SMOKE TUCKETTS T&B

THE ALIBI

— BY —

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Not all his coolness and skill of planning, not all the steadiness of his nerves, nor yet the unshakeable confidence in his blood, could keep the cashier from sensing a violent emotion at this, the moment of his first "break."

For previous crimes—had all been subtle thefts, the juggling of figures in massive ledgers, the falsification of books and balances. Now, however, all was different. Here he stood before the safe, a burglar, brother to the yegg, suffering from him only in the accidentous fact that he possessed the combination, in place of "soap," to open the huge doors.

Slayton began to shiver annoyingly. Under his breath he cursed himself. At this stage of the game was he going to stand there and get stage-struck? An attack of nerves just now would surely be the climax of misfortune. With a strong effort he tried to pull together. He was finding out that for an inexperienced man—no matter how conscienceless—to plan a robbery is one thing; to execute is another.

Despite the fact that he had already lived the scene in imagination, now the reality of it gripped and shook him. Impatiently he tried to thrust introspection aside. Forcing himself to action, he reached up and snapped off the incandescent. The drenching glare of its illumination, flooding down in a cone upon him, would make him a shining mark, a target of targets, should the old man happen upstairs from the vaults.

Then in complete darkness he drew from his pocket the little electric flash-lamp. His pocketbook yielded up the slip of paper bearing the precious carbon-penciled figures—the cipher to the combination recently changed; a cipher whereof only two records existed, one in the hands of President Chamberlain, the other now held in Slayton's gloved fingers under the light pencil of the electric ray.

A week later Slayton could have accomplished nothing. The bank was on the point of installing a time-lock, before which nothing save nitroglycerin or thermit will avail. But now only a combination faced the cashier. And, armed with the little piece of paper, it possessed no more difficulty than A B C. He read:

R 5 to 40; L 4 to 50; R 3 to 25; L 2 to 9; R to stop.

Deftly he turned the knob, sensing with satisfaction the play of the fine mechanism. Through his mind passed a grim amusement at thought of the way in which he would circumvent all evidence against him. His gloved digits were leaving no tell-tale marks, and in the morning the slip of paper with the combination would be found locked in his desk. He could prove it had never left the bank. He could prove he had never quitted his home that night. No possible chance existed of attaching the crime to him.

Nodding with greater confidence, his nerves now steadying, he worked. And now again he glanced at the paper.

With a slight, and almost imperceptible, click the tumblers fell into position. Slayton's eyes gleamed as he turned the brush of light from the dial to the wheel of polished metal at his right hand.

He rotated the wheel, drawing back all bolts. Then he seized the handle and pulled. At the familiar action—the very same thing he had already done some thousands of times—the door swung easily and gently outward. And yet how different now the feeling of it was!

Slayton snicked off the current that operated the little flash, and for a moment stood in complete darkness seeing nothing save some vague gray patches far across the bank windows giving on the street. He seemed to glimpse bars across those windows. Bars! A vague shiver of prescient foreboding insinuated itself into his consciousness, but with impatience he shook it off. Still a glimpse of barred windows was disquieting.

"Confound my nerves!" he growled to himself. "Going back on me, are they?"

Another moment he remained there, listening with terrible intentness. Was there anything to hint at trouble?

Nothing.

A heavy and oppressive stillness brooded over the darkened bank at that very morning hour—an hour of the ebb-tide and dregs of human life. Through the hushed black of the rooms the click of the electric timepiece jumping forward a minute sounded with startling loudness. Slayton's muscles tensed. Even that slight disturbance, that little impingement of energy on the muted inertia of the place, seemed an ill omen.

Outside, a dull, vague murmur bespoke the city's lethargy. A distant tram-gong seemed an impertinence in face of the vast sleep, the entire paralysis of life that marks the Wall street section after midnight. From the East River one or two drowsy, booming whistles drifted up. The hoot of a motor siren over on Broadway mocked the inertia of the sleep-numbed city.

