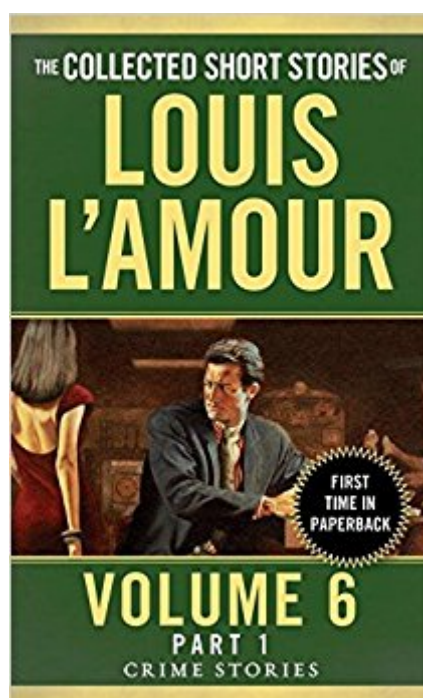


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The Collected Short Stories Of Louis L'Amour, Volume 6, Part 1: Crime Stories



Synopsis

The vibrant tales of adventure by Louis L'Amour, one of America's most beloved storytellers, have brought the American West to life. In *The Collected Short Stories of Louis L'Amour, Volume 6, Part 1*, L'Amour takes us beyond the frontier with gripping stories of crime, sports, and the murky world where the two often meet. These electrifying stories roam from the naked glare of boxing arenas rife with corruption, and freight docks where laborers toil to earn just enough to get by, to the penthouses of the rich and arrogant who calculate the odds of how to get even more. From suspenseful whodunits to rueful tales of fortunes gained and lost, this remarkable collection will enthrall and entertain L'Amour fans old and new.

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Our foremost storyteller of the American West, Louis L'Amour has thrilled a nation by chronicling the adventures of the brave men and women who settled the frontier. There are more than 300 million copies of his books in print around the world.

9780804179775|excerptL'Amour / THE COLLECTED SHORT STORIES OF LOUIS L'AMOUR
Volume 6 Part 1
Unguarded Moment
Arthur Fordyce had never done a criminal thing in his life, nor had the idea of doing anything unlawful ever seriously occurred to him. The wallet that lay beside his chair was not only full; it was literally stuffed. It lay on the floor near his feet where it had fallen. His action was as purely automatic as an action can be. He let his Racing Form slip from his lap and

cover the billfold. Then he sat very still, his heart pounding. The fat man who had dropped the wallet was talking to a friend on the far side of the box. As far as Fordyce could see, his own action had gone unobserved. It had been a foolish thing to do. Fordyce did not need the money. He had been paid a week's salary only a short time before and had won forty dollars on the last race. With his heart pounding heavily, his mouth dry, he made every effort to be casual as he picked up his Form and the wallet beneath. Trying to appear as natural as possible, he opened the billfold under cover of the Form, extracted the money, and shifted the bills to his pocket. The horses were rounding into the home stretch, and when the crowd sprang to its feet, he got up, too. As he straightened, he shied the wallet, with an underhand flip, under the feet of the crowd off to his left. His heart was still pounding. Blindly he stared out at the track. He was a thief.

He had stolen money. He had appropriated it. How much? Panic touched him suddenly. Suppose he had been seen? If someone had seen him, the person might wait to see if he returned the wallet. If he did not, the person might come down and accuse him. What if, even now, there was an officer waiting for him? Perhaps he should leave, get away from there as quickly as possible. Cool sanity pervaded him. No, that would never do. He must remain where he was, go through the motions of watching the races. If he were accused, he could say he had won the money. He had won money—forty dollars. The man at the window might remember his face but not the amount he had given him. Fordyce was in the box that belonged to his boss, Ed Charlton, and no friend of Charlton's would ever be thought a thief. He sat still, watching the races, relaxing as much as he could. Surprisingly, the fat man who had dropped the wallet did not miss it. He did not even put a hand to his pocket. After the sixth race, several people got up to leave, and Fordyce followed suit. It was not until he was unlocking his car that he realized there was a man at his elbow. He was a tall, dark-eyed handsome young man, too smoothly dressed, too slick. And there was something sharply feral about his eyes. He was smiling unpleasantly.

