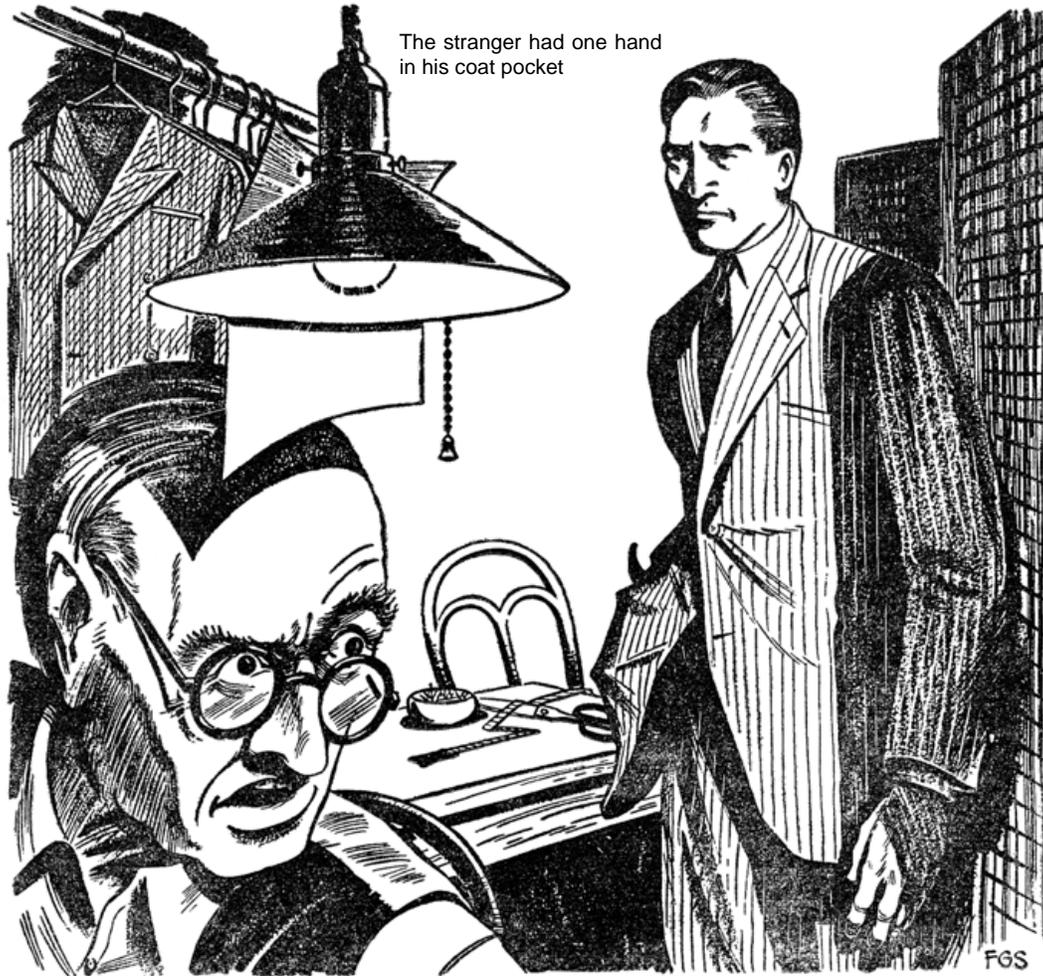


A Stitch in Crime

by RICHARD BRISTER



Mr. Trimble was just a meek little tailor until that fateful day when Blackie Vain held him up for the sake of a change of clothes!

MR. TRIMBLE was in the back of his tailor shop, ripping the seam in a pair of gray gabardine trousers, when a bulky figure loomed in the doorway, blocking off the morning sunlight. Mr. Trimble's bony shoulders stiffened with surprise and fright. His large, balding head jerked around toward the door and his horn-rimmed spectacles dropped precariously downward on his high-bridged nose. He pushed them back into place with a trembling hand, and blinked peevishly at the man in the doorway.

It was Monahan, the blue-uniformed beat cop. He stood with his meaty shoulders pressed against the door jamb.

