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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Attorney for the Damned

By RENIER WYERS

The story of a lawyer who murdered Public Enemy Number One—and the strange doom that sought him out

CAMBERTON knew, by the muffled ring, which of his two telephones to pick up. Yet, he hesitated. Who could be calling him at this late hour, on this secret, unlisted wire?

Only six of his underworld clients knew the number. Two of these gentlemen of doubtful integrity had just gone out the door; two were in Europe, and one in prison. The sixth was Burke Hawtin. But—Burke Hawtin was dead!

The muffled bell rang again. Camberton's pudgy hand closed on the cradled instrument and lifted it to his ear. He said nothing. He never spoke first on this line. Whoever knew the number of it was expected to know also the code word which had to be uttered before Camberton would respond.

Presently the word came: "Reference-room." It was spoken in low, unfamiliar tones.

"Who are you?" rasped Camberton. His round, pasty face was an expressionless mask, save for the glint of suspicion in his beady, fat-encircled eyes.

"A friend of Hawtin's," the unknown whispered. "He gave me this number. Said for me to call it when—when I'm in a jam."

"What's your name?"

"Smith. John Smi——"

"Very unusual," sneered Camberton. "I've never heard it before. I don't know you."

"Wait. You'll know me when you see me."

"Why should I see you?"

"Because I've got plenty of money for legal advice. Are you alone?"

"Yes, I am," drawled Camberton in a bored tone which was belied by the greed in his piggish eyes. "Do you know how to get here?"

"I know everything about you that Hawtin knew. I'll come up the back way—like—like *he* always did. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Horace L. Camberton, criminal lawyer, any way you say it, put down the telephone, leaned back in his chair and looked again at the newspaper item which he had been reading before the interruption. Early that morning, according to the item, Burke Hawtin and two confederates were shot to death while looting the First Industrial Bank of Willow Ridge, a southwestern suburb of Chicago. Hawtin's corpse was identified by the police. The other two had apparently been crime recruits. Their names were as yet unknown.

Camberton's only pang of regret, on reading the item, was in his purse. Hawtin had been a well-paying client; and, although he had not required legal counsel during the past year, he would have, sooner or later, had he not been mowed down.

Perhaps, reflected the attorney, this stranger who had just telephoned would take the place of the dear departed as a source of revenue. However, one couldn't be too sure. It was best to prepare for any kind of a comer.

From his library table, Camberton transferred a loaded revolver to his right-

hand coat-pocket. Then he went into the bedchamber and opened the top drawer of his bureau. From this he took another loaded pistol which he dropped into his left-hand pocket.

He waddled impatiently back and forth in the two rooms which comprised his suite in the Avon Arms Hotel, a receiver-ship skyscraper towering in Diversey Parkway, east of Clark Street. It was a nest of shysters, racketeers, and elegantly clad hoodlums. Ordinarily he felt perfectly at home in this environment, in the shadow of the double-cross, but tonight he was uneasy. Never before had he been so apprehensive of impending trouble as he was now, while awaiting his nocturnal visitor.

Rather than be called upon to open the door and find himself only several inches from his guest, he released the latch, backed across the room and sat down on a straight-backed chair, facing the entrance. Each of his clammy hands was plunged into a pocket, gripping a gun.

"Now," he thought, "if I don't like your looks, Mr. Smith, or whoever, or whatever you are, I'll make you back right out again. Nobody's going to pull a fast one on little Horace."

THE knocking he presently heard was stealthy, almost inaudible. But loud and blustering was his response to it.

"Come in!" he shouted.

The door opened silently. A man whose broad shoulders and muscular arms bulged visibly under his tightly draped jacket stepped in and closed the door behind him. His right hand remained in his pocket, as though he, too, was grasping a weapon. With his other hand he tilted the dip-brimmed, summer-felt hat back from his forehead.

"Dernac!" exclaimed Camberton, jumping to his feet. There was no mistaking the name of this visitor. His face was pic-

tured almost daily in the newspapers. He was Anton ("Tony") Dernac, widely publicized as America's Public Enemy Number One.

"So you do know me, after all," the stranger grunted, defiantly jutting out his jaw. "And you know there's a reward of twenty-five grand on my hide. But"—his pocketed hand lifted the coat slightly—"don't think you'll collect it. Besides, I can more than double the ante—if you'll work on my side."

Camberton's fat, greedy face broke into an oily grimace which he believed was a cordial smile. "Let's be friends," he said, extending a welcoming hand.

Dernac grinned out of the side of his mouth as he grasped the lawyer's flabby fingers in his own ham-like fist. "Okay. Now you're my mouthpiece and you'd better be a good one. That's what I need."

"You need a drink, too, my boy."

The two men sat down facing each other and talked; that is to say, Dernac talked. Camberton merely listened and watched his guest down one drink after another from the whisky bottle which the lawyer had placed on a convenient magazine table. Camberton, at the same time, simulated just the proper degree of sympathetic understanding. He was adept at it. It was in this way that he came to know so many things which necessitated such under-cover equipment as the secret telephone.

