



Master of Fear

by Frank Gruber

DON MASTER pushed open the door of the back room of Luke Mingo's road house. He entered the room and faced a group of men gathered around a crap table.

The beetle-browed giant who was running the game said, "Who the hell let you in?"

"I want to see Luke Mingo," stated Master.

"I'm Mingo," replied the giant. "What do you want?"

Master nodded at the others. "These your boys?"

"Yes—and they'll do what I tell 'em to do.

If you haven't a damn good reason for busting in like this, they'll throw you out on your ear."

"I'll throw him out for you, Luke," piped up an ambitious young hood, and advanced threateningly on Master.

The latter did not budge an inch. "Lay a hand on me," he said, "and the boys will be buying you a silver casket."

Luke Mingo came around the crap table. "Tough guy, eh?" he snorted. "You'll tell me what you want or *you'll* be needing that silver casket."

"I'm a shamus," said Master, "and I'm looking for the boys who snatched Martin

Craig.”

Master’s calm statement had the effect of a bomb tossed into the room. Mingo let out a roar, and his boys charged upon Master. Guns flashed into sight.

Mingo tapped Master on the chest with a hamlike hand. “Fella,” he snarled, “that crack is going to get you the damndest licking you ever got in your life.”

Master shook his head. His face was still as calm as when he had first stepped into the room. “You’re mistaken, Mingo; your boys are not going to maul me. You see—my name is Don Master.”

“Don Master!”

Luke Mingo and two or three of the others repeated the name together. Gasps went up, and the men fell back. One or two guns were quickly dropped into shoulder holsters.

This was the first time Don Master had ever been in Center City, but his name was known here, as it was in every other city in the country. He was a national figure—the peer of all private detectives. It wasn’t that he was such a particularly good detective, or that he had solved so many cases through brilliant work; it was because he was a colorful and—deadly—personage.

Six years ago in reporting Master’s first sensational exploit, a newspaper man had dubbed him with the title, “Master of Fear,” punning upon his name. “He is absolutely devoid of fear,” the newspaper man wrote. The man and the name had caught with the public. The newspapers published columns about him. Every one of his exploits thereafter received national prominence, partly because of his connection with them and partly because of the merciless tenacity with which he carried them through. He seldom wound up a case in which some one wasn’t killed. Criminals became cornered rats when they learned that the Master of Fear was on their trail. They fought to the death, and so far it

had always been their own deaths.

Although the newspapers were spread with Don Master’s exploits, he himself never talked to newspaper men. He was a silent man, preferring to let his actions speak for him. He thought and brooded much, however. Perhaps he was devoid of fear, as the newspapers said. But what was there to be afraid of? Once he had faced a German firing squad—and he had not been afraid. He had been picked up with seven German bullets in him and had lived.

But the peculiar absence of fear in his make-up antedated the war. A shipwreck had thrown Master and four other sailors on a tiny coral atoll in the South Pacific. There was no food . . . the men had gone mad . . . cannibalism . . . Master and one other sailor were finally rescued more dead than alive. After that stark experience Master had never known fear, or any other emotion.

WHEN he had stepped into Luke Mingo’s back room, Master had not done so through reckless bravado. He had gone there for a purpose. He was fully aware of the respect his reputation had brought him, and he knew that in all probability he would walk out of Mingo’s place, even if the underworld czar of Center City was in some way connected with the Craig kidnaping, which Master rather doubted.

The sudden scare which the announcement of his name threw into Mingo’s boys disgusted Master.

“What the hell’s the matter with your boys, Mingo?” he asked. “Are they all as yellow as this?”

Mingo himself had stepped back a pace at the announcement of Master’s name. He still looked truculent, but there was a trace of deference in his tone as he spoke. “So you’re Don Master! I’ve heard of you. And you’re on the Craig case?”

“Yes, that’s why I came here. What do

you know about it?"

"Nothing, Master," said Mingo. "Beer, hooch, and gambling are my games. I don't go in for snatching."

"Maybe not," said Master, "but you run this town, don't you?"

Mingo spread out his big hands. "I don't know a damn thing about this snatching. You're barking up the wrong tree."

Master looked at him coldly for a moment then turned away. "All right, Mingo."

He pulled open the door and stepped out of the room. He almost knocked over a wiry fellow, dressed in a waiter's outfit. The man had evidently been listening at the door.

He tried to scurry away but Master caught him in one or two quick strides. He seized him by the collar and clouted him on the ear. The man bounced to the floor and came up sitting with his back against the wall. His hand started for his left armpit, then stopped. Cold, glittering eyes looked at Master, but the man did not move.

