



*He thrust something long and hard against the man's back*

## Hack Ride

*Taxi driver Stitch Dwyer knew his New York—Broadway and underworld alike; but he needed more than knowledge when he took the Big Shot for a ride*

*By WILLIAM CORCORAN*

STITCH DWYER rolled his Scarlet Tanager taxicab gently along the curb to a precise spot ten feet from the canopied Seventh Avenue entrance of the sporty Hotel Alhambra. He shut off the motor, sat back, and grinned. The imposing young functionary in gold braid and robin's egg blue looked at Stitch, set his military cap at a slightly more jaunty angle with the tips of white-gloved fingers, and grinned back.

"Morning, admiral," said Stitch. "How's business?"

"Booming," said the taxi starter. "The big boy's in town."

"The big boy? Hands Starbeau?"

"In the flesh, cowboy. And he's scattering sawbucks right and left." The starter drew a small wad of five and ten dollar bills from his pocket and flashed it before the driver's avid eyes. Then he came closer, to lean toward the cab.

"You might get a break, kid," he said confidentially. "Hands always pours himself out of the hotel around this time of the day and heads for a bar. The bookings is slow just now. You might land him, with luck."

"Him and what else?" Stitch countered skeptically. "A little spraying with a Tommy gun, maybe?"

The other instantly donned an air of superior dignity as he might a cloak. He shrugged. "If Hands Starbeau ever asked himself that question he'd still be fighting prelims at the local clubs."

"One of these days that might seem a pretty good idea," said Stitch dryly.

The starter looked at him. "Where did you get all the tall millinery, boy? You hacking for pleasure these days or for the money? Besides, whose funeral is it?"

"I'd rather not be along when they find that out," said Stitch with a quick grin. "And I'm still behind a wheel for the money it brings, such as it is. I got to meet a two hundred dollar payment on the rig to-morrow, and only a hundred and a half in the sock. Money? Man, you don't know!" He looked at the starter and said resignedly, "Heck, bring on your machine guns. I got an insurance premium due soon, too. Maybe I won't have to pay that."

The starter shrugged a shrug that was eloquent with aloofness from such sordid details. Stitch watched him in wry humor as he strolled back to his post. That guy was plenty on the strut. Feeling superior even to machine guns this morning. What marvels a little easy money performed—took dopes like this and made them kings for a day, swaggering over domains that ran in size from a sand lot to a city. Well, the Thompson gun was a great

invention. It put out kings the way the fire department put out fires: by turning on the pressure. Short and sweet.

Stitch Dwyer did not disdain money. He had too abiding a need for it. The payment on his expensive Scarlet Tanager cab must somehow be met to-morrow, and Stitch had every intention of acquiring the necessary balance by one means or another. His plans were vague and beset with limitations, and the limitations were four: one swell wife and three grand kids.

They often came to mind when Stitch tossed a half dollar into a hat Fridays at the garage, contributing toward the maintenance of Tom Murchison's storm-tossed family. Tom Murchison had gone careless some months back in a small matter of secondhand, though unused, tires. He would be out again, with good behavior, in eleven months. Stitch had no wish to set up a Dwyer family hat alongside the Murchison.

Stitch was not careless. He worked and watched his chances and kept his conscience from growing either too hard or too elastic, and he let no dollar slip that was fairly within his grasp.

A RATHER stunning young woman sauntered out of the hotel entrance beneath the canopy. She was blond and vividly handsome, and she wore a dark blue tailored suit with a white fox collar. She looked pleased with herself and in no hurry whatever. Stitch watched her, alert to move.

The starter blew a whistle blast loud enough to summon a cab ten blocks away. Stitch rolled the Tanager forward. He allowed no disappointment over Starbeau to disturb him. Women were hard ones to read, but this one

might be a generous rider. It was all in the game.

The starter relayed the orders to Stitch, and as he did so he winked with urgent significance. Stitch only understood the spoken message, "Move up and park for a while; the lady wishes to wait."

Stitch moved the taxi a dozen feet clear of the hotel entrance, then looked back in wonder at the now aloof starter. Something was up, but there was no explanation.

The young woman leaned forward from her seat in the cab. "Big boy," she said in a voice assured and brittle and clear, "I want a match."

Stitch looked at her as he pulled out a pack of matches and handed them through the window. She was as smooth and full of class as Dresden china—and hard as diamonds. Knew what she wanted, and was accustomed to getting it on demand. She smiled at him, and he grinned back. They understood each other. They were both out for what they could get, and each was comfortably aware that there was precious little to be had from the other.