"Nice work!" he said. "Very nice! Now, how about a split?"

Arthur Fordyce kept his head. Inside, he seemed to feel all his bodily organs contract as if with chill.

"I am afraid I don't understand you. What was it you wanted?"

The brightly feral eyes hardened just a little, although the smile remained.

"A split, that's what I want. I saw you get that billfold. Now let's bust it open and see what we've got."

"Billfold?"

Fordyce stared at him coldly, although he was quivering inside with fear. He had been seen! What if he should be arrested? What if Alice heard? Or Ed Charlton? Why, that fat man might be a friend of Ed's!

"Don't give me that," the tall young man was saying.

“I saw the whole thing. Now, I’m getting a split or I’ll holler bull. I’ll go to the cops. You aren’t out of the grounds yet, and even if you were, I can find out who used Ed Charlton’s box today.” Fordyce stood stock-still. This could not be happening to him. It was preposterous! What ever had possessed him? Yet, what explanation could he give now? He had thrown away the wallet itself, a sure indication that he intended to keep the money. “Come on, Bud,” the smile was sneering now. “you might as well hand it over. There was plenty there. I had my eye on Linton all afternoon. He always carries plenty of dough.” Linton • George Linton. How many times had Ed Charlton spoken of him. They were golfing companions. They hunted and fished together. They had been friends at college. Even if the money were returned, Fordyce was sure he would lose his job, his friends • Alice. He would be finished, completely finished. “I never intended to do it,” he protested. “It was an accident.” “Yeah,” the eyes were contemptuous. “I could see that. I couldn’t have done it more accidentally myself. Now, hand it over.” There was fourteen hundred dollars in fifties and twenties. With fumbling fingers, Fordyce divided it. The young man took his bills and folded them with the hands of a lover. He grinned suddenly. “Nice work! With my brains and your in we’d make a team!” He pocketed the bills, anxious to be gone. “Be seeing you!” Arthur Fordyce did not reply. Cold and shaken, he stared after the fellow. Days fled swiftly past. Fordyce avoided the track, worked harder than ever. Once he took Alice to the theater and twice to dinner. Then at a party the Charltons gave, he came face to face with George Linton. The fat man was jovial. “How are you, Fordyce? Ed tells me you’re his right hand at the office. Good to know you.” “Thanks.” He spoke without volition. “Didn’t I see you at the track a couple of weeks ago? I was in Charlton’s box.” “Oh, yes! I remember you now. I thought your face seemed familiar.” He shook his head wryly. “I won’t forget that day. My pocket was picked for nearly two thousand dollars.” Seeing that Alice was waiting, Fordyce excused himself and joined her. Together they walked to the terrace and stood there in the moonlight. How lovely she was! And, to think he had risked all this, risked it on the impulse of a moment, and for what? She was looking up at him, and he spoke suddenly, filled with the sudden panic born of the thought of losing her. “Alice!” He gripped her arms, “Alice! Will you marry me?” “Why, Arthur!” she protested, laughing in her astonishment. “How rough you are! Do you always grab a girl so desperately when you ask her to marry

