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HIDDEN EYES

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HIDDEN EYES

By

ERIC LEVISON

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

SIDNEY RIESENBERG

INDIANAPOLIS
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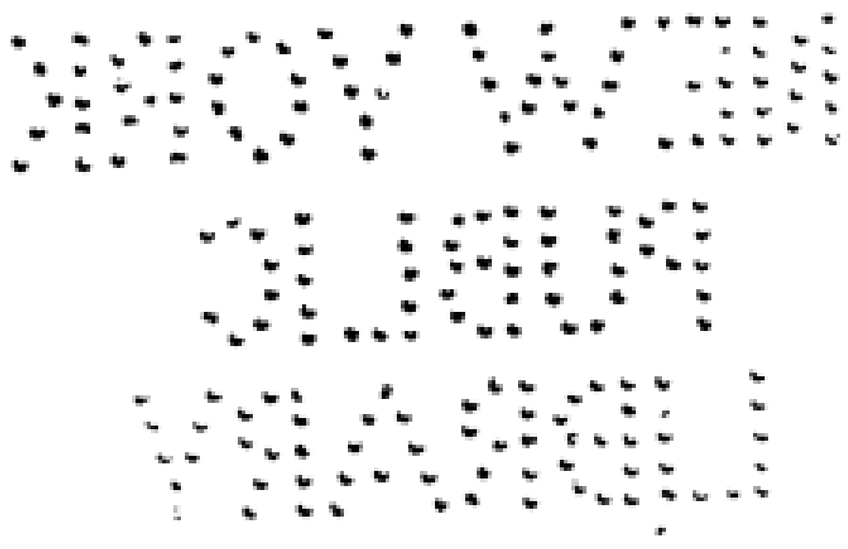

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To

MY FRIEND

DOCTOR HERRMAN H. HARRIS

1926

APR

TRANSFER FROM C. A.

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HIDDEN EYES

CHAPTER I

THE ROBBERY

THE heavy-faced chief of detectives reached irritably for the jangling telephone on his desk, and, without removing his cigar, grumbled into the transmitter:

"Headquarters!"

Then a look of amazement supplanted the irritable gleam in his eyes. He leaned forward and jerked the cigar from his mouth.

"What?" He bellowed the question and slid forward eagerly to the edge of his chair. "Disappeared? Sa-a-ay, what 'r' you givin' me?" His face stiffened suddenly. "Oh, er—all right, Mr. Hayes." Profound respect replaced the incredulity in his voice. "Yes, sir, I'll wait."

He replaced the receiver on the hook and his eyes roved about the office.

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"Great sufferin' mackerel!" he whispered in awe, straightening slowly in his chair.

He jabbed hurriedly at a button on his desk, and addressed the uniformed officer who entered: "Who's here?"

"Riley and Franklin, sir."

"Franklin? Good. Send him in." The chief picked up the cigar he had laid aside as a plain-clothes man entered, and took the chair to which the chief waved an imperious hand.

"You watched 'em put that vault in the Second National, didn't you?"

Franklin nodded.

"Stayed with it all the time."

The chief bit down on his cigar.

"Burglar-proof vault, ain't it?"

Franklin grinned.

"Lightning-proof, Chief!"

The chief eyed the man before him.

"Umph!" he grunted skeptically. "How'd you like to tackle the job of breaking into it?"

Franklin's grin expanded and ended in a laugh. Evidently it pleased the chief to be facetious.

"I don't know that I'd mind trying it, Chief—with a ton of dynamite!" he chuckled.

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"Who else was watching it?"

"Who else?" The plain-clothes man's chuckle ended abruptly. "You mean when they placed it? Nobody; that is, I didn't—"

"Well, somebody did, and we've got to get a line on him, and get it quick."

Franklin leaned forward interestedly.

"Yeh? What's up?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars in currency disappeared out of that vault last night," advised the chief grimly.

"Twenty-five thou—" gasped the astonished detective. "Not a yegg's job."

"Evidently not," nodded the chief. "It was discovered when the vault was opened this morning. I just got the notice from the Second's president. He's coming down and—"

The uniformed officer reentered.

"Mr. Hayes of the Second National," he announced.

The bank official followed close on the heels of the officer. The chief rose to greet him.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Hayes; have a seat, sir. Mr. Hayes, this is Ben Franklin; he was detailed when they installed that vault of yours."

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The banker nodded shortly to Franklin and turned again to the chief.

"Well?" The chief's monosyllable was expressive.

"As I told you over the phone, Chief," the banker began, "we had a package of twenty-five thousand dollars, small denomination currency, in the vault. Put it there last night; in the outside vault; it came in late. We were to send it down the state this morning to pay off the turpentine hands near Manatee. This morning it was gone."

"Who opened the vault?" The chief's question was purely a formal one.

"Kingsley, the vice-president, and Harkiss, the cashier—you know them. This new Defy vault works with a double combination. I have them both, but Harkiss and Kingsley have only one each. Both of them must be there to open the thing. The time lock was set for eight-thirty, as usual."

"And there was no sign of anything having been—"

"None; absolutely none!" The banker anticipated the chief's question.

"H-m. You're sure the package went into the vault."

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"I put it there," answered the bank president simply. "Harkiss was with me. Went out to the house with me, in fact, to talk over the new government loan; and stayed there all night. We came down together this morning."

"Of course, I'd no thought of Mr. Kingsley or Mr. Harkiss," the chief smiled apologetically. "This town has known both of 'em long enough to be certain what they are."

The banker nodded.

"But somebody—somebody last night opened that vault."

"Opened it?" Franklin interjected. "Opened it and closed it?" The detective made small effort to hide his growing disbelief. "Say, that ain't possible. Why, I—"

The chief ended the expostulation with a wave of his hand.

"You've got old Jensen for a watchman, haven't you?"

"Had him ever since he retired from the force, and his time-clock by the vault shows that he was there every half-hour. Nor was he ever out of the building; he's watching the entire building, you know."

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The chief nodded.

"Of course, you don't want any publicity about this—" he began.

The banker waved an expressive hand.

"It doesn't matter," he said shortly. Then: "Of course, the loss of the money hurts, but the Second National can replace it easily enough." A note of pride sounded in the man's voice. "What I want to know," he finished, "is how we can be certain that this same man can not go into our vault at will—any time—opening it as easily as though it were a tin box, and not the latest word in vault construction?"

"Say," cut in the detective again querulously, "how could anybody—"

"That is just what I wish to discover, Mr. Franklin," the banker broke in coldly.

"Have you seen any of the safe people?" questioned the chief.

The bank official shook his head.

"Not yet; you advise it?"

The chief frowned.

"I don't know—a factory man, perhaps. How was that vault set, Franklin?"

"In eight feet of solid concrete, three sides, top

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and bottom," answered the detective shortly. "And three feet of eight-ply steel," he added. "I'd like to see the man who can get into that!"

"I'd like to go up with you." The chief turned again to the banker. "That is, if you think we can look around without having the whole town buzzing at our ears."

"All right." The banker glanced at the clock. "You'll just be looking over the new vault."

The chief rose to his feet.

"You come along, Franklin," he ordered, and the detective, with a shrug, turned to the door.

"It ain't possible," he grumbled. "Why, nothing short of an earthquake could jar that box. As for opening it—" The detective's shrug of incredulity was eloquently expressive.

The president smiled ruefully.

"That was exactly my opinion, Mr. Franklin. That vault is burglar-proof, or the words are a joke; yet that currency went into the vault—I'll take oath to that fact."

The three men left the office together and climbed into the banker's car.

"Who knows of this?" The chief was chewing thoughtfully on his cigar.

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"We three; Harkiss and Kingsley."

"Maybe we'd better keep it to ourselves a while," suggested the chief.

"Whatever you say." The banker nodded agreement.

The car moved rapidly up an avenue, turned into a crowded, building-lined street, and came to rest before a ten-story building, the home of the Second National Bank of Jacksonville.

Not without some cause did the Second National boastfully proclaim in its advertisements that its banking house was second to none south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and the first in Florida. Other banks in Jacksonville might lay claim to a larger capitalization; might boast of a larger figure to represent the amount of loans outstanding, but none could point to the structure which housed it, and show a more businesslike and modern banking floor than the Second National.

A month previous, the officers of the bank received the congratulations of the city and the newspapers on the installation of the latest model burglar-proof, fire-proof, "everything-proof," as one would-be wit of a reporter termed it, Defy steel vault.

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The papers, quick to laud what they praised as "up-to-dateness," held up the Second National Bank as a model institution, boasting that nowhere else in the South, not even in New Orleans, Birmingham or Atlanta, could there be found a more magnificent and pleasing banking floor, nor a better equipped and better officered organization.

The vault had been a seven-day wonder when it was placed, for the curious were barred from the building, and the workmen—all brought down from the Defy factory—worked behind a board wall that baffled the curious eyes of passers-by. With the workmen had been detailed a plain-clothes man, less because it seemed necessary than to add a touch of "official supervision" to the work.

The Defy vault, so the papers had said, was the last word in construction. The huge, circular door, which inspired a feeling of utter safety, was opened, first by aid of a time lock, which, at a certain hour, permitted the working of the double combinations. The combinations, two in number, were independent of each other; one a number combination, and one a word.

Even the builders themselves did not know them, for the combinations were set by the president of

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the bank, and by his two officers; Kingsley, the vice-president, assisting with the number combination, and Harkiss, the cashier, with the word combination.

The steel of the vault defied the inventions of science to pierce it; short of literally blowing the vault to pieces.

The most expert safe men in the country had stood before a replica of this same vault, and tried, with all means at their command, to effect an entrance into it. The exhibition was staged at the Defy factory, and the experts' failures had furnished many columns of advertising for the manufacturers.

It was impervious to the oxy-acetylene blowpipe, and heat served only to throw into operation the sensitive plates, cunningly hidden in the metal, which, in turn, operated the electric alarm connected with police headquarters, the office of the chief of detectives, and the home of President Hayes.

Drills blunted against the vault's eight-ply nickeled surface, and acids flowed as harmlessly as so much water from its door. As near as could be, the vault of the Second National Bank of Jacksonville was proof against burglars, fire and the ele-

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ments. But it appeared that the impossible had been accomplished, and the chief of detectives leaped eagerly to the ground as the car drew up before the bank's building on Forsythe Street.

With a nonchalance that none of the three men felt, they entered the building.