Dernac, the hunted, seemed eager to unburden himself to the attorney. For all his bulk and reputation as a hard hombre, he was plainly frightened. He had achieved too much notoriety for his peace of mind. Having lived by the gun he apparently feared death by the gun. Every man's hand was against him. He poured himself yet another drink and said:

"I met Hawtin in Minneapolis, about six months ago. He joined my gang and we did several jobs, payroll raids in St.

Louis. The last one there wasn't so good. Three of my boys were killed."

"I remember reading about that," remarked Camberton, "but I didn't know that Hawtin was there—or you either."

"Nobody knows it, now. Hawtin and the other two were killed this morning." The bandit licked his lips. "I almost went along—but I had a hunch. Besides, why should I take any chances when I've got more than a hundred grand salted away? Part of it was Hawtin's. But he's dead and the rest of the mob that ain't dead is in jail. So there's nobody left to split with—exceptin' you. How much will it cost me to get out of the country?"

CAMBERTON'S porcine eyes narrowed as he looked at his visitor. Was it really possible for such a hulking lout to retain so much loot? Would he give up half, three-quarters of it to save his skin? The attorney was confident that both questions could be answered in the affirmative.

"It'll be a hard job," he said. "Your picture, given to the police by that dame you ditched, is being printed so often, nowadays, that your face is as well known as Babe Ruth's. Your mug and description are posted in every police chief's office, in every detective bureau and agency in the country—and in every post-office."

"That's just it. Even people who only look like me are getting arrested and shot at!" cried Dernac. "What chance have I got?"

"A good chance," said Camberton, watching his client closely. "But, as I said, it'll be a hard job—and expensive. There will be certain preliminary costs. First of all, I'd have to hire someone to do a little plastic surgery on that well-known face of yours. Then, too, I'd have to pay for 'fixing' aids along the route you're to take and——"

"Hell!" exclaimed Dernac; "if you're worried about my bein' able to pay—here's twenty-five grand for a starter." He reached into his breast pocket and tossed a packet of greenbacks into the attorney's lap. "And remember, there's more than a hundred grand where that came from. It's all safe and snug under the floor of the Ideal Shoe Repair Shop, just a few blocks from here." He hiccupped. Then, loosening his tongue with another drink of whisky, he rambled on: "Yeah, I own the Ideal Shoe Repair Shop. The old shoemaker who's supposed to own it is just a stooge for me. He learned cobbling in the penitentiary."

"Does he know the money's there?"

"Ha, ha! Not much! Old Fred Miller's too dumb to ever know anything important. All he knows is that I sometimes used the joint for business meetings with Hawtin and the boys. I always sent Miller out with enough money to get drunk on. Other times he sleeps there. I chased him out tonight, figgerin' that me and you might take a walk over there after a while and settle our deal."

Mere slits now, the criminal lawyer's greedy eyes flashed from the money to Dernac. Camberton thought fast. How much money would it be worth to risk disbarment, perhaps prison, if anything went wrong in smuggling his client out of the United States? The problem caused a frown to crease his round bland face.

Like a flash an easy solution suggested itself. He leered sinisterly at Dernac. Startled, the fugitive reached for his gun, but the lawyer, with a speed surprising in one so fat and flabby, whipped out his own pistol and fired before the other could take aim.

Public Enemy Number One toppled from the chair, a bullet in his head.

With a deep breath of satisfaction, inhaling a whiff of gunpowder smoke, Camberton noted that his victim's lifeless

hand still held a revolver. It would make the story of self-defense more dramatic. He arose, hurriedly put the packet of greenbacks in the wall-safe, leaving the door open, cleared away the whisky and glasses, and then picked up the telephone—the one connected with the hotel switchboard.

"Send for the police," he said calmly. "I've just shot a burglar. He looks like Tony Dernac."

POLICE officers, reporters, and hotel employees crowding into the suite a few moments later heard his thrilling narrative of how, upon returning from a stroll, he had caught Dernac in the act of ransacking the wall-safe.

"He rushed at me, his gun leveled at my heart. But I was quicker on the trigger."

"Ever see him before?" asked a police sergeant.

"Never. My guess as to his identity was based on press pictures I've seen."

"Gosh, Mr. Camberton," blurted one of the reporters. "You'll get the twenty-five thousand dollar reward!"

"That's so. I hadn't thought of it. I was merely trying to protect my life and property. I'll agree that perhaps I do deserve some reward for having rid society of a dangerous killer."

Highly pleased with himself, the lawyer then posed for innumerable newspaper photographs. He posed pointing his gun at the camera, pointing his finger at the wall-safe, shaking hands with the sergeant, shaking hands with the hotel manager, with bellhops, with chambermaids, with almost everyone excepting his dead victim. He obliged the cameramen willingly—refusing only the request of one who wanted him to stand with one foot resting on the corpse, in the manner of a big-game hunter. This, the attorney declared, would be beneath his dignity.

