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Men, by Graham M. Dean**

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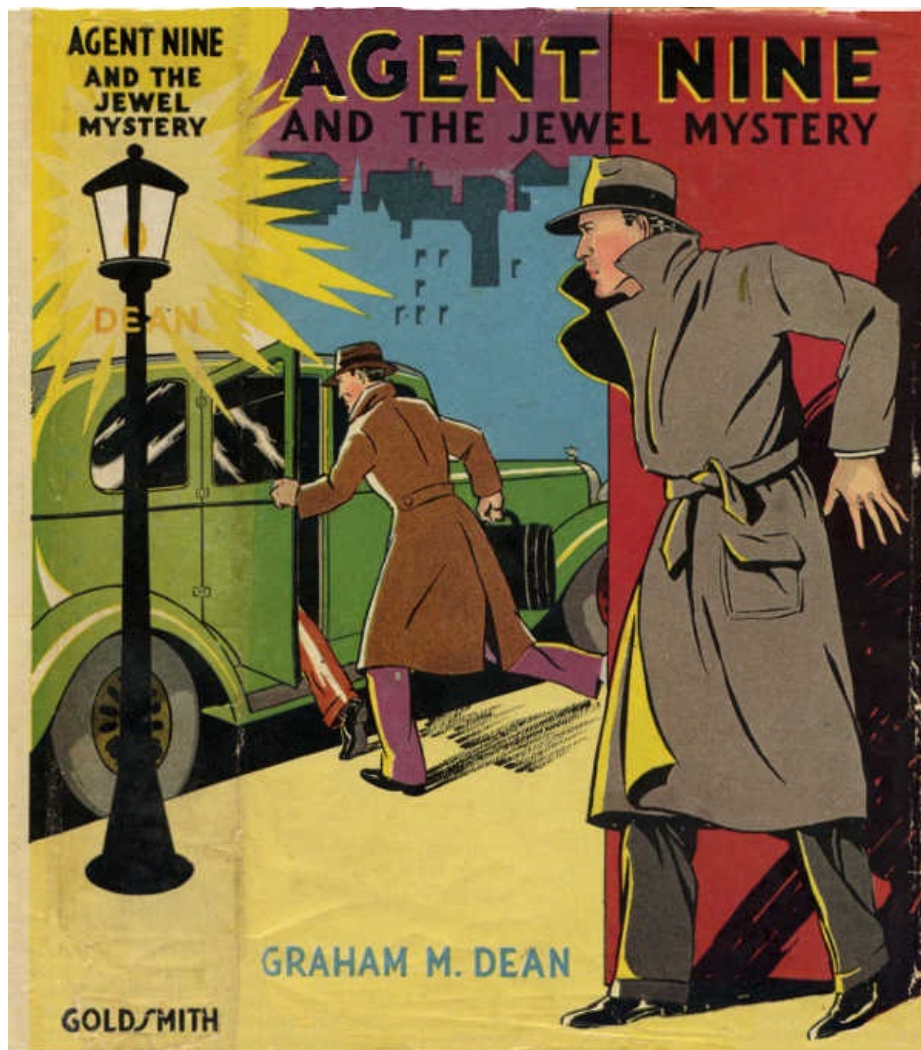
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THRILLING EXPLOITS OF THE "G" MEN ***



AGENT NINE AND THE JEWEL MYSTERY

GRAHAM M. DEAN

Agent Nine and the Jewel Mystery

By
GRAHAM M. DEAN
Author of
Agent Nine's First Case

★

*A Story of Thrilling Exploits
of the "G" Men*

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AGENT NINE AND THE JEWEL MYSTERY

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[15]

CHAPTER I AN EMBARRASSING SITUATION

★

Bob Houston, the youngest agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, stepped out of the Department of Justice Building and turned toward home, his heart beating faster than it had in months. It hardly seemed real but he was now a full-fledged agent in the greatest man hunting division in the Federal Government.

Bob paused a moment at the curb. Another man

who had emerged from the justice building joined him. It was his uncle, Merritt Hughes, one of the most famous detectives in the department. He put his arm around Bob's shoulders and shook him in a rough but friendly embrace.

"Well, Bob, how does it feel to be a real federal agent?" he asked.

It was a moment before Bob replied, and when he finally spoke the words came slowly.

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"I hardly know," he confessed, "as yet it doesn't seem real, but there is one thing I do know—I'm going to work night and day to make a success of this new job."

"Don't worry about making a success," advised his uncle. "You've got the stuff to make good or you wouldn't have been taken into the department."

"When do you think I'll get my first assignment on a new case?" asked Bob.

"That's hard to say," replied the famous detective, "but if I were you I'd go home now and get a good night's sleep. In this kind of a game you'd better sleep when you can."

"Then I'm headed for home now," said Bob. "Good night, and thanks for all you've done for me."

With that the young federal agent strode off down the avenue, his lungs drinking in great gulps of the cool air of the fall night.

Merritt Hughes stood on the curb of the justice building watching his nephew until Bob turned the corner a block away. Anyone noticing the federal agent would have seen a slight smile of pleasure on his lips and he might have guessed that Merritt Hughes was greatly pleased by the events which had happened in the preceding hours.

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As a matter of fact, Bob Houston, a plain clerk in the archives division of the War Department, temporarily a provisional federal agent, had been the key figure in preventing the theft of some of Uncle Sam's most valuable radio secrets.

Through Bob's efforts a daring plot had been thwarted and the men responsible taken into custody. As a reward for this brilliant work, Bob had been made a full-fledged agent of the famous bureau of investigation of the Department of Justice.

There were many thoughts in Bob's mind as he strode toward home that night. Only that afternoon he had led the raid on the east shore of Maryland which had resulted in the apprehension of the gang which had been attempting to steal the radio secrets. Then, after the return to Washington, had come eventful hours.

Bob would never forget the scene in the office of Waldo Edgar, chief of the bureau of investigation, when Mr. Edgar had informed Bob that he was a regular federal agent and had presented his credentials to him.

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Just to make sure that he wasn't dreaming, Bob

pulled a small leather wallet from an inside coat pocket and paused under a street light to look at its contents. There was no mistake. There in the wallet was a small gold badge which denoted his office and the finely engraved card which marked his identification. Bob replaced the wallet with a particular glow of satisfaction and continued toward home.

The night air was raw and Bob increased his pace as he neared the building where he made his home. He turned in at the entrance and made his way up to the third floor where he had a comfortable room in a rear apartment.

Bob unlocked the door and snapped on the light. It was a typical man's room with a large chiffonier and a deep clothes closet in one wall. There was a reading light near the head of the bed and beside this a large easy chair with a book rack. A number of books and magazines were scattered on this rack, and usually Bob sat down to read for a time before going to bed; but tonight he was too tired to read and he undressed rapidly.

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Tired though he was, sleep was slow in coming to him as his mind went over the events of recent hours. Bob wondered just what Tully Ross was thinking and doing, for Tully had been his rival in seeking a solution to the mystery of the radio secrets.

Tully, also a clerk in the archives division of the War Department, had an uncle, Condon Adams, who, like Merritt Hughes, was a federal agent. Both Tully and his uncle had worked on the radio case, but by dint of Bob's good fortune and sharp detective work Bob and his uncle had solved the case before Tully and *his* uncle could find the solution. In spite of this, Tully had been made an agent in the bureau of investigation and there was every indication that the rivalry which had started when they were clerks in the War Department would continue in their new work.

Bob was just dropping asleep when the telephone beside his bed rang sharply. He turned on the light and picked up the instrument, all thought of sleep now gone from his mind. Could it be his first assignment?

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"Hello? Hello?" said Bob anxiously.

But there was no reply over the wire and Bob clicked the receiver hook several times, finally deciding that the call must have been the wrong number.