The vault itself, glistening in the sunlight that filtered through an overhead lighting space, seemed to carry a message of absolute impregnability to the two detectives; for they both shook their heads as they viewed the wide-open, tremendous door, and glimpsed the shiny row of safe-deposit boxes beyond the bronze grille.

A word from the president, and the three men entered. They were alone in the vault, and, hastily, in an undertone—although a revolver shot could not have been heard, save through the open door—the banker explained:

"Here's where I put it, put it personally."

The chief noted the steel shelf—empty.

"And I was the first man to enter this morning when Kingsley and Harkiss opened." The banker spread his hands in a wide gesture.

The two detectives glanced hurriedly over the side and steel glistening roof of the monster, but

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found only the reflecting, solid, impassable adamantine steel meeting their scrutiny.

Finally the chief turned to Franklin; but Ben Franklin, usually more than ready to venture an opinion—and a good one—only shook his head.

"It just naturally ain't possible, Chief."

The chief grinned sourly.

"Huh! But it was done."

They followed the banker from the vault and made their way into his private office.

"Just one thing, gentlemen," urged the financier; "don't let the papers know the amount of the loss, should they learn something and come to you. They'll hardly magnify it, knowing nothing, and I'd rather—" he eyed the chief speculatively, leaving the sentence unfinished.

The chief frowned.

"The Southern National is installing one of these, isn't it?"

The president shook his head.

"A Defy vault, yes; but a much smaller one; one of the old kind."

"I think," began the chief, "I think I'll get in touch with the factory and see—no, by George!" He broke off with the ejaculation.

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"Yes?" The banker was eager.

But the chief only frowned.

"No, I think I'll wait a day or two," he added slowly. "There's no use raising the devil until we have to."

And a moment later the two detectives turned from the building, crossed Laura Street and made their way toward Hemming Park. Near the corner of Adams the chief turned to Franklin.

"There's one man," he nodded, "one man who might be able to work this thing out. I mean Halvey Thornton."

Franklin's face lighted.

"By heavens, yes! Know him, Chief?"

"Um! No," grunted the chief, as the two men crossed the park toward the St. James Building. "He's a steel man, though, and now and then one of the papers boosts him up."

Franklin nodded.

"I know him, and say! what he don't know about steel! And he's forgot more about vaults than we'll ever know." Franklin hurried along at the chief's side. "At least he'll be mighty interested," he agreed. "And he's a dandy fellow, Chief. Office next to Doctor Lester's. I see him once in a while."

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"Was he ever around when the vault was assembled?" the chief questioned slowly.

The detective nodded.

"He'd drop in now and then to kid me along."

The chief frowned.

"A chemist, ain't he?"

Franklin nodded again.

"Yep; working on some steel problem for a Birmingham company; I've heard him talking to Doctor Lester about it."

"That's the man I want to see!" The chief clipped off his words sharply. "Maybe he knows a little too much about—metal."

Franklin eyed his superior.

"You don't really believe that anybody without the combinations got into that vault, do you?"

The chief stopped.

"Just get that idea out of your nut," he demanded. "That vault was opened all right; I'll take Hayes' word for it. And whoever opened it knows a blamed sight more about steel vault construction than is good and healthy for a crook."

At the entrance to the building the two men stopped a moment, and Franklin eyed his chief with an expression but little short of disgust.

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"Say, what's the big idea?" he demanded. "Ain't it occurred to you, Chief, that the man who copped that money *knew it was there?*"

The chief passed a thoughtful hand over his chin.

"H-m. That *is* so. It was unusual, the money being there—wasn't it? That's what Hayes said."

The detective smiled superiorly.

"As for this Thornton chap—wait till you meet him. He's harmless."

The chief's eyes darted a look of interest at Franklin, who pushed through the swinging doors.

"Too certain," muttered the chief thoughtfully, as he followed, "too damned certain."

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CHAPTER II

A LEAD

DOCTOR EDWARD LESTER sat hunched comfortably in a huge chair in his private office, reading industriously. Now and then he scratched his head thoughtfully, as though puzzled, and twice he looked up, staring long and abstractedly at a framed motto above his desk which bore the one word: "Think."

The word, however, hardly impinged on his consciousness, for he was evidently deeply engrossed in the huge volume that lay outspread on his knees.

The office girl tiptoed lightly through the room and into the laboratory beyond, passing close to the huge bulk of the man in the chair, but he paid no attention, muttering thoughtfully to himself, his eyes fixed on the book before him. For an instant the girl hesitated in the doorway and gazed smilingly at the oblivious man in the chair.

Such friends as the big doctor had swore by him with all earnestness. There was something more

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than lovable in the heavy-faced man, whose little black eyes, peering intently from their puffy, fat lids, seemed always to see something just a little removed from the actual.

His clothes he wore patently to hide his nakedness; certainly for no vain purposes of adornment, for they hung from his massive frame with a ludicrous air of having been flung on haphazard. His coat-pockets bulged chronically with half-empty packages of his favorite Virginia cigarettes, and more often than not, cigarette ashes decorated the front of his weirdly colored shirts.

The doctor looked up from his reading, stared a moment at the girl, then shook his head heavily.

"Did I forget something, Mae?"

The girl laughed.

"Not that I can think of," she replied. "I just wanted to cut off the heat from the sterilizer."

The big doctor nodded, and almost immediately immersed himself in the book before him.

Returning through the office, the girl hesitated a moment, and, as the doctor continued his reading, pushed sharply against a chair.

A heavy forefinger descended on the doctor's book to mark the place and he raised his eyes.

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"Now what's up your sleeve?" he grumbled.

The girl extended her bare arms laughingly in evidence.

"No sleeves even," she mocked.

The doctor hoisted himself groaningly to his feet.

"Well, what's it all about, Mae? You might as well tell me what's worrying you, and have done with it."

The girl grew serious.

"I'm—I'm going to get married."

"In the name of all the gods at once!" The doctor's little eyes grew large. "What for?"

"What does anybody get married for?" the girl countered, and the doctor's vast bulk shook with a soundless laugh.

"Don't ask me," he rumbled, "I'm not married, am I?"

"Just the same, I wanted to tell you I'm going to leave—next month."

The doctor cocked his head grotesquely to one side and eyed the girl before him.

"Say, what's going to become of this office, you reckon?"

The girl shook her head.

"It isn't that bad, Doctor Lester, and you know

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it. Besides, it will be more than a month probably before I—"

The doctor lowered himself into his chair.

"Thank the Lord for small blessings," he grumbled. "I might die of apoplexy in the meantime; that's one consolation." He picked up the book again. "Now let me finish this chapter, and don't let anybody pester me—hear?"

The girl turned to the door which led into the reception-room. Even before it was closed the doctor's heavy head was sunk once more on his chest, and the words before him occupied his entire thoughts.

For a half-hour he read industriously, stopping only to light and relight cigarettes.

He sighed hugely as he came to the end of the chapter, then raised his head as the door opened and there appeared on the threshold a young man over whose coatless shirt, and to his knees, extended a leather apron, stained and burned. In the man's hand were a pair of huge goggles which he jerked nervously by a cord.

"Oh, hello, Hal; come in."

Halvey Thornton entered.

"Lord, Lester, you dig yourself in as though you

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had a thousand-dollar fee in view. I've been waiting outside for fifteen minutes, and that girl of yours"—here the girl passed through the office. "Here, Mae!" Thornton's voice was laughingly complaining. "Why didn't you tell me there wasn't any one in here with the bear?"

The girl turned and laughed.

"You said you didn't want to be bothered, didn't you, Doctor?"

And Doctor Lester, putting aside his book, chuckled as he nodded.

"What can I do for you, Hal?" grumbled the doctor good-naturedly, as the girl passed into the laboratory.

"You can lend me a couple of test-tubes; my fingers are all thumbs this morning, and I've broken a half-dozen tubes, more or less."

"Help yourself." The doctor replaced the book in its case and as Thornton turned into the laboratory, he stretched his huge bulk yawningly and followed:

"Still working on the steel, Hal?"

Thornton, running an appraising eye over a rack of test-tubes, nodded slowly.

"Yes, but I'm not making progress."

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The doctor lighted a cigarette.

"Rome wasn't built in a day," he grunted. "That mercurial solution—any 'count at all?"

Thornton shook his head.

"Absolutely no good." And he frowned thoughtfully. "Dog-gone it, Lester, I'm more tempted than ever to chuck the whole business. I feel like a rotter taking the company's salary and turning out nothing. A fine job to give a man, isn't it?"

The doctor chuckled and nodded.

"You should worry about the company," he rumbled. "If they're a lot of asses, what do you care?"

"Just the same," the younger man went on, "it's a silly proposition. For a while I thought I was on the track of it, but Moses himself can't treat iron and make steel of it. Why, man, it's the very bulk of that Bessemer steel that makes it worth while. Oh," and he waved an all-embracing arm, "it's asinine! How the devil can a man cut the thickness of a metal in half and still have the same resistancy and strength?"

The doctor grunted.

"That's your problem, isn't it? Why the Gloomy Gus attitude all of a sudden?"

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"Money, Lester. I'm just hard up, that's all. Now, none of that—" as the doctor made a movement toward his coat-pocket. "Keep your check-book out of sight."

The doctor shrugged and turned to his table as Thornton continued:

"It isn't temporary relief I'm needing, Lester," and he smiled at the expression. "But I'm getting nowhere, and a man my age ought to be accumulating a little, you know."

Thornton hoisted himself to the edge of the operating-table and played thoughtfully with his glasses, while the doctor turned to a microscope and lifted the protecting bell-jar.

"Anything new with you, Lester?"

Doctor Lester selected a glass slide, held it to the light to see that the smear thereon was even, then passed the glass rapidly through the flame of a Bunsen-burner to "fix" it.

"Is there ever anything new, Hal?" he questioned in turn, as he carefully dropped methylene-blue stain from a tiny dropper on to the glass slide. "If there is, it doesn't happen in the St. James Building, nor anywhere else in this beautiful city of Jacksonville-on-the-St.-Johns."

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The doctor washed the stained glass carefully, allowed it to dry between the blotting-pads, then, gently placing a drop of cedar-oil in the exact center of the tiny blue smear, he fitted the slide into the holder, turned the lenses until the oil-immersion lens rested over the slide, and, hunching over the microscope, twisted the adjusting-screw.

In a moment he raised his head.

