

L. RON HUBBARD



MOUTHPIECE

GALAXY
P R E S E N T S

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IT had been a long time since Mat Lawrence had stood upon the corner of a city street; and he found that the sound of traffic—that nerve-tearing clamor of bells, horns, motors and flat-wheeled streetcars—was a foreign and intolerable thing. For three years he had worked in a silent desert, building a mammoth power dam. The loudest noise had been a coyote’s howl at midnight and the swiftest movement that of a buzzard a mile in the air.

With his usual self-sufficiency he did not know that his dusty boots and battered Stetson made him conspicuous; he only remarked to himself that it was strange how pale the people of his former city had become—for Mat and his engineers had been turned walnut brown by the blazing desert sun.

New buildings, odd cars, new parks—he caught himself wondering if he—the son of Lawrence, the gangster—had ever belonged to this world of sound and steel. Then he caught the name of a building across the street and he reverted to his mission.

In direct contradiction to his tremendous height and bulk, he slid swiftly and easily through the ranks of speeding cars.

He arrived at the building’s entrance to soar upwards to the eleventh floor. His leather heels clanged in the marble

corridor and he swung back the door marked: "C. G. Swartz, Attorney at Law."

With his eyes fixed on a man who sat indolently at an ornate desk in the second room, he failed to notice that a protesting office boy was attempting to hold the gate. Lawrence walked on through, to come to a deliberate stop beside the desk.

Behind a scattered array of papers which lapped over the edges of an old-fashioned sand blotting box, Swartz looked up. A startled expression attempted to hide in his dark eyes; his round, hairless head gleamed as shiny as though newly polished.

"Harumph!" coughed Swartz. "I didn't expect—"

"No!" drawled Mat. "You probably didn't. Why in hell didn't you wire me that Dad was dead?"

His poise regained, Swartz pulled his beefy length out of the swivel chair and offered a hand which Mat shook dubiously.

"I didn't think it was necessary, Mr. Lawrence. And besides, telegrams cost money."

"Sure they cost money. Why so careful about Dad's finances all of a sudden? You didn't use to worry about it! I remember one case where—"

"Now, now, now!" cut in Swartz. "You don't fully understand. Didn't you read the letter I sent you?"

"Why, I guess I did. What's that got to do with it?"

Seated and securely entrenched behind his fancy desk, Swartz assumed a consoling air. "My boy, your father died penniless. There was neither will nor estate."

"What?" demanded Mat. "At last report, Swartz, he had a cool million sacked away. That's a hell of a wad to fade!"

He slapped the Stetson on the desk, where it eddied dust.

“If Dad died broke, he died broke. I’d like to know why; but what I really want to know is every detail of his dying. I don’t want news talk, I want facts. You’ve got them. You’ve always got them. Dad paid you out dough in six figures many a time, and I guess it still ought to buy the dope.”

“As for your father’s fortune,” murmured Swartz, “I only know that he invested heavily in worthless securities. He was an impulsive man, and though I often attempted to advise him, he would never listen to me.”

Mat snorted. “Probably not, and I don’t blame him. Now, I want to know what happened.”

“You can never quite tell in this game, Mr. Lawrence. You know that.”

“Come on, Swartz, quit stalling.”

Swartz made a tent out of his fat fingers and then moved them up to tug at his lower lip, his eyes warily regarding Mat. “All right, I’ll tell you. Rat-Face O’Connell was on his trail. Your father had the dyeing and cleaning protection racket of this town and Rat-Face and his boys didn’t like it. So, one night they went up to your father’s apartment, shot down the guards and took Lawrence for a ride. That’s the story.”

Mat probed into the man’s face as though searching for flaws. “Rat-Face O’Connell, eh?” He looked musingly into the palm of his hand as if it were a textbook. “Rat-Face O’Connell. All right, where does he hang around?”

“Oh no, no!” cried Swartz.

“Oh yes, yes!” disputed Mat. “Where can I find him, now—tonight?”

“But . . . but,” blubbered Swartz. “It’s . . . it’s suicide, Mr. Lawrence. I can’t let you do it.” He whipped out a polka-dot handkerchief and mopped at his brow as though the idea had turned the room into a furnace. “You’d better get out and leave this thing alone!”

“I suppose I’m a yellowbelly. Like the rest of you guys, eh?” Mat threw a twisted smile at Swartz. “Well, you’re wrong. If you think anybody can bump my dad and then get off scot-free, you’re cockeyed as hell.”

His square jaw jutted out and his eyes were the size of match heads. “I’m looking to get Mr. Rat-Face and make him talk. Talk, get me? He’ll burn for that night’s work, or by God, I’ll take him to hell with me.”

