

THE STOLEN CODE

It was long after midnight. That much I knew. For it must have been an hour and more since I had watched the twelve ruby flashes from the topmost peak of the Metropolitan Tower signal an unheeding world that another of its days had gone.

I had watched those twelve gargantuan winks with utter listlessness, with that telltale neurasthenic twitching of the right eyelid which reminded me that some angling imp of Insomnia was tugging and jerking at my soul very much as a fly hook tugs and jerks in a trout's mouth.

I knew, even as I wandered drearily out of my Gramercy Square house door and paced as drearily round and round the iron-fenced park inclosure, that I was about to face another sleepless night. So I wandered restlessly on through the deserted streets, with no active thought of destination and no immediate sense of direction. All I knew was that the city lay about me, in the close September night, as dead and flat and stale as a tumbler of tepid wine.

I flung myself wearily down on a bench in Madison Square, facing the slowly spurting fountain that had so often seemed to me a sort of visible pulse of the sleeping city. I sat peering idly up at the Flatiron, where like an eternal plowshare it threw its eternal cross furrows of Fifth Avenue and Broadway along the city's tangled stubble of steel and stone. Then I peered at the sleepers all about me, the happy sleepers huddled and sprawled along the park benches. I envied them, every mortal of that ragged and homeless army! I almost hated them. For they were drinking deep of the one thing I had been denied.

As I lounged there with my hat pulled down over my eyes, I listened to the soothing purr and splash of the ever-pulsing fountain. Then I let my gaze wander disconsolately southward, out past the bronze statue of Seward. I watched the driver of a Twenty-third Street "night-hawk" asleep on his seat. He sat there in his faded green hat and coat, as motionless as metal, as though he had loomed there through all the ages like a brazen statue of Slumber touched with some mellowing patina of time.

Then, as I gazed idly northward, I suddenly forgot the fountain and the night hawk and the sleepers. For out of Fifth Avenue, past where the facade of Martin's still flared with its Cyprian lights, and where between the double row of electric globes that swung down the gentle slope of Murray's Hill like a double pearl strand down a woman's breast, I caught sight of a figure turning quietly into the quietness of the Square. It attracted and held my eye because it seemed the only movement in that place of utter stillness, where even the verdigris-tinted tree leaves hung as motionless as though they had been cut from rusty plates of copper.

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I watched the figure as it drew nearer and nearer. The lonely midnight seemed to convert the casual stroller into an emissary of mystery, into something compelling and momentous. I sat indolently back on my park bench, peering at him as he drifted in under the milk-white arc lamps whose scattered globes were so like a scurry of bubbles caught in the tree branches.

I watched the stranger as closely as a traveler in mid-ocean watches the approach of a lonely steamer. I did not move as he stood for a moment beside the fountain. I gave no sign of life as he looked slowly about, hesitated, and then crossed over to the end of the very bench on which I sat. There was something military-like about the slim young figure in its untimely and incongruous cape overcoat. There was also something alert and guardedly observant in the man's movements as he settled himself back in the bench. He sat there listening to the purr and splash of the water. Then in an incredibly short space of time, he was fast asleep.

I still sat beside him. I was still idly pondering who and what the newcomer could be, when another movement attracted my attention. It was the almost silent approach of a second and larger figure, the figure of a wide-shouldered man in navy-blue serge, passing quietly in between the double line of bench sleepers. He circled once about the granite-bowled ring of the fountain aimlessly. Then he dropped diffidently into the seat next to the man in the cape overcoat, not five feet from where I sat.

Something about him, from the moment he took up that position, challenged my attention. I watched him from under my hat-brim as he looked guardedly about.

Then I saw a hand creep from his side. There

By ARTHUR STRINGER

Illustrations by C. D. Williams

was something quick and reptilian in its movements. I saw it feel and pad about the sleeping man's breast. Then I saw it slip, snakelike, in under the cloth of the coat.

It moved about there, for a second or two, as though busily exploring the recess of every possible pocket.

Then I saw the stealthy hand quietly but quickly withdraw. As it came away it brought with it a packet that flashed white in the lamplight, plainly a packet of papers. This was thrust hurriedly down into the coat pocket of the newcomer next to me. There was not a sound. There was no more movement.

The wide-shouldered man sat there for what must have been a full minute of time. Then he rose quietly to his feet and started as quietly away.

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It wasn't until then that the full reality of what he had done came home to me. He had deliberately robbed a sleeping and unprotected man. He was at that moment actually carrying away the spoils of some predetermined and audacious theft. And I had sat calmly and unprotestingly by and watched a thief, a professional "dip," enact a crime under my very eyes, within five feet of where I sat!

In three quick steps I had crossed to the sleeping man's side and was shaking him. I still kept my eyes on the slowly retreating figure of the thief as he made his slow and apparently diffident way up through the square. I had often heard of those street harpies known as "lush-dips," those professional pick-pockets who prey on the wayside inebriate. But never before had I seen one at work.

"Quick! Wake up!" I cried, with a desperate shake at the sleeper's shoulder. "You've been robbed!"

The next move of that little midnight drama was an unexpected and startling one. Instead of being confronted by the disputatious maunderings of a half-wakened sleeper, I was suddenly and firmly caught by the arm and jerked bodily into the seat beside him.

"You've been robbed!" I repeated, as I felt that firm grip haul me seatward.

