

THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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The Failure

By Harold Ward

AMOS DUNCAN paused for a second beside the time clock in the hallway just outside the offices of Carney & Kirk. Then, his heart beating like a trip hammer, he mustered up courage enough to push open the swinging doors and peep into the gloomy interior.

He was frightened—scared to the point of hysteria. Yet for thirty years he had stopped in that selfsame place in the hallway morning and noon on his way to work. For thirty years, fifty-two weeks in the year, six days a week and twice each day had he sought his number on the time clock and pushed the button which registered his comings and his departures. Instinctively—for figures were one of his hobbies—he made the calculation in his head: Eighteen thousand, seven hundred and twenty times had he pushed his way through those doors.

And never before—except possibly the first time when he had applied for a place with the firm—had he been as frightened as he was now.

For this was the first time he had ever come to rob!

Getting a grip on himself, he entered the big office on tiptoe—an office covering nearly one-fourth of a city block—yet he knew that old Bill Judkins, the watchman, would be making his rounds out in the factory at that particular hour. It was a part of his daily work to check up the dial on the night watchman's clock; he knew that the old man traveled as true to schedule as a mail train.

He halted just inside the doors and listened, his eyes taking in every one of

the familiar details. From where he stood he could discern the dark shapes of row after row of desks, each identical in size and finish with its mates. Around two sides of the big room were innumerable cubby holes of offices divided from each other by ground glass partitions extending two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. During working hours they housed the *elite* of the office world—the men and women who had pushed their heads above those of their fellows.

His own desk was second from the front in the second row from the right just inside the cashier's cage—a huge affair of wire netting and glass. It gave him renewed courage for the task ahead as he gazed upon its outlines staring at him out of the darkness. For twenty-seven years—since the day of his promotion from the office boy ranks—he had occupied that desk, or one like it, in Carney & Kirk's office, giving to Carney & Kirk the best of his manhood for starvation wages and two weeks' vacation yearly on pay. Others had gone over his head—scores of them—men no better fitted than he—young cubs with "pull" or a college education. He had long since given up hopes of promotion. He had reached the point where he was a mere cog in the machine—a fizzle and a failure.

In ninety-nine cases out of every hundred when a man goes wrong a woman is responsible. In Amos Duncan's case the woman was—*Mrs. Amos Duncan!*

A downtrodden cog in an office machine—a man with little force of character in the beginning—henpecked at

home and abroad, Duncan held to the firm opinion that his wife had conferred a favor upon him by marrying him. The fact that he had rescued her from a life of drudgery in the shipping room of the factory changed his opinion not one iota. Nor did Mrs. Duncan fail to keep his memory refreshed whenever opportunity offered itself.

Amos Duncan longed to appear as a hero in the eyes of his wife. It had taken him two years to screw up his courage to the point of robbing Carney & Kirk. Yet he had planned the affair so often that he knew he would be absolutely above suspicion. And with the money once in his hands, he could hide it until all memory of the affair had blown over and then, with a carefully concocted story of a lucky speculation on 'Change, resign and migrate to some distant city to spend his declining years in ease with the lady who had assumed his name.

Carney & Kirk always paid off in cash. Duncan knew that there was close to fifty thousand dollars in the vault ready to go into the pay envelopes in the morning. As assistant cashier and one of the old timers with the firm he had been entrusted with the combination. He had read that skilled burglars are able to open vaults by listening to the whirl of the mechanism. A rag saturated with alcohol would do away with tell-tale finger prints. The police would think the robbery the work of a professional.

Still walking on his toes, he worked his way through the maze of desks to the big vault in the rear of the office behind the cashier's cage. Taking a tiny flashlight from his pocket, he pressed the button and allowed the stream of light to play over the dial, while he manipulated the affair with fingers that trembled as from the ague. It refused to work. . . . In his nervousness he had gone past the number. He

took a deep breath and with the sweat standing out in great beads upon his face, attacked the job again. . . .

Someone was entering the office through one of the rear doors leading from the factory!