"If everything worked out as easily as that, Hal," he indicated the microscope, "we'd have a cinch, and you'd make a million."

Thornton smiled.

"And there are still a good many men, Lester, who say the germ theory is all bosh!" Thornton's brown eyes twinkled; he knew how to arouse the huge, hulking medico, who seemed impossibly blasé and calloused.

Doctor Lester snorted.

"Umph! And the fools deny ocular proof. Any man whose eyes aren't satisfied—" The doctor broke off disgustedly.

The office girl passed the doorway, and the huge doctor nodded after her heavily.

"There's another good girl gone flooey!"

Thornton's raised eyebrows expressed surprise.

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"Mae? What's she up to? Wants to go in training, I suppose?"

The doctor shook his head.

"Naw. Married. That's worse. Seems there's a gum-shoe man down at headquarters—Ben Franklin—"

Thornton laughed.

"Gee, I *am* thick. That's what he's been hanging around this floor so much for. And I thought he was interested in steel vault construction!"

"Speaking of marriage," began the doctor tentatively, replacing the bell-jar over the microscope, "it seems to me, Hal—speaking as a friend of all concerned—that it's about time you and Isabel—"

A laughing voice in the doorway interrupted.

"Who's taking my name in vain?"

And into the room came a smiling, blue-eyed girl, apparently in her early twenties, accompanied by a well-built, impressive-looking man whose sharp black eyes drifted quickly to Thornton, in his stained leather apron, and to the doctor.

Doctor Lester nodded cordially.

"Come in—come in, Isabel, you're welcome. You, too, Ralby." He extended a fat hand to the man who accompanied the girl.

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"Are we breaking into a conference?" the girl mocked, eying Thornton mischievously.

"Sufferin' mackerel, no! I was just trying to cheer up our Gloomy Gus friend. He's as pessimistic as a German philosopher this morning."

The girl came around the table toward Thornton.

"That's not like you, Hal."

Thornton turned to the window and stood gazing out on the city beneath them.

"By the way, Ralby," the doctor turned to the man who had accompanied the girl. "Got a little time? I've got something here I think would interest you."

The man addressed as Ralby glanced toward Thornton and the girl, then nodded.

"Trot it out, Lester; I'm not exactly rushed to death," he laughed. "They're struggling along in the office all right without me." And he followed the doctor into the adjoining office.

The girl turned to Thornton.

"What was he saying about me?" she demanded smilingly.

Thornton grew suddenly embarrassed. "I—really, I don't remember, Isabel—that is—"

"Never mind," the girl laughed. "I'm not afraid

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of any remarks Doctor Edward Lester might make. Did you ever know a more wonderful man?"

Thornton smiled his appreciation.

"No, nor a grumpier one, and sloppy—ugh!" He turned to the doctor's table and cleared away the remains of the blue stain, the water and the blotting pads.

"That's what makes him such a dear," she said finally. "He never seems to do anything right, but he *is* a dandy, isn't he?"

Thornton nodded.

"Indeed, yes, and you've no idea how patiently he helps struggling young chemists."

"Meaning you?" The girl smiled at the thought of Thornton's needing help.

He nodded and picked two test-tubes from the rack before him.

"These are what I came to borrow," he explained.

"Oh, but you aren't going to get away!" The girl raised an admonishing finger. "You're going with me, and with Morton, to see his new launch. We're to go as far as Ortega in her."

Thornton shook his head, and a tiny frown appeared on his face.

"Mighty nice of you to ask, Isabel, but you run

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along with Ralby; he seems to be a gentleman of leisure; I'm rather busy."

The girl pouted.

"I will not," she said; "besides, Morton is head over heels in some case by now with the doctor; let's sneak. I'd rather—rather—" the girl blushed, "I'd rather talk to you anyway, and you *never* come to see me any more."

Thornton took an impulsive step toward her, but drew up sharply.

"Shucks, Isabel; you know I want to come—"

"Well, why don't you?"

Through the open door behind them came the doctor's heavy voice, rich in its southern brogue:

"A plain case of obsession—persecution-mania—eh?"

And Ralby's close-clipped words in answer: "Evidently. Have you tried psycho-analysis? How about hypnosis?"

This was followed by the doctor's: "By jove, Ralby! You're wasting your time monkeying with real estate! Hypnosis; that's the thing—maybe I can do something for the poor kid—"

Thornton and the girl drew nearer the window, away from the open door.

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"Why don't I?" Thornton repeated the question inanely. "Oh—well, you see, Isabel—I—oh, I've been busy; I guess that's it."

The girl smiled quietly.

"That won't do, Halvey." She shook her head. "Morton's busy, too, yet *he* comes. And you even cut my last dance."

Thornton played with the test-tubes in his hand in an embarrassed fashion.

"Oh, Morton! I'm afraid Ralby's not the busiest man in Jacksonville, lady. He's almost never in his office; goes around making calls with Lester, and then—"

The office girl appeared in the doorway, and Thornton turned, seemingly glad of the interruption.

"Want me, Mae?"

The girl nodded.

"I'm sorry—there's some one to see you. I heard the knocking and looked—it's my—it's a man from the police department and some one with him."

Thornton nodded. "Thanks, Mae."

He turned to the girl beside him. "You see, Isabel, I *am* busy. And—thanks, lady, for missing me."

The girl smiled and shook her head. "No thanks

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necessary, Mr. Chemist-who-is-always-busy—I'm counting on you to-night? You're coming, aren't you?" She extended a slim hand which Thornton took in his own a moment.

"Well—thanks, Isabel—I—" he stuttered hopelessly, and the girl looked at him earnestly. This was unlike him. Finally: "Yes, thanks, Isabel—I'll be there," he blurted, and hurried from the office.

In the hall he confronted Franklin.

"Howdy," he greeted, and chuckled. "I've just learned, young man, why you frequent this neighborhood so much."

A flush overspread the officer's face, but he turned to his superior.

"Chief, this is Mr. Thornton. Mr. Thornton, the chief."

Thornton bowed and shook hands.

From the doctor's doorway Mae waved a furtive greeting to the detective in the hall, who smiled and waved his hat in answer, while the chief eyed him heavily.

Thornton turned toward the girl in the doorway.

"Tell the doctor I'll drop in later," he requested, then turned smilingly to the man beside him.

"You wanted to see *me*, Chief?"

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The chief nodded.

"If you please, Mr. Thornton; and privately."

Thornton opened his door.

"Step in, Chief," he invited, and the chief of detectives entered the office; nor did he fail to notice the half-puzzled expression in Thornton's eyes.

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CHAPTER III

CHECK

THORNTON dropped into a chair before a flat-topped desk, and waved his visitor into a leather chair at the desk's side. He passed a humidor of cigars, helped himself, extended a match to the chief, and settled back in his chair.

The detective turned in the doorway.

"I'm going down the hall, Chief," he mumbled; "be right next door when you want me," and he left the room, his face a brick-red under the caustic eyes of his superior.

"Well, Chief?"

The chief scrutinized the man in the chair before him, and nodded slowly as though satisfied, in some fashion, with Thornton's appearance, although that young man did not take the examination coolly, and fidgeted nervously under the chief's gaze.

"You're by way of being a vault expert, ain't you?"

The chief's eyes followed Thornton's gestures

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closely, but saw only a mild interest in the face of the young man before him.

"Well, not exactly an expert, Chief—but I know a little about them." Thornton smiled politely.

"Any information I can give you—"

The chief pondered a moment.

"You were connected with the Defy people once, weren't you?"

Thornton shook his head.

"Connected? Hardly. They're using a patent of mine on their newest vault; a synchronizing device that makes the time-lock and double combinations possible."

"Pretty rotten crowd to deal with; those Defy people, weren't they?" The chief stabbed blindly. "I imagine they held you down pretty tight when it came to talking terms."

Thornton nodded.

"They did that, and no mistake. Still—" he shrugged. "What I get, I get; otherwise, the thing would have been a dead loss. But, they aren't exactly pleasant to deal with."

"Had some trouble with 'em about your patent, didn't you?" The chief seemed weighing each word carefully.

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Thornton nodded again.

"Didn't know any one knew about it," he remarked quietly.

The chief chuckled.

"Oh, we know all sorts of things, young fellow. Believe me," and the chief grinned expansively, "there ain't much going on in Jacksonville that I'm not wise to. Did the vault people come across?"

"Come across?" Thornton wondered what the chief was talking about, and that individual, scenting an evident blunder, hurriedly added:

"I mean, you settled your differences all right, didn't you?"

"Oh, as to that—yes. It wasn't of great consequence." Thornton shrugged. "They went to work installing my device when I repeatedly told them I wasn't ready. I dropped the whole business, that's all. Of course," he added hastily, noting the chief's manifest interest, "there's nothing really that they can't do as well as I could, but—" he gestured with his cigar.

"Yes? But—what?" The chief leaned forward.

Thornton's eyes narrowed.

"Mind telling me why you're so suddenly inter-

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ested in this, Chief?" he asked mildly. "I settled with the Defy people over a year ago, and it isn't perhaps—"

The chief leaned closer to Thornton.

"That vault in the Second National," he asked carelessly, "know anything special about it?"

"Meaning—?" Thornton knocked the ashes from his cigar, thoughtfully wondering to what all this was leading.

"Oh, nothing special." The chief leaned back in his chair. "It's a pretty good type of vault, ain't it?"

"The best on the market," the other man agreed enthusiastically. "I don't know of a better or a more satisfactory type."

"Equipped with one of your devices?" A nuance of eagerness crept into the chief's disinterested tones.

Thornton nodded. "Oh, yes; I watched the men install that vault, by the way."

"Well, young man"—the chief pointed his cigar at Thornton and leaned forward—"that device of yours don't work! There's a hole in it as big as the St. Johns River."

He watched Thornton sharply, but the younger man's shrug seemed innocence itself.

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"I know it," he commented briefly. "But how do you?" Thornton sat straight in his chair. "What's the idea, Chief? You didn't come here to talk generalities, nor to discuss the merits of the Second National's vault."

For a minute the chief sat silent. Then he removed his cigar, and his voice dropped as he said very quietly:

"Happens that twenty-five thousand dollars disappeared out of that Second National vault some time last night, Mr. Thornton."

"What!" Thornton's eyes grew large with surprise.

The chief nodded slowly.

"I said it; twenty-five thousand, in currency."

"And who—who—what—" Thornton stuttered in his astonishment. "Blown up?" he questioned incredulously.

