

# GUILTY

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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# CRIME LESSON

That kid needed instruction,  
and got it from his victim!

by ARNOLD ENGLISH

**N**ORTON was standing near the Central Park Mall. He held his jacket over an arm. Every so often he would tap his right hand pants pocket to feel the shape of a wallet, then swear at himself for having done it. Just the same, that wallet held all the money he had in the world, 48 dollars.

He was fingering the back of a cracked wooden bench shaved white by the moon, when he heard, "This is a stick-up."

Norton held his breath only briefly, then turned. He saw a youngster whose buck teeth shone faintly in the light from nearby lamps. His hair had been clumsily cut, leaving white patches above the small ears. He wore a white shirt and gray pants.

"You're kidding, aren't you?" Norton asked, hollow-voiced.



"Try me, mister," the kid whispered. "Don't hand over the money, and you'll see."

"Suppose I told you that the money I'm carrying is all I've got in the world."

"I'd say you're lying." The kid's eyes raked him up and down. "And it don't make no difference, anyhow. Hand over the money."

A gun glinted in a shaky hand. It was possible that the kid didn't have a hell of a lot of control.

As Norton paused, music tingled in the warm air. An outdoor band concert had begun on the Mall. Listeners old and young lined the wooden seats. Uniformed cops watched, walking back and forth or stopping to talk to each other.

The band was playing something of Schubert's, when the kid said, "Hand over that wallet, mister, or I'll let you have it."

"You can't afford to shoot," Norton answered quickly. "You'd never get out of the park in one piece."

The kid pulled air with his free palm. "Are you going to hand it over? If not, I can

knock you out and then take it. The cops are out there. They can't see what we're doing."

Norton looked at the glare of a faraway lamplight, flies bussing around it, and that turned benches ghost-white. The band played Chopin.

"All right, suppose you knock me out and come up back of me," Norton said. "You can't be sure you've knocked me out. I might be faking and then I could get to you and beat the living day-lights out of you."

Saying that much had been a mistake. The kid's fingers on the gun grew harder, and Norton had to control the impulse to call out. From where he stood, he wasn't sure that the safety catch had been released.

"If you come up back of me," Norton said, keeping his voice down and even, "then you'll be close to me and I'll be able to get to you. I may not look it, but I'm pretty strong."

"Don't give me no lectures..."

"In the second place, if our hands touch while I give you the wallet, I can get at you, too."

"And the gun? That doesn't count, I suppose."

"You're not very handy with it," Norton said. "You're scared of it. My guess is that if I made a jump at you, kid, you'd howl and run."

"Come on and try it." Again the gun grip stiffened. "Let's see what happens."

**C**LASH! went the cymbals on the bandshell in Chopin's Polonaise. The shock of it tingled the legs of the bench Norton was touching, one of a series spaced awkwardly along the path.

"If I put a hand in my pocket," Norton said, "I might be going for a gun of my own, for all you know."

The boy was being worked up to a pitch that could cause him to throw away any caution he'd already shown. But Norton was keeping the wallet, so far.

This tight place was the first one he'd lived through in quite a while. His mind showed him vivid scenes from his recent troubles. The jailbreak, for instance, and the carefully chosen hideout to be used till the heat had died down.

And then the attempts to get a job, failing on account of social security requirements. Money was spent, and nothing legitimate, to keep him out of extra trouble, could be done about it. Or at least he didn't know what.

And now a kid had come forward to try to rob him, and in the tension he could live for a moment without experiencing the continual dullness that he had known so vividly in recent months.

"Why don't you give it over?" the kid asked, his voice rising to a thin note. "What are you trying to pull?"

"I'm trying to help you, believe it or not," Norton said finally. "Don't laugh, I mean that. If you were making a touch on Joe Average, you'd scare him gutless with that popgun of yours. But you're not touching Joe Average this time, kid."

"No, I can see that."

He sounded tired. Norton's sharp eyes rested briefly on the sagging line of the kid's body. He tried to visualize what might happen if he made a grab for the gun, but let it go.

"Is this your first job?"

"I—second."

"Robbery carries a heavy sentence if you get caught." As the kid began to say something, Norton put in fiercely, "You've got to figure on getting caught. It's a risk of the job. You've got to start saving money so you'll have a nest-egg when you get out of jail, something to start with."