“Wheooo!” breathed Swartz, mopping ever harder. He fanned himself with the silk, leaning back in the chair. It was as though he had cooled his legal brain, for he suddenly crouched forward, confidential and wise. “How much money have you got, Mr. Lawrence?”

“Oh, I see!” snapped Mat. “I’ve got to pay for the dope.”

“No,” purred Swartz, “you haven’t. I’m going to give you the address. The dough is for a couple of your father’s gorillas to go with you. You remember them. Petey and Blake.”

Mat sought for the answer in his palm and after several moments of concentrated searching, looked up. “All right. I’ve got five hundred bucks. That will cover Petey, Blake and a car. You’re going to lend me a gat.”

“Fine.” Swartz leaned back again. “I’ll send them around at seven to your hotel. Where are you stopping?”

“Oh, I guess the Savoy is as good as any. Now,” he got up

to leave, “where are my dad’s papers? I want to read them over and find out what the score was.”

Swartz gave Mat a sad stare. “The papers were all taken by O’Connell and his boys. He didn’t leave anything with me, ever.”

Mat frowned and then walked to the door, placing his huge hand on the knob. “I’ll be back and see you tomorrow, Swartz, if I live to tell the yarn.”

Sharply at seven a black sedan stood courteously at the entrance of the Savoy Hotel, two men in the front seat. Mat Lawrence loomed out of the lighted doorway, towering over the gilt-frogged doorman, and looked into the car. He saw Petey first. “Hello, Petey. Hello, Blake.”

Petey was mostly chest and his head resembled nothing so much as a shoe box sunk into his torso—green buttons for eyes and a ragged knife gash for a mouth. Blake was oily and sleek, his hair glistening more than his patent leather shoes, and his black eyes shinier than either. They gave Mat a heartless “Hello” and glanced at each other.

“Get in back, mugs,” commanded Mat. “I’m driving.”

Grudgingly, shying away from the bright lights of the entrance as though they stung, Petey and Blake squirmed out and slunk into the back seat.

Three sizes too big for the seat, Mat crumped the gears and stabbed the headlights out into the blur of traffic. “Where do we go?”

Petey leaned forward, his voice rasping like a saw in mahogany. “Head straight out this street, bo. I’ll put ya wise

to the turns.” He glanced at Blake before he sat back and Blake nodded, his lips sliding into a knowing smile as though well oiled.

With a turn here and a curve there, the sedan went on through the glaring city until the house windows were more dimly lighted and the houses themselves seemed to exude darkness. Mat found it hard to distinguish streets from alleys.

“Hey, Petey,” he called over his shoulder. “Where’s the gun Swartz sent?”

Petey slid an automatic pistol across the rear seat. Mat looked at the blue glint and then shoved the weapon into his coat, to slip out the clip and find that it was fully loaded.

“Thanks, Petey.” He glanced up into the rearview mirror. “Say, what the hell are you smiling about?”

“Oh, things,” rasped Petey. “You turn down this next one.”

Suddenly uncomfortable as if he were hearing fingernails scraping over a blackboard, Mat turned the designated corner and found that he was leaving the last of the houses behind him.

He humped over the wheel, speeding up.

“Say, Petey,” he hurled over his shoulder. “Were you in at Dad’s finish?”

Leaning forward, Petey obliged. “Nope, I arrived about ten minutes afterwards. This Rat-Face O’Connell had cleared out with most of the papers and all the loose jack. I been itchin’ ta get my mitts on him ever since.”

He pointed with a dirty finger. “Ya turn down that next road there. The little one.”

“Okay.” Mat did as he was directed. “This bird sure lives a

helluva ways out, doesn't he? Listen, I'm going to drive right up in front of the house. You two birds circle around back and try to get in that way. After that we'll see what we'll see. Get me?"

"Sure," said Petey.

"If I'm right, this Rat-Face is a rotten shot. And I want him alive, get that? Alive! He's going to burn, see?"

"Sure," said Petey.

"Say!" Mat sat up suddenly and slowed down. "This is the city dump!"

"Sure!" said Petey. "Slow down and stop." He pressed a gat into Mat's ear where it bored viciously. "You didn't know it, bo, but you was takin' yerself fer a ride!"

Mat stiffened, involuntarily reaching for the foot brake. The gun in his ear was a round, hard snarl. Then, still moving at thirty miles an hour, he stamped down on the gas. "Yeah? Well, Petey, if you blow me to hell now, you'll go along too!"

"Slow down!" screamed Blake. "You'll kill all of us!"

Petey drew the pistol away from Mat's head, staring beadily at the treacherous, curving road over which they were hurtling. "Jeeze! Quit, fer God's sakes!"

Mat's square face was savage. He jerked the car around the twisting turns as though he could have picked it out of the road by the steering wheel and whirled it around his head. The headlights clashed on cans and broken glass, throwing themselves over the edge of a twenty-foot drop to the right of the car.