

The Social Pirates :-:

Plot by George Bronson Howard

Novelization by Hugh C. Weir :: Copyright Kalem Company

Story No. 11—Fangs of the Tattler

"Is this Miss Hartley—Mona Hartley?"

The girl who had picked up the telephone transmitter gave a wondering affirmative to the question over the wire, noting that it was a woman's voice which had spoken—a voice which held a suggestion of hysteria.

"My name is Burton," continued the voice, "Mrs. Amos Burton. You don't know me, but I have heard of you and your friend, Miss Davenport, and I—I wish you could help me! I am in desperate trouble. The hysteria in the speaker's voice was rising to a shrill crescendo. "Don't say you cannot! If you refuse me, I don't know what I shall do!"

Mona glanced at her watch. "If you will give me your address, Mrs. Burton, Miss Davenport and I will see you at once," she said briskly.

It was shortly after 11 o'clock when the hired motor of the two girls drew up before a handsome residence, set well back in a yard, on which wealth had lavished much attention. Their cards received an immediate invitation from the butler to follow him to Mrs. Burton's boudoir—a tastefully furnished and essentially feminine room on the second floor. Mrs. Burton rose from a chaise longue to meet them. The newspaper description of her had not been exaggerated. Her age could not have been more than 25 years, and she looked even younger in her lacy negligee and boudoir cap, under which gleamed heavy masses of dull bronze hair. Her eyes showed a sleepless night, and her fingers worked nervously as she shook hands with her visitors, and motioned them to chairs near the door.

She need no urging to plunge into her story. Evidently it was the uppermost subject of her thoughts. "I sent for you," she began, "because I need the services of someone upon whose discretion and honesty I can absolutely rely."

"If you read the newspapers," she began again, "you must know something of my married life, and my husband. The papers printed columns about us both at the time of our wedding. Mr. Burton is much older than myself, although we were both devoted to each other. But he is frightfully jealous, unreasonably so at times, for I swear that I have never given him cause to doubt my loyalty. And now—it looks as though circumstances had conspired against me, and that I shall be branded in his eyes as a designing creature, unworthy of his love, through absolutely no fault of my own."

"Go on, please," encouraged Mona. Mrs. Burton flushed. "To go back a short time in my life, I must tell you that before my marriage I was on rather good terms with George Allison, a young artist. In fact, had conditions been different the affair might have developed more seriously. As it was, it was definitely at an end even before I received Mr. Burton's offer of marriage. You see, Mr. Allison ruined himself and his career with drugs, and about the time I became engaged, he disappeared utterly. A few months after my marriage I received a letter from him, dated from South America, saying he was very ill. Then another letter came, telling me he was in a critical condition, and asking if I could send him some money. Such an appeal, of course, would have destroyed any love for him, even if there had been any left, for it was easy enough to read between the lines of the ravages of his own dissipation. But I sent him some money, rather foolishly, perhaps—and then forgot the incident until yesterday."

She paused again, and continued more slowly and deliberately. "Yesterday afternoon I received a card from a man styling himself Abner Runkle, attorney, with a request for an interview at a vital subject. Reluctantly I received him and he horrified me with the announcement that my letters from George Allison were in the possession of a newspaper, and about to be published—unless I could raise enough money to buy them back. Of course, I thought he was shooting at random, but when I searched by desk I found that he had, indeed, spoken the truth, for all of my letters had been stolen."

"Mona's face contracted grimly. "I see," she said grimly. "And what is the name of the enterprising newspaper in the case?" "The Tattler," she said. "Surely, you must know that it has acquired a tremendous reputation by publishing the most sensational scandals of any paper in this section—affairs which no one but a person intimately acquainted in society could have known about. Everyone has suspected for months that The Tattler was being supplied with its material by someone being received into the best homes of the city—and there have been even rumors of other scandal stories, even more sensational than those it has published, which were suppressed strangely at the last moment. When I received the proposition of the lawyer, Runkle, I could understand how this had been done, and that I was not the only victim which The Tattler had caught in its toils. He told me that he had happened to drop into the editorial offices of the newspaper quite by accident, and while there had seen the proofs of the article about me, which was to have been published in this week's issue. Knowing the injury which such a publication would be to me, he had prevailed upon the editor to hold up the article, as he expressed it, until he could see me—explaining that it would mean considerable loss to the paper's circulation to stop the publication of such a sensational story, and that if I were willing to make up this loss, he thought it possible to get back the letters for me. He told me that it might be arranged for \$5,000, and he is to call tomorrow for the money."