The mid-morning spring sun made the city radiant all about them; it gleamed brightly on the starter's gilded magnificence, and he surveyed the avenue, northward as far as Central Park, southward toward Times Square, with complacent awareness of his value in the decorative scheme.

It was an opulent scene, a panorama of toplofty hotels and apartments, expensive shops, and very swank automobiles. It afforded a smooth and polished front for the activities which went on with much less ostentation along water fronts and narrow, darkened streets, and which in greater part supported it.

Here was the realm of the big-shot racketeer: a latter-day Field of the Cloth of Gold which no amount of sunlight ever rendered the less shady.

Stitch Dwyer quickly concentrated on his job as a man issued from the hotel at a lope and headed for the cab, the starter leaping to open the door before him. A glance identified the man. Stitch had glimpsed him before. Hands Starbeau.

Young, hard, handsome, well tailored, powerful. Inevitably sinister, yet inevitably likable in a forthright, lusty way. The hands that had gained him his nickname were characteristic: beautifully shaped, but brutally enormous and strong. Dark tales were whispered of things he had done with those hands.

Starbeau made plenty of money in many devious ways, and he feared nothing, which was fortunate, for actually he had much to fear just now. It was common gossip in the papers that his extinction was due as soon as his enraged rivals could get the jump on him. So far, despite several attempts, they had failed. He was a strange man, Hands Starbeau, foolhardy yet shrewd, ruthless yet sentimental.

Stitch Dwyer knew he was in luck to have Starbeau for a fare. What kind of luck, remained to be seen. Good or bad, it would scarcely be mediocre—it would be good or bad with a bang.

Starbeau flung himself into the cab and sat back with a groan. "Get going!" he roared. "Goddlemighty, if I don't get a whisky sour inside me—Roll your hoop there, skipper. Forty-seventh, west of Broadway."

"Why don't you stop with me at Tony's?" suggested the woman. "I'm in no hurry."

"I am, sweetheart," he told her,

"—to get rid of you. Scram! I got things to do."

The woman was not offended. "My, your temper's sweet, mornings!"

"There's only one woman in ten," he said emphatically, "that should be seen in the morning. And she should be seen and not heard."

"Really?" She smiled. "What about the other nine?"

"They oughtn't even be alive!" He groaned again. "Jeez, I'm telling you if that wasn't mange cure and carbolic I drank last night—"

"You *would* drink it, darling!" she reminded him. She continued to smile with amused malice. He made not so much as a dent in her armor. Listening, Stitch Dwyer nodded to himself in admiration of her prowess.

THE address on Forty-seventh Street was a small hotel catering to a transient, semitheatrical trade. There was no doorman. Stitch jumped from the seat and held open the cab door himself. Somewhat to his surprise, Hands Starbeau emerged first, hangover and all, and escorted the girl to the entrance.

There was mockery and something close to sarcasm in the farewell Hands bestowed upon the young woman. And just perceptible in her eyes was faint surprise and calculation, veiled behind smiling good nature. Starbeau held her hand and bowed, his hat swept low, his voice suddenly gentle, his sufferings for the moment forgotten.

She was now anxious to go inside. "I'll expect you to call me later then?" she said.

"Sure as shooting, sweetheart."

"I'll be waiting," she added.

"I suppose you will, darling."

She attempted to withdraw her hand. "Don't forget, sugar!"

Hands maintained his grip. "Not for the world," he told her, grinning. "But you forgot something. You didn't tell me where I could find you."

"Why—" she said, taken off her guard. "Where do you think? Here, of course."

"Oh, no, honey." His voice was soft, his eyes bright and hard. "No, you won't—not with all that money to move out on. Suppose you fork over that wallet so I can be sure to find you here."

She looked at him steadily, a half smile on her face. Their eyes met for a moment without wavering. Then she shrugged slightly, amusedly, and opened her purse. She took out a pocket bill fold of pin seal. It bulged with treasury notes. She held it out to Hands, and there was a mocking, unabashed light in her blue eyes.

Hands chuckled as he stowed the bill fold safely away. "Next time, look out for the mirrors in a strange room before trying that, darling," he advised her. "I learned that playing cards."

"I'll remember," she said.

"So long, baby. I had a good time. I'll give you a ring some day."

And he was back in the cab with a dive, roaring fluently profane orders to the driver. Stitch Dwyer took off immediately with eyebrows elevated in pleasure—nay, in delight.

Their destination was a speakeasy on Fifty-fourth Street. It was a little old brownstone house with blind windows and a lattice gate in the area-way. The gate was wide open, and Hands hastened inside, leaving orders for Stitch to wait. The orders were welcome: the longer the ride, the larger the reward. Stitch had been won over to approval of this ride, and he tried to estimate the big man's probable generosity.