"I hate eavesdroppers," said Master, flatly.

"All right, I'll remember—Don Master." stated the other.

Master continued out.

Fifteen minutes later, he dropped from a taxi in front of the palatial residence of Martin Craig. The butler let him in and a tear-stained woman of about thirty-five ran out into the hallway to meet him.

"Mr. Master." she cried, "I just heard from them. They—they know I've employed you—and—and they made threats."

"What kind of threats?" snapped Master.

"Said if I didn't let you go, they would kill Martin. Oh, what shall we do?"

"Do nothing," replied Master.

Mrs. Craig looked at him with wide eyes, then broke into a sob. "But Mr. Master! We can't. They—they will kill him. They killed Henry Farnum."

Master nodded. "Yeah, so they did, but

that was because Farnum's family couldn't raise over five thousand. Farnum wasn't as wealthy as the snatchers thought he was. They didn't kill Edward Jason. But Jason had money, and he paid out—at least fifty thousand. How about your husband? What do you know of his financial affairs?"

Mrs. Craig looked distressed. "Martin sold out his business a year ago. But he has money. I—I talked to Mr. Meyerson, the banker, this morning. He said, while he didn't approve of it, if he received instructions from Martin or myself, he could give me up to thirty thousand dollars."

Master nodded. "All right, Mrs. Craig. In that case you have nothing to fear. They won't hurt Mr. Craig. Have the police been here today?"

"No, I haven't heard from them since yesterday, when the chief of police spoke so nastily to me because I sent for you."

Outside Master hailed a taxicab. "Police headquarters," he said to the cabby.

Ten minutes later he introduced himself to Chief of Police Roberts. The latter did not seem very pleased to meet him.

"I've heard of you, Master," he said. "You're supposed to be quite a boy in your own bailiwick, but this is Center City, and I think the department is more capable of coping with the situation than an outsider. Mrs. Craig has probably told you that I advised her very strongly not to hire you."

"She did say something of the sort, chief," said Master, easily. "As for coping with the local situation, you don't mind my saying that I think you've made a devil of a mess of it. This is the third man to be kidnaped in this town in a month. One of them paid heavy ransom; the second was killed."

Roberts swore heartily. "Wise guy, eh? Well, all I can say is that you'll get no cooperation from this department. And I warn you, Master, if you obstruct our work, it'll go

damn hard with you. Get me?"

"I get you. I just wanted to know where you stood. Well, I'll be seeing you."

FOR the last half hour something had been buzzing in the back of Master's head. He returned to Luke Mingo's road house. He found the local vice lord in his office behind the cashier's desk.

Mingo frowned when he saw Master. "Back again? I tell you, you're wasting your time. You're on the wrong track."

"Maybe so," conceded Master. "But something didn't quite click when I was here before. A waiter, pasty-faced fellow with a long nose—why should he have listened at the door when I was in the back room with you?"

Mingo's eyes opened wide. "That's funny, that bird quit his job just fifteen minutes ago. Jake Summers he said his name was when I hired him a week ago."

Master leaned forward slightly. "Is he a Center City man?"

Mingo shook his head. "No, these waiters come and go. I don't pay much attention to 'em. There's nothing they can get away with here."

"His address?"

Mingo reached into a pigeonhole in his desk and scooped out a note book. "It's on Howard Street—2237 is the number."

Jake Summers had flown. The address on Howard Street was a shabby rooming house.

"He came here only ten minutes ago and got his bag," the landlady said.

Master was disgusted with himself. He had muffed his one possible chance of establishing contact. He should have paid more attention to Jake Summers. Even waiters in road houses don't pack guns in their working clothes, and Summers certainly had started for a gun. That should have told Master that the fellow wasn't an ordinary waiter.

He returned to his hotel, went to his room,

and dropped into a big chair. He had to think things over before his next move.

His chair was turned to the window. His back was towards the bathroom. He did not hear the stocking-footed man come out of the bathroom. The first he was aware of any one's presence in the room was when a cold ring of steel was suddenly pressed against the back of his neck.

"Steady, Master!" gritted a voice in his ear.

A hand reached over his shoulder and whisked out his automatic from the shoulder holster.

"You can get up now," continued the cold voice.

Master rose and turned. "Hello, Jake," he said in his even, calm voice. "Glad you dropped in. I was afraid I'd lost you."

Jake Summers showed his teeth in a wolfish grin. "Thought you'd tumble after a while. That's why I came here."