When Bob finally did get to sleep he slept with the heaviness of complete nervous and physical exhaustion. It was mid-forenoon and the sun was streaming in his windows when he finally awakened. There had been no instructions to him on when to report for his new work and he took a shower and dressed leisurely.

Bob stepped out of the apartment building and took a deep breath of the crisp air of the mid-fall morning. Then he walked down the street to a small shop where he usually had his breakfast.

After ordering his breakfast he picked up a morning paper on his table and his eyes instantly focused on the headlines in the center

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of the front page:

“FEDERAL AGENTS CAPTURE GANG OF
RADIO THIEVES”

Bob read the story with avid attention. Here in detail was related on the front page of one of the nation's great newspapers the complete story of the part he had played in rounding up the gang of radio thieves. Bob looked up from the paper. His face felt flushed and he knew he appeared highly self-conscious, but no one seemed to be noticing him and he resumed his reading of the story.

It was evident that the reporter who had written the story must have obtained his information from a federal agent, but Bob knew that there was a rule in the department that all information of this type must come from the head of the department. He was quite sure that Waldo Edgar had not given out the story. As Bob read further the conviction grew that Tully Ross must have supplied the facts for the newspaper story, for a great deal of credit had been given to Tully for things which he had not done.

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Bob dropped the paper in disgust. That was just like Tully to attempt to claim credit for something which someone else had done.

Bob finished his breakfast, paid his bill and started walking toward the Department of Justice Building. He had gone a little more than a block when a car pulled along the curb and the driver stuck his head out the window.

“Want a lift, Bob?” asked a pleasant voice and Bob turned to face Lieutenant Gibbons, War Department intelligence officer, who had helped him in the solution of the radio mystery.

Bob climbed into the coupé and Lieutenant Gibbons sent the car shooting down the avenue, dodging in and out of the heavy mid-forenoon stream of traffic.

“Quite a story in the morning papers,” smiled the lieutenant.

Bob nodded.

“Looks like Tully Ross has been doing a little personal press agenting,” he said. “Personally, I’m not very strong for that sort of thing.”

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“Neither am I,” said the lieutenant, “but some people seem to live on a diet of publicity and I guess Tully is one of that kind.”

The lieutenant wheeled his coupé up in front of the Department of Justice Building and Bob stepped out.

“Thanks a lot for the lift,” he said.

“Oh, that’s all right, Bob. I wonder when we’ll be working on a case again?”

“That’s hard to say,” grinned Bob. “Hope it will be soon.”

With that he turned and entered the building while Lieutenant Gibbons resumed his journey.

Bob took an elevator to the top floor where the head of the bureau of investigation had his

offices. A clerk in the anteroom took his name and looked up sharply as he consulted an appointment chart on his desk.

"I think Mr. Edgar is expecting you," he said, "for your name is on his call list this morning."

Bob looked eagerly at the clerk.

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"Does this mean I'm going to be assigned to a case?" he asked.

"I can't say," replied the clerk, "but I shouldn't be surprised. I'll send in your name at once. Just have a seat and wait for a few minutes."

Bob was the only one in the anteroom and he sat down on a padded bench beside the clerk's desk, with a growing feeling that within a few minutes he would be called in and assigned on his first case as a full time federal agent.

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CHAPTER II A NEW CASE



Bob had been waiting in the anteroom less than five minutes when the door banged open and Tully Ross almost catapulted into the room. Tully was about the last person in the world that Bob wanted to see just then but he grinned and made the best of it.

"Hello, Tully. What's all the hurry?" he asked.

Tully stopped abruptly and stared at Bob. There was no friendliness in the glance that swept Bob from head to foot.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he blurted out.

"That goes for me, too," replied Bob. "That was quite a story you gave the reporters last night."

A deep flush swept over Tully's face but he was quick to deny the implications in Bob's words.

"What story do you mean?" he asked sharply.

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"I guess you know what I mean," said Bob evenly. "I thought it was a rule of this department not to give out news stories."

"You're on the wrong track," Tully insisted; but Bob knew by the expression on Tully's face that Tully had given out the news story, thereby violating one of the rules of the department.

Tully sat down on a bench on the other side of the room facing Bob. He was silent for less than a minute for he could not check his curiosity.

"Have you been assigned to a case yet?" he asked. There was an envious note in his voice.

"Not yet, but I expect to get an assignment soon," said Bob. "Have you a new assignment?"

"I'm expecting one this morning," replied Tully confidently. "In fact, that's why I'm here."

The clerk in charge of the room returned and

asked Tully's name and business.

"Mr. Edgar will be ready to see both of you in a minute or two," the clerk advised them.

A buzzer on the clerk's desk whirred and the official stepped to the door, opened it and motioned for Bob and Tully to enter the private office.

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Waldo Edgar, the slender, wiry head of the bureau of investigation looked up from behind the pile of papers on his desk. Bob saw a copy of one of the morning papers spread out in front of the federal chief and he knew that both he and Tully were quite likely to be in for some unpleasant moments.

"Good morning, boys," said Mr. Edgar, but there was little warmth in his voice and he left them standing in front of his desk as he pointed to the story in the paper in front of him. His gaze centered on Bob.

"Are you responsible for this story, Bob?" he asked.

The young federal agent's denial was quick and confident.

"I didn't know a thing about the story until I read it at breakfast this morning," he said.

"This seems to be a pretty accurate account of what actually took place in the roundup of the gang responsible for the theft of the radio secrets," said the federal chief. "The information could have been supplied only by someone in our own department and you know there is a rule against giving out such information."

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"I know there is such a rule," said Bob, "and I can assure you that I have talked to no one."

Bob's straightforward words seemed to satisfy the federal chief and he shifted his gaze to Tully, who was standing uneasily on first one foot and then the other.

"What have you to say for yourself, Tully?"

The question was short and pointed and Bob saw Tully's eyes shift away from those of Waldo Edgar.

"I guess I'm to blame for the story," confessed Tully. "You see it was this way—"

But Tully's explanation was cut short.

"I'm not interested in how you happened to talk," said the federal chief. "However, I am glad that you have admitted your indiscretion so readily. In the future be sure to keep this rule in mind. It is your job to solve the cases assigned to you and to keep out of the headlines and off the front pages of the newspapers. The less publicity we have the more effective can be our work."

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After delivering that short but pointed lecture Waldo Edgar picked up a file of papers on his desk and skimmed through them hurriedly.

"I called both of you in at this time," he explained, "because I am assigning you on the same case."

Bob glanced sharply at Tully and there was a deep scowl on his rival's face. The exchange of glances was not lost to Waldo Edgar for he was aware of the rivalry between his youngest agents.

"I realize quite well that both of you are intensely interested in winning advancement in this department," he went on. "For that very reason I know that when I assign you to a case you will leave nothing undone until you find the solution. You may step on one another's toes in reaching your goal but you get results and that is what I want."

The federal chief once more consulted the file on his desk.

"The mission I am going to send you on is one which has baffled some of the best men in the customs service. In other words, I am counting on you two youngsters, with your enthusiasm and determination, to get to the bottom of one of the most difficult cases that has been assigned to this department in recent years."

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Bob, looking down at the desk in front of him, saw a number of letters which bore the insignia of the customs service. Several of them were post-marked from cities in Florida. In addition, there were several letters from Paris and London.

"When I tell you that I am assigning you to this case, don't think I'm altogether foolish, for both Merritt Hughes and Condon Adams will be working with you," said the federal chief.

Bob knew what that meant. There would be the same rivalry which had marked the radio mystery with Condon Adams and Tully Ross attempting to solve the case before Bob and his uncle could find the solution.

"I have already had Adams and Hughes in here this morning and have explained in detail this case. They have departed on their own assignments and I shall expect both of you to be on your way to Florida early in the afternoon."