Fifty bucks—that was the goal. A lot of money, even though the day was young. Far too much ever to be earned by straight hacking. Riders had fixed in their minds the curious idea that a ride with many stops was somehow much more laborious than an equally long ride with but a single stop. They always tipped lavishly on such occasions. And Hands Starbeau, so far as the meter went, was just another rider in the day's work. Fifty bucks. Well, Stitch would get it some way if he had to stay on the street the round of the clock.

A MAN came out of the speakeasy and paused in the areaway to light a cigar. He stepped to the sidewalk and looked up the street, then down the street, then idly at his cigar. He advanced to the cab and stared over the cigar at Stitch. He was a lean, lantern-jawed man with a cold, dark eye.

"Where'd you pick up the ride?" the man demanded.

"What ride? Who?"

"Hands."

Stitch paused warily. "My orders didn't include talking," he told the man. "Why don't you ask Hands himself?"

"I did," the man replied surprisingly. "But Hands is riding high. He's on a bender, and this ain't the time for it. He won't listen to reason. You been places with him?"

Stitch shook his head reassuringly. "Picked him up at his hotel. Him and some babe of his. Dropped the girl and come here. That's all I know."

"I see," said the man. He stared at Stitch appraisingly. "There's things liable to happen any minute to-day. I'm giving you a steer. Don't you drink with him. Keep your eyes open. Head him away from the speaks.

Stick by him till he's among his own boys."

"Oh, yeah?" said Stitch. He paused. "I don't especially want this job anyway, brother."

"Yes, you do."

"I don't think so. In fact—"

"Think twice, friend," the man said softly.

Stitch followed the suggestion. It seemed wise. "Things" could happen, did happen every day, even to lowly taxi drivers. Besides, there was the money.

"Well," said Stitch, "if you feel that way about it!"

"I don't feel no way," the man snarled softly. "I'm telling *you* how to feel."

"O. K.!" agreed Stitch quietly, returning the other's stare.

The man flicked an ash from the cigar, grunted, then turned about and strolled back into the speakeasy.

When Hands Starbeau came out half an hour later he had successfully rid himself of the hangover. He was in a rolling, jovial mood; he was all the world's big brother, albeit a reckless and embarrassing relative to have around. He plucked open the cab door with one bone-crushing hand, then paused to thrust his large, square-jawed face into the driver's compartment and fix Stitch with his icy-blue gaze.

"How much gas you got, skipper?" he roared.

"Tank full," said Stitch.

"You'll need it," Starbeau assured him, grinning. "Give her the gun. Up Broadway and to the devil with the cops. We're going places." He launched himself into the taxi and the door closed with a thunderous slam.

Stitch left the curb with a most satisfactory roar of exhaust and a sprint-



er's start. The last he saw of the speakeasy was a cold, hard eye in the doorway giving them a darkly significant stare just above a glowing cigar.

Starbeau was right. They went places. And then on to more places. They stopped at a bank while Hands obtained additional cash. The wallet now bulged like a Christmas turkey. Stitch gulped to think of its contents, and of his need on the morrow. Then he passed through a moment of severe illness as he thought of the added dynamite in the wallet. If anybody were to corner Hands Starbeau to-day, he'd have a rich haul. That guy with the cigar had no need to advise Stitch how to feel. He was only human and fully attuned to his problem.

But shining like a dark star before him was the thought—fifty bucks! Fifty bucks to go, and ten grand at least in the cab behind him. Stitch Dwyer shot his cab through the droning traffic like a comet through the Milky Way.

**T**HEY visited a real estate office on north Manhattan which had every appearance of doing no real estate business whatever, and thriving on it.

They called briefly at a warehouse on the Harlem River near One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street.

They visited a lawyer's office close by the Bronx County Courthouse.

And constantly they visited speak-easies. There seemed to be one always within two minutes' drive from whatever spot they happened to occupy at the moment Starbeau was overtaken with a thirst. It was at one of these that their flying tour of the city came to a brief pause. And it was here that Stitch was given a real hint of the seriousness of his job.

Stitch was invited inside for a drink, but he declined. At each such stop a similar invitation had been offered and declined. Stitch felt safer outside. Starbeau certainly knew the interiors of these places better than he, but no one knew the streets before them better than Stitch. He settled into the seat behind the idle motor and gave himself over to a scrutiny of the scene about and periodic glances at the clicking taximeter. The latter already had passed four dollars and was pleasant to contemplate.

They were in a mean neighborhood of coal yards and produce houses and dingy tenements. People of unintelligible tongues crowded the sidewalks, their lusty offspring racing among stolid peasant legs. There were only a few other vehicles on the cobble-paved block.