He seemed to be getting a big kick out of Mr. Trimble's reaction to his sudden appearance.

"Scared you, didn't I, Trimble?"

Mr. Trimble dropped the gray gabardine trousers over his knees, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. Some day Monahan would indulge in his boorish pranks once too often. Apparently the big flatfoot had nothing better to do with his time than to play kid games with Mr. Trimble.

"It's not funny," Mr. Trimble said testily. "I've got half a mind to telephone your chief, and tell him how you badger me all the time."

Monahan pulled a toothpick from between his buck teeth, and grinned.

"You wouldn't dare, Trimble," he said easily.

"Oh, wouldn't I?" Mr. Trimble's high, timid voice trailed downward a little. "Just you keep

making a pest of yourself in my shop and see if I'd dare."

"Trouble with you, Trimble," said Monahan pontifically, "is you're cop shy. I've never seen a guy jump at the sight of a cop the way you do, Trimble." He wagged his big head, smiling thinly. "If you ask me," he added, "there's a reason why you act scared. Like they say, 'Where there's smoke, there's fire.'"

Mr. Trimble gulped and said weakly, "What are you hinting at, Monahan?"

"I'll bet you've been in trouble with the force, Trimble, some time or other." A sadistic smile twisted the policeman's thick lips. "Why else would a guy squirm around cops the way you do?"

There was an answer to that, Mr. Trimble thought bleakly. He *was* leery of cops, as Monahan said. Not for any sensible reason. He was just a painfully timid man who seldom ventured beyond the confines of his tailor shop or the cramped living quarters behind it.

ONCE, as a shy, sickly youngster on the East Side, he'd been walking along the street while a band of young ruffians was stealing some peaches off a fruit wagon. When the cop had come running in response to the fruit vendor's cries, Trimble had run, although he'd taken no part in the thievery. Some strange guilt complex had forced him to flee, and the cop had caught him.

Later, at the precinct station, he had received the fright of his young life. Ever since that time he had lived in mortal fear of policemen. It was a phobia with him. It had effectively warped his whole life.

Monahan knew his weakness. It was painfully dull, pounding a beat all day. Monahan brightened his life up, now and then, by appearing suddenly in the doorway of Trimble's dingy shop and scaring the daylights out of the tailor.

Mr. Trimble disliked the big fellow intensely. But he knew the futility of trying to out-talk the policeman. Monahan, after all, was a cop. Mr. Trimble didn't know how to talk up to a cop, and whenever he tried to, Monahan hacked away at his nerves until Mr. Trimble shook like a leaf.

Mr. Trimble said weakly, "Go away, Monahan. I'm busy. I'm in no mood to talk to you."

Monahan chuckled. "Cop shy. That's your trouble, Trimble. Come clean, why don't you? You did something once, to get the bulls down on you. What was it?"

Mr. Trimble bit his lower lip. He leaned forward and snapped on the tiny radio at the end of his sewing table. It hummed briefly, then a news commentator's incisive voice filled the small room. Mr. Trimble leaned toward the sound, serving notice on Monahan that he was not going to say anything more to him.

The smooth, resonant voice on the radio was saying: "Policemen are combing the South Side between Third Avenue and Water Street in an attempt to pick up the trail of Blackie Vain, who added another reckless holdup to his series of daylight crimes at eight-thirty this morning, when he emptied the cash register of an all-night diner at the corner of Third and Hargrove.

"Vain is described as a black-haired man of medium height, brown-eyed, slightly built. When last seen in front of the Downtown Drury Shop, he was wearing a gray pin-stripe suit with a solid brown tie, pale blue shirt, and a brown fedora. Police Chief Edwards . . ."

Mr. Trimble smiled softly as he turned down the volume. "I wouldn't presume to tell you your business, Monahan. But with a dangerous criminal at large right here in your section of town, I should think—"

"Lay off the chin music," the burly policeman growled. "You stick to your stitching. I'll do the beat pounding."

Monahan turned huffily out the door, and walked down the pavement.

Mr. Trimble shrugged and wagged his bald head. Then he picked up the gray gabardine trousers and went back to work on them.