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"Briefly it will be your task to help bring to justice one of the most daring band of jewel smugglers that has ever operated between Europe and the United States. They are so clever and daring that they have defied the efforts of the best detectives in the customs service and we have been appealed to for aid in solving the case. Actually, we have very little to go upon.

"Apparently this is a small but very versatile band of men. Just how they get the jewels into this country is one of the mysteries which you must solve. One of the few things that we do know is that they apparently are operating off the Florida coast, reaching this country by the means of small, fast boats. It is going to be your task to attempt to find the base along the Florida coast where they center their operations."

Waldo Edgar swung around in his chair and turned to a large map of the United States which covered the entire wall behind his desk. He picked up a pointer and touched several spots on the Florida section on the map.

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"Bob," he instructed, "you are to proceed as rapidly as possible to Atalissa, a small town on the coast. That is to be your headquarters for we know that somewhere in the territory adjacent to Atalissa these smugglers have been operating. I must warn you now that you must use every precaution to keep your identity secret for this particular section of the Florida coast is not friendly toward federal men."

The pointer in the hand of the federal chief moved further along the map until it paused once more at a coastal town.

"You are to go to Nira," he instructed Tully. "I consider that this is as far south as the smugglers are operating while Atalissa is the northern point. Somewhere between these two bases I am sure you will be able to uncover information which will be of real value to us."

Waldo Edgar turned back from the map and faced his young agents. There was just a trace of a smile on his lips.

"Think you can handle this assignment?" he asked.

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Bob was the first to reply.

"I'll handle it if I have to swim along the whole coast of Florida," he said.

Waldo Edgar chuckled. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"How about my uncle and Merritt Hughes?" asked Tully. "Will they be working in the same territory?"

"Yes, they are working on the Florida angle of the case and I expect you to keep them advised of any developments which you are able to uncover. You can reach them in Jacksonville and their telephone number will be given to you before you leave Washington this afternoon. If you call here at one o'clock, your complete transportation and expense money will be ready for you as well as a written file of all the information which we now have about the jewel smugglers. Can you be ready by one o'clock?"

"I can go now," said Bob.

"Better go home and throw an extra shirt or two and some socks into a traveling bag," advised the federal chief. "I like to see plenty of enthusiasm, but you may be gone a good many weeks and you should be thoroughly prepared for a strenuous trip. If you have boots and some good heavy clothes, be sure to put them in your bag and by all means do not go unarmed."

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Waldo Edgar stood up and shook hands with each of them.

"I will not see you again before you go, but I expect great things from both of you. I shall watch your reports with interest."

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CHAPTER III "GOOD LUCK"

Bob and Tully left the office of the federal chief together and descended in the same elevator to the first floor. Both of them were stirred by a strong feeling of elation for this was their first assignment since becoming federal agents.

Bob would have liked to talk the case over with his uncle, but he knew now that Merritt Hughes was already on his way to Florida and whatever Bob was to do on the case he would have to do alone.

"Seems to me you get all the best of these assignments," grumbled Tully. "I know something about Florida and Nira is just about the last place in the world I want to go to."

"I don't see why you should complain," said Bob, "even though Nira may not be a very pleasant place, for you have a distinct advantage over me since I have never been to Florida."

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They parted as they walked out of the building, and Bob, hailing a taxicab, sped toward the apartment building where he made his home.

Packing was a comparatively simple thing for Bob. He pulled a serviceable but battered Gladstone bag out of the closet and opened it upon the bed.

Fortunately he had a large supply of freshly laundered clothes and he packed one side of the bag solid with shirts, socks and underwear. That done he went back to the closet and rummaged around until he found an old hunting outfit of corduroy trousers and coat.

From one corner of the closet he pulled a pair of heavy boots which were soft and pliable. The woolen socks which he pulled from the boots had been almost consumed by moths and Bob threw the socks away, making a mental note that he would have to buy more either in Washington or when he arrived in Florida.

On the third trip to the closet Bob returned with a well-worn gun case in his hands. He opened the brown leather case and drew forth a special hunting rifle which had been given to him by his uncle several years before.

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The gun had received excellent care as the gleaming barrel indicated, and Bob, sitting down on the edge of the bed, caressed it with hands that were almost affectionate. He had nicknamed the gun "Ezekiel" after an eccentric old hunter he had known in his home town in Iowa.

Bob, although not a remarkable shot with a rifle, could be classed as better than average, for his eyesight was good and his finger was steady in its pull on the trigger.

The young federal agent examined the gun carefully. There was more than a good chance that it might be called into use if his Florida trip developed all of the possibilities Waldo Edgar had indicated. Bob sighted through the barrel of the gun and smiled to himself as he noted the cleanness of the bore, for he prided himself on

the care which he had given the weapon.

There was a small box of ammunition in the gun case and Bob examined the shells. They had been in the case for three months but there was no reason to believe that they had deteriorated for the gun case had been kept in a warm, dry place.

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Bob slipped the rifle back into the case, which was just long enough to fit into his Gladstone bag. He folded up his corduroy outfit and placed this on top of the rifle. Then the boots went in and on top of them he jammed several soft flannel shirts that could be worn a reasonable time without laundering. It was impossible to foretell just what he would encounter in Florida and he wanted to be prepared for every possible emergency.

The packing had taken longer than Bob had expected and when he looked at his watch he realized that there was little time to lose if he expected to reach the justice department building for his one o'clock appointment. Bob jammed his shaving outfit in on top of his clothes and closed the bag. It fairly bulged with the articles he had packed away and the big case was both clumsy and heavy to carry.

Bob looked around his room as he paused at the door. It might be weeks before he would return and he would miss the orderly pleasantness of the room with his comfortable chair and his excellent books.

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Then he closed and locked the door and walked down the hallway as rapidly as he could with his heavy bag. He summoned a taxi and started for the Department of Justice Building where detailed instructions were awaiting him.

The ride down town took less than ten minutes and Bob reached the building at five minutes to one, just in time to see Tully Ross precede him through the main entrance.

Bob paid his taxi fare and then left his heavy bag at the information desk on the main floor while he was whirled upward in an elevator. The same clerk who had greeted him that morning was on duty in the outer office and Tully, seated on a bench, was opening a large Manila envelope.

"Your instructions, train tickets, expense money and data on the case are all in this envelope," said the clerk, handing a similar container to Bob. "Your train leaves at 1:30 so I suggest that you get to the station at once and then go into the details of this case after you are on your way south."

[40]

"Thanks a lot," nodded Bob. "I'm on my way."

"Good luck," said the clerk, who looked enviously after Bob, for after all there were not very many thrills in clerical work.

[41]

CHAPTER IV TULLY'S CHALLENGE



Tully Ross followed Bob into the elevator and they dropped toward the first floor.

"I guess we're taking the same train as far as Jacksonville," said Tully. "What a pleasure that's going to be!"

Tully's last words were sneering and vindictive, and a little of Bob's pent-up resentment burst out. Fortunately no one else was in the elevator at the time.

"You'd better take inventory of yourself, Tully," advised Bob, "or you're going to run head-on into trouble. I haven't got it in for you and you can take full credit for anything that you do. Don't be so blamed suspicious of everything. You do your work and I'll do mine. The main thing is going to be to solve this case and I don't care who does it just as long as we are successful. If you'd only warm up a little we could go over this case on the way south this afternoon and we might have some ideas that we could both benefit by."

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Tully looked suspicious.

"What are you getting at?" he asked.

They were on the main floor again and passengers bound for the upper floors swept into the elevator.

"We'll take a taxi together to the station and I'll tell you on the way there," said Bob.

Tully had two smaller bags while Bob had only the large gladstone and they loaded the bags and themselves into a taxi and started for the union station.

"I'm just trying to get at this," said Bob. "Both of us have chances for brilliant futures in this service if we don't let personal rivalry warp our better judgment. That was a shabby trick of yours in giving that story to the newspapers and I rather think you hoped that I would be blamed."