"And you have planned to give it to him?" asked Mary. "I can't! I haven't got it! And there is no way I can raise it without carrying the whole wretched story to my husband. You see, I have already overdrawn my allowance, and it is quite impossible even to pawn my jewels without Mr. Burton finding it out, and suspecting all sorts of things. No—there is no way out, unless you can help me!"

"You say the letters were stolen from your private desk?" asked Mona promptly. "That fact, at least, should give you a base from which to work. Who, besides yourself, had access to the desk—and who knew the letters were there?"

"No one!" said Mrs. Burton promptly. "But that is impossible," remonstrated the girl. "The thief must have known. And we must find the thief if we are to help you! Have you a maid?"

"Of course—but Mimi is quite above suspicion, I assure you. I would vouch for her devotion."

"Can we talk to her?" asked Mona. "In answer Mrs. Burton pressed a concealed call button at her side. It was quite obvious that she thought her visitors were wasting valuable time. A moment later the door opened to admit a young, dark-eyed girl, with unmistakable Parisian features and mannerisms, who stood silently surveying them as Mrs. Burton explained that her visitors wished to ask her a few questions.

Mona flung a half dozen searching queries to the demure maid, who met them all without so much as a change of color. In the end, Mona was forced to abandon the amateur investigation, and giving a signal to Mary, arose reluctantly as Mrs. Burton dismissed the servant.

"I am afraid you are right about Mimi," said Mona, as she stood, surveying the room uncertainly. "She is either absolutely loyal and honest, or one of the most consummate actresses I have met."

"As they passed through the hall, Mona caught a glimpse of Mimi's face watching them wonderingly. In the lower hall, Mona uttered a sudden exclamation, and started back to the stairs. "I have forgotten my purse," she said hurriedly. "I can get it, Mrs. Burton, thanks."

"I have caught you red-handed, Mimi!" she said crisply. "Perhaps you have not heard of the wonderful evidence of human finger prints? It has been established that there is no more infallible witness than the tell-tale marks of the thief's own hand. This envelope—holding out that which Mrs. Burton had given her—revealed a peculiar set of finger prints. And now," producing the vanity box, "I have another set of finger prints which coincides exactly. As the envelope was recovered from Mrs. Burton's desk, there is only one course I can take. I must telephone for the police, and give you into custody on the charge of purloining documents of your employer. May I use your phone Mrs. Burton?"

The mistress stared as though fazed by the sudden development. For a moment Mimi stood, surveying her questioner with wide-eyed amazement. Then with a gasp she sprang forward and caught Mimi's arm. "No—no, not the police!" she wailed. "Anything but the police! I confess! I will tell you everything—but not the police!"

Mona's ingenious ruse had worked perfectly. The girl swiftly veiled her satisfaction and pretended to consider the maid's request.

"I don't know that you can help us—that we need your evidence," she said dubiously. "Oh, but you do not know—you do not know all that I can tell you," pleaded Mimi awfully. "I can take you to the man who paid me the money for the letters, who—"

"You wretch!" cried Mrs. Burton, who now saw the other's duplicity. Mimi's tears redoubled. "His name is Runkle, and he told me that he would pay me well for any information I could give him for his newspaper. But even he is not the man you want. He is only an agent. The real man is—"

"Who?" snapped Mona. "Mimi smiled craftily. 'You promise me that I shall be protected—that I shall not suffer?'"

"If you tell the truth and keep faith with me," conceded Mona grudgingly. "Very well, then. It is a promise. The man is Reginald Wentworth. Mrs. Burton gave a cry of incredulity.

"Impossible! Why, I know Mr. Wentworth well! He is above any such infamy. There would be no need for him to stoop to such methods to gain money, for he is rich in his own right, popular, and a caller in all the best homes of town."

Mona smiled cryptically. "Doesn't your description tally exactly with the idea you gave me of the mysterious informant of The Tattler in Society? All but the financial standing of Mr. Wentworth—and perhaps his income may be largely bluff!"

Mrs. Burton frowned dubiously. "Of course, you may be right," she conceded. "After the revelation of Mimi's treachery I could believe almost anything! She turned on the maid angrily. "If it were not for Miss Davenport's promise of protection I would be tempted to turn you over to the police myself!"

"You forget that you would have to tell them about—the letters!" reported Mimi sullenly. Mrs. Burton stiffened. "Oh, what shall I do?" she moaned again, as the realization of her situation again broke upon her. "Even if Mimi has told you what she did with my correspondence, how does it help us? How are we to get back the letters? And, remember, unless they can be returned to me intact, without their contents becoming known, I am ruined—ruined!"