Master nodded. "Your face bothered me for a while. I place you now. Barkus is your real name—Pete Barkus."

The other's eyes narrowed. "How come?"

"Newspapers," said Master. "I got a good memory. And where's Joe Canada? You two usually play together."

"He'll be here in a few minutes," said Barkus. "You might as well sit down. We're waiting for Joe."

Master dropped to the bed. He studied the ceiling. "What's the matter with Chicago, Pete? The boys getting too tough for you there?"

Pete snorted. "Too tough for Pete Barkus and Joe Canada? Don't be a fool, Master. We saw a chance to make some big money here, so we came. Doing pretty well, too."

"Why the waiter act at Mingo's?" asked Master. He was purposely drawing out Barkus, hoping the little Chicago hood would make a slip. Pete liked to talk.

"Just in case. Every one goes to Mingo's dump sooner or later . . . Quiet!"

A knock had sounded on the door. Pete didn't say a word. The knock was repeated, two long and three short ones.

"All right," called Pete.

Master raised his head to see the newcomer. Joe Canada came in with a gun in his hand. He was a taller man than Pete and had a colder glitter in his eyes. More brains too.

"Good work," Canada said, then to Master, "What'll it be, shamus—the works or do you leave the city?"

Master had dropped back and was again studying the ceiling. "I never quit, Canada," he said.

"So I've heard," retorted Joe Canada. "O.K. then, come along. The boss wants to see you. Maybe he can make you change your mind."

Master swung his feet to the floor.

"We're going through the lobby," continued Canada. "Pete on one side and me on the other. You know how to behave."

BARKUS went to the bathroom and got his shoes. Then he slipped his left hand through Master's right arm. Canada took Master's left arm. Their free hands were in their coat pockets, gripping guns.

They left the room and walked to the elevators. Barkus and Canada chatted on the way down. Master helped in the act by smiling now and then. The elevator operator thinking them old friends saw nothing out of the way in the fact that two men held the arms of their companion.

They walked through the lobby the same way. A half-block up the street they halted before a black touring car. "In the rear," said Canada, pushing Master. Master climbed in and Canada followed. Barkus got into the

front seat behind the wheel. He switched on the ignition, stepped on the starter, and pulled away from the curb.

Master leaned back in his seat and relaxed. Joe Canada had heard of Don Master and was keeping a close watch on him. Besides, it wasn't the time for anything. If he did get away from the two hoods, he'd be just where he had started. It wouldn't be so easy to establish "contact" the second time.

They left the city, and Barkus stepped on the gas. For twenty minutes the big car roared along, making better than sixty on the straight stretches. Barkus was a good driver.

The car left the paved road and lurched into a graveled road. Barkus drove slower now because the road was narrow and rough. Ten minutes on this road and Barkus turned up a narrow lane through a heavy growth of pine trees. A few minutes later, the car stopped before a log cabin.

Canada and Barkus climbed out and motioned Master to follow. They entered the cabin. It was large and luxuriously furnished in the rustic manner. The hunting lodge of a wealthy man who loved his comfort when "roughing it."

A man with a black silk hood over his head turned from the fireplace. He regarded Master for a moment without saying a word, then he spoke in a deep voice, evidently disguised: "You were hired by Mrs. Craig. What for?"

Master shrugged, "What do they usually hire private dicks for?"

The hooded man nodded. "We had intended asking Mrs. Craig for forty grand. She hired you, so the amount is now fifty thousand."

Master shook his head. "Then you've a corpse on your hands. Mrs. Craig can't raise over twenty-five grand even if she hocks the family jewels."

The hooded man swore. "Damn these rich

guys. They've got nothing but a big front these days. This is the second one."

"Yeah—the second one," agreed Master, his eyes narrowing.

The snatch leader turned to Joe Canada and Pete Barkus, who were standing a short distance behind Master with their guns in their hands. Then he looked at Master again.

"All right, the amount will be twenty-five thousand. You'll bring the money."

"Me?"

"Yes. What the devil do you suppose we brought you here for? Oh, I'm not afraid of anything you'll try. You're hired to save your client's life—not to have him killed. Here's the plan. To-morrow afternoon at exactly three o'clock you will leave Center City on Highway 218. You will drive Martin Craig's limousine. When you are exactly twelve miles out of town, you will pull to the side of the road and jack up the left rear wheel and take off the tire.