The chief's reply was a look of disgust.

"Naw—opened."

Thornton laughed shortly.

"What's the joke, Chief?" he questioned mildly.

The chief snorted.

"Joke? A hell of a joke. It happened. And what's more, I—"

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Thornton raised his hand.

"You mean to tell me that the vault in the Second National Bank was *opened* and money stolen?" A smile played over the young man's face. "Somebody's been kidding you, Chief."

"Then it's the president of the bank," grunted the chief, "and if you'd had a look at him you wouldn't think he was kidding. Hayes ain't the kind to report a twenty-five-thousand-dollar loss just for the fun of it."

"But who—" Thornton began, and the chief's shrug interrupted.

"That's what I want to find out, Mr. Thornton. I've come to you because I've been told you know these vaults, and I want to know whether—well, if you think it could be done?"

Thornton laid his cigar aside.

"Just a second, Chief; you're asking me seriously if I think any one could open that Defy vault, working at night, and in one night? Lord, man, no!"

The chief nodded.

"Not workin' all night either; the watchman came 'round every half hour."

Thornton picked up his cigar again.

"Then, all I can say, Chief, is that you'd better

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look inside the vault for what's missing. My word for it—it'll be there."

The chief shook his head slowly.

"But it isn't," he insisted.

Thornton's gesture of impatience was manifestly sincere.

"Let me tell you something, Chief." He spoke slowly, as a teacher would address a very stupid pupil. "The best vault men in the country have tried to get into a vault of this kind. They tried in the open daylight, with everything from dynamite and the oxy-acetylene blowpipe on down. And they had half a day to work on it. I happened to be there myself to watch the experiment. You read of it probably, up at the Defy factory. And they didn't get in! You can understand how I feel, Chief, when you sit there and tell me a wild yarn like that."

"And I'll tell you this much," the chief wagged a minatory finger before Thornton's face. "The Second National's vault was opened, and to hell with your experts!" The chief's face purpled slowly.

A touch of color appeared in Thornton's face.

"Very well, Chief. You came to me for information, and I give it. Now I'll tell you further that

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whoever entered the vault of the Second National Bank last night—as you say—entered by opening the vault door in only one fashion; that is, by means of the combinations!"

The chief puffed silently on his cigar, then shook his head slowly.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Thornton," he grumbled. "You see how I feel about this," he added apologetically; "that vault was got into; that's my only information, and the three men who know the combinations, well, they're Hayes, Harkiss and Kingsley, and Harkiss was at Mr. Hayes' house all night."

Thornton, mollified by the chief's tone, shrugged slightly.

"About this—this imperfection?" the chief continued. "I mean in this device of yours; just what is it?"

"Not such as to make burglary even remotely possible," Thornton answered quickly. "It isn't really an imperfection, but it is something that should be improved. It hasn't a thing to do with the vault itself; it is in the time lock—in the clock, that is."

"In the clock?"

Thornton nodded again.

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"The clock depends on electricity for its winding power; that's the trouble. It winds automatically and only for one hour at a time, by my new tension arrangement, without the usual springs. Shut off the electricity and the clock stops—stops and drops automatically into the time set for the vault to be opened."

"Just a minute." The chief puzzled with the idea, thoughtfully eying his cigar. "If you cut the juice from the Second National's vault clock, the mechanism immediately throws the clock to eight-thirty?"

"If that is the time set—yes." Thornton smiled at the chief's expression of bewilderment.

"Then it ain't got a thing to do with the opening of the vault itself, this invention of yours?" He seemed, somehow, disappointed.

"Just as I told you, Chief; it doesn't affect the vault one way or another. The cutting off of the power merely permits the working of the combinations—not another thing."

With a murmured request for permission, the chief reached for the telephone and growled a number into the transmitter.

"Hello!" The chief frowned thoughtfully. "Get

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me the superintendent. That you, Karks? Yes—yes. Tell me, was your power shut off, even for a second, any time last night? What's that? I mean the up-town power, no, not the lights—hell, I don't know. I mean the juice at—well, say, the Second National Bank. All right, I'll hold the wire."

Holding the receiver, the chief turned to Thornton.

"I've got the power-house out in Springfield. They'd know. Say, if the juice was cut off and sent back on later, what'd happen?"

"If the power were turned on again, it would not affect the clock," Thornton explained. "The clock stops, and the only way to start it is to open the vault, close it, and reset the clock."

The chief nodded and opened his mouth to speak again—but turned instead to the telephone.

"Hello. Yes. All right, Karks. It was not, eh? You're sure? All right, Karks, thanks. Naw, it's not important, just wanted to know; s'long."

He turned again to Thornton.

"That eliminates the clock."

Thornton's eyes had narrowed puzzlingly, and he was frowning thoughtfully before him.

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"There was power all night?"

The chief nodded.

"Then," Thornton stated positively, "that makes it doubly impossible. There's not a man in the country who could get into that vault. I know it couldn't be done with the power off, but with the clock running—well—it just simply can't be done, that's all."

The chief grinned slightly.

"Sounds fine, Mr. Thornton, but you're overlooking the fact that it *was* done."

Thornton turned to a cabinet beside his desk, and drew from a flat drawer a series of blue-prints. These he spread out on the desk before him.

"Take a look at these, Chief; here are your measurements, and here," he sought a moment among the prints, "here's a cross-section of the door; this one—" and he indicated a drawing. "Now, honestly, Chief, does it look possible to you?"

The chief looked thoughtfully at the prints, although the drawings meant little to him. After a moment he shot a side glance at Thornton, and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"Mind telling me, Mr. Thornton, how you happen by these prints?" The chief's voice was mildly in-

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quiring, but the look in his eyes betrayed his keen interest.

Thornton flushed slightly, but answered promptly: "Of course not. Got them from the Defy people after the work was installed. They had no need for them, and I wanted a set—just to have in my files, you know."

The chief relighted his cigar.

"And there's no man—mind you, nobody you ever heard of—who you think could open this Second National box?"

Thornton studied the blue-prints before him, then raised his eyes to the chief's.

"Well, it might sound silly, after what I've already said; but I'd like to tackle the job of getting in there myself. Oh, not in a few minutes," he laughed at the chief's startled expression, "but I'd like to have a week to try out the combinations, that's all."

The chief pondered this.

"But you don't really think you could do it?"

Thornton laughed outright. "Well, frankly, I do, Chief, although I've been laughed at about it before. The Defy people offered to let me try when they carried on the experiments up north. I

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did try, as a matter of fact, but they'd bunged that door up so it wasn't really a fair trial. Still, I think if I had a week to work over that vault, undisturbed, I *might* be able to get into it."

"You mean by working out the combinations?"

Thornton nodded, then waved his cigar in a dismissing gesture.

"But what's the use talking about it?"

The chief grunted.

"Oh, I don't know. I come in here and you tell me that nobody in the world can work into the place, and a minute later you turn around and say you think you could do it yourself."

Thornton reddened. "That's what I get for boasting," he smiled ruefully.

"You don't know the safe-men, Chief. Ask any one of them the questions you asked me and you'd get the same answers. And talk to any of them about vaults—except their own make, of course—and you'll find them blowing that they can get into anything from a two-by-four strong-box to the vaults of the Bank of England.

"It's just our way, I suppose, even though I'm not the most expert safe-man in the country—not by a blamed sight."

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The chief got slowly to his feet.

"Well, some one got in there, Mr. Thornton, and, what's more, I'm going to find him."

Thornton rose.

"You can count on any assistance I can give you, Chief. I'd be mighty interested if you'll let me help. But don't be too sure about it. I'm afraid you'll find that Mr. Hayes is just mistaken, that's all."

The chief smiled grimly.

"Well, we'll see. I'm pretty sure, though, that Hayes knows what he's talking about. By the way, Mr. Thornton, the two combinations: what are they?"

"The first a five-letter word, and the second a five-figure number; that's the extent of my knowledge, Chief. I don't know which comes first, or whether they alternate, or anything else."

The chief turned to the door.

"If you'll drop around this afternoon, Mr. Thornton," he said slowly, "maybe I'll take you up on that offer to help."

"Do. I'll be glad to." Thornton shook hands with the detective, and turned to gather up his blueprints, which he replaced in their cabinet. "But,"

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and Thornton turned again to the chief, "I'm mighty afraid you'll find that somebody's made a bad bull somewhere." He closed the print file with a snap, and shook his head slowly. "That vault's simply impregnable, Chief; that's all there's to it."

And when the door closed behind him the chief stood for a moment in the hallway, gazing abstractedly at the ground-glass panel of the door marked "Halvey Thornton—Chemist."

He stuck his cigar thoughtfully in one corner of his mouth, and smiled slightly to himself: "Too certain," he grunted, "too damned certain."

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CHAPTER IV

THE LAUNCH

THE Brannon home, set far off on the Ortega Road, some five miles from the city, shone brilliantly, and the spacious grounds were crowded with a moving throng of men and women.

Isabel Brannon's dances were important affairs in the social life of Jacksonville; informal almost in their frequency, but affairs to be looked forward to.

Here could be met, in the cool of the early evening, many whose names were written large in the social and business register of the city, and the broad veranda, which encircled the house, and which faced, for a portion of its length, the swiftly moving St. Johns River, had witnessed the beginning of more than one important civic movement—and matrimonial.

To be counted among Isabel Brannon's regular guests was in itself a badge of social distinction, and to be an intimate of the circle was proof posi-

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tive of the possession of an intellect above the ordinary.

Near a large sycamore on the lawn before the house Max Railey, the youngest and most brilliant prosecuting attorney that the city of Jacksonville and the county of Duval had yet produced, held forth oratorically in the center of an intensely interested crowd.

It was generally conceded that Railey's next step was the mayor's chair; then Congress, and later perhaps he would be Jacksonville's contribution to a gubernatorial campaign, and after that—

At any rate, the powers that be in Florida politics hoped great things from the young prosecuting attorney.

"And the sort of reform we need, we're going to get; we'll get it, I tell you, if I have to go to Tallahassee and bulldoze the Legislature in person!"

The bright moonlight drifted down on the speaker, clearly outlining his deceivingly youthful face and the shock of black hair thrown carelessly back from his forehead.

"*Bravo! Muchissimo bravo!*" chuckled the professor of Spanish from the university, flipping a cigarette across the grass.

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Ralby laughed aloud.