Tully was silent and Bob went on.

"I'm willing to let that pass and some other things that have happened if you feel that you're willing to work along with me on this case. The old saying that two heads are better than one is certainly true in this kind of work and we can both benefit by it. What do you say?"

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Bob's clear, blue eyes bored deep into Tully's brown ones and he held out his hand.

Tully held Bob's gaze for a moment and then his eyes shifted uneasily. He made no motion to take Bob's proffered hand.

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, I'm glad that we have had a definite understanding," said Bob.

"I guess that's the way it's got to be," said Tully slowly. "I don't like you, Bob, and there's no use in making any bones about it. I'm going to solve this case even if I have to step all over you in doing it."

"Well, Tully, you just run along and do your best; but I'm serving fair warning on you right now

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that if you try to step on any of my toes, you'll wish you hadn't. There's only one way to play this game and that's to play it fair and square. I'm going to play it that way and I'm going to win and nothing that you can do will stop me. If it is humanly possible that case will be solved within the next few weeks."

Tully looked squarely at Bob.

"Is that a challenge?" he asked.

"Call it anything you like."

"Then I say that you won't solve it in two months if you solve it at all."

"Two months it is," retorted Bob, "and by that I mean that every angle of this case will be cleaned up and either all of the men connected with it in federal custody or beyond our reach and you can put that down in writing if you want to."

"I won't do that," sneered Tully, "for it might be too embarrassing to have to have it recalled when you fail."

"I'm not going to fail," said Bob firmly, and although Tully wouldn't have admitted it at the time, he had a premonition that Bob was right—that he would not fail.

[45]

CHAPTER V ON THE SOUTHERN LIMITED



The taxi pulled up in front of the union station and Bob and Tully, spurning the offers of red caps, carried their luggage into the huge structure.

The great terminal was alive with activity and through the loud speaker system the departures of half a dozen famous trains were being announced.

Bob's Gladstone was too heavy to carry very far without shifting it from hand to hand. When he reached the train shed he put the bag down beside him and opened the envelope in which his tickets had been placed. His Pullman reservation called for lower five in car 43 on train number 7, the Southern Limited. Tully paused beside Bob.

"Are you in car 43?" he asked.

"Lower five," said Bob.

"Humph," grunted Tully. "What luck I have. There must have been some mistake. I'm in upper five."

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"No, I don't think there was any mistake," grinned Bob as he visualized how Tully, who was inclined to stoutness, would look scrambling in and out of upper five that night. "Perhaps the clerk who made out these tickets thought you needed a little exercise."

Picking up their bags they walked to the nearest train gate where the ticket inspector checked their tickets and waved them toward the Southern Limited, which was standing on track number three.

Car 43, in which they were to make their journey southward, was near the center of the train and by the time Bob and Tully were comfortably seated in the car, the porters were making their final calls of "bo-o-oard." The Southern Limited started slowly but easily picked up speed as the trucks clicked over the joints.

Travel that day was light and there was only one other passenger on the car, a man who appeared to be about forty, short, dark, but marked with a distinguishing streak of grey in the center of his head. He was the type of man who, though he attracted attention, did not invite acquaintanceship.

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Tully continued to grumble at intervals, complaining that it was grossly unfair for Bob to have a lower berth while he was compelled to climb into an upper.

But Bob ignored Tully's complaints. The train was soon speeding into Virginia and with the capital behind Bob took out the envelope with the history of the case they were working on. Since they were practically alone on the car it would be an ideal time to go over this material and memorize in detail all of the essential information contained in it.

Tully likewise pulled out the heavy manila envelope which contained a copy of the same report Bob had in his hands but instead of reading it there Tully went forward into the smoking compartment. Bob knew that Tully did not smoke so it was obvious that Tully had gone forward simply to get away from him.

There were a dozen closely typed sheets in the report and they reviewed in detail all of the activities of the jewel smugglers which were known to the federal officials. As he read, Bob was astounded at the daring with which the smuggling was conducted.

[48]

The reports indicated clearly that the headquarters for the smuggling operations must lie somewhere along the east coast of Florida and the names of both Nira and Atalissa appeared frequently in the typed reports. It was evident that at least half a dozen federal men, most of them in the customs service, had been working on the case at various times.

There was one paragraph in their report that struck Bob with unusual force. It read:

"A conservative estimate of the amount of jewels which the gang has smuggled into this country in the last six months would be at least half a million dollars. There is no way of knowing just how extensive are their operations. Agents are especially warned to use great care in any approach to any members of this gang. Agents working on this case should go armed at all times. It is imperative that the men responsible for these operations be taken into custody at the earliest possible time."

[49]

Bob read this paragraph several times and it

brought home to him the possible dangers which he might face in the coming weeks.

The other passenger in the car whose seat was behind Bob got up and went forward into the smoking compartment where Tully had gone previously.

Bob looked up as the man went past him. The stranger was powerfully built and Bob especially noticed the breadth and strength of his hands.

Bob thought little of the incident but hoped that Tully would have the good sense to put away the secret papers when the stranger entered the smoking compartment. As the train sped through the fertile Virginia farm lands the young federal agent continued his perusal of the report.

The concluding paragraph was such that he read it three or four times.

"From all information at hand, it appears obvious that not more than five men are involved in this smuggling enterprise. So far we have been unable to identify positively any member of the gang so all agents are doubly warned against any incautious remarks which might indicate the reason for their visit to Florida. In case of any unusual emergency notify headquarters by long distance telephone at once."

[50]

Bob went back over the report again in detail and, when he had finished, placed it in the sturdy envelope, sealed it, and put it in his Gladstone bag. He felt now that he knew as much about the case as it was possible to learn until he actually reached Atalissa.

After a time Bob walked forward and stepped into the smoking compartment where Tully and the stranger were engaged in animated conversation.

Tully looked up but there was little warmth in his glance. That, however, did not deter Bob from sitting down on one of the comfortable leather upholstered benches. The stranger looked at Bob and a rather pleasant smile framed his lips.

"Going to Florida?" he asked.

[51]

"Jacksonville," said Bob laconically.

"That's fine, I'm going there too. Hamsa, Joe Hamsa, is the name," said the stranger reaching over and extending his hand in greeting.

Bob grasped the extended hand but he winced slightly at the strength of the other's grip.

"I'm Bob Houston of Washington," replied Bob by way of introducing himself.

"Going south on business or just taking a vacation?" asked Joe Hamsa and Bob thought there was a peculiar flicker in the other's eyes.

"Well, it's a combination of both," replied Bob.

"Wish I could say as much," went on Hamsa, "but it's all business with me. I'm glad you boys are on the car today. I don't like to travel alone and especially at night."

Bob wondered just why Mr. Hamsa, who appeared perfectly capable of taking care of himself, did not care to travel alone. He was not in doubt long for Hamsa suddenly developed a voluble streak.

"Diamonds are my specialty," he said, "and I've been held up once or twice. Believe me, there's no fun in that."

[52]

Mr. Hamsa did not look particularly like the type of man who would submit to a holdup peacefully, and there was something about him that aroused suspicions in Bob's mind.

The young federal agent glanced across the compartment to where Tully was seated and he was surprised to note that the papers in the confidential report on the smuggling ring were scattered on the seat beside Tully.

What was even more astounding was the pallor of Tully's face, and the glassy stare in his eyes.

"Tully," cried Bob, "what's the matter?"

But there was no response from Tully except a slight twitching of his lips which indicated that he might be trying to answer.

"Tully," repeated Bob, "what's the matter?"

The sharp questions voiced by the young federal agent caused Hamsa also to turn and stare at Tully.

Bob was less than six feet away from Tully, yet the other failed to answer his questions or to give any sign of recognition. He sat there like a man under a hypnotic spell.

[53]

Bob leaped to his feet and in one long stride was beside Tully. With firm hands he grasped Tully's shoulders and shook him vigorously.

