

*The stone throat of the statue of the blindfolded lady must have rumbled
with laughter when courtroom clowns turned the law into the . . .*

Fangs of Justice

By Hal Quincy

Author of "A Phantom Decree," etc.

THE thin man on the witness stand fumbled with the edge of his necktie. He had been Raynor's secretary and one of the two men present in the district attorney's house the night he'd been murdered.

I asked him: "The day Raynor was killed, didn't he tell you he had enough on the defendant to hang him?"

"Objection!" Sam Lubock, the defense lawyer, had leaped to his feet, thick-jowled face flooded with color.

"Sustained," snapped Judge Martin. He said it without even glancing at me.

That's how it had been all through the trial—Lubock making objections, the judge sustaining them. And this was supposed to be a court of justice. The lady outside, weighing scales in her hand, must have been laughing in her stone throat. Only there was nothing funny about it.

Lubock grinned and sat down beside his client.

I looked at the defendant, and a white sheet of fury blazed through me. There was no doubt in my mind that he had murdered my chief, District Attorney Raynor, the one man I had worshipped and respected.

Judged by certain standards, Frank Hauser was a success. He had made and kept three fortunes, had done it over the sweat and toil and blood of a hundred men. Night clubs, clip joints, slot machines, numbers, protective societies—anything that paid big dividends.

He was a slender man, smooth and oily, cold and deadly as a rattlesnake. He sat there,

smiling contemptuously, a stain on the community. Any time he pulled the strings a couple of politicians danced.

And then, quite suddenly, two months ago, a reform ticket had placed Dan Raynor in the district attorney's office. Dan Raynor was not for sale. Nobody had that kind of money. Alone, Raynor was not dangerous. But teamed with his special investigator, Tom Gahagan, they menaced the organization, the very existence of Hauser's machine.

Gahagan was all cop. Ploddingly, meticulously, he'd piled up the evidence against Hauser, enough to send the man to the gallows, and some half dozen big shots with him.

So of course Raynor had to go. The evidence had to be blown out of the safe. And Gahagan—well, that was the question. Where was Gahagan? The only man who could tie Hauser to this rap.

At the bottom of the river? Bought off? Hiding? I didn't know and it probably wouldn't do much good if I did.

Because this was one murder case that was fixed. Good and tight. Hauser was going to go scot free.

The jurors had been bought and paid for. I'd known that since the second day of the trial. What's more, Hauser was the man who'd hoisted Martin to the bench. And the judge was going to protect him even if he had to rewrite the rules of evidence. With Gahagan missing there wasn't anything I could do.

What I really wanted though, was to get Gahagan up there on the witness stand. I

wanted him to shout his testimony until the bailiffs dragged him from the chair. Sure, it wouldn't hang Hauser, but the spectators would hear it, the reporters would hear it, and maybe the world would learn what was going on in this beautiful city of ours.

You see, Gahagan had been in the district attorney's home that night Raynor was killed. He had been in another room but at the sound of the shot he'd caught a fleeting glimpse of the car as it had rocketed away down the street. He had recognized it as Hauser's.

But—Gahagan—was—missing—

I clenched my fists. Fifty grand! A hundred grand! That kind of money was chicken feed to Hauser. But it might turn the head of even a man like Gahagan.

I know. It had been offered to me. I was still weak from temptation. But if I'd ever accepted a bribe from Raynor's killer, it wouldn't have been much fun living with myself.

THE weapon that had smoked down Raynor had been tossed through the window of his study. It was an old Colt army automatic, millions of which had been manufactured, practically impossible to trace. It had already been introduced into evidence. I picked it up and showed it to the thin man on the witness stand.

"When you heard the shot and ran into the deceased's study, where did you find this gun?"

Raynor's secretary wet his lips, his eyes wandered to the floor. He said: "Mr. Raynor was holding it in his hand."

For a brief instant I was shocked into immobility. I just stood there, staring at him, completely stunned. A whisper rippled through the courtroom.

It had happened. They'd bought off Raynor's secretary. They were trying to show that the D. A. must have committed suicide. My own witness had boomeranged. And I was bound by his answers.

I guess what happened then was absolutely unprecedented. I saw red. My face was burning. I took a single step forward and sent my fist crashing full into his face.