The clock ticked tirelessly on the wall above him. Aside from that comforting sound it was very quiet in the shop. Mr. Trimble hummed softly to himself as he worked. These were his best moments, when he was all alone in his shop, his fingers moving automatically while he daydreamed of the man he might have been, the adventurous life he might have lived, had he not been such a shy one.

If things had been different, if he'd just been born healthy, so he could have held his own in games with the neighborhood kids, he might even have married. What sort of girl would he have chosen? A gay, flashing-eyed redhead, maybe. Or perhaps a dark, smiling girl with—

"Turn around, Pop. Nice and slow, if you don't want a mouthful of lead."

THE voice had a gruff, gravelly inflection. He did not recognize it. It seemed to come from across the room—from behind the tall screen in the corner. He felt his heart thumping a wild drumbeat beneath his frail ribs as he swiveled his chair around slowly.

There was a man standing in back of the screen, so that Mr. Trimble could see him plainly, but it was impossible for anyone on the street to look in and see him. He was a slender young fellow, with a smooth, handsome face. He was smiling, but there was a stiffness in the smile which scared Mr. Trimble.

He was taking in the gray pin-stripe suit, the solid brown tie knotted over the pale blue shirt.

He saw that the stranger had one hand in his coat pocket. That hand twitched a little, and Mr. Trimble jerked back, almost falling off the chair.

“Y-you’re Blackie Vain,” he announced weirdly. “Listen, I—I don’t have any money. Only a few dollars. In the register there. You c-can take them.”

“Shut up,” snarled Blackie Vain. “Now get a hold on yourself, Pop, or I’ll blow your brains out. I want a change of clothes and I want it fast. Get me?”

“Yes, sir,” gulped Mr. Trimble.

His frightened glance drifted past the young stranger toward the back of his shop. The door was ajar, back there, and through it he could see to the rear door, the one which gave onto his littered yard. That was the way Blackie Vain had sneaked into the shop without being detected, he realized sickly.

“All right,” snarled Vain. “Get to it. I’m a thirty-eight-long coat, thirty-two waistline—trouser length thirty. Give me the nearest thing to it, and make it snappy. I’ve got the bulls after me, in case you don’t know it.”

Mr. Trimble stood up, his bony knees shaking. “It’s—it’s not so easy, young man. Finding a suit that will fit you on the spur of the moment. I’m a tailor. I have suits here”—he waved at a tall rack from which a dozen suits dangled—“that people have brought in to be pressed or—”

“You talk too much, Pop,” Blackie Vain suggested grimly. “Pick one out and bring it over here in back of this screen.” His eyes glittered, and the hand that was hidden within his pocket jabbed outward. “Or do you need some urging?”

“No, no,” gasped Mr. Trimble.

Fussily, he went through the dangling suits,

seeking one that might fit the fellow. He took down a blue serge. Blackie Vain looked it over quickly.

“Seems all right,” he grunted. He was disrobing swiftly as he talked. “Got a white shirt, size fifteen, handy? And another necktie?”

“I—I—” Mr. Trimble stammered foolishly. He was too rattled to finish.

“You better get in the game, Pop, if you know what’s good for you.”

Mr. Trimble found a white shirt and a necktie. He wrung his hands like a nervous old woman, while Blackie Vain slipped into the blue suit.

Suddenly a middle-aged woman, expensively dressed, entered the shop from the street and approached the green counter.

“Listen, Pop,” hissed Blackie Vain, “I’m gonna watch you handle that dame through the crack in this screen, see? One false move and I’ll drill a hole in you so fast—”

“Please,” gulped Mr. Trimble, “don’t point that thing at me.”

“Get out there, then, and act natural.”

Mr. Trimble walked out briskly to greet his customer. The woman lifted a long pouch purse and pointed a well-manicured finger at a jagged tear in it. “Would it take long to mend this? I only have a few minutes to spare.”

Mr. Trimble accepted the purse and examined the tear more closely. The purse was constructed of some heavy fabric with which he was unfamiliar, but it was strong and would probably hold together firmly if mended.

HE SHOT a covert glance back toward the screen behind which Blackie Vain stood watching. Vain was not visible to the woman from her position in front of the counter, but Mr. Trimble could make out the young fellow’s baleful eye staring at him around one edge of the screen. Vain nodded his head in slow affirmation.