Tully's head dropped forward on his chest and he seemed suddenly to collapse, sliding forward off the leather bench and falling to the floor.

[54]

CHAPTER VI STRANGE EVENTS



Tully's collapse came so suddenly that Bob was unable to check his fall to the floor, but he leaned down almost instantly and lifted Tully back on one of the benches.

Bob's face was close to Tully's and he caught a whiff of an acrid smell on Tully's breath. His companion's breathing was slow and distinctly labored.

Bob grasped one of Tully's wrists and checked the pulse beat. His knowledge of first aid was somewhat limited, but the steadiness of the pulse count reassured him and he decided that Tully had probably fallen victim to a sudden fainting attack.

Joe Hamsa leaned over Bob and attempted to aid

him in ministering to Tully.

"Anything I can do?" he asked.

"Get a cup of water," said Bob, and Hamsa hastened away to do his bidding. He was back soon with the paper cup brimming full of water. Bob moistened his handkerchief in this and bathed Tully's cheeks and forehead while Hamsa loosened his tie and collar, and massaged his wrists.

[55]

Just then the Pullman conductor came into the compartment.

"What's doing here?" he asked.

Bob answered without looking up.

"I think my companion suffered a fainting attack. Have you any smelling salts?"

"I have some in my first aid kit up ahead," replied the conductor, departing to obtain it.

He returned in less than a minute with the smelling salts and Bob gave Tully several deep sniffs from the pungent smelling bottle. The penetrating qualities of the salts seemed to reach Tully's subconscious mind and draw away the curtain which had clouded his consciousness. He made an effort to rouse himself but Bob speaking in a low voice forced him back on the leather bench.

"Take it easy, Tully," he advised. "You'll feel stronger in a short time."

[56]

Tully opened his eyes and stared at them. It was evident that he had no idea what had happened to him.

Bob, who had been somewhat concerned when he saw the sheets of Tully's confidential report laying out in the open, now took time to look for them. They were still scattered on one of the leather benches and as far as Bob could determine they had not been disturbed. He reached out and with the sweep of one hand brushed them into a pile at one corner of the bench. Fortunately they had been turned face down, and Bob felt sure that there had been no opportunity for either Hamsa or the Pullman conductor to read the contents.

Tully attempted to sit up and Bob's attention returned to his unfortunate traveling companion. Tully still appeared shaken but his eyes were clearer and once more there was a touch of color in his cheeks.

Tully signalled that he would like a drink of water and Hamsa hurried away to fill another paper cup from the tank in the vestibule. When he returned Tully took several deep draughts of the water and he appeared greatly refreshed.

[57]

"I don't know what happened," he mumbled, shaking his head slowly. "My mind seems so heavy. I can't think."

"Better take it easy for a while," advised Bob. "Here, stretch out on this couch. I'll get the porter to bring you a blanket."

Bob stepped out and called the porter who was in the other end of the car, and, thus far,

unaware that anything unusual had taken place in the smoking compartment. At Bob's instructions he brought a blanket and placed it over Tully. Then he brought in a pillow and the federal agent was made as comfortable as possible.

"Want me to make up a berth?" asked the porter, but Tully shook his head.

"Not now. I'll be all right here. Just let me rest."

Bob's keen eyes roved around the smoking compartment. The papers which had been in Tully's confidential envelope had been placed on the opposite couch, evidently by Hamsa or the Pullman conductor. Bob caught a quick glance from Tully and sensed that the other wanted the papers put away at once.

[58]

The young federal agent stepped over to the leather couch, scooped up the sheets of typewritten paper, and placed them in the envelope.

"Thanks," said Tully, when Bob handed the package to him. He slipped the documents into an inner pocket of his coat, closed his eyes, and was soon in a deep sleep.

This might have been alarming had not Tully's breathing been deep and natural and the color in his cheeks more normal.

"I think he's coming around all right," said Hamsa, who had remained in the smoking compartment. "Looks to me like it might have been an attack of acute indigestion."

"Perhaps," agreed Bob, but for his own satisfaction he would have preferred to have a doctor examine Tully. He stepped outside into the corridor to speak to the Pullman conductor.

"Do you know if there is a doctor on the train?" he asked.

[59]

"I don't believe so. We're running light today but I'll find out; your friend any worse?"

"No. He's better, but I'd like to find out just what happened to him."

"I can wire ahead and have an ambulance meet us at the next division point," suggested the conductor.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," replied Bob. "We're anxious to get to Jacksonville on this train. However, I wish you would ascertain if there is a doctor aboard."

As the trainman hurried away, Bob stepped back into the smoking compartment. There was something definitely puzzling and disturbing about the sudden illness which had overtaken Tully, for the latter was usually in the best of health.

Bob thought back over the days of their association in the archives division of the War Department, trying to remember if Tully had ever been the subject of sudden fainting spells. As far as he could recall, nothing like this had occurred before, which did not make his mind rest any easier.

[60]

Hamsa wandered out of the smoking compartment and Bob and Tully were alone. Half an hour slipped by and Tully remained in the deep sleep.

The train had stopped once, a long halt for coal and water, and it was after it resumed motion that the Pullman conductor returned to the compartment.

"I've been all over the train, even into the day coaches ahead, and there isn't even a veterinarian aboard. Sure you don't want us to wire for an ambulance to meet you? We'll be in at the next division point in an hour and a half."

"I'll let you know definitely a little later. If he doesn't rouse from this sleep, it may be necessary to do just that."

"Anything more I can do?" asked the conductor, but Bob shook his head.

"I'll stay here and watch him. If I need any help, I'll signal for the porter."

The curtains at the doorway swished down behind the departing figure of the conductor, leaving Bob and Tully alone once more.

[61]

The afternoon was waning as the train sped southward, the steady clicking of the trucks underneath indicating that the Limited was doing at least a mile a minute. The roadbed was smooth and the high speed did not make the car ride uncomfortably.

While Tully was asleep, Bob studied his companion's face. Tully's features were really remarkably strong and if he made an effort to look pleasant he would have been a handsome young man. But his lips were inclined to a perpetual downward curve that made it appear that a steady scowl was on his face.

Bob would have enjoyed liking Tully, for there were many qualities in the other that were outstanding. For instance, Tully was sturdy and he had the power to drive steadily toward a goal once he set his ambition to that end. It was too bad that he let personal feelings creep into his work and sway his better judgment, such as challenging Bob to beat him to a solution of the jewel smuggling case.

Bob was a better than average judge of character and he knew that Tully would worry so much about what he was doing that Tully's own keen mind would be somewhat dulled on the case. For that reason Bob had not hesitated to take up the challenge.

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The Limited plunged into a short but heavy rain storm and drops of water streamed down the windows. It was not an especially auspicious beginning to their manhunt.

Tully moved restlessly and Bob thought for a time that his companion was about to wake up, but Tully's breathing deepened once more and his eyes remained closed.

Joe Hamsa stuck his head into the compartment.

"Any change?" he asked, and Bob thought he appeared a little too solicitous for a passing acquaintance.

"I think he's resting easier," replied Bob.

"Are you going to take him to a hospital?" asked Hamsa, pressing Bob for further information on his plans.

[63]

"I haven't decided yet."

"Let me know if there is anything I can do," volunteered the other. It was apparent that he would have liked an invitation to stay in the room, but Bob turned toward the rain-washed windows and after a brief pause Hamsa dropped the curtain at the doorway and walked back into the Pullman.

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CHAPTER VII THE MAN ON THE PLATFORM



Tully remained in the deep sleep for another fifteen minutes. Then he stirred restlessly and Bob went over to his side. As he looked down Tully opened his eyes. They appeared clear and perfectly normal.

Tully attempted to sit up, but Bob put his hands on his shoulders and gently pushed him back on the couch.

"Take it easy for a while, Tully," he said.

