

Seasoned Crime

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With his hand on the back of the seat, he gazed at the motionless man

*The Keen Eye of Austin Tyler,
Private Detective, Finds a Clue to
Murder on a Bus in One Single Bright Spot!*

THE bright lights of the bus station refreshment room in the small New Jersey town gleamed down on Austin Tyler's handsome face and wavy auburn hair. He looked like a young leading man in some stage production as he sat at the counter sipping the last of his coffee, and occasionally gazing at the rain washing against the window panes. The weather had been bad ever since the bus left Washington, D. C., bound for New York.

Only six other passengers were making the trip. Five of them were in the refreshment room now, but the sixth had

remained in his seat in the coach.

Tyler was quite conscious of the fact that some of these people were watching him. He knew he had an air about him, for until two years ago Austin Tyler had been quite a success as a juvenile, and there still were times when he could not resist acting. In fact he had managed to make quite a ceremony of drinking a cup of coffee.

Idly he watched the man he had heard called John Haynes reappear from the washroom. The stout salesman seated himself at a table in one corner of the room and started eating the hamburger on

a roll the counter man brought him. Tyler mentally grinned as he noticed the watery ketchup the stout man was using. This was the third hamburger Haynes had eaten, for he had gulped down two more before he had gone into the washroom five minutes ago. Apparently he didn't mind the weakness of the ketchup, for he had used it every time.

"Nasty night," Tyler said, his voice deep and musical, his gaze fixed on the dish-faced man who had charge of the lunch room as the fellow stepped behind the counter. "Reminds me of the rainy season Down Under."

"Yeah," said the counterman, whose name was Joe Higgins.

Tyler frowned as he heard a chuckle. The small, thin-faced man he had noticed among the bus passengers had just stepped in out of the rain, and appeared to find the remarks amusing. However, the two middle-aged women who looked like school teachers appeared quite impressed by Tyler's voice. Martha Lawrence, the pretty, dark-haired girl whom Tyler knew was one of Washington's most popular young society girls—of the plenty-of-family-background-no-money type, however. She did not look up from her magazine.

"Down Under is what we call New Zealand," announced Tyler, as he paid for his coffee and slid off the stool. "Doubtlessly you've heard of the place."

"Yeah." Higgins yawned. "I've covered all of New Zealand, been on both North Island and South Island."

TYLER felt foolish as he left the lunch room and hurried through the rain to the bus a short distance away. He had never been near New Zealand in his life. Why did he always have to put on an act, he wondered. After all, that was no longer

necessary since he had become a private detective instead of an actor.

"Ham!" he muttered. "That's what I am—a ham. It's a wonder I didn't start spouting Shakespeare."

He entered the bus and walked back to his seat in the rear of the coach. The big vehicle was deserted save for one man slumped down in his seat, apparently sound asleep. Tyler passed him with no more than a casual glance. The rain drummed steadily upon the roof of the bus, and outside the shadows were bleak and gloomy.

It was not until Tyler had taken his seat that he recalled the man up ahead had been with Martha Lawrence. Why had he remained in the bus and let her go into the refreshment room alone, Tyler wondered. It didn't seem quite natural.

He sat staring at the back of the dark-haired young man, and as he did, Austin Tyler's eyes narrowed. He had caught a faint gleam of something red on the back of the man's neck—a spot that might be blood. Tyler got to his feet and went closer. He stood for an instant with his hand on the back of the seat as he gazed at the motionless man.

"Bus Number Thirty leaving for New York," came through the loud speaker of the depot. "Passengers please return to their seats. Bus Number Thirty now leaving."

The driver climbed into the bus, a black slicker protecting his uniform from the rain. He looked at Tyler, standing beside the motionless figure slumped down in the seat.

"What's the matter?" asked the driver. "That guy sick?"

Tyler reached out and caught the dark-haired man's wrist. His fingers were seeking a pulse, but he could not find any. The flesh felt clammy, was beginning to

turn cold. Tyler raised his head and looked at the driver.

"This guy is dead," he said, deliberately making his tone hardboiled for the bus driver's benefit. "It looks like murder."