"Highway 218 hasn't so much traffic on it, but there will be some cars passing. When we figure the coast is clear, we'll stop for the money. After we get it, you'll put the tire back on the car and drive back to Craig's home. Craig will be home about the time you get there—if you haven't tried any funny stuff."

Master shook his head. "What assurance will we have that you'll let Craig go after you get the money?"

"None," said the hooded man. "You take my word for it, that's all. So far it's been fifty-fifty. We turned Edward Jason loose."

"Yeah, but what about Henry Farnum?" asked Master.

The other made a gesture with his hands. "They didn't pay—and the same thing will happen to Craig if the money doesn't come through. The Farnum killing ought to show that we're not bluffing."

There was nothing else for Master to do but to agree. To attempt anything now would

have been suicidal. "All right," he said. "I'll tell Mrs. Craig to get the money. How do I get back to town?"

"Walk back," said the hooded man. "We play safe. Martin Craig isn't anywhere in this vicinity and we borrowed this shack just for to-day. I'm telling you so you won't waste your time looking around. Ready, boys?"

Pete Barkus ran out of the lodge, and a moment later the motor of the touring car turned over. Watching Master carefully, Joe Canada and the hooded man backed out. Master ran to the window just in time to see the car dash off.

It took him forty minutes to walk to the paved highway and another ten minutes before he could catch a lift to Center City.

MRS. MARTIN CRAIG sobbed with relief when Master told her that he had made contact with the kidnapers of her husband.

"You'll have to get \$25,000 in small bills ready by to-morrow noon," he told her.

She nodded gladly. "I don't care at all about the money, if only Martin will come back safe. I—I'll go to the bank right now."

Master did not tell her how the money was to be delivered. He did caution her, however, about keeping everything quiet "Don't tell the police anything," he emphasized. "The kidnapers mean business, and it would be exceedingly dangerous to have the police butt in and spoil things."

Mrs. Craig did tell the police, however. Lieutenant Kirby and Sergeant Needham of the Center City force dropped in on Master at his hotel that evening.

"Mrs. Craig told us," announced Kirby.

The muscles stood out on Master's jaw, but otherwise he showed no emotion.

"Where's the pay-off going to be?" continued Kirby.

"Find that out like you did the rest," said

Master. "And if you do. I assure you that there'll be another dead man to chalk up for your splendid police work."

"All right, keep your mouth shut and see what it'll get you," snapped Kirby.

They left, but Master knew that they were not giving up. Just to test them, he went out for a walk. A plain-clothes man picked him up in the lobby and kept a short distance behind him. He returned to the hotel and went to bed.

At nine o'clock the next morning, he called at the Craig residence. "Is the money ready, Mrs. Craig?" he asked.

"Yes, it was brought from the bank only a few minutes ago."

Master opened the small gladstone bag and nodded. It was almost full to the top with packages of paper money.

"You shouldn't have told the cops," he said, as he picked up the bag.

Mrs. Craig reddened. "I didn't mean to, but they badgered me so much I finally let it put. I do hope that it won't hurt Martin's chances any."

Master shook his head. "No, but it's going to make me a devil of a lot of work shaking off the cops. That's why I got the money so early. I'll need your car too. I want you to see that it is parked at Market and Sixth at two o'clock. The ignition key should be in it. I suggest you have your chauffeur take the car out about one o'clock and leave it at that corner. And tell him not to return here until at least three-thirty. If he drives off alone, I don't believe he'll be followed. Do you understand everything?"

Master returned to his hotel with the money, followed by his police shadower. At twelve o'clock he looked out of his room and saw a man loitering in the hallway. They were closing up now to make sure that he would not avoid them.

At two o'clock Master looked over his automatic and slipped it into his shoulder

holster. Then he picked up the bag containing the ransom, money and left his room. He rang for the elevator. The man who had been loitering in the hall came up and prepared to ride down with him.

The elevator door opened. Master reached out suddenly and gave the detective a shove that sent him staggering against the opposite wall. Then he sprang into the elevator.

"Down you go, and quick!" he cried to the operator. The lad took one look at Master, and the car dropped swiftly.

"All the way to the basement," said Master.

A moment later he stepped out of the elevator into the kitchen of the hotel dining room. A cook and several helpers stared open-mouthed at him as he tore through. He did not even look at them. He climbed a flight of stairs and found himself in a corridor behind the elevator banks. A door at the end caught his eye. He opened it cautiously and swore. A man was leaning against the building a dozen feet away. The police were certainly guarding the hotel well that day.