"What happened?" the other demanded, and Bob noted that the words were slow and his speech thick.

Then before he could answer, Tully grunted and made a face.

"Get me some water, quick."

Bob hastened out into the corridor where he filled a paper cup to the brim. Tully drank every drop and signaled for another cup, which Bob procured immediately.

[65]

When that was done, Tully appeared greatly refreshed.

"Help me prop this pillow up so I can sit up a little," he urged Bob, and he was soon in a more comfortable position.

The rain still washed the windows of the car, and the porter, entering the compartment, turned on the top lights, for it was nearly dark.

Before he spoke again Tully felt inside his coat and, reassured that the documents on the jewel smuggling case were there, he looked at Bob.

"I don't remember very much," he said slowly, "but all of a sudden everything went dark. I felt that I was going to fall but I couldn't move. I couldn't even reach out my hands and neither could I say a word."

He paused and Bob felt that it would be well for him to explain what he had seen.

"You looked like you were hypnotized," he explained. "I came over and caught you, but you were out cold. Believe me, you had us worried for a while."

Just then the Pullman conductor looked in.

"Made up your mind about calling an ambulance at the division point?" he asked. Then he saw Tully propped into a half-way sitting position and his face brightened.

"Coming around now?"

"He's feeling better. We'll go right on through to Jacksonville," said Bob and the conductor went on about his duties.

"Didn't you think I'd come around?" asked Tully, a look of worry on his forehead.

"We didn't know just what was happening for a while," explained Bob. "You had us pretty badly scared."

Tully looked thoughtful.

"I honestly don't know what took place," he said, slowly shaking his head. "It seemed as though blackness simply exploded in my face. Actually I believe there was some kind of a shock or blow on my face."

"I don't know what it could have been," replied Bob. "Hamsa and I were the only ones with you and you had been visiting with Hamsa for some time before I came in."

"He's a queer duck," muttered Tully. "I don't know whether I could like or trust him."

Bob had exactly the same feeling and he was interested to know Tully's reaction to their traveling companion.

"I'm still kind of sleepy. Guess I'll take another nap. You might tell the porter to make up my berth."

"I'll have him fix up lower five for you," replied Bob. "I'll take the upper for you probably won't feel much like climbing in and out of a berth for the next few hours. Think you'll want anything to eat tonight?"

"Perhaps a little soup later," nodded Tully as he closed his eyes.

Bob remained in the compartment for several minutes until he was sure that Tully was in a deep and comfortable sleep. Then he returned to the main section of the Pullman.

As he turned in the corridor and could look down the full length of the car he thought he caught just a glimpse of Hamsa dodging out the other end of the car.

Only a few lights were on and Bob could not be sure that his eyes were not playing tricks on him. In any event he hastened his pace and when he reached the section which he and Tully occupied he drew his big Gladstone bag out from under one of the seats.

Bob breathed easier when he saw the envelope which contained the confidential information on

the smuggling was just where he had left it. It had been more than a little careless of him to leave such valuable data unprotected for so long a time.

It was fully dark and Bob snapped on the individual lights in the berth and rang the buzzer for the porter, who appeared almost immediately.

Bob instructed him to make up both the lower and upper berth.

"I'm going ahead into the diner. Let me know when you've finished," he said, "and also keep an eye on my friend in the smoking compartment. If he should wake up, inform me at once."

The rush to reach the train plus the exciting events of the afternoon had made Bob ravenously hungry and when he entered the dining car he splurged by ordering a large porterhouse steak and an extra order of French fried potatoes.

[69]

The conductor had been right when he described travel on the Southern that night as light for there were only five others in the diner in addition to Bob. All of them were strangers, three of them being women and the other two rather elderly men who were engaged in an animated conversation on the economic problems of the day.

Bob summoned the steward, explained that a companion was ill, and asked that a nourishing soup be prepared for him to take back to the Pullman when he returned.

The steak, when it was brought in, was both thick and tender, and the potatoes were done just to the right crispness. It was a meal that Bob could thoroughly enjoy and he ate it in comparative leisure, relying on the Pullman porter to call him if Tully awakened.

The train slowed to a smooth halt in a North Carolina mill town and Bob looked out on the well lighted station platform. The rain was descending in torrents now and Bob knew that it might be hard to keep the Limited on the fast schedule which its time card demanded.

[70]

It was evidently a service stop for the train remained at the station for at least ten minutes. Bob, watching from the windows, could see anyone on the platform and he was startled to catch a glimpse of a man hurrying along beside the train. He had just a glimpse, but the man, short and rather bulky, was making what appeared to Bob to be an obvious effort to avoid attracting attention for he was hugging the side of the train. He was clad in a dark oilskin and a soft hat, pulled well down, shielded his face.

Bob pressed his own face against the glass and peered along the platform. Up ahead a brightly illuminated sign marked the telegraph office, and Bob saw the man hurry inside, but the distance was too great for him to see the other's face. In less than a minute the man reappeared, but he did not come back along the train.

Then the Limited plunged southward again, beating its way into the teeth of the storm, and

[71]

Bob wondered if Joe Hamsa could have been the man on the platform.

Bob finished his meal and after paying his bill went back into car 43 to see how Tully was getting along. He found him awake and ready for something to eat.

"Soup would taste good," nodded Tully when Bob suggested it and the young federal agent returned to the diner at once. When he re-entered the car he saw Joe Hamsa seated at the far end of the diner and he was sure that he had not passed Hamsa either going or coming from car 43. That meant that Hamsa had been up ahead some place.

Bob thought the diamond salesman made a deliberate effort to avoid his eyes by staring intently through the storm-bathed windows of the car. The soup was ready and Bob followed a waiter who carried it back to the Pullman.

The train was traveling at a wild pace now and Bob almost lost his balance as he walked between the cars. As the anger of the storm deepened, he became more convinced than before that Joe Hamsa was the man he had seen on the station platform and there was something about the wildness of the night and Tully's sudden illness that caused grave apprehension in Bob's mind.

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[73]

CHAPTER VIII TULLY'S PAPERS VANISH



When Bob returned to the Pullman, Tully was obviously much refreshed from his deep sleep and he ate the soup with real relish. After he was through and the waiter had gone, Tully spoke to him.

"I'll appreciate it if you'll give me a hand down to the berth," he said. "My legs are still a little shaky, but I guess I'm all right otherwise. A good night's sleep will put me back to normal."

Bob supported Tully and together they walked down to the berth which had been made up. Joe Hamsa was not in the car.

"I still can't figure out what happened to me," said Tully, shaking his head.

"You are sure I wasn't struck over the head?" he looked at Bob so sharply that Bob was inclined to laugh.

"Don't accuse me of doing a thing like that," he retorted, but there was no anger in his words.

[74]

"But I tell you it felt like something struck my face. Then there was a blanket of darkness that settled over me and I couldn't move or say a word. It was a mighty helpless sort of feeling."

Bob agreed that there had been nothing pleasant about the experience and he helped Tully in getting undressed. Tully drew the letter

with its confidential report on the smuggling ring out of an inner pocket.

"This goes under my pillow," he said.

"I thought it was kind of foolish for you to read it while Hamsa was in the smoking compartment with you," said Bob, and a flicker of anger glowed in Tully's eyes.

"Hamsa's all right," he replied. "You take care of your copy and I'll take care of mine."

With that Tully pulled out the flap of the envelope and drew forth the closely typewritten pages which comprised the report.

Bob saw a sudden, startled change in Tully's face, and he leaned closer.

"Bob," whispered the other. "Look at these pages. Am I seeing things?"

[75]

Bob picked up the handful of data and scanned the typewritten words. Even before he read the printing on the page he knew that something was wrong for the paper was thicker than that upon which his report had been written.

But the real shock was when he read the first page. It was a recipe for making dill pickles.