Hell broke loose. Judge Martin started banging with his gavel. Sam Lubock was on his feet shouting. Two bailiffs were dragging me back. Hauser's mouth was warped by a thin smile. If I could have got my hands on him at that moment I would've choked the life out of him.

I waited for the judge to finish his scolding comments. I didn't apologize. I didn't say anything. I just stood there, licked, beaten, ready to give up the fight. And then, suddenly, there was a flurry in the rear of the courtroom.

I turned and the pulse started hammering against my temples. A tall figure, his hands pressed tightly against his sides, was walking in stiff-legged, jerky steps down the aisle.

Tom Gahagan. . . .

He didn't look at me. He didn't look at anybody. He went straight to the witness chair, gripped the arms and eased himself into it. His eyes were narrowed, his lips grim and colorless. He seemed tired, almost exhausted. Then his eyes found mine and I saw a thin sheen of oily perspiration standing out over his whole face.

Lubock vented an audible gasp. Hauser was staring pop-eyed. Both men looked dumbfounded, as if they'd paid Gahagan to go to Africa and were suddenly amazed to find him here. I knew then that they had never expected him to show up.

Excitement quickened my blood. Here was a chance to do something. If only Judge Martin didn't order the bailiffs to throw us both into the clink for contempt of court. I asked Gahagan a few preliminary questions and he answered them in short cryptic sentences. Then I picked up the old Colt army automatic and handed it to him.

"This is the People's exhibit one," I said. "Do you recognize it?"

He turned it over slowly in his hands. You could hear a watch ticking in the courtroom. All eyes were focused upon him. He opened it, peered into the empty chamber, then held it loosely in his lap. He looked up.

“Yes. This is the gun that killed Mr. Raynor.”

“Where were you when the shot was fired?”

Gahagan’s eyes met mine in a steady look. “I had just opened the door to Mr. Raynor’s study.”

THAT was a lie! I sucked in a sharp breath, waiting for Lubock’s objection. Gahagan hadn’t been near the study. But Lubock was biding his time. I knew then what was going through Gahagan’s mind. Probably he felt that if all the other witnesses were perjuring themselves for the defense, he could lie for the prosecution.

A thought struck me and suddenly my hands were clammy, like two lumps of cold dough. What if Gahagan had sold himself? What if he testified that he had seen Raynor commit suicide? Scarcely breathing I asked my next question.

“What did you see?”

Lubock and Hauser were both leaning tensely forward, watching Gahagan. Judge Martin sat stiffly at the bench. Gahagan’s eyes traveled along the counsel table and came to rest on Hauser. He said in a low voice:

“I saw Hauser standing at the window holding this gun in his hand, pointing it at Raynor, like this—”

And he lifted the gun, sighting along the dull barrel directly at the defendant. Hauser’s mouth sagged loosely and he stiffened in his chair. For once in his life I could see that Lubock was speechless. But his neck muscles were taut and he was getting ready to jump up.

For the moment, Gahagan’s play had caught everyone by surprise.

His eyes were opaque, like blank empty windows. A vein bulged in a blue diagonal across his forehead. His voice came out clearly, almost ringing:

“Hauser pulled the trigger—like—this—”

A shot exploded in the courtroom. And as I watched, a raw red-lipped hole suddenly jumped into the temple above the bridge of Hauser’s nose. A split-second of unbelief rioted across his face, then he toppled forward over the defense table.

A woman screamed, high and shrill. Spectators ducked under their seats. The jurymen cowered back against the rear of the jury box. Judge Martin held his gavel poised in midair. Lubock held a horror-stricken look upon his client.

Gahagan dropped the gun. It clattered to the floor. His face, the color of wax, was lighted by a smile, a strange triumphant smile. Unseen, he had slipped a shell into the automatic. I grabbed his arm and dug my fingers into it.

“They didn’t want me to testify,” he said in a dull voice. “They were holding me in a warehouse.”

“Good Lord, man! This is murder. You didn’t really see Hauser kill the D.A.”

Gahagan coughed. “No, but I saw him kill somebody else down in that warehouse this morning.”

I stared at him. “Who?”

“Me,” Gahagan whispered hoarsely.

And then he tumbled forward out of the witness chair in a half turn, sprawling to the floor on his back. He didn’t say anything more. I didn’t expect him to. For his coat had pulled open and in stark crimson relief against the white of his shirt was the jagged tear of a bullet hole.