

AT THE END OF THE STRING

By Jack Lait

Illustrated by R. Tandler.



CRONIN was a fixer. That was his business and—you might as well know it now—his vocation.

He had been, always, a sneaking stool-pigeon in every walk that he had stepped, and a go-between in delicate and indelicate matters. He would have been a blackmailer had he the courage to take chances and take a chance—there is a difference between these; ponder over it.

His status, professionally, was that of a disbarred lawyer. He had been kicked away from the bar for a job of disreputable business early in his practice. Since then he had subsisted ostensibly as an "investigator." Whenever you hear of an "investigator," look out. He is usually something else, something worse. Investigating may be a lawful and decent calling. But an "investigator" seldom is on the level.

At times Cronin prospered. There are cases from time to time, in big cities, which find rich men panic-driven. It is then that these men clutch the lapels of their attorneys and tell them to spare no expense, stand by no rules of right or law, but for heaven's sake get them out of the nasty mess. That is the harvest of the "investigator," who is brought in to help the lawyer.

What he is to do depends on his own conscience, sincerity and degree of viciousness. The least he is ever asked to accomplish is to shake or buy or scare pivotal witnesses out of jurisdiction, try to "get something on" the prosecutor, the opposing counsel, the main figures of the other side's case, the judge if possible, the jurors, and put over any unfair advantage, strategical, psychological, crooked or criminal that an oblique mind and a liberal expense account can deliver.

Jury bribing is one of the advanced specialties of the fixer. A good jury fixer is worth his weight in double eagles, and many a supposedly ethical attorney has him on his telephone card. But most of the species never hope to attain this splendor, and look with envious eye upon the rival fixer who has to his credit a juror who has hung a case for a few hundred, or an acquittal for a guilty man bought through enough of the twelve men good and true to swing the balance against the truth.

Cronin was an all-around man. He had scored with juries several times in tight pinches, and he had rustled witnesses and driven a famous jurist to cover in one little affair by bringing into court and seating in a forward row a certain woman who, at a critical stage of the proceeding, reached over and communed at intimate propinquity, in whispers, with the defendant. He had "thrown" several historical cases against the percentage and had brought about some inexplicable not guilty's.

A new character of the underworld—the "fixer"—who creates humor and vice wherever he works

So he was the logical specialist to call in when a number of saloon-keepers were suddenly arrested on complaints signed by a committee of fussy reformers who had quietly gathered bottled evidence, sworn evidence, eyewitness evidence and earshot evidence of all the violations of all the paragraphs relating to the legal restrictions on the sale of malt, vinous and spirituous liquors, theatrical performances in places where liquors were sold and the abuse of restaurant licenses as filmy cloaks for distribution out of lawful hours.

The saloon-keepers were pooled and organized. They saw that they had a long, hard fight against them, and that if it was lost to them there would be dangerous precedents. The most unsavory of the clan had been arrested for the test cases, which would make it harder. The drys had been hammering and battering and had won a point after a point, and this looked like about the last stand, when the booze sellers would see whether a man could violate an ordinance in a free country or whether he was going to be pestered by butters-in who had no real estate and no visible means of support, by jingo.

The barroom trust had a regularly constituted set of lawyers. Their chief defender was a former prosecutor who knew all the ropes and all the strings. An indignant committee locked itself into his office with him and his staff, pounded his good mahogany desk with their hardwood fists and said money was no object—no, sir. What they wanted was to teach these blatherskite reformers a lesson they'd never forget—to learn them that when they go against business men with their bum law and their scurvy code-books they were biting off something that would break their jaws in trying to chew it.

Again—money was no object. This had reached a point where an example had to be established, where these blue noses had to be driven to the understanding that they didn't have a chance.

The lawyer said all right—all right. They needn't be so emphatic; he would look to the matter. He knew how this was to be handled.

So, after they departed, he sent for Cronin.

Cronin arrived. He had read the papers and he had a fair idea of what he had been sent for. His interview didn't take ten minutes. He walked out with some new money in his pockets and carte blanche to unhorse the parties with the

side-whiskers and the law-and-order foolishness.

