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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Eric Martin's Nemesis

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

Who—or what—was the shape that pursued Eric Martin as he fled from the prison after murdering the guard in cold blood?

ERIC MARTIN fingered the sharp knife he had fashioned from a piece of heavy tin broken from the dangling spout by the jail's upper window and planned for the time when he would use it to gain his freedom.

He didn't intend to spend the next ten years of his life in the state penitentiary. He had stolen the money, of course—who wouldn't have if given the chance? The county prosecutor had spoken of him as weak-willed, a coward who had taken advantage of his position in the bank to steal the savings of widows and orphans. The bonding company had made good, hadn't it? Anyway, he had meant to pay it back, just as soon as he doubled or trebled it on the races. He could have, too. But they hadn't given him a chance. And now he faced ten long years in the penitentiary.

He rubbed his thumb against the knife, under his shirt, and wet his lips nervously. Not while he had his strength, he wouldn't. . . .

It seemed to Martin that things were breaking just right for him. The usual crowd of Kingstown's Saturday drunk-and-disorderly prisoners had been released. Three negroes were in the back cage, a half-dozen white men were idling the time away in the front cage. Those two big rooms were where the common run of prisoners were kept. But he was in a solitary cell—just a small room with a wide-barred door—just off the top of the stairs, outside of the main rooms. As a prisoner booked for a trip to the state

penitentiary the next morning, old Tom Brenner, the jailer, had felt it would be safer to have him there. Old Tom hadn't known about that broken spout just outside of his window. That was old Tom's tough luck.

Maybe Brenner had thought he would rather be alone. A great one for preaching sermons, Brenner was. Martin had known the jailer all his life. He drew his face into a scowl. Trying to tell him to be good, and let this be a lesson to him! Sunday School tripe! It wouldn't be any lesson to him—except to teach him to be more careful. He was going to be a big shot when he got out. . . .

It was almost time. Lights were out. Probably a majority of the other prisoners were seeking freedom in sleep. He had asked Brenner to bring him some ice-cream about eleven o'clock, and the jailer had promised to get it from the one café which kept open till midnight. Kingstown wasn't an all-night town. The rest would be easy, if he used his head—and the knife.

HE HEARD Brenner coming upstairs. The door to the inner room was closed. Not that it mattered, for there was a barred door inside of the wooden one. But it would be better, by far, to be unseen.

He held the crude, sharp piece of tin in his right hand, kept it out of sight inside his shirt. Brenner wheezed into view. He carried a cardboard container of ice-cream.

"Here it is, Eric," he said, and held it out before him.

"Bring it closer," demanded Martin.

Old Brenner complied. Martin stuck his left arm through the bars, suddenly grabbed Brenner by the neck. His right hand came up, holding the knife. He poised the sharp point against old Brenner's Adam's apple.

"Will you open up?" he demanded tensely.

Brenner clenched his teeth, shook his head carefully left and right.

Martin meant to hit him with the heavy end of the improvised weapon, to pound him into unconsciousness. But Brenner struggled, and all of Martin's rage boiled over. He struck swiftly, blindly. Red spouted from Brenner's severed jugular.

The jailer opened his mouth as if to scream, but no sound came. He sprawled to the floor. It seemed to Martin that everyone must hear him. But there was no noise from the inner room. The jailer lay there wide-eyed. A pool of crimson grew larger on the floor beside his body.

Brenner tugged at the body through the wide-apart bars of the door. He obtained the keys from Brenner's pocket, unlocked his cell, went into the passage.

The jail prisoners wore no uniforms, of course. In the darkness, it would be a simple matter for him to walk out and away. He stopped downstairs, took Brenner's gun from its holster slung over a chair in the dead man's cluttered living-room, pocketed a double handful of cartridges. Not that he expected to need them, but he had gone too far to take chances now.

Even as he worked, the horror of his position came to him. For the first time he realized that he had gone farther than he had planned, that he had killed a man in cold blood. If he were caught, that

would not be a jail sentence. It would mean the gallows. . . .

He found a topcoat in the closet, together with a battered felt. He put on the coat, turned up the collar, pulled the hat low over his eyes. Martin peered cautiously through a window. He knew there should be no visitors to see Brenner at this hour, but he meant to take no unnecessary risks. He wanted to go it alone. The county prosecutor had been right, he realized. He *was* a coward. He shivered as he thought of Brenner lying dead upstairs, shook physically as he visualized the trap, his own body falling, falling—the neck breaking. . . . He forced the pictures from his mind. He must think of other things. Once away from town, out of the state, he could get clear all right. He walked quietly out of the door to freedom. . . .