Master closed the door, then, opened it again. He whistled. The detective came over. Master dropped the bag of money and smacked the man a terrific blow on the jaw. He fell like a log. Master pulled him inside the door, then catching up the money bag darted up the alley.

He came out on the next street and mixed with the crowd. He walked slowly for two blocks, then hailed a taxi. During the next half-hour he rode in two other taxis, walked through a department store, and took a short street car ride. Then he found himself clear of the business section.

He walked rapidly to Sixth and Market and there saw a big limousine parked at the curb. He climbed in, saw that the ignition key was in the lock, and stepped on the starter. He headed for the country, in the opposite

direction from his rendezvous with the kidnapers. Five miles out he began taking side roads and working back in a northerly direction. He avoided the city, however.

At 3:10 he was on Highway 218 five or six miles out of Center City. He watched the road markers, and when he estimated that he was twelve miles out, slackened speed. Ahead was a long straight stretch of road, with only a farmhouse or two in sight. This was evidently the spot the kidnapers had had in mind. They could see for a mile or two in either direction. An ideal place for their purpose. Master drove up another mile, when he judged he was about in the center of the straight stretch of road. Then he pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped.

HE got out the tools from under the driver's seat and jacked up the left rear wheel. He took off the tire and scattered the tools around. The bag containing the money he set beside the wheel. Passing autoists would think it was a tool kit.

He waited for fifteen minutes, during which time a dozen cars passed in both directions. Every time one approached Master busied himself at the wheel—but he watched each approaching car carefully.

The kidnapers had used a black touring car yesterday. If they were smart, they would have a different car to-day. A brilliant green sedan shot by him once. Five minutes later it came back from the other direction. The second time Master noted that there were two men in the front seat, but they had their heads down as they passed and he could not recognize them, but he did not doubt that they were Joe Canada and Pete Barkus.

A few minutes later the green car approached again from the direction of Center City. No other cars were in sight and Master felt instinctively that this time they would stop. They did.

The engine was left running and Pete Barkus and Joe Canada climbed out. They were carrying their guns in their hands. Master was holding the tire iron in his hand. The bag containing the ransom money was at his feet.

"Got it?" snapped Canada.

Master kicked the bag.

"Look at it, Pete," said Canada.

Pete stooped and opened the bag. "O.K.," he said.

Master had been watching Canada's face and suddenly saw that what he had been expecting was about to happen. They were going to kill him. He knew them and they couldn't risk letting him go—not with Henry Farnum's murder and the kidnappings hanging over their heads.

Barkus was straightening before Master. The latter suddenly clipped him on the head with the tire iron. Barkus fell against Master and at that moment Joe Canada fired.

The bullet went clear through Pete Barkus and burned Master's left arm. Then Master had his own gun out. He threw Barkus from him and fired at Canada, just as the Chicago hood was firing the second time.

Canada staggered back, and Master shot him again, through the head. Canada's second shot grazed Master's throat.

As Canada fell Master turned to the green car just in time to see a black-cloth-covered head lean out, and a gun pointing at his head. The snatch leader hadn't trusted Canada and Barkus with the money and had come along.

Master dropped to the ground like a plummet, firing even as he fell. He saw the hooded man's head jerk back, then he fired again. He was taking no chances. After that he sat down on the running board of the Craig limousine.

Less than ten minutes later, a police car came tearing up, siren screaming. Lieutenant Kirby and a half-dozen policemen piled out and stormed over to where Master was still

sitting.

"Geez!" exclaimed Kirby, in awe, as he surveyed the scene. "You got 'em all. Who's the guy with the black sack over his head?"

"Look for yourself, lieutenant."

Kirby strode over and tore the black hood from the dead man's head. He cried out in astonishment. "Martin Craig!"

"That's who I figured it was," stated Master, calmly.

"He kidnaped himself!" ejaculated Kirby.

Master nodded. "He'd lost most of his money, so he went to Chicago and hired Joe Canada and Pete Barkus and went into the snatch racket. He got fifty grand from Edward Jason. Then he made a slip and killed Henry

Farnum. Craig had to cover up his tracks then, so kidnaped himself. I suspected it yesterday, but wasn't sure until a little while ago."

Kirby looked at him sharply. "What made you suspect him?"

Master shrugged. "The amount of the ransom for one thing. Craig had a big place, but he didn't have so much money—if we don't count the money he got from the Jason snatching, which of course he was too smart to put into his bank as yet. I told him Mrs. Craig couldn't raise more than twenty-five grand. He let it go at that. Anyone not knowing his circumstances would have stuck out for fifty grand, at least."