"It's a pickle recipe," gasped Bob.

Tully nodded grimly.

"Look at the rest of them!"

Bob skimmed through the pages, bending down to examine each one closely. Instead of the confidential data the pages were mimeographed recipes and Bob and Tully stared at each other in amazement.

"My report's been stolen!"

It was Tully speaking and he sounded like a stricken man. Then he grasped Bob's shoulders.

"This isn't a trick you're playing on me?" he demanded.

"Don't be silly," said Bob firmly. "That isn't my idea of a joke. We've got to get busy now."

[76]

Bob pressed the buzzer for the porter, who put in an almost immediate appearance.

"Get the Pullman conductor here at once," he commanded.

"Sorry, boss, but he's eating supper up ahead."

"Get him," retorted Bob, and the manner in which he gave the order sent the porter scurrying up the aisle.

"How could this have happened?" asked Tully, and from the heaviness of his voice Bob knew that his companion had not fully thrown off the effects of the attack which had overcome him that afternoon.

"The secret of this is somewhere on the Limited," replied Bob. "Only three people, in addition to myself, were in the compartment with you. One was the Pullman conductor, the other was Hamsa, and the third was the porter. I

think we can rule out the porter for he was in there only once or twice. There's just a chance the conductor might have come back in while I was in the diner."

"What motive would he have in taking such a report?" Tully wanted to know and Bob confessed that there apparently was none.

[77]

The conductor, evidently irritated at being called from his dinner, entered the car and hurried down to the section.

"What's the matter?" he asked crisply.

Bob did not like the tone of his voice and he drew forth the little badge which identified him. The conductor's eyes widened in astonishment and there was an instant change in his attitude. He looked toward Tully significantly.

"Prisoner?" he asked.

"No. He's a federal agent like myself. Sometime after he was stricken this afternoon an envelope containing valuable information was taken from him and worthless papers substituted."

"You're not suspecting me of this, are you?" asked the conductor and there was such pathetic anxiety in his voice that Bob felt that the man was innocent of any wrong doing.

"I'm not suspecting or accusing anyone at present," replied Bob. "I simply want to know if you saw anything unusual going on in this car at any time while I was in the diner and while my companion was asleep on the couch in the compartment ahead."

[78]

The conductor shook his head.

"I was through the car twice," he said, "and the only one here was the man who had lower nine. The first time he was in his seat and the second time he was near the rear vestibule. He had on a slicker and had the upper part of the door open."

"When was that?" The question shot eagerly from Bob's lips.

"Just before our last stop at Atkinson where we took on coal and water," replied the conductor. "I didn't notice him again until up in the diner a few minutes ago."

"The vestibule door was opened by someone while we were in Atkinson," put in the porter.

"Then lower nine's passenger must have taken a walk. Fine night for a thing like that," said the conductor. "Come to think of it, I did see his slicker on another chair in the diner."

There was no question now but that Joe Hamsa had been the man Bob had seen on the station platform, and the suspicious feeling Bob had held toward him from the beginning was strengthened.

[79]

"I'm going forward to talk with Hamsa," he told Tully, and he started ahead through the train as fast as he could walk.

When he reached the diner the steward was turning down the lights.

"I'm looking for a dark, heavy-set fellow who was wearing a black slicker," said Bob. "He belongs in car 43."

"He left not more than two or three minutes ago," replied the steward. "You should have met him, for he started back into the Pullmans."

Bob shook his head.

"I just came from car 43 and he couldn't have passed me."

"He might have turned around and gone up into the coaches," said the steward. "I've been busy in the kitchen checking with the chef. You might look up ahead."

Bob went up into the day coaches and found the train conductor in the forward car. There were three day coaches on the train and the conductor was busy making out his reports.

[80]

The young federal agent wasted no time in identifying himself.

"There's a man aboard I want to question," he explained. "He was in the diner a few minutes ago and after finishing his meal started back for the Pullmans. He belongs in lower nine of car 43, but I'm sure he didn't reach there. Get your brakeman out and search this train."

The small gold badge Bob displayed worked magic with the trainman and he summoned his brakeman. Bob gave them a brief description of Hamsa and they started back through the train.

Every vestibule and every compartment was checked as the three worked methodically. They even looked into the kitchen on the dining car while the chef, a jolly negro, grinned at them.

Back in car 43 they found the Pullman conductor standing watch beside Tully.

"There's no sign of Hamsa up ahead," said Bob. "He didn't come this way?"

[81]

"No one's been through this car," replied the Pullman official firmly.

Bob shook his head.

"A man can't vanish on a train and we've been running too fast for him to jump off. That would have been sheer suicide."

There were two more Pullmans and an observation lounge car behind car 43 and with the trainmen at his heels, Bob resumed the search.

The next two cars were practically deserted and even in the observation lounge there were only five passengers in addition to the porter. They looked up with evident interest at the wholesale invasion of the trainmen and the grim intentness of the expression on Bob's face.

But the observation car failed to yield any sign of Hamsa and Bob stepped out on the rain-lashed platform. The Limited whistled sharply and seconds later rumbled through a small village. Then the train was rushing through the desolate night once more.

The young federal agent turned and re-entered the car and the feeling of unrest which had gripped him ever since meeting Joe Hamsa deepened. There was something about the diamond salesman that sent shivers up and down Bob's spine.

"That fellow's got to be on the train some place for we haven't even slowed up since we left Atkinson," said the train conductor. "We'd better look again."

They started forward, once more examining every compartment aboard the train, and this time they even went into the baggage car, but the baggageman insisted that no one had been through his car.

Back in the first day coach they stopped to take council.

"I'm afraid he's fallen off the train in some manner," said the train conductor. "We're stopping in ten minutes at a junction and I'll send a wire back to division headquarters. They'll warn all trains over the road to watch for him."

Bob, however, doubted that Hamsa had fallen from the train for he felt that the diamond salesman was far too clever and cautious to be the victim of such an accident.

[83]

[84]

CHAPTER IX BOB GETS A WARNING

★

The young federal agent returned to car 43 and related in detail to Tully the result of the search of the train.

"It doesn't seem possible that Hamsa could be on the train, yet I am sure that he did not fall off," concluded Bob.

"I've the same feeling," said Tully. "You're sure you didn't miss any place?"

"We looked in every closet and compartment aboard the Limited," insisted Bob. "We'd have found even a fly if one had been aboard."

Tully was visibly downcast for he felt the loss of his confidential instructions keenly.

"Hamsa is the only one who could have taken them," he said, half to himself.

Bob felt like telling Tully that he should have known better than to have opened and read them in the presence of anyone else, but he checked the impulse, and was glad that he had had the foresight to protect his own papers by placing them in his Gladstone bag.

[85]

The train slowed to a stop at a lonely junction and Bob went to the vestibule where the porter opened the upper half of the door for him.

The federal agent, peering ahead through the rain, saw the train conductor make a dash for

the station where a night operator was on duty. The conductor ran back to the train just before the engineer "whistled in" the flagman and Bob knew that already a message was humming over the wires telling of the disappearance of Joe Hamsa, the diamond salesman.

The porter closed the upper half of the door and Bob returned to the Pullman. The lights had been turned low and he looked in at Tully, who was dozing.

Bob was too wide awake to think of sleep just then, and he went ahead to the smoking compartment, where the porter had left an evening paper.

Bob picked up the paper and scanned the headlines on the first page, but there was nothing recorded in the news there that drew his attention and he turned to the sports page, where football dope stories could be found plentifully, for Bob liked nothing better in the sports world than a good football game.

[86]

The train conductor came in and sat down.

"It's a bad night," he said, looking at the curtain of rain which swept the windows. "We'll be late getting into Jacksonville. A message at the junction back there gave us a lot of slow orders where the track is going bad ahead of us."

"The rain must be worse farther south," said Bob.