It was when he turned the corner into the alley a block from the jail that he first had the feeling that he was being followed. He waited there in the darkness, not daring to run, his heart pounding madly in his breast, steeling himself to club his pursuer with the gun butt. His nerve wasn't as taut as it had been when he had used that improvised knife. The idea of clubbing someone didn't appeal to him. Suppose he missed!

But no one came along. In the half-light shining through the trees from the arc on the corner, he saw no one moving away from the jail. He decided it had been his imagination.

MARTIN skirted the one-block business section, going through a cross-alley. He came out by the creek near the railroad station. It occurred to him that they might use bloodhounds when they found Brenner's body in the morning. He entered the creek, waded about fifty yards up the shallow stream. At the foot-bridge which led across to the station, he

pulled himself up onto the wooden floor, crossed toward the railroad.

No one was on duty at the station. Probably a coal drag would be along soon. They ran all the time, especially at night.

Martin walked the ties toward the water tank. Occasionally, he tried to balance himself on a rail, with a vague idea that it might help throw off the hounds if they ever got that far, keep the officers from being sure where he had gone. Of course, in the morning word would go out everywhere to pick him up, but if he could catch a freight and be in the city by that time it shouldn't be impossible to lose himself. It had been done. . . .

Again he had that strange feeling that someone was following him. When he sat in the shadow of the water tank, he peered back over the route he had followed. The moon was riding low in the sky. No one was to be seen.

A whistle wailed in the distance, the rails began to hum. Soon the long, thick finger of light from a locomotive's single eye touched the side of the tank, sent him scurrying behind it.

The freight stopped for water. He had counted on that. When the empties started clicking past again, Martin swung himself up and over, climbed carefully into a car. He stayed there for a good five minutes, until the scattered lights of the county seat were lost around a bend, then found a more comfortable place under the slanting end, between two cars. He had seen hobos riding there. All he had to worry about now was the brakeman, and it was unlikely that a brakeman would come climbing over the empties on the night run.

Suddenly he was quite sure that there was someone near him. His heart seemed to miss a few beats, then to pound ahead with renewed fury. He tried to get hold of himself, fingered the gun in his top-

coat pocket. But the feeling persisted. He told himself there was no reason for his belief. Nevertheless, he *knew* that someone had followed him from the jail.

He stood up cautiously, holding tightly to the rods on the car, bracing himself to keep from falling between the whirling wheels. No one was in sight, but the fear inside of him did not abate. It grew. His heart wouldn't behave. He felt smothered, and opened his collar for air.

He decided on action. He was a good thirty cars from the engine. Clutching the hand bars with grim resolve, he climbed over the unaccustomed surfaces of the car ends and interiors. As he made his way toward the front of the train, he continually stole glances back toward the distant caboose. Only on an occasional long straight-away could he discern the tiny point of light which marked the rear end of the freight.

They were traveling fast. Once he thought he saw a vague shape outlined against the sky, but he told himself it was a brake wheel, suddenly caught by his eyes just as the cars lurched around a curve and outlined it against a gray cloud. But he was not sure.

He put the space of eight cars between himself and his former position. And all the time that fear grew. The faster he tried to run away from his imaginary pursuer, the more frightened he became, and the more certain he was that a pursuer really existed.

He was safely braced in his new place when he saw it. It was the shadowy form of a man, and it sat on the end of the next car down from him. It had not been there when he passed. It *was* following him!

Martin ducked out of sight, peered over the car top. It sat there, motionless, looking at him.

He thought perhaps it was a hobo. Well, he had a gun. He wanted to travel

alone. Setting his jaws, he started back through the car. The man on the other end started back too. When he reached the place where the other had sat, he saw the figure perched quietly at the far end of the car. Again he started toward it. Again the figure retreated. He turned, came back. The figure followed. Like a shadow, it hounded him. He was afraid to relax, to sit down quietly out of sight. He pulled his gun, threatened to shoot. The man ignored his gestures, just sat there.

Martin was afraid to fire the gun. He didn't want to murder anyone else. Besides, he feared his shot might draw the train crew. No telling who might hear the sound.

He decided to leave the train at the first opportunity and go it alone, on foot. Whoever this fool was, whether it was some railroad detective or a crazy hobo, he wanted no part of the stranger. He could catch another freight.

His chance came when the freight slowed down just after passing Ranside. It was a long haul up the hill, and even a string of empties had to lose speed. Martin, in his inexperience, misjudged the speed of the train, landed running but fell flat on his face and rolled over and over down the cinder bank of the right of way. He lay there in a heap in the shadow until the train passed, and the clatter of the wheels became a low rumble in the distance.

THE moon was high now. He stood up, brushed some of the cinders from his clothes, limped experimentally. He was not badly hurt; only scratched and bruised. He looked around, moved away from the railroad.