He looked into the pasts of all the prosecuting witnesses. The search proved discouragingly unprofitable. He found that one of the lily-pures had been sued for a rent bill; but that wasn't very strong. He learned that another had once been a newspaper reporter; but he had outlived that and had been good so long that the past probably wouldn't break him. He went through and after the whole list. It was most fruitless.

Cronin felt injured and picked on. That was just his luck. The enemy had rung in a lot of airtight saints on him. It was an attack against his means of livelihood. It wasn't honest and it certainly wasn't good sportsmanship.

So he went into the record of the public attorney who was to push the cases. Nothing doing. The man was as clean and white as a washerwoman's thumb. And the judge who was to try the first case—the big one—was the superintendent of a Baptist Sunday school, had never looked to right nor left and had left a trail of pious decency behind him that made Cronin sick.

There was nothing left, then, but the jury.

All the hope was wrapped up in the twelve peers of the blackleg underworld dive proprietor whose trial was set to open the court campaign.

As quickly as jurors were tentatively accepted Cronin and his lieutenants swarmed about their home neighborhoods and "looked them up." They found that two or three had bad records—one was a total abstainer and another was a member of a Christian Endeavor circle, and a third had caused a janitor to be fired because he was drunk and abusive. These were peremptorily and tartly challenged.

The jury box was filled at last. Cronin had not reached any of the dozen, but he had passed on them all as reasonable possibilities for missionary work—with attractive inducements.

The trial began. The defendant's flock of lawyers began entering objections, impugning the sincerity of the prosecution, throwing out flimsy technical hurdles, introducing innuendó of subtle depth against the veracity of the state testimony and appealing to the judge for their constitutional rights, privileges and advantages. They thundered the principle that their client was innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, and that an in-

dictment was no evidence of guilt, and that the burden of proof was on the side of the authorities. They wrangled and they fought with the experts who said they knew whisky from cold tea when they chemically analyzed it, and they demanded that the jury be discharged and a verdict of not guilty ordered by the court.

But all in vain. The court refused to take the case from the jury. All the demanded rights were yielded. Some of the objections were sustained and exceptions freely entered where otherwise. But the evidence went right along, and, to a man up a tree, had there been a tree in the courtroom, it would have seemed very likely that the jury would convict. The law was plain. The facts were nearly as palpable. The defendant wiped his brow. The lawyers flew to their feet and tried to dam the tidal rush of unfriendly truths with far-fetched straws of obscure and irrelevant legal interpositions.

The liquor world felt before the trial was half over that that idiotic jury would hang "guilty" on that bewildered and helpless whisky merchant, and that they all would suffer—that they all would be forced to give up certain sacred rights to violate the law which had so long been rights that the law had died of atrophy and old age. The word "obsolete" was prominent in their argument. The word "hell" was conspicuous in their irritated comment.

Meantime, what had Cronin and his worthies been doing?

Ah—let us see.

Busier than rats, they had been nosing about the homes of the twelve jurors. They couldn't get at the men themselves, who were guarded by unapproachable bailiffs, night and day. But they could find the wives, the children, the other relatives, the employers and the cronies of the jurors. It was through them or some of them or one of them that a little suggestion might percolate. A cousin twice removed had been known to open a leak into a jury-room. Judges are inclined to be liberal in permitting communications to sealed jurors from their families.

The work was cut twelve ways, and each of these ways was subcut many more. And failure after failure tumbled on the spinning and ringing head of Cronin.

Here was one of the biggest cases that had ever been intrusted to him, and from one of his best patrons, and out of a bottomless bank roll, and he couldn't turn a wheel, he couldn't move a cog.

The work grew raw in his desperation. Cold and open propositions of money were made to the nearest kin of the imprisoned jurors—nothing gained and a lot of risks taken.

The lawyer was on Cronin's neck nightly after the court sessions demanding to know what progress had been made, if any. And Cronin promised and stalled