"Shut up!" said a calm and very wide-awake voice, quite close to my ear. I struggled to tear my arm away from the hand that still clung to it.

"But you've been robbed!" I expostulated. I noticed that his own gaze was already directed northward, toward where the blue-clad figure still moved aimlessly on under the arc lamps.

"How do you know that?" he demanded. I was struck by his resolute and rather authoritative voice.

"Why, I saw it with my own eyes! And there goes the man who did it!" I told him, pointing northward.

He jerked down my hand and swung around on me. "Watch that man!" he said, almost fiercely. "But for Heaven's sake keep still!"

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"What does this mean?" I naturally demanded.

He swept me with one quick glance. Yet he looked more at my clothes, I fancy, than at my face. My tailor seemed to be quite satisfactory to him.

"Who are you?" he asked. I took my time in answering, for I was beginning to resent his repeated note of superiority.

"My name, if that's what you mean, happens to be the uneuphonious but highly respectable one of Kerfoot—Witter Kerfoot."

"No, no," he said, with quick impatience. "What are you?"

"I'm nothing much, except a member of eight or nine clubs, and a man who doesn't sleep overly well."

His eyes were still keenly watching the slowly departing figure. My flippancy seemed to have been lost on him. His muscular young hand suddenly tightened on my sleeve.

"By Gad, sir, you can help me!" he cried, under his breath. "You must! I've a right to call on you, as a decent citizen, as—"

"Who are you?" I interrupted, quite myself by this time.

"I'm Lieutenant Palmer," he absently admitted, all the while eyeing the moving figure.

"And—" I prompted, as I watched his gaze follow that figure.

"And I've got to get that man, or it'll cost me a court-martial. I've got to get him. Wait! Sit back here without moving. Now watch what he does!"

I saw the thief drop into an empty bench, glance down at his timepiece, look carelessly about, and then lean back with his legs crossed. Nothing more happened.

"Well," I inquired, "what's the game?"

"It's no game," he retorted, in his quick and decisive tones. "It's damn near a tragedy. But now I've found him! I've placed him! And that's the man I'm after!"

"I don't doubt it," I languidly admitted. "But am I to assume that this little bench scene was a sort of, well, a sort of carefully studied out trap?"

"It was the only way I could clinch the thing," he admitted.

"Clinch what?" I asked, conscious of his hesitation.

"Oh, you've got to know," he finally conceded, "now you've seen this much! And I know you're—you're the right sort. I can't tell you everything. But I'm off the Connecticut. She's the flagship of our Atlantic fleet's first division, the flagship of Rear-Admiral Shrodder. I was sent to confer with Admiral Maddox, the commandant of the Navy Yard. Then I was to communicate with Rear-Admiral Kellner, the supervisor of Naval Auxiliaries. It was in connection with the navy's new Emergency Wheel Code. I can't explain it to you; there's a lot of navy-department data I can't go into. But I was ashore here in New York with a list of the new wireless code signals."

"And you let them get away?"

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"There was no letting about it. They were stolen from me, stolen in some mysterious way I can't understand. I've only one clew. I'd dined at the Plaza. Then I'd gone up to the ballroom and sat through the amateur theatricals for the French Hospital. I'd been carrying the code forms, and they'd been worrying me. So I 'split the wheel,' as we say in the service. I mean I'd divided 'em and left one half locked up at my hotel while I still carried the other half. Each part, I knew, would be useless without the other. How or when they got the half I was carrying I can't tell, for the life of me. I remember dancing two or three times in the ballroom after the theatricals. But it couldn't have been any of those women. They weren't that sort."

"Then who was it?" For the first time a sense of his boyishness had crept over me.

"That's just it; I don't know. But I kept feeling that I was being shadowed. I was almost positive I was being trailed. They would be after the second half, I felt. So I made a dummy, and loafed about all day waiting for a sign. I kept it up until to-night. Then, when I actually found I was being followed, every move I made, I—"

His voice trailed off and he caught at my arm again.

"See, he's on the move again! He's going, this time. And that's the man! I want you to help me watch him, watch every step and trick. And if there's a second man, I'm going to get you to follow him, while I stick to this one. It's not altogether for myself, remember; it's for the service!"

We were on our feet by this time, passing northward along the asphalted walks that wound in and out between the trees.

"You mean this man's a sort of agent, a foreign spy, after your naval secrets?" I asked, as we watched the figure in blue circle casually out toward Fifth Avenue.

"That's what I've got to find out. And I'm going to do it, if I have to follow him to hell and back!" was the young officer's answer. Then he suddenly drew up, with a whispered warning.

"You'd better go west, toward Broadway. Then walk north into Fifth Avenue again, toward Brennan's corner. I'll swing up Madison Avenue on the opposite side of him, and walk west on Twenty-sixth Street. Don't speak to me as we pass. But watch him, every moment. And if there's a second man, follow him!"

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A moment later I was sauntering westward toward the Hoffman House corner. As I approached the avenue curb I saw the unperturbed figure in blue stop beside the Farragut monument on the north-west fringe of Madison Square. I saw him take out a cigar, slowly and deliberately strike a match on the stonework of the exedra, and then as slowly and deliberately light his cigar.

I felt, as I saw it, that it was some sort of signal. This suspicion grew stronger when, a moment later, I saw a woman step out of the avenue doorway of Martin's. She wore a plumed Gainsborough hat and