Mona patted her encouragingly on the shoulder. "Mimi is going to redeem herself by helping me to make the acquaintance of Messrs. Runkle and Wentworth—and unless I am more mistaken than I ever was before, I think I promise you a gratifying report in the very near future. I begin with, now that Mimi is out of your service, she is going to enter mine—for the time being. She scribbled the address of their apartment on a card, and gave it to the hesitating maid. "I am trusting you absolutely! You will report to me this afternoon. If you so much as try to warn either Runkle or Wentworth of what has happened, I shall give you to the police—no matter what the results may be to Mrs. Burton!"

For a moment she and Mimi watched her for a moment in a cynical glance, and lit a cigarette. "Perhaps it is better to have it over with!" he called after her, lifting his hat with a flourish. "At any rate, you know the truth now!" Without a backward glance, he stropped back down the path, leaving the weeping girl alone on the bench. For a moment Mary sobbed convulsively, and then lifted her head—to discover that she was alone, and that Carlton had disappeared. She rose to her feet, glanced wildly about her, and hesitatingly walked to the lake. Apparently she was about to throw herself into the water, when Mimi, with a muttered oath, sprang across and grasped her arm.

"None of that, young woman!" he snapped as Mary glared at him. "If he has thrown you over, there are far better ways of revenge than that!" Mary stared at him, as though not comprehending, while Mimi hovered discreetly in the background. At that moment the honk of an automobile horn sounded from the driveway, and the voice of Reginald Wentworth called across to Runkle.

"If you will wait here a moment," the latter said to Mary. "I should like to talk to you. And I think a little interview might be of profit to both of us!"

Mary glanced quickly at Wentworth, who was watching the scene curiously from the car, and dropped back on her bench, indicating that she would wait. The opportune arrival of Wentworth was a real piece of luck. She was confident that her spectacular parting from Carlton, and consequent desperation at his desertion, had effectually blinded Runkle, and had given her a logical approach into the other's confidence. If she could deceive Wentworth as well half of her battle would be won. She stole a glance at Mimi, who was acting her role of curious servant girl to perfection. A moment later she saw Runkle's stocky form leave Wentworth's car. Evidently the two men

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Runkle gave a grunt of satisfaction. "I am Mrs. Douglas's confidential companion," continued Mary viciously. "And I always thought she was the best friend I had in the world until she threw me over for Raymond Daniels!"

"Or he threw you over for her?" suggested Runkle maliciously. Mary sprang to her feet with a fresh burst of rage. "The cat! If there was only some way in which I could even up with her, and make her suffer as she has made me!"

"I thought Mrs. Douglas was the possessor of a husband," said Runkle reflectively. "Or is that just gossip?" Mary looked at him musingly, and suddenly her eyes snapped with satisfaction.

"If Steven Douglas ever found out about his young and beautiful wife's flirtations with Raymond Daniels, his youthful secretary—" she stopped short, biting her lips at just the right point, and saw Runkle's eyes gleam. "Yes?" he encouraged. "And what would happen if he did?"

"Happen?" cried Mary. "He would throw her off without a dollar! He would have to be given actual proof. He is too wise to take gossip for evidence—and too devoted to Mrs. Runkle. I think he would pay—handsomely! But I don't want the money. I would be satisfied if I could pay back my debt to her—the treacherous hussy!"

The gleam in Runkle's eyes deepened. Around a bend in the road Wentworth's automobile appeared leisurely, stopping opposite the bench. Runkle rose to his feet, and sauntered over to the road, where he talked for a moment with Wentworth, and then beckoned to Mary. The girl obeyed the summons with just the right degree of hesitation, and found Wentworth's eyes appraising her shrewdly as Runkle explained the situation. She smiled up at him, and Wentworth moved over to the end of his seat, making room for her.

"Won't you let me give you a lift?" he invited. "Then we can talk at our leisure."

Mary veiled her elation, and glanced at her watch hesitatingly. "I don't know whether I ought to go—"

"Nonsense!" protested Wentworth, and the girl allowed herself to be persuaded. "She knew that Runkle had told the other of their conversation, and that the man had taken this opportunity to study her for himself. It was evident that he was waiting for her to bring up the subject of Mrs. Douglas, but she studiously kept away from it, and at length he was obliged to refer to the topic himself.

"Runkle tells me that you are living at the Roanoke with Mrs. Steven Douglas?" he began. "And that you have been having some trouble. Tell me about it!"