Mr. Trimble turned quickly to face the woman. “Shouldn’t take more than a moment, madam. If you’ll just take your things out . . .”

The woman’s hands fluttered. “Oh, dear! Is that necessary? I’m in such a hurry. If you could work around—” She smiled as Mr. Trimble shrugged his thin shoulders.

He carried the purse back to his sewing table, quickly found some thread to match its color, and worked swiftly and surely with needle and scissors.

When he was finished, he walked back to the

counter, where the woman stood waiting. As he passed the screen, Blackie Vain gestured with his pistol, and hissed at him:

“Get rid of her quick, Pop.”

The woman took the purse and inspected Mr. Trimble’s handiwork on it. “My,” she smiled, “that was fast! That’s a fine job. You’d hardly know where the rip was, would you? How much do I owe you?”

Mr. Trimble was sweating. *Get rid of her quick, Pop*, Blackie had ordered. The pistol had helped emphasize those instructions.

“It’s all right,” Mr. Trimble smiled largely. “Nothing to the job, madam. I won’t charge you for it.”

“But—” The woman looked surprised. A sudden glint shone in her eyes, and she smiled at Mr. Trimble. “Why, that’s awfully nice of you. Thanks very much.”

“It’s quite all right, madam.” Mr. Trimble bowed slightly, and watched her walk out.

“Okay, Pop, come back here,” ordered Vain. “And *move*, you old fossil!”

Mr. Trimble went back and looked at Blackie Vain. He was standing behind the screen, fully clothed in the blue serge suit he had commandeered from the tailor.

“Yes?” Mr. Trimble faltered.

“The trousers are too long. Otherwise, it’s all right. How long will it take you to shorten these trousers a couple of inches?”

“Why, I can’t do that. The man who owns that suit will—”

“Don’t talk about it,” Vain cut in, already slipping out of the trousers. “Get to work. I can’t wear ‘em like that. It’d be a dead tip-off.”

Mr. Trimble picked up the trousers and moved back to his sewing table, somewhat dazed. He ripped the threads on the cuffs with fingers that trembled. Once the razor he wielded slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor with a tinny tinkle.

Blackie Vain was watching impatiently from behind the screen. “You better hold onto your nerve and work fast,” he snarled. “The heat’s on me good, this time. And I don’t much care whose toes get stubbed while I’m makin’ my break through them coppers.” His black eyes glared at Mr. Trimble. “Ain’t you even got ‘em unstitched yet?”

“Yes,” Mr. Trimble said meekly, pulling the final stitch out.

He cut a strip off each leg of the trousers, turned back the cloth to form the new cuff and basted it into position quickly. He hurried across to the steam press and cranked the big irons down on the cloth, to make the new cuff creases. Then he went back to bind the cuffs, but Blackie Vain’s voice halted him.

“Forget that part of it. Bring ‘em here, Pop. The crease will hold the cuffs in place for as long as I’ll need ‘em.”

Mr. Trimble handed the trousers back. As a painstaking artisan in his chosen craft, he hated to turn out such a patchwork sort of job, but there was no arguing with that gun in Blackie Vain’s fingers.

BLACKIE VAIN climbed into the trousers and pulled up the zipper. He stared down critically at the new cuffs, then raised the gun toward Mr. Trimble.

“Come here, Pop,” he said.

“What-what for?” Mr. Trimble quavered. He didn’t like the hard glitter in Blackie Vain’s small eyes now. He didn’t like the way that gun pointed straight at his chest, either. “You—you’re not going to—”

“Come here!” thundered Blackie, and the gun jabbed toward Mr. Trimble.

Slowly, against the dictates of his frightened brain, Mr. Trimble’s spindly legs carried him toward the hard-eyed young hoodlum.

“For Heaven’s sake, man—” he began and stopped, choking for breath.

“Maybe,” said Blackie Vain, “you take me for a chump, Pop. Why do you suppose I went to all this trouble changin’ my outfit? So you could blab to the cops about what kind of clothes I changed into?”

