

# THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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# A Weapon of the Law

By George W. Breuker

IT was very still in the library where Judge Lathrop sat reading. The lamp on the table at his elbow shed a soft circle of light in the centre of the room, leaving the outer edges dim and shadowy. The house was quiet. A small clock in the room had already struck one. The Judge's wife and daughter had been in bed for some hours.

At last the Judge put down the legal tome and sat thinking over what he had read. He became so lost in meditation that the door at his left was quietly opened and closed without his hearing it. Then a low cough brought him out of his abstraction. He turned and gazed at the intruder.

The man he saw standing near the door in the semi-darkness was about his own age—that is to say, somewhat over forty years. He was dressed in shabby clothes that seemed a trifle too large for him. A slouch hat was pulled down over his eyes. His right hand was thrust in the side pocket of his coat. Even in that subdued light the gleam of triumph in his eyes was only too apparent. Judge Lathrop stared at him blankly without moving a muscle.

"Well, Judge," said the man with a short, hard laugh, "can you place me?"

"We've met before, then?" asked the Judge calmly.

"Met before? That's good!" The man chuckled evilly. "You bet your life we met before!"

"Then I beg your pardon. You see, you're standing in the shadow. If you'd be good enough to turn that switch—"

The man eyed him distrustfully.

"None of your tricks, now!"

"The switch is directly behind you. You can find it without turning," the Judge went on in an even voice.

Without removing his eyes from Judge Lathrop, the man groped for the switch, found it, and flooded the room with light. Then he pushed his hat back and planted himself brazenly before the Judge, a sneering smile on his lips.

"Maybe you remember me now!"

The Judge looked him over carefully and coolly and as he turned away his eyes a look of contempt spread over his face.

"Humph! Jack Dodd, I believe you call yourself. A cheap crook, a low-down thief—scum of the earth!"

Sudden anger flared up in the man's eyes.

"You be damned careful what you say!" he said between clenched teeth.

"Five years ago I sentenced you to ten years imprisonment," continued the Judge, as if he had not heard.

"Yes," hissed the man, "and I swore then if I ever got the chance I'd get you—and get you good!"

"I suppose you escaped from jail."

"You suppose right. And I got these duds—well, never mind where I got them. Hell, we're wastin' time. I come here to get even with you, you dog!"

The Judge folded his hands and smiled.

"I hope you brought a revolver." He spoke anxiously.

The man stared at him a moment, and then brought an automatic out of his coat pocket.

"I got a gun, all right."

"And I hope you're going to kill me," said the Judge in a lifeless tone.

This time the man's jaw dropped a little. It was plain he was puzzled. Then he brought his jaws together grimly.

"That's why I'm here," he said roughly.

The Judge looked at the man with a smile of thankfulness on his face.

"Jack Dodd, fate has sent you here at the right moment!"

"Say, what are you driving at?" demanded Jack Dodd uneasily.

The Judge leaned back in his chair with his chin on his breast.

"I have a nasty, cowardly job on my hands, Mr. Jack Dodd. Now, you can do it for me."

"Dirty work, eh?" sneered Dodd. "When I'm through with you, you won't have to worry about that."

"You promise me that?" said the Judge, looking at him earnestly.

"Cut out the mystery," snapped Dodd impatiently. "What's in your bonnet?"

Again the Judge dropped his eyes to the rug. There was a pause before he spoke.

"When you entered this room," he said slowly, "I was on the point of—taking my own life!"

"What!" said Dodd in an astonished whisper.

The Judge nodded.

"Suicide is always a low thing—a coward's trick, Dodd. But now I'm saved that. You can kill me, Dodd!"

Dodd stared at him, a little taken back.

"You mean you want me to kill you?"

"If you will, Dodd," answered the Judge pleadingly.

The other made an impatient movement.

"That's bunk! Why do you want to pass out? You got everything to live for."

"Dodd, my son was arrested tonight

for embezzlement. Tomorrow the papers will be full of it. My name has never been tarnished before. The disgrace of it will be more than I can bear. I prefer to die rather than face it."

Dodd gave a laugh.

"So the Honorable Judge has a crook in his family! No wonder you ain't got the nerve to face it. The upright Judge Lathrop, all for law and order, no mercy to criminals! Cripes! that's the best revenge I've heard yet."

"Don't, don't!" moaned the Judge as he hid his face in his hands.

"Go on, suffer! Go on!" chuckled Dodd. "I'm eatin' it up."

The Judge suddenly sat up and extended his arms sidewise.

"Shoot me, Dodd!" he begged. "Put an end to it! Dodd, for God's sake—"

"Shoot you!" laughed Dodd. "I guess not! I got half a mind to stick here and make you face the music. I'd go back and do my bit with a smile on my mug if I could see you, dragged in the slime."

The Judge's manner suddenly changed. He flashed a dark look at Dodd.

"You're afraid to shoot," he said in sullen anger. "You haven't got the nerve, you yellow pup!"

The prison pallor of Dodd's face went whiter, still. He pressed his lips together, but said nothing.

"You low-livered, degenerate skunk!" the Judge flung at him. "I wish I had given you twenty years."

Dodd's hand tightened on the automatic. His mouth began to twitch.

"Look out, you—" He ripped out a stinging oath.

"That's it, Dodd!" cried the Judge. "Shoot! Shoot!"

"So that's it," snarled Dodd. "Tryin' to egg me on to shoot, eh? It won't work, mister. I wouldn't shoot you now if you called me a dude!"

"Is that final, Dodd? You won't do as I ask?"

"Surest thing you know. You're going to live and get your dose o' misery."

"Then I'll do it myself!"

The Judge turned to the table at his elbow and pulled open the drawer. There in the front of the drawer lay a blued-steel revolver. Dodd, who was watching him narrowly, sprang forward with a cry as he caught sight of it. Before Judge Lathrop could get his hand on the gun in the drawer, Dodd had clapped his own hand, that held the automatic, over it.

"I tell you you got to live!" he cried, frowning down at the Judge.

The Judge returned this gaze, and for a second they measured each other with their eyes. Then, with his eyes still fastened on Dodd, the Judge suddenly gave a mighty push and jammed the table drawer shut. There was a howl of pain from Dodd, and the drawer was deep enough so one could hear the automatic fall on the wood bottom. The

Judge eased the drawer a trifle, at the same time shoving at Dodd with his foot. Dodd staggered across the room, where he stood wringing his hands in an agony of pain. The Judge quickly opened the drawer, picked up the automatic and covered Dodd with it.

"Jack Dodd," said the Judge, "the crime for which I sentenced you is one of the filthiest, vilest deeds on the criminal calendar. It will give me great pleasure to return you to your keepers."

"You—you—" Dodd sputtered. "A trick, a damnable trick!"

"Yes, a trick, Dodd. There are other weapons beside firearms."

Dodd's lips curled back from his teeth with venom.

"I hope that son of yours ends in the electric chair!" And then followed a string of vile oaths.

"My dear Dodd," said the Judge as he took up the receiver to telephone the police, "I have no son."