you? He released her arms, embarrassed. "I guess I was violent," he said, "but I just... well, I couldn't stand to lose you, Alice. Her eyes were wide and wonderfully soft. "You aren't going to, Arthur," she said quietly. "I'm going to stay with you." "Then you mean..." "Yes, Arthur." Driving home that night his heart was bounding. She would marry him! How lovely she was! How beautiful her eyes had been as she looked up at him! He drove into the garage, snapped off the lights and got his keys. It was not until he came out to close the doors that he saw the glow of a suddenly inhaled cigarette in the shadow cast by the shrubbery almost beside him. "Hello, Fordyce. How's tricks?" "It was the man from the track." "My name's Chafey, Bill Chafey." "What are you doing here? What do you want?" "That's a beautiful babe you've got. I've seen her picture on the society pages." "I'm sorry. I don't intend to discuss my fiancée with you. It's very late and I must be getting to bed. Good night." "Abrupt, aren't you?" Chafey adopted a George Raft manner. "Not going to invite an old friend inside for a drink? An old friend from out of town... one who wants to meet your friends?" Arthur Fordyce saw it clearly, then, saw it as clearly as he would ever see anything. He knew what this slick young man was thinking... that he would use his hold over Fordyce for introductions and for better chances to steal. Probably he had other ideas, too. Girls... and their money. "Look, Chafey," he said harshly, "whatever was between us is finished. Now beat it! And don't come back!" Chafey had seen a lot of movies. He knew what came next. He snapped his cigarette into the grass and took a quick step forward. "Why, you cheap thief! You think you can brush me off like that? Listen, I've got you where I want you, and before I'm through, I'll have everything you've got!" Chafey's voice was rising with some inner emotion of triumph or hatred. "You think you're so much! Figure you can brush me off, do you?" He stepped close. "What if I got to that fancy babe of yours and told her what I know? What if I go to Linton and tell him? You're a thief, Fordyce! A damned thief! You and that fancy babe of yours! Why..." Fordyce hit him. The action was automatic and it was unexpected. In the movies it was always the tough guy who handed out the beatings. His fist flew up and caught Chafey on the jaw. Chafey's feet flew up, and he went down, the back of his neck hitting the bumper with a sickening crack. Then his body slipped slowly to the ground. Arthur Fordyce stood very still, staring down at the crumpled form.

His breath was coming in great gasps, and his fist was still clenched hard. Some instinct told him the man was dead. "Mr. Fordyce?" It was his neighbor, Joe Neal, calling. "Is something wrong?" Fordyce dropped to one knee and touched the man's head. It lolled loosely, too loosely. He felt for the heart. Nothing. He bent over the man's face, but felt no breath, nothing. Neal was coming out on the lawn, pulling his belt tight. "Fordyce? Is anything wrong?" He got to his feet slowly. "Yes, Joe. I wish you'd come down here. I've been held up and I think I think I've killed him." Joe Neal hurried up, flashlight in hand. He threw the light on the fallen man. "Good heavens!" he gasped. "What happened?" "He was waiting there by the tree. He stepped out with his hand in his pocket • you know, like he had a gun. I hit him before I realized. That was the story, and he made it stick. For several days it was the talk of all his friends. Fordyce had killed a holdup man. That took nerve. And a punch, too. Didn't know he had it in him. Of course, it was the bumper that actually broke his neck. Still • had there been any doubts and there were none • a check of Chafey's record would have removed them. He had done time and was on parole. He had gone up for armed robbery and had been arrested a score of times for investigation. He was suspected of rolling drunks and of various acts of petty pilfering and slugging. A week passed, and a second week. Arthur Fordyce threw himself into his work, never talking about what had happened. Others forgot it, too, except Joe Neal. Once, commenting on it to his wife, he looked puzzled and said, "You know, I'd have sworn I heard voices that night. I'd have sworn it." "You might have. They might have argued. I imagine that a man might say a lot when excited and not remember it." That was what his wife said, and it was reasonable enough. Nevertheless, Joe Neal was faintly disturbed by it all. He avoided Fordyce. Not that they had ever been friends. Arthur Fordyce had been lucky. No getting away from that. He had been very lucky, and sometimes when he thought about it, he felt a cold chill come over him. But it was finished now. Only it wasn't. It was Monday night, two weeks after the inquest, the first night he had been home since it had happened. He was sitting in his armchair listening to the radio when the telephone rang. Idly, he lifted it from the cradle. "Mr. Fordyce?" The voice was feminine and strange. "Is this Arthur Fordyce?" "Speaking." There was an instant of silence. Then, "This is Bill Chafey's girl-friend, Mr. Fordyce. I thought I would call and congratulate you. You seem to be very, very lucky!" The cold was there again in the pit of his stomach. "I beg your pardon? I'm afraid I don't know what you

mean. "He told me all about it, Mr. Fordyce. All about that day at the track. All about what he was going to do. Bill had big ideas, Mr. Fordyce, and he thought you were his chance. Only he thought you were scared. He got too close to you, didn't he, Mr.