"Nest egg?"

"Crooks have to feel secure, too, just like other people. And you won't be on Civil Service. No benefits and health plans go with this line of work, kid."

"No, I guess not."

"Kid, I've spent about a third of my life in prison and it don't pay. There's no percentage in it. A guy goes to prison, he loses everything."

**T**HOUGH talking quietly, his voice vibrated with sudden conviction. His intensity caused the kid to flinch, as if from a burn.

"You get out of touch with normal people, with women," Norton added. "Prison turns a man into a goddam animal. It sets him up to go crooked for

the rest of his life. You've got a chance to stay out of it and live good, get a job someplace—all sorts of things."

"Maybe." The kid was rubbing an eye in tiredness, his fierce expression almost gone. He couldn't seem to take in what he was hearing. But the gun was firmly held in a hand.

Then Norton smiled slightly, probably in triumph, and the kid said sharply, "And you get to hold on to your dough! Mister, you're a real smart cookie. I'm surprised you don't get down on your knees and beg for the dough."

Norton flushed and made a fist. He released the bunched-up fingers, though. The kid, seeing it, smiled.

"Okay, now we understand each other," the kid said softly. "Give it here. The dough, I mean."

Norton was suddenly aware of moisture softening the smells of pigeon droppings, and of grass bending to throaty wind-whispers. At his side, the kid was growing angrier.

"You won't give it here? Mister, I can use this, don't make no mistake. You give

damn pretty speeches, but they don't prove nothing. The color of your money proves plenty, and I want the money and I don't want no more speeches. And mister, I'm asking you real nice—for now."

Norton drew air into his lungs and let it out in a long sigh as he reached a hand into his breast pocket. Careful to make no urgent moves and a little surprised by his own nerve, he turned and looked down at the boy's gray pants and up to the white button-down shirt.

"You ought to wear dark clothes next time," he said, almost as if to pass the time of night. "What's wrong with you, kid? Do you *want* to land in the can?"

The boy said sharply, "I want the dough, that's all I want. That's all you've got that interests me."

Perhaps the words were meant as a challenge. If that was the case, Norton promptly picked it up.

"Kid, I'm willing to strike a deal with you. Your part of the deal is that you let me keep my money. My part is that I teach you how to handle

yourself the next time you do a robbery."

"I already know."

"You know enough to wear dark clothes? To cover yourself? To do the hundred and one things a guy has to do if he'd going to hold up another guy?"

"I didn't have no trouble last time."

"Sure, you hit it lucky. But you don't always hit it lucky. Well, kid, what do you say?"

**I**N the silence between them, the military music came to a brief halt. Applause sounds were scattered by wind over the tops of trees. Clouds scudding by above, were shaped in the small curves of bunched fingers.

"Mister, you better know what you're talking about," the kid said. "I don't make no guarantees, but if you want to talk, I'll listen."

"All right. Put away that damn gun..."

"Ixnay! I'll give you three minutes. No more, no less. After that," the kid paused, "either I decide you didn't tell me anything and I take the

dough—or you get away with it.”

“In three minutes I can’t even start—”

“You’re wasting time, mister. I been counting, already.”

Norton accepted it with a shrug. “First off, kid, dress in something dark, and wear a hat that covers your eyes as much as possible. Stick to dark places for robbery.”

“If that’s all you’ve got to offer, mister, you can shove it you-know-where.”

“I’ve just started.”

A new selection was being played. Sudden hot wind distended Norton’s shirt. He didn’t seem aware of danger, standing with hands in his pockets and feet spread wide. His eyes were fastened to the front, but every so often he would sweep a look to his right.

“Don’t carry a gun,” he said. “Guns are dangerous and they go off and get a guy in big trouble. That’s important to remember. Put something square and bulky and harmless in your jacket pocket, instead. Keep it where the bulge shows. Don’t use a toy gun, either.”

A couple passed by arm-in-arm. The music was stronger now, the tempo picking up.

“And don’t mention a stick-up,” Norton added. “Say something like, ‘I sure wish I had the money in your pocket.’ Don’t let yourself say directly that you’re making a threat, but keep your hand in your pocket, and make sure the sucker can see that bulge.”