A dapper youth emerged suddenly from the speakeasy, which was no more than a cheap barroom with a tiny tobacco shop in front for a blind. The young man glanced quickly up and down the street, then set out at a fast walk for the distant corner. There was a definiteness of purpose in his gait that caused Stitch to frown as he watched.

Then Stitch observed a second man also watching. The second man was a middle-aged, worried-looking South European with a rolled-up apron about his middle. He remained in the speakeasy doorway as though fearful of being seen by the departing patron. Stitch bent his attention on this second figure.

The second man abruptly gathered courage and hastened to the taxi. He leaned within. "You with Hands Starbeau?" he asked. "Please, you come and get him. You take him away fast."

"I'm with him," said Stitch, "but

he ain't with me. I can't do anything. What's the matter?"

"That fellow," said the proprietor, worriedly, indicating the disappearing young man. "You know? Hands is alone. He should not be alone. I don't want him in my place alone."

A slight shiver traveled down Stitch Dwyer's spine. He shot a glance at the young man's swiftly vanishing back. The purposefulness in that hasty stride became purely sinister. Stitch moved in the seat.

"You get along inside," he curtly told the older man. "I'll be in after you. I'll see what I can do."

The older man scuttled apprehensively back to his bar.

**S**TITCH found Hands Starbeau rolling dice on the bar with a pair of suave, genial men whose somewhat flashily expensive appearance was at odds with the poverty of these surroundings. He was all a-grin and very much at home, and he was winning. He wielded the five dice in the cup like a pitcher warming up.

"Come on, you Indian dice!" pleaded Hands—or perhaps commanded. He rolled them and yelled, "Four threes in one! A leg apiece and a roll to go. Come on, you box cars. Any fives tie." He threw the dice again and exulted, "Five in two and a tie! Horse and horse and one flop takes the money. I follow my roll." He churned the dice in the leather cup, praying for luck.

The others watched, quietly amused, unperturbed. Hands spun the little cubes down the length of the bar with a grunt of expectation. Eyes swiftly assayed the throw. Starbeau smacked the bar with a mighty palm.

"Five sixes in one!" he roared in exultation. "Freight train on a clear track. Beat that if you can!"

The opponent made his throw, a hopeless one, and lost; and Hands beamed and picked up the money on the bar. He ordered drinks and advised the others to bring their rabbits' feet along next time. Then he suddenly noticed Stitch. He gave an inquiring look, glass half raised to his lips.

"The girl's getting impatient, boss," Stitch quietly told him.

"Yeah?" said Hands. His eyes probed Stitch, but neither his voice nor his face betrayed mystification. "What the devil about?"

"Said she's tired sitting in the cab, waiting. Wants you to come on."

Hands grunted a loud disgust with women's ways, looked at his drink, then tossed it down. He flung a bill on the bar for the drinks, slapped one of the gamblers on the back in hearty farewell, and walked out of the room belligerently—fully determined, by all the signs, to raise a little trouble with his impatient, if mythical, companion. Stitch quietly followed.

Starbeau restrained his curiosity until Stitch Dwyer had raced the taxi out of the neighborhood. Then he sat forward on the folding seat with his head through the window and demanded explanation.

"The boss of the joint tipped me off, that's all," said Stitch. "A guy pulled out just after you went in. He was on his way to rat on you."

"What d'you know about guys rattin' on me?" Starbeau asked suspiciously.

"Heck, I read the papers!" said Stitch.

Hands grunted sourly. "O. K.," he said. "I knew something was up and I couldn't inquire for details in there. Anyway, I was due to pull out. Those boys were set to rim me. The cards are my dish, but the bones I never had

any business touching." He ruminated for a moment. Suddenly he ordered, "Pull up at that drug store ahead. I got some phoning to do."

Stitch left the cab and strolled into the drug store while Hands was in a booth telephoning. He bought a pack of cigarettes and then lighted one leisurely close by the booth. Hands's voice rose in the latter part of the conversation and was clearly audible.

"The devil I will!" he roared. "Who's running things, you or me? I took care of myself when you were snatching apples . . . What do I care? That rotten bunch of bog-trotters won't overtake me till I pass out of old age." He listened for a long minute, then added decisively, "Listen, bozo. You'll wait and you'll like it, see? Never mind where I am. Go on back to your dominoes and I'll be along when I'm good and ready. So long!"

He slammed down the receiver and burst forth, leaving the phone booth rocking on its foundations. "Come on, skipper," he ordered. "We ain't half started yet."

Stitch followed him outside with a resigned sense of the inevitable.