Convinced that he still remained quite undiscovered and that no danger menaced, Slayton now once more switched on the beam of his search light, quickly he threw back the bolts of the inner door of the safe. Then, hesitating not a second longer, he stepped boldly into the strong-room of steel, the goal of all his thought and toil and peril.

Money, hard cash, specie in huge masses, exerts a peculiar, almost a maddening, effect on the average man. When confronted with the chance to dig both arms to the elbow in real currency he is apt to lose his better judgment, to run amuck, to do hasty, ill-considered, incriminating things. If he steals he will often steal in stupid and unscientific ways that not only limit the amount he can get away with, but also lay open the way to his subsequent detection.

He was no amateur. He stood far off from the beaten paths of averages.

For long years and years he had daily and hourly handled money as the commonest of all commodities. He knew money as he knew nothing else. He understood money, thought money, lived money.

To count, handle, appraise, estimate, check, weigh, pay out and take in money had for many years constituted his life. Now, confronted by all those bales, stacks, rolls, and bundles of the familiar stuff, he found his emotions subsiding.

Well, was he not at home there in that vault in face of all this currency? The cash soothed and calmed him. At sight and touch of it his cold blooddiness returned; his pulses ran normally; the fever left his blood. Again he smiled, but this time confidently, masterfully, the smile of a connoisseur who sets his hand to something that he dominates and knows and loves.

Methodically now, without a single false move and without the loss of a second's time, he began his work. To a "T" he knew exactly the place of each denomination, each medium, each kind of specie, bills and other assets in the vault. Leaving aside the compartments devoted to commercial paper and securities, and likewise shunning the canvas sacks of metal, he thrust his hand into a certain pigeonhole where reposed two hundred and fifty one-thousand-dollar bills in neatly sealed packages of fifty bills each.

Well did he know that the number of each of those bills was recorded in a certain ledger, even as he extracted each of the packages and slid them into his inner pocket, he was preparing for the next step in his procedure. He might have taken more, but that might have increased the subsequent peril; and his idea was not to make a haul, but merely to clear himself from his complications with a generous margin to turn round on. No; it would take only one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. That would do very well, indeed. And the next step would effectively block all tracing of the bills.

To this end he took down the ledger containing the entries of the bank-note numbers, turned to the pages thumb-indexed "1909," and ripped them clean out.

These pages he folded and stuffed into his inside coat pocket, thereafter replacing the ledger in its proper position on the shelf.

He reflected a moment, then nodded with assurance. An important step toward a perfect alibi had now been taken. The theft would assuredly be fastened on somebody in the employ of the bank. No outsider would ever have thought to tear out those pages. Slayton neither knew nor cared about where the blame would fall; but at the back of his mind that nascent idea kept glimmering out again—the idea that if it should become known that one of the junior clerks was in financial trouble suspicion could not help pointing an finger that way.

"Well, anyhow, it's no affair of mine," said he, preparing to retreat, now that his work was done. "Let them figure it out for themselves."

For a moment he scrutinized the interior of the vault by the rays of his tiny light. He paid particular attention to the floor. Nothing had been dropped, he assured himself—nothing that could in any possible way incriminate him. He had left no finger-prints, should any tracks of his rubbers be detected that would amount to nothing. The rubbers were of a style and pattern sold by the million; moreover they were worn quite smooth.

Cautiously he returned to the door of the vault, flashing his little antenna of light ahead of him. A few minutes more of non-interference would liberate him, would put him back on the sidewalk again, disguised and safe, only a few minutes more! Already he seemed to breathe the outer air again—the frosty, life-inspiring air of liberty!

When—hark! What was that?

Recalling, Slayton gave ear. Back into the shelter of the vault he shrank, peering out tensely into the black.

A step?

Could that be a step out there somewhere in the corridor leading from the safety-deposit vaults below stairs to the bank offices?

All Slayton's blood seemed to congeal into sound his heart and clot there and stifle him.

A step!

A step indeed—the old man's step! Mackenzie's!

CHAPTER VI.

Louder now it sounded, louder and heavier still. It paused a moment as if in nascent suspicion; then came on slow as again, shuffling a trifle, yet swift.