The bus driver had plenty of nerve, and it took a lot to get him excited. He walked down the aisle and stood looking at the corpse. Finally he nodded.

"Yeah, could be," he said gruffly. "You know him?"

"Not by name. Face seems familiar though." Tyler frowned. "Miss Lawrence, that pretty dark-haired girl passenger, was with him. You better have the dispatcher get the police."

"Yeah."

The bus driver quickly left the bus.

There were voices and footsteps out in the rain. The driver evidently had not stopped to warn them, and the other passengers were climbing back into the bus. The fat man, Haynes, was the first to appear. He stood there with his mouth opening and closing like a character talking in a silent picture. Martha Lawrence followed him into the coach. Her dark eyes widened as she saw Austin Tyler standing beside the corpse. With a little moan she rushed down the aisle.

"He—he's—" She couldn't force herself to utter the word, but her eyes were pleading as she stared at Tyler.

"I'm afraid so, Miss Lawrence," Tyler said gently. "But we better try and get a doctor to be sure." The small, thin-faced man heard him as he pushed his way into the bus. He assumed a professional air as he went to his seat, opened his bag and took out a physician's case.

"I'm Doctor Henry Mathew," he said. "Glad to be of service, of course."

HE BEGAN his examination of the dark-haired young man. The fat

salesman had slumped down in his seat and was watching the doctor. The two middle-aged women had not yet boarded the bus. Evidently the driver had finally thought of telling the passengers that something was wrong.

Tyler looked closely at the Lawrence girl and noticed how white her face had grown. He led her over to one of the seats and made her sit down.

"A close relation?" he asked, as he dropped down beside her.

"No. Just—just a friend. His name is—was—Bob Clark. We were going to New York. I'm to be married tomorrow and Bob was to have been a wedding guest, at my invitation." Martha Lawrence shuddered. "Perhaps you were mistaken and, he isn't—"

Dr. Mathew stood up, and there was something quite final in the gesture.

"This man is dead," he announced. "As far as I can judge he has been poisoned, apparently by a hypo injected into the back of his neck."

"Then it's murder!" murmured Martha dazedly.

No one else spoke, and the rain pattering on the roof seemed like the drumming of ghost fingers. A police siren was like the wailing of a banshee somewhere out in the darkness of the night. It grew louder, finally to blend with the squealing of brakes as the police arrived. Two carloads of them. And they went to work quickly.

The bus passengers were ordered back into the refreshment room. Detectives barked questions at them, jotted down names and addresses. They had all been in the refreshment room or nearby when the murder had occurred.

Austin Tyler expected trouble, because he had been alone when he had found the body. But his credentials as one of the operatives for one of the biggest private

detective agencies in Washington carried weight. The southern New Jersey police willingly accepted his story. They did not even hint that he might have murdered Bob Clark.

But the bus driver, whose name proved to be Grogan, caused plenty of trouble.

“Get this over with, will you, guys?” he kept repeating. “I got to get goin’ to finish the run on time. Hurry up!”

Finally the body had been removed, and Washington had been notified. The passengers had been told they could continue their journey, but the murderer had not been found.

“Anything unusual about the corpse?” Tyler asked the captain of detectives who was in charge of the police. “Reason for the murder, I mean.”

“Might have been robbery,” answered the captain. “His wallet is missing—and there are no papers in his inside coat pocket.”

“Thanks,” said Tyler. “That means something all right.”

As he turned away John Haynes came waddling up to him. The fat man placed his hand on Tyler’s wrist. His fingers were moist and flabby, his shirt cuff sticky.

“I don’t like this,” Haynes said nervously. “Whoever did it might strike again! Anyone of us could be murdered and robbed.”

The stout man was in a pitiful state of terror, Tyler saw. The inclination to act swept over the ex-juvenile. His expression grew sinister, and when he spoke he sounded like the menace in a horror picture.

“You’re right,” he said grimly. “It might happen to any of us!”

HAYNES gave him a startled look and moved hastily away. Tyler climbed into the bus with the other passengers as the coach continued on its journey. He took

the seat next to Martha Lawrence and discovered that the girl was anxious to talk.