**H**ANDS STARBEAU seemed very successfully to be combining business and pleasure. For an interval they stopped at obscure establishments uptown where Hands made plunging entry and roaring departure, wasting no time. Starbeau's heavy cargo of liquor began to show on him, for all his enormous strength, and there came a slight glaze on his eyes and an occasional thickness in his rapid-fire speech. But his vitality, though no longer so well directed, failed to diminish.

They completed their business uptown, and then drove to the lower end

of Manhattan Island. Their destination was hard by the great transatlantic piers on the West Side. Stitch judged from the peace within the cab during the ride down town that their tour of the city was nearing its end.

He took a route that led him down Broadway to Times Square, and from thence on down Seventh Avenue. A few blocks below Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village he slowed for a right turn, stopped, then cut a course around the dead traffic, which was halted by the control lights.

The traffic officer on post at the crossing waved clearance for him. As the cab turned into the street, Stitch leaned out and raised a hand in salute. The policeman grinned in genial reply and called, "How's the hacking, Stitch?"

Then the taxi was in the cross street and Stitch sent it speeding toward the Hudson.

The address he sought proved to be an ancient tenement building in an advanced stage of decay. At least so it was in appearance. But a second glance revealed that while every window was dark and dust-lined, there were a number of small but active ventilator fans twirling inconspicuously on the front of the building. And Hands Starbeau's ready admittance, when he rang the bell in the small area, proved it anything but deserted.

Stitch Dwyer sat back in the seat with an uneasy feeling. He took out a cigarette. He glanced at the meter. The face now registered nine dollars and eighty cents. They had been rolling for hours, mile after mile. Hunger stirred in Stitch. Worry stirred in him.

The clock ticked on imperturbably by his ear, but Stitch Dwyer was far from comfortable. And he could in no way account for that feeling of im-



pending disaster, so much like the staring of an invisible, unblinking eye.

Then all at once Stitch was fully aware of the cause. It rested in a car parked against the curb farther along the street. It was a heavy, dark sedan, powerful and fast. The sedan faced west, whereas Stitch had turned the Scarlet Tanager about to head toward Seventh Avenue. In the sedan were four men, silent, immobile, watching.

They watched no one definite object; they observed everything. Next Stitch discovered that they were not actually silent; that they talked with each other in curt, tense syllables out of hard, motionless lips.

There was nothing to indicate who they were or what absorbed them so. But Stitch needed nothing. He sat still, staring through narrowed eyelids, his face expressionless. Beside him, the taximeter gave a small complacent *chung!* and the figures read ten dollars, even money!

Ten dollars; forty bucks to go. And on the quiet street, four grim, hard men in a fast black sedan. The hackles of Stitch Dwyer came erect, and a cold, unearthly wind blew over his soul.

ONE of the four got out of the sedan. He was short, heavy, dark. He stood for a second beside the car, then walked across the street toward the house with the black dusty windows. His gaze rested on cab and driver, and the pupils were like polished black marble. For a moment the eyes hovered, then went elsewhere. The man walked to the old house and stepped into the areaway.

Stitch stirred in the seat. He took out a cigarette, dropped it, and retrieved it. He came out of the compartment awkwardly, backward, stretched as he stood erect, and con-

sulted his watch. He wound the stem a little, put the watch away, tossed the cigarette into the gutter, and walked to the areaway where the man stood awaiting a response to the ring on the bell. The iron grille gate to the place was out of sight of the black sedan.

Stitch walked up to the short man, thrust against the man's back something long and hard that was concealed in his coat pocket, and spoke curtly. "Hold everything, you rat. One move and you take it in the spine."

The man gave a sharp start, then gained immediate control. He betrayed no further surprise. He turned his head to look into Dwyer's face with a gaze of infinite hate.

"You'll take it in every bone in your body, mug!"

Stitch Dwyer's left hand snapped upward and struck the man across the face. The man stepped backward with a quick intake of breath. Stitch pressed after him, boring into his body with the long hard object gripped in his coat pocket.

"My turn now, rat," he snarled. "Play up or you get it. Where d'you keep the heat?"

Stitch ran his left hand over the man's body. He found a blunt .45 automatic in a shoulder holster and confiscated it. There was no other weapon. Stitch slid the automatic into his left coat pocket and held it there, trained on the man; he withdrew his right hand.

"You and I are asking for Hands Starbeau," he told the man. "When he comes out we're walking with him to my cab. If anything is turned loose, you get it first. Get that?"

The man's face was a choked red. He was forced to nod acknowledgment.

"All right," said Stitch. "Here

comes the guy. Don't forget to say your piece."

The short man spoke his piece as directed, when the portly doorman of this elaborately disguised resort peered through the grille. The latter promptly drew the gate open, but the pair in the area declined to enter.