He stopped for a second. Then, as he heard the footsteps coming toward him in the darkness, he leaped outside the cage and drew his revolver. He had never fired a gun in his life. He had bought this one—a cheap, second-hand affair—merely as a matter of precaution and because he knew that burglars always carried such weapons.

From out of the darkness came a flash! A report! A bullet sped past his head and flattened itself against the vault door! It must be that Judkins, the faithful, had heard something suspicious and had entered. He longed to call out to the watchman his name. . . . The realization of his mission in the office at that time of the night stopped him. Involuntarily, he gave a little squeak of fear. A second bullet passed unpleasantly near.

Instinctively—just as a cornered rat will fight—so his finger pressed the trigger of his own gun. He fired aimlessly in the general direction of the other, dodging from desk to desk, knocking over chairs. . . . He was in a panic of fear.

The other's fire ceased suddenly. From out of the darkness across the great room came a dull, throaty cry. Something metallic jangled against the tiled floor. An instant later it was followed by a heavier body—a body that crashed against a desk as it dropped.

Duncan leaped through the folding doors and out into the hallway again. To unlock the outer door and dash out onto the sidewalk was but the work of an instant. . . . Around the corner he heard the shrill whistle of the policeman on the beat as, attracted by the

shots, he came lumbering along signaling for his mate. . . .

He dodged into the shadow and turned into the alley. Behind him he could hear the policeman hammering on the office door with his night stick. From two blocks down street came the sound of another whistle. In the distance a third shrilled, proving that reinforcements were on the way.

Mrs. Duncan was sleeping soundly when he arrived home after a round-about trip through alleys and side streets. Letting himself into the house with his pass key, he hastily sought the security of his own room.

So far as he knew no one had seen him either going to the factory nor leaving it. But, God! What a fizzle he had made of the affair. And there was blood on his hands—the blood of poor old Judkins. What had he gained? Nothing—absolutely nothing.

He paced the floor, every nerve tingling. He wondered. . . . Poor old Judkins. . . . And he had a crippled wife, too. . . . With Judkins gone she would have to go to the poorhouse. . . . It was something that he had not foreseen.

He was still pacing the floor when the sun came up in the east. In the other room he heard Mrs. Duncan getting up. In less than two hours he would have to go to the office. Of course no one would suspect him, but—

He could hear Mrs. Duncan rattling the pots and pans in the kitchen when the door bell rang. He opened the bedroom door a crack and peeped through as she answered the summons. A gruff voice was asking for him. He heard her admit the visitors—there seemed to be two of them—then she called shrilly up the stairway for him.

He knew that they were detectives from their heavy tread. They were after him for killing Judkins. His brain was

in a whirl. Yet he wondered how it happened that they associated him with the crime. He had been so careful, too. Probably he had dropped something in his mad rush to the outer door.

He could never face the music. . . . And Mrs. Duncan! What would she say? He couldn't tell her that he had gone to the office to rob the vault for her sake and had made a failure. . . . The gun lay in the bureau drawer where he had tossed it. He picked it up and broke it open. The chambers were all empty. He had used every cartridge in killing poor old Judkins. . . .

From downstairs came a buzz of conversation. Mrs. Duncan shrieked. . . . He heard his own name mentioned. . . . God! They had told her what he had done! . . . He must move rapidly.

His glance fell upon a bottle of carbolic acid. . . . Mrs. Duncan was at the bottom of the stairway now, shrieking his name. . . . He placed the bottle to his mouth and emptied it at a gulp! . . . With the fiery liquid eating into his vitals—his throat afire—he reeled across the room and tumbled in a heap upon the bed. . . .

Outside, Mrs. Duncan was pounding at his door.

"Amos! Wake up!" she was shouting between sobs—for Mrs. Duncan was a hysterical woman—"an awful thing's happened. There are two detectives here. *Old man Judkins went home sick from the factory last night and while he was gone somebody broke into the office! The robbers had a fight 'cause one of them was found dead when the police broke in after hearing the shots!*

"Enright, the cashier, is out of town and they want you to come down and open the vault and see if anything is gone. Oh, isn't it awful?"

"Amos, why don't you answer?"