“I feel so terrible about the whole thing,” she said. “Yet I guess this isn’t anything compared to what Basil has been going through.”

“Basil?” asked Tyler. “Who is he?”

“Sir Basil Martin—the man I’m going to marry,” said Martha. “He just arrived in New York from England yesterday on the Clipper. He came over on a special mission and we decided that we would get married while he was here. He has to go back in a few days. I expect to go with him.”

“I see,” said Tyler as the bus roared through the night. “Did Bob Clark know Sir Basil?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Martha. “But he seemed quite anxious to meet the man I was going to marry.” She sighed. “Poor Bob! We quarreled just before I went into the lunch room at the bus stop. He thought he was in love with me—and tried to persuade me not to marry Basil. He was peeved—that was why he didn’t come into the refreshment room with me. I—I wish he had.”

“So do I,” said Tyler. “But of course, that really didn’t make any difference. Whoever killed him would probably have tried to find some other opportunity to do it.” Tyler’s tone grew hard. “I’m a private detective, as you know, Miss Lawrence, and I want you to let me guard you until after your wedding.”

“Why?” she asked, looking at him anxiously.

“Because I’m afraid that your life is in danger,” Tyler said grimly. “Apparently Clark was killed because the murderer wanted something he had in his possession—”

“Maybe that’s why he gave me that envelope to keep for him!” Martha said

softly.

Austin Tyler's eyes narrowed as he heard the girl's words. He glanced at Dr. Mathew, seated up the aisle ahead of them on the left. The physician was reading a magazine and appeared oblivious of his surroundings. Tyler had not forgotten that Clark had been killed by poison injected by a hypodermic needle—the sort of murder weapon that a doctor might use.

John Haynes was also up ahead, slumped down in his seat like a mountain of jelly. The two school teachers sat in front of the fat man, and they were obviously frightened. Tyler was sure that the others were too far away to be able to overhear the girl and himself as they talked the matter over.

"What was in the envelope?" he asked quietly.

"I don't know," said Martha, fumbling with her purse. "I'll show it to you. I have it here in my bag."

"No, don't!" said Tyler quickly. "Not now. The murderer may not know you have it, if that is what he is after—though he may guess. Don't give him a chance to be sure. It's too dangerous! Remember we're dealing with a killer."

Martha Lawrence was far from a fool. She evidently realized that any of the other passengers might be watching her. Casually she opened her purse, took out her vanity case, then snapped the bag shut again. She looked at her pretty face in the mirror of the vanity and quickly powdered her nose.

"You will take Bob Clark's place as one of the guests at my wedding, Mr. Tyler," she said. "It is to be a noon wedding, and so please dress formally."

"Very good, Miss," said Tyler, with a mocking light in his eyes. "And now suppose we change the subject . . . Have you read any good books lately?"

MARTHA managed to laugh a little, in spite of her distress, and they chatted casually until the bus finally arrived at the bus depot in New York. Here Tyler gathered up the girl's luggage and his own and they took a taxi to the hotel where she planned to stay. Tyler turned the girl over to a tall; good-looking young Englishman who was waiting in the lobby with Martha's aunt. Tyler decided he liked Sir Basil as soon as they had met, and the young attaché was suave and gracious.

Austin Tyler learned that the wedding was to take place in the hotel and that most of the wedding party were staying there. He registered, then turned in for the night. He slept well and was up early in the morning. As soon as he had breakfasted he put in a long distance call to the detective agency in Washington which employed him.

Swiftly he told his boss what had occurred on the bus.

"Robert Clark!" exclaimed Kenneth Small, the head of the agency as he heard Tyler's story. "Of course I want you to stay with the case. We've already heard about the murder here—it's big stuff. Clark was on some sort of important Government job. If you can do anything toward clearing up this business it will be a feather in the agency's cap. Go to it, boy."

Tyler talked a little longer and then hung up. He bought a morning paper and glanced over the war news on the front page. Then skimmed through the rest by the paper. An item on Page Three caught his eye. It was an account of a bus driver being killed in a hit-and-run auto accident during the night—and the bus driver had been named Tim Grogan.