"Tell Starbeau to come out a minute," the short man said. "We'll wait."

The guardian of the door hastened off to deliver the message. They waited. Presently they could hear Starbeau's voice inside, raised in loud inquiry. Dissatisfied with the information furnished, Hands finally agreed to obey the summons. He loomed out of the darkness in the entry hall on rolling gait and peered at his visitors. Neither Stitch nor the short man spoke.

"Harry!" Starbeau said sharply in recognition. His gaze was befogged, his coördinations ragged; he was drunk. Uncertainty visited him. He betrayed no fear whatever, but he was unable to command the situation.

"What d'you want?" he demanded. "What's the devil's up?" He stared a moment, then roared suddenly, "Talk, damn you! What d'you want?"

Stitch sent his glance roving all about. Then smoothly he withdrew the .45 and presented it so that it covered both the short man and Starbeau.

"Come out of there, Hands," he ordered. "This lad just probably can't talk. We're pulling out of here."

The meaning clicked a second too late in Starbeau's brain: He began an abortive move for his own gun; but he was not so far gone in liquor as to misread the circumstances. Stitch had the drop. Starbeau did not touch his weapon. He stared at the two with red eyes for a long moment, and then

as the automatic waved gently in insistence, he stalked out of the doorway. Within, the portly guardian of the gate was revealed in a paralyzed state of terror.

"TAKE it easy!" Stitch snapped at both his prisoners. To the short man he added, "Follow my play, rat."

The short man followed the play. The three of them sauntered out of the area into full view of the black sedan. Hands Starbeau, sullen, viciously submissive for the moment, went first. Command of his faculties was returning, restored by the shock of danger, more severe than a cold plunge.

The short man followed, and Stitch walked close. No one said a word. The sinister gaze of the three in the sedan was like something that reached out and touched them. They crossed the sidewalk to the cab. Hands Starbeau shot a hot, calculating glance at Stitch. Stitch winked.

"Get in there, Starbeau—fast!" he said. "And don't pull your gat as you go. You'll have better use for it later."

Several things clicked rapidly this time in Starbeau's brain. The quick wink. The fact that his driver had not taken his gun from him. The fact that he was pretty drunk. Hands dived into the cab.

Up the street a suspicious watcher was emerging from the dark sedan. Stitch came close to the short, heavy man. He looked at him and took a deep breath, his lips compressing thinly. Then Stitch's body suddenly pivoted, his right fist flashed up to clip the heavy man cleanly on the button—and he completed the body swing by diving headlong for the driver's seat of the cab. Stitch was behind the wheel before the short heavy man, who had

not uttered a sound, hit the sidewalk. The Scarlet Tanager leaped from the curb with a throbbing thunder of exhaust. Nothing barred the way; it tore with smoking tires up the street toward Seventh Avenue. The driver of the black sedan was in frantic motion, getting his heavy car started. The Scarlet Tanager flew past the sedan.

Hands Starbeau was shouting through the window. "I see the play now, kid! For God's sake, get out of here! They carry Thompsons!"

The Scarlet Tanager was close to the avenue. South and north the traffic rolled along; south and north the control lights shone green for clearance. Against the Tanager a red eye glowed, denying movement.

Behind them the black sedan climbed sidewalks as it swung about in the narrow street, engine roaring.

Like a torpedo taking to water the Scarlet Tanager shot out from the street into the busy avenue. It careened through an instant snarl of traffic which formed to an accompaniment of shrieking brakes and yells of indignation. By a miracle no collision followed. The cop on duty whirled to investigate the sudden alarm. Stitch forced a clear path to the cop's side. The officer was purple of face.

"What the devil?" he demanded furiously. "Stitch, you fool—"

"Give me a pinch, Steve," said Stitch, curtly. "Get me out of here. Jump on. Let's get going."

The cop stared.

"A pinch? Go where?"

"To the house, Steve. You're pulling me in, get me? If you don't want it—"

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the cop. His eyes hardened. "Heck, if that's what you want, you've got it! Get going."

3 A

He stepped on the running board. Furiously he waved the bewildered snarl of traffic to disperse from their path. The Tanager throbbed and moved.

And at the crossing, blocked by a jam of vehicles, the black sedan panted in frustration while within the car three wrathful men cursed to the heavens with all the inventiveness they could summon. In front of the house with the blind windows the short heavy man was picking himself up from the sidewalk in a staggering daze.