“That’s crazy!” the kid snapped. “And suppose the Honest John tries to jump me? You talked about it, somebody else might do it.”

“You can’t prevent a foolish guy from doing something,” Norton answered. “If he’s going to jump you, there’s no help for it. Usually, though, Honest John is so anxious to see the last of you, he kicks in without a word.”

Norton glanced at an attractive girl as her footsteps pattered out of the ring of benches and past the light-edge thrown by the nearest lamp.

“In case you get a girl’s rings in a job, or other stuff, you’ll need a fence. Try Jimmy Idaho in Muldoon Street. He gives you the most you can expect out of a fence.”

"Any more you want to say, buddy? Time's running out."

"The big thing is that you've got to be learning all the time," Norton said, "and always on the lookout for the main chance. For instance, learn about jewelry and what's valuable and what isn't. Reason is that you can fence it for more money if you know what's going on." A pause. "That's all."

"I ought to take the leather away, anyhow, just to show you not to fool around with me." The kid ran a thin hand over his hair. "But I won't. I play fair."

Norton nodded. He wasn't relieved, only a little more angry that his fate should have turned on the whims of a kid. He tried to discount the impulse to turn fiercely on the boy and slap him down, then take away his gun.

"I want to do a job, tonight," the kid said. "Who do you think is a likely prospect?"

**I**T was familiar enough to Norton, what was happening, but he felt himself growing older even as he listened.

There had been a time when he had been the boy's age, but he couldn't remember a day of it.

"How does that guy strike you?" Norton pointed to a prosperous looking man in a dark suit, a bowler hat on his lap. A band gleamed in his vest, probably the extension of a pocket watch. "I don't think you'd have any trouble with him. One look and he'd give you the money."

The boy sneered at the man in the distance. "Got Honest John written all over him."

It was Norton's thought almost exactly, so closely phrased that it jarred on him. A mind-reader might have taken the boy to be his son, their thoughts were so close together.

When the kid took a step towards the bench where the honest john was sitting, Norton saw that the kid's eyes were almond-shaped, but he wasn't of Chinese origin; his hair was blond. His face was pimpled, which Norton hadn't noticed before, either, and that, too, irritated him.

The honest john was sitting some 50 yards off, tapping the



bowler hat in time to the military music. The hat whipped up and down at increasing speed as the music's tempo became faster.

"Okay," the kid said, satisfied. "Mr. Honest John has got a few things to learn."

"The gun."

The kid turned, smiling. "I suppose you want it for yourself."

"I don't give a damn," Norton said very quickly, "but you'd be a lot better off to remember what I told you. The least you can do is not to wave it in his face. Everybody around him will know what's happening."

"Yeh, I remember. You told me. Crooks have got to be sharp, skillful." He looked down at himself. "I ought to be wearing dark clothes. I know it now, but I want to pull a job tonight."

The kid looked from Norton to the older man. Norton wiped his lips with the back of a palm.

"At least put the gun away."

The gun wavered. Norton suddenly rubbed his hands together, as if calling on the unknown to give him patience.

The kid dropped the gun into a pocket.

Norton scowled around to make sure that no cop was nearby, and struck out. The palm of a hand crashed into the side of the kid's neck, sending the kid down to the earth.

NORTON stooped over the fallen form and pushed up one of the boy's eyelids, nodded with satisfaction, and allowed the lid to curtain the eye. From the boy's pants pocket he took out the revolver. He glanced at the chambers, then put away the gun in a jacket pocket. The feel of it soothed him, somehow, settled his nerves. All the skill and sharpness in the world didn't mean a thing compared to the feel of a gun in your pocket. He smiled down at the kid.

The things he had told the kid—Norton shrugged. He had waited a long, long time to get his hands on a gun again. He'd worked hard to get it away from the kid. The biggest surprise he'd had in a long time was that a gun should come his way so easily. It'd keep

him from starving, let him have a chance to live again like a human being. The things he had told the kid would have been absolutely right if not for the human element taking the shapes, in this case, of instincts that couldn't be controlled.

Norton walked very slowly

over to the bench where the older man sat, bowler hat on a knee. Norton sat down gingerly, then pulled out the gun so that it was in the other man's plain sight.

"This is a stick-up," he said.

THE END



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