“I—I won’t t-tell anybody,” Mr. Trimble said faintly.

Blackie Vain’s left hand slid forward and gripped the short-barreled gun firmly, butt outward, making a bludgeon of it.

“You bet,” he said. A crooked smile twisted his thin mouth. “You bet you won’t tell anybody.”

He lifted the gun sharply over his head, and snapped it down in a vicious arc aimed at Mr. Trimble’s bald forehead.

By now Mr. Trimble’s spindly knees were knocking and he knew he was on the verge of fainting. But the animal instinct to survive roiled up within him. He ducked sideward, felt the heavy gun

butt come crashing down on his bony shoulder. It sent a sharp spurt of pain through him. And in that moment something strange happened within Mr. Trimble.

Suddenly he was like a cornered rat, with all that animal's ferocity and back-to-the-wall courage. He reached out and tried to knock the gun out of Blackie Vain's fingers. The hoodlum snarled, jerking the weapon back. Relentlessly he raised it again.

Mr. Trimble put his bald head down and butted the man hard in the abdomen. He heard Blackie's breath wheeze out through agonized lips. Then the gun crashed down hard on Mr. Trimble's back. He plunged forward limply, feeling hot pains dart all through his frail body. He slammed against the screen, knocked it over, and landed on top of it with a bone-rattling thump.

Then he saw Monahan charging into the shop, spurred on by an angry, red-faced woman.

"Trimble!" roared Monahan. "This woman says—" He stopped and saw Mr. Trimble on the floor, saw Blackie Vain crouched above him. "Say, what in blue blazes is going on here?"

"You fool," yelled Mr. Trimble. "Watch out. It's Blackie—"

He looked back in time to see Blackie Vain's gun coming up quickly, the long barrel lining up with the policeman's chest. Monahan stood there with his mouth open, paralyzed by the swift turn of events.

Mr. Trimble lashed upward with one spindly leg and kicked Blackie's gun-arm upward just as the hoodlum squeezed the trigger. There was the splintering sound of lead crashing into the ceiling, then a guttural curse from Blackie Vain.

Monahan had finally remembered he was a policeman. His blue police positive was out, barking thunderously in his big hand. A tiny hole appeared in the new white shirt Mr. Trimble had provided for Blackie.

THE hoodlum choked and toppled forward. He grasped the counter, stumbled heavily against it, and slowly slid to the floor.

Monahan walked cautiously to him and

snatched the gun from his limp fingers. He shot a dazed glance toward Mr. Trimble.

"What gives? What was Blackie Vain doing here?"

Weakly, his sore back still smarting like tongues of fire, Mr. Trimble explained things. Monahan was still too excited to understand, completely.

"But this woman"—he waved at the woman, who stood wide-eyed against one wall of the room, breathing with difficulty—"she says you sewed up a rip in her purse and swiped a twenty-dollar bill out of it."

The woman said in a faltering voice, "Th-that's right, officer. I thought there was something queer going on, when he didn't charge me anything. Then when I looked, that money was missing."

Mr. Trimble sighed gently. "It's a new way to call a cop in a hurry, madam. Figure it out on your own time." He took a twenty-dollar bill from his vest pocket and handed it to the white-faced woman.

She hesitated. "I don't understand why—"

Monahan understood now. He interrupted her. "Run along, lady. Go on now." When she left, he closed and bolted the door against a gathering crowd of curiosity hounds. He said, "That was a pretty slick trick you pulled, Trimble. I ain't forgetting the way you kicked Vain's gun, neither."

Mr. Trimble's thin chest puffed out a little. He wasn't afraid of Monahan now. He had always pictured cops as burly, hard-hearted fellows whose chief function was to make trouble for people, as they once had for him. In the last few minutes he had seen that Monahan's real job was to protect him.

"You took your time getting here," he suggested shortly, looking Monahan right in the eye.

"What's happened to you all of a sudden?" gaped the cop. "Are you through bein' cop shy, Trimble?"

Mr. Trimble smiled inside. "Get that corpse out of here, Monahan," he said firmly. "I know my rights as a taxpayer."

"Sure," smiled Monahan, slightly deflated. "Sure, Mr. Trimble."