THE Scarlet Tanager came to a stop in a quiet block sufficiently far from the scene of the disturbance. There Stitch Dwyer convened a council of war—or better, of peace. He opened negotiations by surrendering to the policeman the gangster's .45 automatic in his left coat pocket. Simultaneously he also relieved his right hand pocket of its weighty burden: a short, heavy monkey wrench which he threw among the other tools in a compartment beneath the driver's seat. He introduced his passenger to the officer, and a load was lifted from his mind as Starbeau took the cue and played a genial, conciliatory rôle.

It took some little time and a lively inventiveness of imagination, but the affair was finally explained to the cop's satisfaction. The offense was slight, after all, and the cab's passenger no man to monkey with. If the cop could have pinned a real felony on the racketeer, he would have done so with keen joy. To involve him in a simple misdemeanor was to invite useless trouble. A token from the bulging wallet helped, and the officer went his way, grinning, and wishing them luck.

Stitch and Hands Starbeau stared at each other when they were alone.

"Well," said Stitch, "had enough?"

"Holy jumping Hannah!" exploded Starbeau. "I don't know yet what all was going on, but I'm satisfied. I don't feel so good." He held out one huge hand and looked at it. The hand was palpably shaking. "All right, I had enough," he stated with finality. "Get me a drink and take me where I belong."

Their pause for restoratives was brief and uneventful. Starbeau drank deeply and quickly and bought a bottle to take along. He gave Stitch an address and settled back with the bottle.

Their destination proved a little surprising to Stitch. It was a brownstone private house on the West Side positively reeking with respectability. It was located midway on a sleepy street of similar small houses.

Within the cab Starbeau was asleep. Stitch opened the door and gripped his arm.

"The ride's over, Hands," said Stitch. "I'm leaving you here. Your pals are waiting for you."

"Nerts!" mumbled Starbeau. "Heck with them!" But he began to organize himself for locomotion.

Stitch found it necessary to enter the cab to assist. He did so very willingly after sizing up the situation with narrowed eyes. He wore a hard, shrewd smile as he helped. Together they were struggling to force an exit when a tense, threatening voice smote their ears.

"What's the matter here? Hands—damn you, you're drunk!"

STARBEAU abandoned everything and stared belligerently at the newcomer in the cab door. "Who says so?"

The newcomer, a sleek, husky, dark man with an air of command, was in

no mood to humor his associate. "I say so. And I got plenty more to say besides. Get in the house before the whole neighborhood sees you."

"Huh!" grunted Starbeau indignantly. It was an inadequate reply, and he seemed to realize it. "Huh!" he repeated—but resumed his efforts to climb outside.

Two quick, silent aides darted out of the brownstone house on the dark man's signal, and they pounced on the staggering racketeer. They knew their business, and despite his protests, rushed him effectively off his feet and into the entrance of the dwelling. The dark man watched the process with satisfaction, and then briskly followed.

Stitch had kept himself in the background, wary and watchful. Now he stepped after the dark man. "How about the fare, fellow?" he inquired. "The clock reads eleven seventy. Who's settling?"

In the house doorway the dark man whirled on the hackman. His eyes blazed. "You got yours. Hands never rode yet that he didn't put out plenty in advance. Beat it."

"Oh, no," said Stitch evenly. "I didn't get a cent in advance. He didn't have his money on him when he hired me. Ask him."

The dark man grinned an evil grin. "You chiseler!" he snarled. "Trying to clip a little extra off a lush, eh? You ought to know what you're up against, mug. Get away from here or you'll get smacked!"

Stitch licked dry lips. "I want my money. I rode him half the day."

The dark man looked over his shoulder as if minded to call his efficient assistants. He decided against it, glared at Stitch a second, and settled the dispute by the simple expedient of stepping inside and quickly slamming the

door. It was a reply of stunning finality.

Stitch stared at the door for a long moment. It was a heavy door, and not a sound came from inside. It was, in view of all that had happened that day, a sinister and evil door. There was no hope anywhere on its blank exterior.

Stitch Dwyer walked to his cab with slow, uncertain steps. He looked up and down the block. Only the distant nursemaid and charge were in sight. He looked up at the windows of the quiet house. They were blank, aloof, forbidding.

FOR some time Stitch sat on his seat behind the wheel, staring ahead and thinking. Once or twice he looked uncertainly at the silent house. At length he made up his mind.

His mouth was set in firm, determined lines as he snapped the lever into speed and shot away from the spot.

Stitch drove through the heavy afternoon traffic for twenty blocks. His purpose was very clear in mind. He drove with all his customary assurance—perhaps even a little more. He encountered an acquaintance from the home garage and answered his salute with a genial hail. He grinned at the traffic cops as he passed. He made a stop at last on a busy block near the midtown section, and he was whistling cheerfully as he got out.