"Come out of it, Max!" he cried. "The next dance begins in a minute, and I guess the city won't go to the demnition bow-wows entirely."

"The devil it does!" Apparently the young attorney placed more importance on the immediate present than on the possibility of future reform.

"Where the deuce is that girl?" he laughed, looking about him. "Seen Bernice around, Ralby?"

Ralby nodded.

"Disappeared when you began to hold forth concerning the relative merits and demerits of John Barleycorn's reign.

"Here, Isabel!" Ralby hurried across the path to where Isabel Brannon stood smiling at her guests. "My dance, Isabel," he claimed, his dark face lighting.

The girl nodded, then called: "Oh, Max—"

Max Railey hurried to her side.

"Fair lady, behold Pierrot disconsolate! Columbine has vanished!"

Isabel Brannon nodded.

"And I don't blame her—there! And the very next time, Mr. Pierrot, that you bring your nasty politics into this—"

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"Pardon, Heaven-born, pardon! I would kneel —I would make obeisance—but—the grass is damp, alas! Where, oh, where is my lady?"

Isabel laughed, taking Ralby's arm.

"I think I saw Bernice hiding in the library," she said lightly. "And I've missed all of this dance I intend to."

"Pierrot thanks you, Heaven-born."

The young attorney hurried to the large porch and made his way to the side of the house, while Ralby and the girl entered through the large open windows from which came the lilting, infectious strains of a fox-trot.

Out of hearing of the music from the house, near the bank of the river, thoughtfully and judiciously throwing stones into the water, was Doctor Edward Lester, and beside him stood Halvey Thornton.

The doctor, in his evening clothes, looked, if anything, more grotesque and awkward than he did in his laboratory, while Thornton's appearance left little to be desired from the standpoint of masculine effectiveness.

The contrast between the two men was sharp and distinct. The doctor's six feet of pulpy flesh, his double-creased chin and puffy cheeks, set off to

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good advantage the clean, lithe appearance of the younger man who was speaking earnestly:

"I tell you, Lester, the thing bothers me. It's uncanny. How could any one have got into it?"

The doctor spun a flat stone into the water, watched it ricochet and disappear.

"Why worry over it, Hal? None of your business. Let the detectives and the bank worry."

"But, man alive!" expostulated Thornton. "I feel as though it were a personal affront to me—as though it were *my* vault they'd broken into—if they have."

"If they have?" The doctor turned his little eyes on the younger man.

Thornton fidgeted under the direct gaze.

"Oh, I thought Hayes might have put the money somewhere and forgotten about it. Such things do happen, you know. But both Harkiss and Kingsley were with him when he put the package away, and when the vault was opened. I talked to Hayes this afternoon; dammit, Lester, show some interest!"

The huge doctor chuckled.

"Go on, I'm listening—you're too infernally nervous these days, Hal."

Thornton shrugged.

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"By George, it's enough to make any one nervous. Hayes reminded me that it was my recommendation that finally induced him to get that Defy vault instead of the others, and—well, don't you see, Lester, the position I'm in?"

The doctor shook his massive head.

"Can't see that I do, Hal. What if you did boost the Defy product; you had an ax to grind, didn't you? There was the royalty from the patent—"

The doctor lighted a cigarette. "Quite a distinction for this burg of ours, eh? A cracksman who can calmly get into the pride of the Defy people and walk off with what he likes."

"Confound it, Lester, be serious." Thornton did not smile in answer to the doctor's rumbling chuckle. "Some one did it—I believe that now—the question is, who? I don't believe there's a man alive who could—"

The big doctor laughed again.

"Ralby would tell you, Hal, that there's a man alive who can undo anything that another man has ever done. Got a good argument, too. Jam up on criminology. Ever argue with him about it?"

Thornton turned impatiently and walked slowly away.

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"Bother Ralby and his stupid ideas."

The doctor grinned at Thornton's back.

"Just the same he's a coming young man," he taunted. "Isabel's taken a notion to him, too, it seems."

Thornton stopped short.

"What's the idea, Lester?" he asked shortly.

The doctor's laugh boomed out.

"Got you, eh?" His huge frame shook heavily. "Nice chap, Ralby, mighty nice chap," he grunted. Then: "By the way, where were you last night?" he finished banteringly.

"That's not as funny as you think, Lester," Thornton flamed. "I even considered that, too, for if there's a man in this town—and I'm not boasting and you know it!—who could get into that vault, well, I'm the man. But, lord, it would take me weeks to work out the combinations. However, if I—"

The doctor waved a fat hand. "Of course I was joking."

Thornton nodded.

"I know you were; but I've puzzled over it all day; and if a man can get into that vault that easy—

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why, there isn't a vault or strong-room in the United States that's safe!"

"Well?" The doctor was plainly bored.

"And yet," Thornton continued speculatively, "I *might* be able to do it."

The doctor grumbled something unintelligible and uncomplimentary.

"I was with Isabel until about ten," Thornton mused aloud. "Met her down-town and didn't go home with her; had a headache. By ten-thirty I was in bed, and I awoke this morning about seven—"

"Come on, let's get back." The doctor took Thornton's arm commandingly. "You'll find there's something wrong somewhere, for if that vault can't be got into—well, that's all there's to it, I guess."

Thornton shook his head gloomily.

"I wish I thought so," he muttered.

The doctor laughed. "You offered your services to the chief, of course."

"Yes. But what can I do against this—against this—whoever he is. I don't think you realize, Lester, that a man who could do a thing like that is a genius—a man who could command—"

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Doctor Lester shrugged his massive shoulders and yawned mightily.

Together the two men made their way across the grounds and were met by their hostess.

"For goodness' sake, Hal," greeted the girl, "why the portentous frown?" And Thornton smiled.

"There, that's better," she remarked, taking the arm relinquished by the doctor. "As for you," she addressed herself to Doctor Lester, "Morton has been looking for you all over the place. He found a book in the library, and seems to have proved you wrong about something—something with a funny name—I don't know what it is."

"H-m," Doctor Lester frowned jestingly. "That's a fine way to try to shake an old friend. But—all right, young lady; it means something that tastes nasty the next time I get a chance at you—just wait."

And he heaved his huge bulk across the narrow path toward the house.

The girl turned to Thornton in the semi-darkness of the lawn. The music from the house came to them but faintly.

"Well, Mr. Chemist-who-is-always-busy, what's the matter?"

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Thornton shook his head slowly.

"Nothing much, Isabel, except that I'm bothered. The impossible has happened, and even Lester is laughing at me, I think."

He outlined the situation briefly, telling her of the chief of detectives' visit to his office and of his conversation.

After a moment the girl nodded quietly.

"Every one seems to know about it," she remarked. "Max was telling Morton of it a few minutes ago. The papers didn't mention it, however. I suppose you are to help?"

"Try to help," he corrected. "What does Max think of it—and Ralby?"

The girl laughed.

"You know our 'brilliant young prosecuting attorney,'" she said lightly. "He vows they'll find whoever it is in a week. Of course Morton doesn't agree with him. I left them arguing Morton's idea that there's always some one who can undo things that have been done. I think Max was getting the worst of it, too."

Thornton noted the note of enthusiasm in her voice.

"You like Ralby a lot, don't you, Isabel?"

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The girl shot a quick glance at him.

"Why—why do you ask, Hal?"

Thornton shrugged.

"Oh—" he waved a hand helplessly. "I don't know; everybody seems to like him."

The girl smiled at his vagueness and shook her head a little.

"I don't know, Hal," she said frankly, "sometimes Morton is a little short of wonderful, and sometimes—"

"Yes?"

"Sometimes I just despise him without any reason." The girl laughed. "And if you ever breathe a word of it—" she threatened.

Thornton came back to the subject which occupied him.

"You know, lady, I believe there is just one man in town capable of getting into that vault."

The girl looked up quickly and bit her lip. It seemed that the sudden switch of conversation was not too pleasing to her.

"Yes?" she questioned dully.

"I could."

The girl laughed quickly.

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"Nonsense. In a month, perhaps. You didn't succeed the last time, did you?"

"Oh, it was different at the factory," Thornton explained. "So many things had already been done—"

"I've heard enough about vaults and such, Mr. Chemist," the girl broke in archly. "And I've been saving this dance for you."

When the dance ended, a half dozen clamoring men claimed her attention and Thornton drifted outside. His mind would not leave the problem, and he wandered toward the river, turning it over and over.

Near the dock lay Ralby's new launch; a mahogany-finished, glistening thing, with the lines of a yacht, and gleaming beautifully in the moonlight.

Absently Thornton wandered aboard and looked about him, first on the deck and the little wheelhouse, and then below in the two cabins the launch boasted.

Two or three times, between the dances that followed, Isabel searched for Thornton. Neither Ralby nor Doctor Lester had seen him, and she determined to seek him out later, the while she laughed at the

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doctor's suggestion to check over the list of feminine guests and find an absentee that would explain Thornton's disappearance.

It was past midnight when Thornton made his reappearance in the ballroom.

The doctor drew him aside, scanning closely with his little eyes the slight pallor which rested on the young man's cheeks, and the bewildered expression in his eyes.

"What's wrong, Hal?"

Thornton smiled weakly.

"I think I'll be a patient of yours pretty soon," he laughed. "That is, if I don't buck up. I went out for a stroll toward the river. Saw Ralby's launch at the dock and clambered aboard. I must have fallen asleep in the cabin. Anyway, I was there two hours."

"You come to me in the morning, young man," grumbled the doctor heavily. "I'll have no breakdowns at this stage of the game." He drew the younger man into an alcove. "That girl has been hunting for you all over the place. Tell me, Hal—I meant to ask you this morning—what's the verdict?"

"Isabel?"

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The doctor nodded.

"I'm afraid, Lester, afraid to ask her. She seems to like Ralby so—"

"Faint heart—" broke in the doctor heavily, and Thornton flushed.

"I know, Lester," Thornton laughed shortly, "but suppose she turns me down? Why shouldn't she? She's a thousand times too wonderful—"

"None are so blind—" Again the doctor broke off his quotation. "Look," he nodded across the room to where the girl could be seen making her way through one of the large windows. "Whom do you suppose she's looking for?"

"Me?" Thornton queried inanely.

"No, oh, no. Maybe she's looking for me," the doctor answered sarcastically.

Thornton stepped out into the room to follow the girl. A butler caught his eye and hurried across the room.

"You're wanted on the phone, Mr. Thornton."