Mary glanced quickly from under her eye-lashes. There was a genuine ring of interest in his voice, and she felt his eyes traveling over her face and figure approvingly as she unbosomed herself, in more detail, of the details which she had confided to Runkle. When Wentworth finally instructed the chauffeur to stop, at a point near the Roanoke, he lingered in his good-byes, and forced her to consent to dine with him the next evening.

"She drew a long breath as the car finally rolled away. Wentworth waved in to her from her rear seat. She felt that she had conquered! With sparkling eyes she hurried to their apartment in the Roanoke, and excitedly poured out the details of the afternoon to the impatiently waiting Mona. The other girl hugged her impulsively at the conclusion, and for a moment the two stared silently into each other's eyes.

"It is a risky game, dear!" said Mona wistfully. "But the goal is worth it!" returned Mary resolutely.

Three weeks passed—three weeks of varying incidents. Mona's flirtation with Carlton, or young Daniels, as their new friends knew him, was beginning to attract more than casual attention, and more than once Mona caught the calculating eyes of Wentworth surveying them at the various affairs, where they chanced to meet. In the meantime, Mary's acquaintance with Reginald Wentworth was fast approaching a degree of intimacy. It was apparent to the girl that the man was genuinely attracted to her, and the topic of Mrs. Douglas, and the supposed young wife's indiscretions was discussed between them now with a direct candor and speculation. But there was a vague, indefinable element of distrust, even yet in Wentworth's manner, which the girl was at a loss to understand until one evening when the two motored out to a restaurant on the outskirts of the city for a Bohemian dinner.

During the ride Wentworth carelessly toyed with his wallet, which he had drawn from his pocket to refer to a memorandum it contained. Suddenly he looked up at her, and tapping the wallet significantly, said: "Do you know that its contents are almost priceless to myself—and a certain very much worried lady of society?"

Mary shook her head with a quizzical smile. "I dare say that the lady in question would redeem the half a dozen letters in this wallet for a thousand apiece—and be grateful for the chance!"

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where in his haste he had forgotten it! For a moment she hesitated, and then her hand reached out stealthily to appropriate it. The instinct that whispered her a swift warning she could not have explained, but she drew back hurriedly, leaving the wallet undisturbed. Was it not possible that Wentworth had laid a clever trap to test her? It was inconceivable that a man accustomed to living by his wits, would be careless enough to leave a \$6,000 weapon of blackmail conspicuously on a restaurant table! A moment later Wentworth sauntered back, and his glance told Mary that her suspicions had been justified.

With a low laugh he picked up the wallet, and turning it inside out, flung it back. It was empty!

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anticipation. A tempting lunch of cold viands had already been set on a table! Carlton took the seat which Mona indicated and edged his chair closer to her, as she inspected the articles of the menu. Neither had glanced toward the bed room.

"Now!" whispered Mary. Wentworth softly struck a match and dropped it into the powder, as Mary flung aside the heavy tapestries, screening the entrance to the living room. The bright flash of the powder mingled with a cry of fright from Mona—and Wentworth stepped into the outer room, smiling cynically. But his smile was suddenly frozen.

Carlton was facing him with a drawn revolver. "Hands up!" snapped the young actor.

Wentworth whirled about—to confront a second revolver in the hands of Mary. The girl laughed at the scowl of rage on his face. "Caught with the goods!" she mocked.

Wentworth bit his lip, glancing covertly around him in an effort to measure his chances of escape. But he was shrewd enough to realize that the trap was secure.

"You devil!" he growled as Mary laughed again. "That will do!" commanded Carlton. "The game's up. We've got you fair, and we mean to hold you! We know your connection with The Tattler, and your own judgment must tell you that we have evidence enough of your blackmailing methods to send you to prison for more years than you would probably care to reckon!"

"What do you want?" glowered Wentworth. "First—those letters of Mrs. Burton, and next your promise to put The Tattler out of business and remove yourself from this vicinity."

"Which means, of course, immunity from the law?" sneered Wentworth. "Not quite!" It was Mary who spoke. "You are forgetting the expenses of the case—and the money you have made us spend to get you where we wanted you! I think five thousand would about cover it. You can give us a check. I think we can take it for granted that you won't stop payment!"

Wentworth swore, clenched his hands as though meditating a bolt for it—and then bowed ironically. "You win—with my compliments!" Mona stepped to the telephone and ordered a taxicab.

"We may as well wind up the business in hand now. We'll accompany you to The Tattler sanctum—if you don't mind."