

A Snitch in Time

By E. C. Marshall

Locked in a windowless room, in a secret building, this kidnaped magnate still found a dead sure way to trap his unknown captor.



MOUNTAINS pressed on his head. He could feel them distinctly. For awhile he had not even been able to feel. There had been only a great instant of utter fright and alarm as something black, short, and straight descended toward his eyes until it seemed like a plummet of doom growing frightfully in size. The plummet had blotted out everything. Consciousness was extinguished.

But there had been light. Flashes, like fitful bursts of lightning seen through murky fog. Flashes outlined against crushing masses of rock, thick, impenetrable, massive. Perhaps the mountains that closed him in were made of rock. Only rock could be that heavy.

A thin gleam of light split the blackness. Only this time it was not a visiting gleam. The light stayed. No matter how he strained his eyeballs behind their lids the light remained constant, steady, unwavering. Eternal as the weight on his head.

Could he move? A part of him was in motion. He was not dead. His heart was beating. Experimentally he tried to wriggle his toes. They crisped up and down, cramped by the shoes he wore. But they had moved.

His body? It was not easy. The mountains imprisoning his head seemed to have rooted themselves about his middle. Where were his arms? He could not feel

them. Had they been cut off, removed as the climax of some surgical operation?

A wave of hideous fear swept him, as the implication of the phrase "surgical operation" burst on his brain like a bombshell. Trembling he tried to sit up.

His head and shoulders came up in a swift, forward motion as, caught in the grip of panic, he suddenly exerted every muscle, every nerve. The split second of action seemed a hundred years.

The mountains, weight and all, vanished as his arms and hands which had been covering his eyes fell with a thud to the floor. His eyes came open.

He rose to his feet in a small, brightly lit room, took a step forward, stumbled, fell full length. In an instant he was again on his feet, violently shaking the man over whose prone body he had fallen.

The other came awake slowly, eyes opening with a sort of puzzled horror, then rapidly taking in his surroundings.

"Where are we?" The first man poked a finger at the walls.

"Blessed if I know, Martin." The other rose to his feet, brushed himself, took a quick look at the room.

"Whoever it was got us in the car must have hidden in the back seat." Martin rubbed the back of his head. "The last thing I can remember is turning into Market Street. Then. . .

"Yeah, I got it too." His companion was rubbing his head.

"Bryant!" Martin grasped his right arm violently. "The conference! It's tomorrow!

We've got to sign the contract. Or"—he paused—"maybe today is 'tomorrow'." He looked at his wrist watch. It was still running. Ten minutes past two. They'd started out from their office at noon. How long. . .

Bryant looked at his own watch. He shook his head. "No telling how long. Might be twelve hours, either way."

Martin took a step toward him. "But we've got to—"

"We'll get out," the other asserted grimly. "Let's look around."

There wasn't much to look at. The room was small, possibly ten feet wide by fifteen long, windowless. Its ceiling was low, no more than eight feet from the floor. The only break in the concrete walls was a metal door at one end of the room's length. One look at the door convinced both men of the futility of trying to break through it without tools. Solid, of the regulation fire door type, its fastenings were on the other side. There was no handle or knob visible.

The light in the ceiling burned on. They were grateful for it. Without it, both knew they might have gone mad. Time passed slowly, heavily. Hunger began to grow on them. A panic took hold of Bryant. At first cool, almost assured, he began to fidget, stir, mutter to himself.

Only his voice broke the silence. There was no other noise. As time passed, something else in the room started to oppress Martin. He did not know what it was or even imagine what it could be. He only knew that at length his mouth was parched, his stomach screaming for food, and his body trembling from head to foot.

AS the hands on both their watches touched five o'clock, the lights went out. There was an instant of complete silence, while neither of them breathed. Then a slit of light appeared in the far wall

as the door began to swing back. Just a slit which vanished as the light behind it went out.

Martin tensed himself for a spring, strained through the darkness for the vanished gleam. He leaped forward, collided with a heavy body, flung his arms outward in wild slashes. Behind him came Bryant, fighting desperately forward.

The pair pressed ahead for a moment or two, while great, muscled arms tried to restrain them. With a grunting heave they were flung back, while the beam of a flashlight flared momentarily. Martin heard a ponderous step advancing toward him, shrunk back against the nearest wall, side by side with his companion.

Again the black rod of doom loomed from behind the light, came up at him like a thundercloud, swerved and smashed into the back of his head.

Rough hands woke him next. He wearily opened the eyes in his aching head to find the room again ablaze with light. The figure that had been shaking him rose, stepped back, leveled a gun. Martin glanced at it through bleared eyes. It was nothing extraordinary. Just a man in a blue serge business suit—masked and armed. Painfully, Martin got to his feet, stood swaying. The only thing he could think to do was to look at his watch.

Its hands showed six o'clock.

"Do you know where you are?" The words came thickly through the mask, tones muffled by layers of cloth. As it spoke the figure with the gun moved backward slightly, toward the fire door.

Martin fell against the wall, remained there breathing with difficulty. He looked up, grimaced.

"Maybe you'd like to tell me," he grated.

The figure chuckled. The muzzle of the gun moved into line with Martin's middle.