Thornton cast a glance after the disappearing girl and followed the servant.

The doctor's huge face creased into smiles.

"The gods," he muttered, "don't seem ready for this thing to happen." He produced the inevitable

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cigarette, stepped out to the veranda, and, musing thoughtfully, wandered off beneath the trees.

"It's a good match," he soliloquized, "mighty fine match. He's a boy with a future, and she's a—what the devil!"

The doctor drew up near the tiny dock in the river, and his eyes grew large as he gazed at the launch made fast to one side. The moonlight glinted on the polished bow of the little craft, a bow that was pointed down the river.

"Now, who," muttered the doctor heavily, thoughtfully eying the little launch, "who turned that craft around?"

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CHAPTER V

THE SECOND VISITATION

THE doctor returned to the house unnoticed in the babel that attended the leave-taking of the guests. He shook hands absently with whoever presented himself, his eyes searching for Thornton. Finally he discovered him leaning gloomily against a post far down the veranda, and waddled gravely to his side.

"You look like a study in pessimism," the doctor greeted. "What's up now?"

"Nothing."

The doctor eased his huge bulk into a wicker chair, lighted a cigarette and meditatively puffed a moment.

"See the lady?" he queried, and Thornton gloomily shook his head. "That's the occasion of the funereal expression, I suppose," the doctor continued, eying Thornton.

The younger man scowled and dropped into a chair beside the doctor's.

"I came out," he explained glumly, "and Ralby

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was with her. He always is, dammit. And just when I—"

The doctor laughed encouragingly.

"Had your courage screwed to the sticking-point, eh?" He contemplated Thornton from out his little shrewd eyes. "Nothing important in the call?" he hazarded.

Thornton shook his head. "They'd rung off; don't know who it was."

A little frown appeared in the doctor's forehead.

"Idiots—call a man this time of night and decide they don't want him. I've been trembling in my boots that somebody'd have a young fit and drag me away from here. Must be my lucky night."

Thornton remained silent, staring intently at the floor before him.

The big doctor smiled.

"I'll probably have a string of calls waiting when I get home," he rumbled on.

Still no word from Thornton, and the doctor snapped his cigarette in a wide arc across the rail of the veranda.

"'Rah for the fireworks!" the young prosecuting attorney cried approvingly as he approached. "Gee, that was a push—eh, Bernice?"

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The girl at his side nodded in turn.

"You wait for me," she demanded poutingly. "I won't be five minutes. I'm ready to go home, too."

"Lady, whenever have I failed you?" protested the young man theatrically. "Here shall I make my home until you return." He took a chair next to the doctor's.

"You keep him for me, Doctor," the girl laughed her request at Doctor Lester. "He's the onliest man I've got, you know." And she turned into the house.

Railey accepted a cigarette from the doctor's fat hand and leaned back comfortably.

"A corner on feminine loveliness; that's what I've got," he exulted cheerfully.

Doctor Lester grunted unintelligibly, and Thornton remained silent. The young attorney smoked a moment, then:

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Come out of it, Thornton; this isn't a sphinx party."

Thornton raised his head.

"Oh, hello, Max; didn't know you were here."

"What?" The young man drew up in his chair. "And you did not see the blinding vision of beauty that commanded me to remain here until she re-

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turned?" he mocked. "You must have been dreaming."

Thornton turned toward the speaker.

"What's your idea about this Second National business, Max?"

Railey laughed.

"The expert—the steel oracle—desires information? Well, frankly, I haven't any theory, Thornton." His voice dropped from its light tone and took on a vein of seriousness. "Just how do you explain it yourself?"

"Explain it?" Thornton frowned. "By heaven, there's no explanation to it. I think the chief is wrong somewhere, that's all."

"H-m." The young attorney hummed thoughtfully. "The chief told me he'd talked to you, Hal, and that you'd sort of thrown a bluff that you could get into that vault. He's rather struck with the idea. Why did you do that?"

"There you are." Doctor Lester seemed to rouse into wakefulness. "That's what you get for blowing, Hal. Shouldn't be surprised if the sleuth had an eye on you."

Thornton shrugged.

"I'm going to satisfy myself to-morrow," he said

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quietly. "I want to see if I can do it. Suppose they'll let me try, Max?"

"Why not? But I wouldn't make an ass of myself, Thornton. I looked at that vault to-day, and, believe me, it looks about as solid as Gibraltar."

Thornton nodded.

"That's what I say; but I can't get the idea out of my head. I've been bothering with it all night. It seems so ridiculously impossible."

"Glad Ralby's not around," chuckled the doctor. "He'd read you a lecture on what isn't possible and what is, eh, Max?"

"Gosh, yes. He had me in a corner to-night," laughed Railey. "Brilliant chap, that Ralby."

The doctor agreed readily. "Keeps up with things well," he admitted. "Got the finest little library on the new psychoanalysis movement I've seen yet; from Freud on down."

Thornton listened without interest.

"Just how good is the city's detective force, Max?" he questioned.

Railey started.

"Hey? Oh,"—and he laughed slightly—"nothing to brag about. The chief's a fat-headed, bulldog sort; he gets some results, through sheer luck,

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it seems to me. No, Hal, don't pin your faith of working out this thing on the detective force. They're about as much up in the air as I've ever seen them."

The doctor grunted.

"I'm up in the air, too," he admitted, "what with Thornton's insistence that the blamed thing is bullet-proof and all. Damme! I'm beginning to wonder about the thing myself." The doctor lighted still another cigarette and grumbled heavily as though blaming himself for his interest.

"Here's an idea," suggested Railey slowly. "Let's see. Wouldn't it have been possible, Hal, for the men who put the vault in the bank to fix it so that they could come back some time and work the combinations?"

Thornton shook his head.

"If they did, they're marvels, that's all. I saw considerable of that work, Max, and it looked all right to me. Of course," he continued thoughtfully, "I wasn't looking for anything wrong, but—" he shrugged slightly. "It's too far-fetched, I think. That vault is so delicate that it would not close if a sheet of moderately thick paper were placed on the side of the door. No, that's not a good guess, Max."

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The prosecuting attorney laughed.

"Oh, well, I can guess again, then; it just occurred to me, that's all."

"Seems to me," rumbled the doctor heavily, "seems to me that I read somewhere once—some detective story, probably—of a bunch of crooks who got into a vault like this by coming up from underneath, after working months to open the way. Sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"No-o," Railey began speculatively; "think I read the same thing, a long time ago." He tapped a foot consideringly on the floor. "As good a guess as any, I suppose, and worth looking into. What do you think of that one, Hal?"

Thornton shook his head.

"Won't do," he declared. "The base of the vault—its setting, that is—is on a solid concrete base from the ground; about eight solid feet of concrete, and some three feet of steel. Getting through that would be more of an impossible feat than opening the door itself."

The doctor yawned.

"I guess I'm not a Nick Carter," he grinned. "Besides, it's morning, and time to get in. Coming with me, Thornton? I'll drop you at—"

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"Mr. Thornton"—the butler approached again—"the telephone, please."

Thornton turned to the doctor.

"I don't know who it can be this time of night—or morning—" he smiled; "but wait a minute and I'll go with you." He followed the servant.

Railey rose to his feet.

"That fair lady of mine is taking too much time," he commented. "Think I'll chase in and see— Hello, Ralby— not gone yet?"

Ralby drew near the two men.

"No," he said shortly. "I've been talking to Isabel. Everybody seems to have left, though, except the younger bunch. Where's Thornton—seen him?"

The doctor raised his eyes.

"Just went inside to the telephone. Wait a minute; we'll all go together. I've got my three-cylinder buzz-wagon outside."

The doctor invariably spoke of his roadster as a three-cylinder, claiming that the fourth cylinder had chronic something or other, which prevented it functioning, and no small part of the doctor's profanity was perfected while swearing over this same cylinder.

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"You're still in the Riverside Apartments, aren't you, Ralby?"

Ralby nodded.

"Yep—third floor. Thornton's down on the first. Thinking of coming in with us?"

The young prosecuting attorney laughed.

"Yes, whenever I can bring Bernice to terms," he chuckled. "In the meantime my diggings will hold me."

"Glad to have you," said Ralby easily. "We'll make you feel at home there. And if we can get you too, Lester—" He turned to the huge doctor.

"Huh." The doctor humphed his displeasure. "I spend half my time there now, doctoring that Haines kid."

"Oh, yes, our little mania patient," Ralby commented. "Think you'll try that suggestion business when— Oh, good night, Max, see you to-morrow— I mean later in the day." Ralby nodded and shook hands with the young attorney, who moved off.

"Thanks for taking care of him, Doctor," the girl in the doorway cried laughingly. "And it's time you people were abed."

"Thornton's an infernally long time at that phone," grumbled the doctor.

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Ralby nodded.

"Yes, and we're keeping Isabel, I think. Want to go dig him out?"

The doctor shook his head. It just occurred to him that Thornton was with the girl.

"No, I'm not especially tired," he grunted. "Had an easy day of it."

Meanwhile Thornton passed through the empty library and to the telephone on the table.

"Hello. Yes. Thornton speaking." He frowned into the transmitter trying to recall the voice. "Oh, hello, Chief—what's the idea? Did you call me a minute ago? Well, about twenty minutes. You did? All right. What is it?"

A look of astonishment crossed his face.

"The devil!" he gasped. "When? Yes. Yes. All right. I'll come down now. Yes. All right. Be with you in a few minutes."

He hurried to the porch.

Doctor Lester looked up.

"What's the rush?" he grumbled, and Ralby looked expectantly at Thornton.

"I just heard—" Thornton began, as the girl appeared in the doorway.

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"Shoo! All of you!" she demanded laughingly. "I'm going in and it's past one o'clock."

She smiled impartially on the three men as they made their adieus.

Thornton was manifestly excited.

"Now, what is it?" demanded the doctor, stopping still.

"The St. John's National has been robbed!"

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CHAPTER VI

DOCTOR LESTER MAKES A BET

THORNTON'S voice was melodramatically quiet.

"The devil you say!" Ralby brought up short. "When? How?"

The doctor whistled softly through his pursed lips.

"In the same way," continued Thornton, moving on. "I was just talking with the chief. Another vault entered—the loss is ten thousand."

They stopped before the doctor's car.

"Want to come to town with me?" Thornton turned. "I'm going down to the chief's office and see what I can learn of the affair."