Fordyce? "I'm sure, he kept his voice composed, "that you are seriously in error. "She interrupted with a soft laugh, a laugh that did not cover an underlying cruelty. "I'm not going to be as dumb as Bill was, Mr. Fordyce.

I'm not going to come anywhere within your reach. But you're going to pay off.

You're going to pay off like a slot machine. A thousand dollars now and five hundred a

month from now on. "I don't know what you're talking about, but

you are probably insane," he said quietly. "If you are a friend of Chafey's, then you know he was a criminal. I am sorry for you, but there is nothing I can

do. "One thousand dollars by Friday, Mr. Fordyce, and five hundred a month from now on. I don't think you were scared when Bill went to you, but how about the gas

chamber, Mr. Fordyce? How about that? "What you assume is impossible. "He fought to keep his voice controlled. "It's absurd to think I have that kind of

money. "She laughed again. "But you can get it, Buster! You can get it when it means the difference between life and the gas chamber. "Her voice grew brusque.

"Small bills, understand? Nothing bigger than a twenty. Send it to Gertrude Ellis, Box X78, at the central office. Send me that thousand dollars by Friday and send the five hundred on the fifth of

every month. If you miss by as much as ten days, the whole story goes to your girlfriend, to your boss, and to the police. "The phone clicked, the line buzzed emptily. Slowly, Fordyce

replaced the phone. So there it was. Now he had not only disgrace and prison before him, but the gas chamber. A single mistake • an instant when his reason was in abeyance • and

here he was • trapped. He could call her bluff. He could refuse. The woman was obviously unprincipled and she had sounded vindictive. She would certainly follow through as she had

threatened. For hours, he paced the floor, racking his brain for some way out, some avenue of

escape. He could go to Charlton, confess everything, and ask for help. Charlton would give it to him, for he was that kind of man, but when it was over, he would drop Fordyce quickly and

quietly. Alice • his future • everything depended on finding some other way. Some

alternative. If something should happen to this woman • And it might. People were killed

every day. There were accidents. He shied away from the idea that lay behind this, but slowly it

forced its way into his consciousness. He was considering murder. No. Never that. He would

not • he could not. He had killed Chafey, but that had been different. It had not been murder,

although if all the facts were known, it might be considered so. It had been an accident. All he had done was strike out. If he killed now, deliberately and with intent, it would be different. He ran his fingers through his hair and stared blindly at the floor. Accidentally, he caught a glimpse of his face in a mirror. He looked haggard, beaten. But he was not beaten. There was a way out. There had to be. Morning found him on the job, working swiftly and silently. He handled the few clients who called, talked with them and straightened out their problems. He was aware that Charlton was watching him. Finally, at noon, the boss came over. "Fordyce," he said, "this thing has worried you. You're doing a fine job this morning, so it looks as though you're getting it whipped, but nevertheless, I think a few days' rest would put you right up to snuff. You just go home now, and don't come in until Monday. Go out of town, see a lot of Alice, anything. But relax." "Thanks." A flood of relief went over Fordyce as he got up, and genuine gratitude must have showed in his eyes, for Charlton smiled. "I do need a rest." "Sure!" Ed put a hand on his shoulder. "You call Alice. Take her for a drive. Wonderful girl, that. You're lucky. Good connections, too," he added, almost as an afterthought. The sun was bright in the street, and he stood there thinking. He would call Alice, make a date if possible. He had to do that much, for Ed would be sure to comment later. Then • then he must find this woman, this Gertrude Ellis. He got through the afternoon without a hitch. He and Alice drove out along the ocean drive, parked by the sea, and then stopped for dinner. It was shortly after ten when he finally dropped her at her home. He remembered what the police had said about Bill Chafey. They had known about him and they had mentioned that he had been one of several known criminals who frequented a place called Eddie's Bar. If Chafey had gone there, it was possible his girl did, too.

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