"Grogan!" exclaimed Tyler. "That was the name of the man who drove our bus last night: He was outside when Clark was

killed. Maybe the murderer felt that Grogan knew too much.” Tyler frowned. “Still it may have been just an accident.”

He grew conscious that a page boy was calling out his name as the bellhop made his way swiftly through the ornate lobby of the big hotel. Tyler beckoned the boy to him.

“Mr. Austin Tyler?” asked the boy, and, as Tyler nodded, “You’re wanted on the telephone, sir. This way, please.”

The boy led Tyler to a booth. The tall, red-headed detective tipped the boy and picked up the phone.

“This is Mr. Tyler,” he said to the hotel operator.

“Oh, yes, Mr. Tyler, I have a call for you. Just a moment and I’ll connect you.”

“Hello, Tyler?” demanded a masculine voice over the wire. “This is John Haynes, your recent bus companion. It’s vital that I see you at once.”

“Why?” demanded Tyler shortly.

“It’s a matter of life and death,” declared Haynes.

“What do you mean—life and death?” asked Tyler.

“My life is in danger,” said Haynes. “I’m sure of it. I’m at the Skyscraper Hotel. Won’t you please come over here at once? I’m in Room Eighteen-forty-seven.”

“Why should I come over there?” demanded Tyler.

“Because I’ve learned something important regarding that murder on the bus!” said Haynes hastily. “I can’t talk now. I—”

He broke off abruptly, and what sounded like a heavy thud came over the wire.

Tyler scowled as he hung up hastily. It sounded as if the fat man actually was in trouble. Austin Tyler decided he had better investigate. This might prove interesting.

TWENTY minutes later he was at the Skyscraper Hotel and in an elevator being taken up to the eighteenth floor. He had announced that Mr. Haynes was expecting him. He walked down the heavily carpeted corridor and found Room 1847. Quickly he assured himself that his gun was in his shoulder holster as he discovered the door of the room was standing half open, for he sensed danger.

Pushing the door open, he glanced into the room. It appeared empty but the low window was wide open and a man’s coat was lying on the floor as though someone had hastily discarded the garment before jumping out of that open window.

“Good Lord!” muttered Tyler.

He dashed toward the window, and had almost reached it when his ankle struck against something that tripped him. As he fell he just managed to grab the lower sill of the window in time from keeping himself from being hurled out into space.

Cold sweat beaded his forehead as he scrambled back to safety. Death had been horribly close. He glanced down and saw the thin but strong strand of copper wire that was stretched across the room.

He went to the window and peered out. It was a sheer eighteen-story drop to the street below. Traffic was moving along the street, and pedestrians crossed the sidewalks. There was no sign that John Haynes had jumped from the window.

Austin Tyler stepped back from the window, and as he did, a crumpled square of paper on the floor caught his eye. He picked up the paper and smoothed it out. It was a printed blank such as doctors use to write out prescriptions. Across the top was printed “Henry Mathew, M.D.”, and a New York address.

Tyler whirled as he heard a slight sound near the door. John Haynes stood there. The stout man glared at Tyler wide-

eyed. Haynes wore no coat and one of his wrists was bleeding from a small cut.

“That doctor!” he muttered. “He’s a devil.”

“What happened?” demanded Tyler tersely.

“Dr. Mathew came here a little while ago,” said Haynes. “He pointed a gun at me, and forced me to phone you and ask you to come here to my room. I was going to try and warn you over the phone when you started questioning me, but Mathew hit me over the head with the gun and knocked me out.”

“Go on,” said Tyler, as Haynes paused.

“When I regained consciousness I found myself tied up in another room on this floor of the hotel. My hands and feet were tied and I was gagged—but I managed to break the ropes that bound my arms. Cut my wrist doing it. Then I came back here, and found you.”

“The murderer planned it well,” Tyler said. “We’d better report this to the police.”

“All right,” said Haynes doubtfully. “But I’m afraid that while the police are questioning us something may happen to that pretty girl—that Miss Lawrence who is to be married today.”