"By George, I will!" The doctor clambered into his car. "Come along, Ralby; this'll interest you. A nice study in criminal psychology—a damned nice study."

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Ralby shrugged and laughed.

"At least he's an engaging sort of thief, this. And he's got the nerve."

They crowded into the doctor's small car and sped toward the city. As they were crossing the Riverside Viaduct toward Bay Street Ralby broke the silence.

"Well, Doctor, doesn't this demonstrate again that there's always some individual who can—"

The doctor, driving, made the turn into Bay Street on two wheels.

"H-m," he grunted. "It begins to be interesting, certainly."

"Interesting?" Thornton's voice was tense. "By heaven—it's more than that. You don't understand. It's almost unbelievable. The man who is doing this is a marvel!"

The doctor grunted again.

"Just the same," he threw the words at Ralby, "they'll get him—just as they get 'em all."

"Never in the world," laughed Ralby. "I think our gentleman will be too shrewd to be caught napping."

Thornton concurred. "Any man who can do things like that," he agreed, the words jolting from

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his mouth as the doctor swung the car around a corner, "isn't likely to be caught."

The doctor pressed his heavy foot on the accelerator.

"What'll you bet?" he questioned.

Thornton gestured with one hand.

"Not me," he frowned. "The whole business is too queer."

"Bet what, Doctor?" Ralby was interested.

"I'll bet five hundred they'll catch him in two weeks," grumbled the big man.

"Five hundred? Done with you," Ralby laughed aloud. "That's a sporting proposition."

The car swerved abruptly and brought up before the detective's offices with a screech of brakes. The three men descended and the doctor chuckled aloud:

"Good bet," he agreed, "and I'll split fifty-fifty with you, Hal, if you can work it out. You're on the case, you know."

"All that I can say," finished Thornton, leaning back in his chair, "is that whoever is responsible for these robberies is a safeman, par excellence."

The chief nodded heavily, and turned to Franklin at his side. The room in which the men sat adjoined

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the chief's office; the air was heavy and redolent with tobacco smoke.

Doctor Lester, who had spoken but little, scanned the faces of the men about the table. There were Thornton, the chief of detectives, Franklin, two other plain-clothes men, Morton Ralby, and the doctor himself.

It was Ralby who broke the momentary silence that followed Thornton's remark.

"Isn't it a bit peculiar, Chief, that the man should just grab one package of currency? Surely there were bonds in the vault?" He tapped a cigarette over an ash-tray.

"Hell!" exploded the chief. "Whoever it was probably realized that it was a cinch to get more when he wanted it. Why should he bother with bonds, and take chances on being located by the serial numbers?"

"Then you expect still another attempt might be made?"

"Why not?" the chief demanded. "The man seems to be able to get through anything; even into what Mr. Thornton says"—here the chief's voice grew heavily sarcastic—"is burglar-proof."

Ralby smiled, and Thornton blurted out:

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"I tell you again, Chief, as I've told you a half-dozen times already: there isn't a man in this part of the country who knows as much about these things as I do, and I doubt that *I* could get into—"

The chief waved a pudgy hand.

"All right, Mr. Thornton, I'm not disputing you; but—" he grinned weakly, "you'd better look to your laurels then."

"That's all very well, Chief," Thornton returned quickly, "but my idea is that these—this—whoever it is—isn't just one man, but a gang of them. They must have planned this thing for months."

"What makes you think so?"

Thornton flushed at the chief's tone.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "But—oh, it isn't reasonable to suppose that suddenly a man appears—a man of whom the police have no record, no history—who is able to get into an absolutely burglar-proof vault." Thornton scowled thoughtfully at the detective. "You know yourself, Chief, that any single man of this extraordinary ability would be known somewhere, and you admit you've no record—nor any history of a—a—"

He broke off, and the chief scratched his head musingly, while the detective, Franklin, nodded.

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"It does sound reasonable," he admitted.

"Of course it does," Thornton flashed. "It would be queer if a man of this power suddenly decided to turn thief and chose Jacksonville as his field. It's ridiculous. He would pick a place where his robberies would net him ten times the amount they do here. That's simply common sense."

"Was there any sign of damage in the St. John's vault?" Doctor Lester's heavy voice broke in, more to turn the conversation from Thornton and the chief than for any other reason.

Franklin answered the doctor.

"Not a sign. The guy just knew the combinations—or worked 'em. It's an old single-door box, and he walked in, helped himself, shut the door, and—flooey!" The detective's gesture was all embracing.

The heavy doctor chuckled.

"Quite an easy way of making a living, eh?" he grunted.

Franklin nodded, grinning.

"But you watch, Doctor," he commented, "that guy's going to get too blamed biggety, and we'll get him. He'll think it's too easy."

The chief dropped his cigar into a cuspidor.

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"I'll tell you this much, Doctor," he offered. "If Mr. Thornton and you and Mr. Ralby here are interesting yourself in this—er—affair—"

Ralby hastened to nod.

"With your permission, Chief, though there isn't much I can do, I know. I'm interested, well, less in the robberies, frankly, than in the personality of the robber. Psychology, you know—a harmless hobby, and—"

Doctor Lester heaved himself heavily to his feet.

"Anything I can do, Chief, just say the word." The big doctor chuckled. "But there doesn't seem to be much use for me."

The chief smiled grimly.

"Never can tell, Doctor," he snapped. "We may have use for you at that—you, too, Mr. Ralby."

"Well," the doctor yawned, "don't give that lunatic too much to do." He nodded heavily toward Thornton. "He's nervous as a jumping-jack already."

"What do you propose to do first?" Thornton ignored the doctor's remark.

The chief shrugged. "At least I can prevent a recurrence of it. I've got men stationed at each bank in the city"—the chief looked straight at

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Thornton—"and it's unlikely that we'll have another chance—"

"Surely you don't think this is going to continue?" Ralby's voice was incredulous.

"Huh!" the chief grunted. "Doesn't it look like it?"

"Why not?" Thornton asked bitterly. "It seems to me that one of the things we *can* expect is a repetition of the robberies."

The chief nodded his agreement, and Doctor Lester eyed Thornton thoughtfully.

"It may be down the state," Thornton went on, "but I doubt it. If it is one man, and I don't believe it, he'll have the whole country in an uproar in six months."

"Not if I know it," growled the chief, viciously biting off the end of a fresh cigar.

"I'd like to go down with you in the morning, Chief," Thornton continued as he rose to his feet, "later on, that is, just to see whether it is possible for a man to work the combinations of the vault in the Second National."

The chief eyed Thornton again.

"All right, young man. You can have a fling at it, and also at this St. John's—"

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Thornton laughed.

"I've no doubt about the St. John's, Chief. I know what can be done with that, and I'll bet I can get into it inside of thirty minutes. It's that Defy vault that's worrying me."

Doctor Lester, moving toward the door, took it up:

"You folks," he commented, "seem to be overlooking the fact that watchmen are supposed to be in these banks."

Franklin turned to the doctor.

"No, we ain't, either. But this guy works like streaked lightning. Why, he didn't have fifteen minutes between the watchman's rounds at the St. John's."

"What time was it when this last robbery took place?" Doctor Lester was beginning to manifest an interest in the proceedings.

"As near as we can make out, a little after midnight," answered the chief promptly.

"That was when you first called me, wasn't it, Chief?" Thornton questioned.

"Er—yes." The chief nodded embarrassedly, and hurriedly held a lighted match to his cigar.

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"Why did you ring off?" Thornton queried curiously.

The chief turned visibly red.

"Er—I—that is—I was at my house," he stuttered, "and you were so long coming to the phone" —he fidgeted about in his chair—"I was in a hurry to get to the office, of course," he explained. "Called you again right after I got here."

Doctor Lester's heavy face creased into a grin and he winked broadly at Ralby, who wondered what the reason was.

It was patently evident to the big doctor that Thornton's questions embarrassed the chief of detectives, nor did the shrewd physician for a moment doubt that the chief's call was made for any other reason than to fix definitely the fact that Thornton *was* at the Brannon home, five miles from the city.

The doctor eyed Thornton speculatively, but the young man seemed entirely unaware of the chief's nervousness or of the doctor's gaze fixed on his face. The chief's answer evidently satisfied him, for he was frowning at nothing, staring straight ahead, evidently endeavoring to solve the problem by sheer thought.

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Doctor Lester shook his head heavily, and a puzzled light came into his little eyes as he met those of Morton Ralby fixed on him. He shrugged hugely and turned aside. Ralby was undoubtedly puzzled, and showed it. He had been listening intently:

"Tell me," he began again, "who discovered the St. John's robbery at this time of the morning?"

The chief's guttural laugh answered him.

"I thought you'd get away without asking that," he admitted. "Our gentleman left a light burning before the vault. The watchman reported it to Hollwood, the cashier. He went down and investigated; then called me."

Ralby shook his head slowly.

"A man such as this one appears to be," he speculated, "would hardly leave a light—"

"Oh, there's none of 'em perfect," the chief assured him positively, glad to get away from the subject of his telephone call for Thornton. "That's why I'm morally certain we'll land him. But—thirty-five thousand dollars in two days."

"Will the papers have it?" queried Ralby.

"That's the hell of it," agreed the chief. "They will, by to-morrow—by this afternoon, that is—and they'll be on me like a pack of hungry wolves."

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"Did you look for finger-prints?"

The chief smiled tolerantly at Ralby's questionings.

"About fifty hands a day touch that vault," he grumbled. "Besides, Hollwood had opened the vault before I got there."

"There isn't any inner vault there?"

The chief shook his head.

"Nope. Only one. A small inner safe, one of the circular kind, which they use for securities."

Ralby frowned, and Thornton broke in:

"There wasn't any effort made to open the inner safe?" he questioned. "That sounds queer. To a man who can go through the outer vault-door, the inner safe would be like a cigar-box."

The detective, Franklin, had been listening carefully, especially when Thornton was speaking. It was easy to see that he considered Thornton but little short of an infallible oracle.

"I guess he didn't have time," he volunteered. "He must 'a' had a line on the watchman's rounds all right."

Ralby, carefully studying the tip of his cigarette, asked Thornton:

"How long, Thornton, do you think it would take

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a man, knowing the combinations, to open, enter, and close the St. John's vault?"

Thornton pondered the question, and the big doctor again eyed him closely. The chief leaned forward interestedly.

"Ten minutes," Thornton answered finally. "That is, if he had the combination down pat, and got it the first time without a slip."

Ralby whistled.