There was a cigar and stationery shop on the corner. Stitch entered and bought a strong manila envelope such as is used for shipping valuable documents by registered mail. He borrowed pen and ink from the proprietor of the shop and retired to the privacy

of a rear corner. There he addressed the envelope:

H. STARBEAU, Esquire,  
Hotel Alhambra,  
New York City.

Drying the wet ink with a blotter, Stitch next drew from his pocket a bulging bill fold of pin seal leather. He opened the purse on the counter. A veritable fortune swelled and spilled itself before his eyes. The notes were mostly of the hundred-dollar denomination, and there was also a little sheaf of crisp one-thousand-dollar bills.

With a grin of satisfaction that envy could not spoil, Stitch finally inserted the empty wallet into the manila envelope. He ruffled the money judiciously, and abstracted a single fifty-dollar bill. He gazed at it admiringly. Then the fifty-dollar bill went deep into Stitch's own pocket beside his personal store of cash. The remainder of Hands Starbeau's roll went into the manila envelope with the wallet.

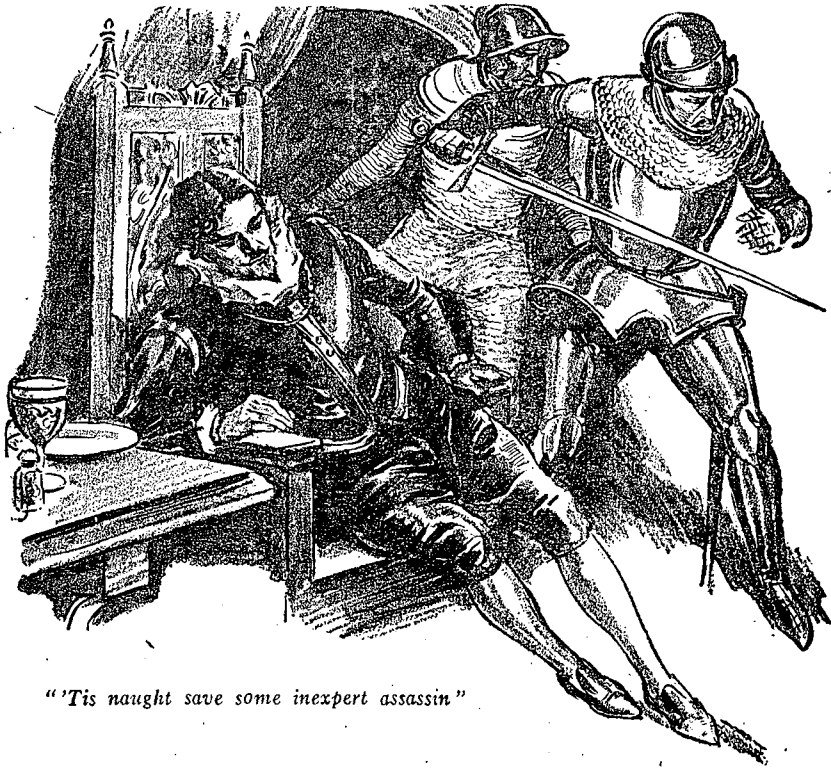
Briskly Stitch Dwyer licked the flap and sealed the envelope. He negotiated another loan with the gaping shopkeeper, and dropped hot sealing wax over the flap. It was ready for deposit in the registered mails. Stitch thanked the proprietor and walked out.

Down the street several loaded trucks were backed before a branch U. S. Post Office. Stitch walked toward it. Over the Hudson the sun was beginning to sink into the west. Along the sidewalks people were hastening homeward. The day's work was done and, with its worries fended off till another sun, the city relaxed.

Stitch Dwyer whistled in cheerful contentedness with the world as he strode through the doors of the busy post office.

THE END.





"'Tis naught save some inexpert assassin"

# Naked Steel

*Rafael Colonna could see the assassin hidden behind his back, but no man in feudal Italy was sharp enough to foresee all the fiendish plots of his enemies, the Borgias*

**By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON**

*Author of "The Dagger of Doom," "The Battle of the Silent Men," etc.*

## Novelette—Complete

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE ASSASSIN.

"**T**WERE wiser, Messer Assassin, did you keep your boot tip from showing underneath the hanging!" Rafael Colonna's voice broke the silence in the tower room. Naught stirred, save mayhap a faint movement behind the arras of the Flemish tapestry which bordered the far side of the chamber.

If it was to this point that Rafael Colonna's voice was directed, it was more than passing strange, for the young knight sat with his back to the wall, lounging easily in his suit of black velvet with its doublet slashed with cloth-of-gold. No armor had he nor any weapon save an ivory handled dagger slung at his waist, a dagger which even now he had used to carve the joint of mutton before him on the small table. With some daintiness he