Not until the dark hour just before the dawn was he left alone. Excitedly he turned the leaves of his telephone directory, seeking the address of the Ideal Shoe Repair Shop. Here it was, "692 Elwell Court." Less than four blocks away! He patted the revolvers in his pockets, took an electric torch from his bureau, put on his hat and went out, leaving the building by a rear stairway.

ALTHOUGH only a few blocks from the brightly lighted corner of Clark and Broadway, Elwell Court was a shabby little side-street of dismal, frame shanties. Bleakest of these was number 692 with "Shoe Repairing" crudely lettered on the glass of the front door. It was hardly a place you would suspect of being the depository of a hundred thousand dollars in cash. Camberton, however, was confident that he would find this sum. He knew his crooks and had correctly judged Dernac as the simpleton that he was. The fool hadn't even put a modern lock on the door. Camberton's skeleton key opened it easily.

Inside, he observed that the weakened rays of a distant street lamp penetrated the grimy front windows just enough to cast a dim and eery light, blocked out here and there by machinery and furnishings which cast grotesque and misleading shadows. Feeling his way, he stepped forward. His shin encountered something in the dark—something that sprang through the air with a hissing spitting sound. Two yellow eyes glared balefully at him. He flashed his torch at it and cursed under his breath at the cat that arched its back in the glare. He threw the beam around the room to get his bearings.

There was a door at the rear of the shop. Camberton regarded it apprehensively as he put out the light. What if old Miller, who, according to Dernac,

sometimes slept in the rear of the shop, had returned? The lawyer decided to look into that back room before searching for the loot.

Tiptoeing forward, he placed his hand on the door-knob. As he turned it, slowly and silently, a strange fear gripped him. It was unusual; for, though he was not the bravest man in the world, he was certainly not one to be frightened by darkness and the angrily gleaming eyes of a cat. The touch of terror was caused by something else, he knew not what. It angered him.

Forgetting his caution, he jerked the door open. An icy draft swept round him, enveloping him so completely that he shivered with intense cold. There was something wrong about this, too, this chill on a warm, July night. It required all his will-power to stop the quivering of his fatty flesh as he stared into the room: it was better lighted than the other. The illumination which streamed through the window came from the rear porch light of a house next door.

Camberton's nervous scrutiny sweeping the room was halted and held by an object in the darkest corner. It seemed to be the figure of a man lying on a cot. So! That old cobbler, Miller, had come back to sleep off his drunkenness here! But the odor that assailed Camberton's nostrils was not of alcohol. It was of something equally familiar, something that did not belong here. Sniffing to clear his nostrils and at the same time firmly grasping his revolver, Camberton started to slink toward the recumbent form, then stood stock-still, wide-eyed with fright.

The figure on the cot was sitting up—and it wasn't the figure of an old man. It was the husky, broad-shouldered figure of Tony Dernac, America's Public Enemy Number One! Tony Dernac, whose corpse at this moment should be stretched on a slab in the county morgue, was sit-

ting up. The face of the figure seemed to gleam with a greenish phosphorescent light, making more horrible the vilipending leer that was directed at the horrified attorney. In the forehead of the face was a bullet hole. And the odor that was creeping into Camberton's brain was the odor of burnt gunpowder!

His round countenance paled to sickly white. His eyes almost popped out of their thick, fleshy pouches. He moved his lips but could not utter a sound.

"You!" he managed to croak at last, "you—why, damn you, Dernac, I killed you once and I'll kill you again."

He aimed his pistol at the apparition. The shanty seemed to shake as the gun roared again and again. The spurts of gunfire seemed to pierce right through the figure which rose slowly from the cot and moved relentlessly toward Camberton, step by step. The lawyer backed away from it, firing desperately. Try as he might, he could not turn and run. The eyes staring into his with a hypnotic fixedness seemed to fasten his own with invisible bands, permitting him to step back only as far as the other had stepped forward, no farther.

SOBGING wildly, Camberton pulled out his other gun and emptied its contents at the wraith. Automatically his twitching fingers jerked at the triggers of the emptied weapons, clicking them futilely.

That was the way the police squad-car crew found him, idiotically clicking the triggers of two empty guns. The shooting had aroused the neighborhood and brought the prowler car to number 692 within three minutes of the first crack of the first gun.

The lifeless body of old Fred Miller, riddled with the bullets from the attorney's pistols, lay on the cot. That was all

that the police saw—that and the drooling madman who had once been Horace G. Camberton, well-known criminal attorney, pressing the revolver triggers like an automaton.

It is hardly likely that he will ever be tried for the murder of the aged shoemaker because he does not seem able to comprehend what he's done. In an asylum for the criminal insane, he crouches in his cell, insisting that he and Dernac were the only occupants of the back room at number 692.

Few people are permitted to visit the broken attorney. Fewer care to do so, since, as the authorities explain it, the mad terror which creeps over his face at intervals is of such awfulness that the most hardened observers shudder at the sight of it. The intervals are becoming more and more frequent. And, should the apparent suffering he experiences in these intervals become a permanent mental condition, it will not be necessary to punish Horace L. Camberton further for his crimes.