"He's some fast worker then. And if he had to work out the combination, what then?"

Thornton frowned.

"That's just what I've been trying to get out," he explained, "if a man had to work those combinations out—any man short of the most expert vault constructor in the world—it would take him at the very least an hour."

Doctor Lester glanced at his watch.

"Well, I'm off," he announced, satisfied that there was but one way to end the apparently interminable discussion. "Coming along, Thornton?"

Thornton nodded and turned to the door, accompanied by Ralby.

"See you later, Chief; don't forget I'm to have a hand at that Second National vault."

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The chief nodded and the men withdrew.

Left alone with his men, the chief turned to Franklin.

"Well?" he demanded.

Franklin shook his head.

"It seems to me, Chief, that that guy Ralby's mighty interested."

The chief shrugged his shoulders.

"One of these scientific guys," he commented caustically, his voice plainly indicating his opinion of the scientific fraternity. "Supposed to be in real estate, ain't he?"

Franklin nodded.

"Yep. Offices on the first floor of the St. James Building, but he's never in 'em. Always seems to have money. Always did have—but where he makes it beats me."

The chief shook his head.

"Nix," he commented briefly. "He's harmless."

"All the same," continued Franklin tenaciously, "he sat up a little when you mentioned that light."

Another of the men laughed.

"Come off, Fran," he grinned. "So did you. Said it wasn't so at first, didn't you?"

"I don't know," commented the chief thought-

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fully. "It's a good point, that light." He turned to the man who had spoken to Franklin. "You pick this Ralby up and stick with him," he ordered.

The detective nodded.

"A pipe," he declared.

"And you," the chief continued, turning to Franklin, "you hang with this Thornton chap who's so damned certain that he's the only man in town with brains enough to pull a thing like this."

The assignment pleased Franklin, for it meant, as he knew, the spending of considerable time on the third floor of the St. James Building—next to the offices of Doctor Lester.

"But I wouldn't advise you," the chief finished heavily to Franklin, "to worry more about that girl in Doctor Lester's than your job."

"When's it coming off, Fran?" laughed one of the men jeeringly.

Franklin turned red.

"Seems to me," he growled, "that if you guys paid as much attention to your blamed business—"

A guffaw of laughter interrupted him.

"Enough of that," grunted the chief. "I'm not talking just to make noise," he went on, "but I'm tellin' you boys there'll be some mighty loud howl-

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ing going on in this town in a day or two, and we've simply got to get on the job—and get there right." The chief's fist pounded the table before him.

"I want you," the chief turned to one of the men beside him, "to start up Bay Street to-day with this list." The chief grinned as he drew a list from his pocket. "Serial numbers of some of the big bills in the St. John's package," he explained. "I ain't spilling all I know, you see. You make copies of this list, and spread it pretty well over town—on the q. t., mind."

The detective nodded and pocketed the slip.

"And you, Franklin," the chief turned again on Franklin. "You pick up Thornton at his apartment, and just forget that girl of yours a little bit."

Franklin turned red.

"I'll do my end of it, Chief," he began, but the chief waved his hand to end the discussion.

"That's what you're here for."

"How about the doctor?" commented Franklin ironically, digging back at the chief. "Hadn't somebody better—"

The chief flushed slowly.

"Aw, get to hell out o' here," he grumbled good-naturedly. "Give me a rest. We'll all be needing

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to work together to land this steel-vault Johnnie of ours."

"Then why waste my time watchin' Thornton?" Franklin demanded. "I could do twice the good hanging around Bridge Street, gettin' a line on some of the new faces, or down to Pablo."

"Nix." The chief slapped the desk heavily. "The guy who's pulling this stuff isn't your Bridge Street kind, and you won't find him hanging 'round down the beaches, either. I've got a hunch this is one o' those gentlemen crooks you're always ravin' about, Franklin, and—well, we've got him to get, that's all."

Franklin shrugged, picked up his hat, and made for the door.

"Just the same," he insisted, "they'd laugh you out of the place if they knew you were wasting time on Thornton and his crowd."

The chief wagged a finger at the retreating detective.

"I ain't saying a thing, Fran, but when a man shoots off his mouth so much and frequent that he's the only guy who could pull a thing like this, well, I reckon I'd keep an eye on him—even if he was my own grandfather. And that's your job; get me?"

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CHAPTER VII

AN UNPROFESSIONAL VISIT

DOCTOR LESTER'S car coughed its complaining way along the deserted streets, the doctor hunched far down in his seat behind the steering-wheel.

Thornton was moody and silent, and Ralby, after twice trying to light a cigarette, gave it up as a bad job, and watched the huge doctor as he twisted the car about, picking the best spots in the going, and grumbling over the cylinder, which missed chronically.

As they swung into Riverside Avenue Thornton broke the silence.

"Remember coming across any case analogous to this in your reading, Ralby?"

"What?" Ralby sat up with a start. "Beg pardon, Thornton; I was dreaming. What was it?"

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Thornton repeated the question, and Ralby mused silently a moment.

"No," he finally answered, "can't say that I have. There was that Tennessee case of the man they called Midnighty Somebody-or-other; I forget what. He was a pretty wise one, but hardly up to a game like this. Besides he's still doing time in Tennessee, if I remember aright."

"You mean that fellow Josephs," Thornton remarked. "I remember reading of that. No; it would take a better man than he was at his best. Josephs depended on the sense of touch to tell him when the tumblers began to fall in the doors, and I don't believe he could get very far on these new vaults."

The doctor at the wheel grunted skeptically.

"Is there anything in this Jimmy Valentine business?" he questioned. "I mean this opening of vaults by the sense of touch." He half turned to Thornton, who nodded immediately.

"You're mighty right there is. There's a man up at the Defy plant who is a wizard at it." Thornton chuckled reminiscently. "I can do it myself sometimes."

Ralby shrugged.

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"A matter of practise, I presume. Same old argument, Lester: there's always a man to do *anything*, provided he works hard enough."

The doctor grunted unintelligibly. Then he chortled:

"By the same reasoning, there's a man who can catch this cracksman of ours then."

"Of course," Ralby admitted immediately. "But I doubt if our worthy chief or his colleagues have the necessary imagination." He was silent for a minute, then: "If I were running this bunch of sleuths, I think I'd work on Thornton's idea of a gang of them; a well-laid, plotted scheme; not just one man."

"But one man must do the actual work," argued Thornton. "It's almost impossible to believe there is a man capable of it. If there are more it simply makes it so much the more improbable."

Ralby shrugged. "Well, we've beefed about it enough. For my part I'm willing to forget it and go to bed. Something is bound to turn up—it always does."

"I hope it turns up quick," grumbled the doctor. "Five hundred dollars' worth. You're not forgetting our bet, Ralby?"

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"Don't worry, Lester; you've got the losing end. Thornton's experiments later on will demonstrate that. Personally, Thornton, I doubt that you'll be able to manage, although, of course, I don't know a blessed thing about the darn vaults."

"I'm almost sure myself," Thornton admitted. "Still I want to determine to my own satisfaction that it can't be done. There's always the possibility of a flaw in the mechanism, you know. That's what I'm hoping to find. You'll be there, won't you?"

"If they'll let me," laughed Ralby. "Gosh, but the chief's face would be a study in emotions if, by any chance, you should succeed."

The doctor's laugh boomed aloud.

"It'll be worth seeing," he admitted. "Think I'll drop around myself. Ought to see Hayes anyway. Haven't dropped in on him for a coon's age."

Thornton spoke enviously. "Wish I hadn't;" and Ralby's eyes shot a side glance at him.

"Why?"

Thornton laughed.

"Oh, nothing, except he's carrying a little paper of mine. Not enough to amount to anything—but

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bothersome, just the same. Oh, yes, I see our friend Mr. Hayes every now and then."

Ralby made as if to speak, hesitated, and finally dropped a hand in a friendly fashion on Thornton's arm.

"Be glad to help you out on that—er—paper, Thornton. Just say the word."

"Thanks, old man." Thornton was genuinely pleased. "It's good to know that I've got a couple of you fellows to fall back on if I need you. Lester here," he nudged the doctor beside him, "tries to swat me with a check every once in a while, but I'm pulling through all right. If those infernal Defy people would do the right thing, and come across as they should for that synchronizing device, I'd be on Easy Street."

"Take 'em into the courts," grumbled the doctor. "You've got 'em tied now, since they started using the thing definitely."

Thornton laughed.

"What's the use? I'll take what I can get—what they'll come across with, but, believe me, the next time I offer a patent to a corporation I'll have it tied up so tight they can't monkey with it."

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The car slid to a halt before the ornate front of the Riverside Apartments, and Thornton and Ralby alighted. They stood for a moment talking with the doctor.

"You'll remember to drop in at the office, Thornton," the doctor remarked. "These sleeping fits need looking into."

Thornton smiled. "I am a bit all in," he admitted. "Too much work, probably."

"Too much dancing, I'd say," laughed Ralby. "We'd begun to think you were going to cut all of the lady's dances this year," he bantered, and Thornton flushed.

The doctor humphed. "If you'd been wasting your nights more profitably," he growled, "I'd say all right. Now there's Isabel—"

Ralby's voice cut in.

"Well—it's time to turn in, and then some. If Thornton wants to burn the midnight oil tinkering with that steel mess, it's his business. I can dig up some mighty good authorities, though, Thornton, to prove that a too constant application to work tends to degenerate the capacity for it. Great strides we're making in the modern psychology."

The doctor grumbled his displeasure.

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"I'm not saying a word about the psychologists, Ralby," he said, "but a whole raft of them could very profitably go back to James and learn fundamentals. The whole trouble is Freud became popularized too blamed sudden, and every whippersnapper on earth thinks he's a psychologist, because he's read that Brill translation on psychoanalysis. Why, demme! Any man without a groundwork of anatomy and medicine trying to grasp the modern psychology is simply butting his head into a brick wall, and—"

Thornton interrupted:

"So-long, pill-roller!" he laughed, knowing there was but one method of stopping the avalanche of words when the doctor started on his pet subject. "I'll drop in on you and let you thump me over a bit. Good night!"

"Good night!" The doctor's heavy voice rumbled as he slid in the gears and the car trembled at the curb. "And, say—" But Thornton and Ralby were out of hearing.

Carefully the doctor picked his way down the dimly-lighted streets, flashing and dimming his lights alternately.

By the time he arrived at his home all thoughts

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