino's head.

The beaker was knocked from Baudino's hand as the bottle caught him just at the temple. He fell backward, screaming pain-mad cries as the nitric acid slopped down the front of him. He fell to the floor and lay twisting and whimpering, his

hands thrown up before his face.

Durst wiggled free, untied Mavis. He went and kneeled over the fallen man. He dug his hands into the charred rags of clothing, lifted the man to a half-sitting position.

"You counted on me forgetting a lot of things, fellow," he said. His eyes blazed white anger. "I was supposed to forget that you were on the rocks. I was supposed to think that those two thugs were interested only in the ransom that Mavis' wealthy fiance would pay for her return, and that somehow they had gotten mixed up with a lunatic with a frenzied hatred for beauty.

"I was supposed to forget about the insurance you had taken out on Mavis last year—the beauty insurance which provided that if anything happened to mar your only box-office star's looks something like two hundred and fifty thousand dollars was to be paid to the studio. That, coupled with the ransom, would just about pull you out of the hole, wouldn't it?

"You had to have a witness for that—me. All right. Okay. But what really burns me up is that after all the trouble we went to at the studio to import that tropical grass for the island sequence, you should think that I wouldn't spot it again when I saw a bit of it caught in the heel of your shoe. And you and me standing there this morning, right in the middle of that grass on the lot."

Mavis caught Durst's arm and pulled him around. "Joe Whitefield?" she whispered. "The boss?"

Durst nodded. "Who else? If you want to take the trouble to pull that rubber mask off what's left of his face, you'll see I'm right. That nut stuff was just build-up."