Swift, Slayton switched off the light of his electric beam and crouched there motionless in the dark. Terrible curses rose to his lips, hissing imprecations, furious maledictions against the old watchman who now for the first time in weeks, perhaps, had just taken it into his head to break his schedule, to mount the circular stairs, to make an extra turn about the bank.

On came the step, and on.

In a few seconds Slayton knew Mackenzie would reach the office door, would see that the incandescent before the safe had been extinguished, would start investigating.

The end—the end of everything to life for Slayton—now all at once on the ultimate verge of success, had hurled itself to smite him down. Fall! are mocked at him—ruin, destruction.

And a sudden tigrish hate leaped into the cashier's heart as he crouched there in the blackness of the big safe watching. He felt no personal hate against the simple-minded, honest faithful old Scot, but hate of him as a tool, a means, an instrument of wreckage in his path.

For the first time in his life Slayton felt a thrill of the lust for blood. He comprehended, as with a lightning flash of appreciation, how man can raise his hand to strike his brother down. But he would not kill, whatever might befall. Of that he felt entirely positive. Subconsciously he knew he would not kill. Let come what might, he would not stain his hands with murder.

Yet a strange, persistent shudder quivered through his body. He felt a fever that singularly seemed a chill. Only by clamping his jaw could he stop the castanneting of his teeth. And in the dark his lips parted in a snarl of hate and malice.

Now all at once a little wavering will-o'-the-wisp of light became visible in the bank office, a spot of white illumination that wandered vagrantly over desks and grilles, along the walls, across the windows.

"Mackenzie's flash-light!" thought Slayton.

His heart sank. In a second now the old man himself would appear. Everything would be lost. Ruin would smite him down.

Slayton heard a grumbling voice. Obviously old Mackenzie's suspicions had been aroused by something. The watchman was talking to himself as he advanced. Then, just as a vaguely dark form moved in the darkness through the far doorway, Slayton understood.

The watchman's light had found and was resting on one of the lowered window-shades. Like an inquiring eye, it held its gaze a moment there. And again Slayton heard the burring accents of the old Scotchman in self-communion.

Mackenzie moved forward. The light jumped sharply. Slayton knew the old man had noticed that the incandescent before the safe had been extinguished. A sound of breath, quickly inspired, told Mackenzie's surprise. Then the dark form pushed forward with determination.

Swiftly the cashier thought. Was there any means of escape? Could he still retreat around the vault, gain the corridor, reach a door, a window?

Even as his fevered mind leaped for the hope of safety he knew it was futile. Every window was barred with steel. The only door he could hope to reach was in plain sight of Mackenzie's sharp eye. And in that stillness any slightest move might now betray his presence. Nothing remained to do save crouch down and wait and hope—hope against every possibility that in some way or other he might yet escape detection.

But now already Mackenzie was advancing.

The watchman had at last become convinced something was amiss. The incandescent might have burned out; but the window-shades could not have lowered themselves. Mackenzie knew trouble was afoot. And with the bulldog courage of his race, with an admirable and self-immolating sense of duty, the Scotchman hesitated not, but advanced to ferret out this mystery.

Even through his welter of hate and venom Slayton felt a stab of admiration for the simple directness of the old man's courage. He rang in no alarm, summoned no help, waited not to reconnoiter or to estimate the peril; but as if going his usual rounds pressed forward down the grilled passageway toward the safe.

As he came on and on, grumbling to himself, telling himself that something was "surely wrang the noo," he sprinkled the floor with light from his flash. Suddenly the flash stopped short, resting on some object that lay upon the floor.

"What—what—is this?" Slayton heard the Scot exclaim.

Tensed in panic-stricken observation as the cashier cringed there peering round the edge of the safe-door, he saw the vague form bend as though to pick up something. Then the little silvery beam of light played over an object held in Mackenzie's hand. Hand and object stood out with startling vividness by contrast with the dense curtains of the surrounding gloom.

Slayton, peering, felt a sudden weakness turning his bones to water.

The thing that old man Mackenzie was staring at in mute amaze was—Slayton's wig!

(To be continued.)

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