“Why not? No harm in telling you now. Too late for you to do anything about it.” The figure paused. “You’re twenty stories above ground, in a concrete storeroom. In precisely what building is none of your business. The walls of this room are two feet thick. Beyond it are others—and other men. Escape is impossible. No one can hear you. There is no one who knows you are here.”

Martin cocked his head. That strange impression again, in the absolute silence. Was it sound, smell—or what? He couldn’t think.

“What are you going to do with me!” he asked slowly.

“For the present, nothing. You’ll be fed, of course. Later—another blow on the head, possibly fatal this time. . .”

Martin leaped. Every ounce of power in his not-inconsiderable body was behind it. He was weak, nauseous, but in that leap was the strength of desperation.

The gun fired, once, twice. Both bullets went wild. A third hit the light bulb. Then Martin’s fists were smashing against the figure’s chin. An instant later he had flung open the door, closed and locked it behind him, whirled to the left and dashed down a long passageway. At its end was an ordinary door. Trembling he laid his hand on the knob, pulled it toward him.

The soft glow of evening fell past the flight of steps that led from the basement in which he had been imprisoned and bathed his upturned face. Then swiftly and rubbing his head, Martin walked up the steps, emerged onto a well-known and busy street corner in a residential neighborhood and hailed a taxi. Noting the time by a clock in a store window he was hurried downtown to make an appointment he had almost missed.

THAT evening at his and Bryant’s club, Martin surveyed the circle of men who sat about the large table in one of the establishment’s famous private chambers.

They were his partners now, he reflected, for better or worse, in a giant enterprise created just in time to save him from utter ruin. All partners. Jackson, the city’s greatest banker; Hopkins, wealthy industrialist; Bryant, his own business partner who had separately managed to escape from an adjoining cell shortly after Martin trapped their captor in the original cell; Goldwater, eminent research chemist; Schroeder, affluent philanthropist; and Fownes, least known of the group, mysterious, supplied with money no one knew from where.

Martin lit a cigarette, flicked an ash from his lapel. For some moments now the assembled company had been waiting for him to speak. They were expectant, wondering why this additional meeting had been called after the conference earlier in the evening.

Schroeder poured himself a glass of water from the carafe on the table, turned quizzical eyes on Martin. “Well?” he demanded, abruptly.

“Someone in this room is a criminal, a kidnaper.” Martin’s eyes shifted purposely about the circle of faces. “Bryant and I were removed to keep us from signing that contract. It has to be one of us, for only in this group could exist the necessary motives.”

Goldwater giggled nervously, then fell silent, chewing the ends of his mustache.

The others looked at Martin with apprehension. A tension began rising in the room, charged and supercharged with fear. And Martin talked:

“It’s very simple, really. Bryant and I were slugged from the back seat of my car. We woke up in the place we told you

about. It was a very silent place. The man who kidnaped us told me that the room was twenty stories above the ground. That was merely a lie. The walls were damp, not wet, but damp enough to have to be located underground. Although nothing could be heard, the vibration of passing trucks shook the walls. Not noticeably, not obviously. That's why I knew that beyond the fire door lay a street and people, not more concrete and then empty air.

"And your kidnaper?" Fownes' voice was pointed. His flat, spatulate finger coiled and uncoiled. The atmosphere thickened.

"He had a motive—a good one. Delaying the conference for many days by keeping me a prisoner, making it necessary at last to go on without my signature would have ruined me, without ruining him. A lot of money was involved. Millions, as you all know.

"There is of course only one such man. He was in that room with me and he hadn't been there more than two minutes before I knew who he was, knew because something about him identified him immediately. His confederate had brought me there. It was he who opened the door after Bryant and I first awakened."

Schroeder thoughtfully knocked ashes from his cigar. "You knew your kidnaper?"

Martin smiled grimly. "Let's say rather that I knew the man who paid him to do his work—the second man in the room, the man with the mask. He was the real criminal. Dressed in a nondescript suit, muffled, absolutely disguised beyond recognition, except for one thing, his watch."

Across the table nonchalant hands poured a glass of water, dropped a pellet within the glass, unobserved. Martin's voice went on, inexorably:

"The room was silent. But there were sounds. My breathing. His. The tick of that watch sounded loudest of all. And I knew what it was, when I'd heard it the second time—a big, old-fashioned dollar watch, the kind one of us uses from eccentricity.

"A watch worn in the vest pocket of a man who had been with me in that room once before. A man who was an hour and a half late for the conference, because I locked him in the concrete room. He couldn't get out until his hireling had come and enabled him to change back to the clothes he wore when he'd stretched himself out beside me feigning unconsciousness. He'd had a gun too, a .38."

Martin plucked a lead slug from a vest pocket and threw it down on the table.

"His third shot, the one that shattered the light bulb fell into my coat pocket after it had hit the ceiling. You all know who uses the watch I've described, but only I know who owns a .38 pistol on a permit. It should be fairly easy to check the markings on the slug if he'll surrender the gun—now. As for the watch, you can hear it ticking right now, even in this room, if you listen hard enough."

Bryant's head fell forward. His eyes, bulging with the poison he'd drunk, stared hideously in the glare of death. Then the body slipped sidewise and dropped like a sack of wet flour. As it hit the floor a shiny object spun from a vest pocket and shattered.

A dollar watch.