He was about a hundred feet from the embankment when he had that feeling again, stronger than ever. He turned swiftly. The half-familiar figure was

coming down the bank, sliding along after him determinedly.

Martin ran then. He didn't stop to reason. He just found himself running. He glimpsed a road paralleling the right of way, and streaked for it as fast as his bruises would allow him to travel. He glanced back over his shoulder. Without sound, seemingly without effort, the figure followed after.

Martin reached the dusty road, turned right, ran on. The other followed his trail. He ran until he gasped for breath, stumbled a few steps more, fell to the ground exhausted. He was afraid to look back. He had completely forgotten Brenner's gun by now. He cowered there, waiting for he knew not what. He fought desperately to keep his reason, tried to conquer this fear which was driving him mad.

For what seemed an eternity, but must have been but seconds, he lay there in the dust of the road. Finally he jerked himself to his knees, turned to meet the figure. It sat in the road, about a hundred feet away.

Martin had the feeling that the thing was a nightmare. It couldn't be real. It must be something he was dreaming—it had to be. . . .

His elbow hit the hard object in his topcoat pocket. He drew the gun with a little sob of thanks, aimed at the man on the ground.

"Stand up!" he ordered. Nothing happened.

Martin himself stood up then. So did the other. Martin took a few steps toward his pursuer. The other walked away as he approached.

Suddenly Martin's taut nerves broke, and a red mist came over his eyes, and he was cursing and sobbing wildly—broken meaningless curses, directed at the figure which stood so quietly watching him.

He squeezed the trigger fast. A jet of

flame shot from the gun, and the crash echoed back from the embankment. The figure stood there unmoved.

Eric Martin fired five more bullets. Then, screaming like a maniac, he hurled the gun at the silent creature, ran again. He knew now what was pursuing him. He had known all along. But he hadn't wanted to admit it. It was old Tom Brenner, come back from the dead! He was being followed by a murdered man's ghost. . . .

The idea wasn't fantastic any longer. It was not just an idea. It was reality. He staggered, screaming and sobbing, up the road toward Ranside, looking for someone, anyone, who would take away that impossible figure that followed him so ominously, whose pursuit he could not shake off.

He found the night policeman. Rather, the night policeman found him, when that gentleman came out to see what drunk was disturbing the peace and quiet of the night.

"Take him away!" screamed Eric Martin, reeling blindly into the policeman's arms. "It's old Tom Brenner—I killed him! I killed him! Do you hear me—I killed him! There he is—there he is—take him away!"

The policeman looked down the road. "I see nobody," he said, jerking Martin by the coat collar to make him quiet. "You're crazy drunk!"

"He's there—right there!" insisted Martin, pointing a shaking finger at the figure which stood about a hundred feet away.

The policeman had heard of old Tom Brenner, Kingstown jailer. He was sure this fellow had a good case of the blind staggers. But he locked Martin in a cell for safe keeping until morning, and hurried to a long-distance telephone.

It was when Martin, tossed into a corner of the cell, heard the key turn in

the lock and came dizzily to his feet that he saw the figure again. It was closer now—it was in the cell with him!

And then he really knew the truth. Then he recognized his pursuer. Tom Brenner, come back from the dead, would have been bad enough, beyond all sense, enough to drive him mad. But it wasn't Tom Brenner. It was Eric Martin. . . .

Eric Martin knew, then, that he had killed himself, that he had lost his soul. The other Eric Martin stood there, just looking at him. Its eyes were the saddest things he had ever seen. There was no fire in them—only an utter hopelessness. They had lost all hope in life and death, all belief in a here or a hereafter. Somehow, Eric Martin felt that this other self he had killed would haunt him always, here and in eternity.

AT FIRST he tried to grapple with it. He had a desperate notion that if he managed to lock the figure in his arms he could merge it into himself again, regain his soul. But when he approached the other Eric Martin, it moved away. He walked faster, chased it around the little cell. He could not catch up with it. He screamed and cursed, until the other inhabitants of the jail cursed him in turn, and finally he fell unconscious on the cell floor.

They found him there after the telephone call confirmed his babbling.

He was judged to be crazy beyond a reasonable doubt. A kind-hearted lawyer appointed by the judge sought to comfort him.

"They aren't going to hang you, Martin," he explained. "You're just going to be sent to the insane asylum, where you can be cared for and live quietly, alone——"

Alone! Eric Martin went berserk at that. He tried to tell them that he didn't

want to live, that he wasn't crazy, that the self he had murdered would stay with him always, would make his life a hell on earth, that he wanted to die. But he only gibbered meaninglessly in a shrill cracked voice, and tried to crash his head against the wall, so that they had to strap him in a straitjacket. And all the while the other Eric Martin stood silently beside him, looking at him with its hopeless eyes . . . stood as he knew it would stand through endless days and nights. . . .