“You’re right,” exclaimed Tyler. “I’m going back to her hotel and make sure she is safe until the wedding takes place.”

As he hurried out of the room, he heard Haynes close the door softly from inside. Tyler rang for the elevator and quickly descended when a car stopped for him.

AUSTIN TYLER was quite busy during the remainder of the morning. He first got in touch with the bride and groom and assured himself they were quite safe, then he phoned an inspector he knew in the New York Police Department and had a talk with the man.

Shortly before noon, Tyler appeared among the wedding guests who had gathered in the Regal Suite which had been engaged for the wedding. All of the wedding gifts were piled on a long table at one end of the room which had not yet been opened to the guests. Here Tyler found Martha Lawrence in her bridal gown, examining the presents.

“Oh, I’ve been wondering if you were here, Mr. Tyler,” she said. “I just received a package that hasn’t been opened yet. I wonder who it is from? There’s no card with it.”

“Let me open it for you,” said Tyler.

He unwrapped the square box and lifted the cover. The girl raised her hands in horror as she saw what was inside the box. An alarm clock attached to storage batteries had been rigged up to sticks of dynamite so that it formed a time bomb.

“Look out!” shouted Tyler as he caught a glimpse of a hand holding a gun that appeared around the edge of the half open door.

He fired the automatic that swiftly appeared in his own right hand, while his left reached for the second gun in the shoulder holster beneath his right arm-pit.

The gun in the doorway roared at the same instant, but the bullet that had been aimed at the bride went wild as the slug from Tyler’s automatic plowed into the killer’s hand. The door swung open completely and John Haynes stood there with blood dripping from his shattered wrist.

Men came running with Sir Basil Martin and grabbed Haynes—plainclothes men who had been placed among the wedding guests by the police inspector at Tyler’s suggestion.

“We’ve got him!” Tyler said. “There’s the man who murdered Bob Clark, and tried to kill me in his hotel room. He must have been desperate, or he would never

have sent the bomb to—”

Tyler broke off abruptly and hastily disconnected the wires attached to the dynamite and the clock.

“That was close,” he muttered. “This thing was set to go off at twelve o’clock and it is three minutes of twelve now.”

“But what on earth was the reason for it all?” demanded Sir Basil. “I don’t understand quite.”

“You came over here on a special mission, didn’t you, Sir Basil?” demanded Tyler. “You were to take some important papers back with you, I believe?”

“Quite so.” Sir Basil nodded.

“Clark was carrying those papers. Haynes here apparently is a Fifth Columnist of some sort. He killed Clark in order to keep those papers from reaching you. After he had committed the murder he found that the papers weren’t on the dead man.”

“That was because Bob gave me the envelope containing the papers to keep for him,” said Martha quickly.

“Right.” Tyler nodded. “I suspected Haynes when I discovered that what I thought was blood on the neck of the murdered man was actually ketchup. Haynes had been eating hamburgers in the refreshment room and putting ketchup on them. When he went out into the washroom—he must have climbed out through a window, murdered Clark, and come back into the washroom through the window, and casually back into the lunch room.”

“What made you so sure about the ketchup?” demanded the inspector who was present with his men.

“Haynes put his hand on my wrist at the bus station and I noticed that the shirt cuff was sticky,” said Tyler. “Evidently there was still ketchup on the inside of the sleeve. That was when I really started suspecting him.”

TYLER explained how Haynes had phoned him and asked him to come to his hotel room, and told what had happened there.

“Leaving a prescription blank that he must have stolen from Dr. Mathew in order to make the doctor a suspect if I was found dead beneath the window was smart,” said Tyler. “But not quite smart enough. I didn’t believe it. Doctors don’t usually toss away prescription blanks like that unless they change their mind about what they have written on the paper. That one was blank.”

“But Haynes story of having been tied up might have sounded convincing,” said the inspector.

“It did until he told me that he had cut his wrist on the rope. It wasn’t the sort of a wound a rope would make—looked more like it had been done with a safety razor blade.” Tyler smiled. “I guess you can go on with the wedding now, folks. I’m sure there won’t be any more trouble. The murderer used too much ketchup in seasoning his own crime.”