"It's nearly a cloudburst in some places. I wouldn't be surprised if we find a bridge washed out and get hung up for hours."

The conductor was silent for a minute. Then he added, "I can't figure out where that fellow in lower nine went. Seems impossible that he could have fallen off the train, yet he isn't here."

"I'm just as puzzled as you are," admitted Bob, "but I have a feeling that no harm has come to him. I sized him up as a fellow pretty well able to take care of himself."

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"I don't recall seeing him," said the train conductor, "for the Pullman conductor handles this end of the Limited. Well, I've more reports to get ready."

He got to his feet and started for the door. The Limited lurched heavily and the conductor was thrown back against Bob.

"There we go!" he cried. "The track's gone out from under us."

The car was weaving and lurching as the wheels screamed in the grip of powerful air brakes, but the rhythmic clack of the trucks told them they were still on the rails.

The conductor hoisted himself to his feet and Bob followed him in a dash for the vestibule.

"That blamed engineer almost shook us to pieces," groaned the conductor as he threw open the top half of the vestibule door and peered out.

Bob, looking over his shoulder, could see a red glare that penetrated even the brilliance of the

locomotive's headlight.

"Someone's swinging a fuse against us," said the conductor, buttoning up his slicker. "I'm going ahead."

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Bob ran back into the Pullman and got his own coat. Tully, who was awake now, wanted to know what it was all about.

"An emergency stop of some kind," said Bob. "I'll be back soon."

By the time he was back in the vestibule the Limited was grinding to a stop and Bob swung down behind the conductor, the two running ahead alongside the train as rapidly as they could in the darkness.

The Southern had been flagged at a lonely way station where it seldom if ever made a stop, and the engineer, who was leaning from his cab, bawled lustily at them.

"Find out what that hick agent means by flagging us down," he shouted. "We've got to get rolling again. We're 23 minutes late."

The agent, the red fuse still in his hands, came toward them and Bob caught a glimpse of a telegram in one hand.

"What's the idea of flagging us down?" demanded the conductor. "I'm going to report you if you haven't a mighty good reason."

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The agent's retort was sharp.

"Oh, quit your howling. I waved a fuse at you because I had orders from the super to stop this train and deliver a message to one of your passengers."

"What's that?" bellowed the conductor. "You had the nerve to stop the Southern just to deliver a telegram?"

The agent shrugged. "You heard me. Now I've got to find this passenger and deliver the message."

"Give it to me. I'll deliver it." The conductor reached for the telegram, but the agent backed away.

"Oh, no you don't. I'm going to deliver this in person and get the signature of the man I deliver it to."

"Hurry up there!" It was the engineer, shouting at them above the noise of the storm and the air pumps on the locomotive.

"Who's the telegram for?" asked the conductor.

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"Bob Houston in lower five, car 43," replied the agent. "Let's get going."

"That's all right, I'll sign for the telegram," said Bob. "My name is Houston and I'm in lower five, car 43."

The agent looked suspiciously at him as though he had not expected anyone as youthful looking as Bob.

"I've got instructions to see a certain badge before I turn over this message," he said.

Bob reached into his inner coat pocket, drew forth his billfold, and produced the badge.

"That's right," nodded the agent. "Sign this slip."

He produced a pencil and Bob, writing in the light from the headlight, signed his name.

"Thanks," said the agent. Then he turned to the conductor. "All right. Now you can tell that hoghead up there to pick up his wheels and get the string of varnished gondolas out of here. I want to go to sleep."

The conductor snorted, but he was too anxious to get back to his train to make a reply.

[91]

The vestibule of the forward coach had been opened by the brakeman. They climbed aboard and the engineer whistled off the moment they were on the train.

Bob looked at the damp envelope in his hands and suddenly he felt himself shaking slightly. For some reason the Southern Limited had been stopped at a lonely railroad outpost to deliver this message to him. That it was important there could be no doubt for he had been forced to identify himself before he could obtain the message.

The coach was less than half full and Bob dropped down in the nearest seat and ripped open the telegram, looking first at the signature. It was from Waldo Edgar, chief of the division of investigation.

Bob read the message quickly and thoroughly:

"This is to warn you that a man known as Joe Hamsa, traveling south with you on Limited, is now believed linked with gang we want. Watch Hamsa closely and take no chances with him as his record is a ruthless one. In view of this, contact Merritt Hughes and Condon Adams when you reach Jacksonville."

[92]

Bob read the telegram again, folded it carefully and placed it in an inside pocket with the feeling that even though Joe Hamsa had disappeared from the train, they would meet and that their meeting would not be far in the future.

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CHAPTER X IN CAR 43



Bob walked back through the Southern Limited with many things running through his mind. His suspicions concerning Joe Hamsa had been confirmed by the telegram in his pocket.

The rôle of diamond salesman was an ideal one for Hamsa to assume. In that capacity he would be able to go around the country selling the smuggled diamonds and if he appeared to be working for a legitimate firm of wholesale diamond merchants there was little doubt that he would go unmolested by the federal agents.

Bob wondered just how the department had obtained the information on Hamsa which had led to the telegram to him. Perhaps his uncle would be able to enlighten him when he arrived in Jacksonville the next morning.

The young federal agent entered car 43 and stopped at lower five. He parted the curtains and looked down at Tully, who was sound asleep. Tully was breathing so deeply that Bob hesitated to awaken him and tell him about the message. If Tully was still asleep when Bob went to bed, there would still be time to awaken him.

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Bob went on back to lower nine, which Hamsa was to have occupied. There was nothing on the seats, but Bob caught a glimpse of a bag sticking from under the forward seat and he leaned down and pulled a small bag out.

The case was of well worn brown leather securely fastened with two small but sturdy padlocks. There was something soft inside, but the leather was too thick for his fingers to ascertain just what the contents might be.

The porter came through the car and stopped.

"Haven't seen anything more of the man in lower nine?" asked Bob.

The Pullman employe shook his gray head.

"No sir, and I don't know whether to make up his berth."

"You might as well save yourself work. I don't believe I'd make it up," advised Bob, and the porter, deciding to accept the counsel, went on up the aisle.

[95]

Bob walked back to the observation and lounge car. There was only one passenger who had not retired to his berth in the forward Pullmans. He was an elderly man, thin, but with an expression on his face which gave one a feeling of tremendous vitality. He was deeply engrossed in reading and Bob picked up a newspaper which had been brought aboard the train at one of the Carolina towns.

But he found reading a difficult task. His mind was centered on the disappearance of Hamsa. It seemed absolutely incredible that a man could have vanished from a fast train while it was speeding through the night between stations. Yet apparently that was just what had taken place.

Bob knew there was an answer to the problem, and it was probably something ridiculously simple, but it evaded his every mental effort and he finally turned to the comic page of the newspaper for a chuckle or two at the antics of the comic characters.

[96]

The other passenger in the car put down the magazine he had been reading and went forward to his berth in another car. Bob was alone in the observation lounge without even a trainman in the car.

From up ahead the dismal hoot of the locomotive whistle drifted back and seconds later the car lurched as the trucks crashed over the frogs of a siding and the dimmed lights of a village drifted by in the storm. Then the train was in the heart

of the desolate night once more.

After the events of the afternoon, with Tully's sudden collapse and the disappearance of Hamsa, it was not a scene to inspire confidence in the heart of any young federal agent and Bob felt a queer chill running up and down his spine. Once or twice before, when sudden danger impended, he had had the same feeling.

Some premonition caused Bob to turn quickly toward the forward end of the observation car and his eyes riveted on a hand, extended around the edge of the corridor, which was groping for the switches controlling the lights inside the car.

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Bob was motionless, but for only a second. Then he leaped forward, his powerful legs driving him ahead as the groping hand finally found the switch and he saw the fingers tense as they started to move the lever downward which would plunge the car into darkness.

A blanket of darkness engulfed the interior of the observation car and Bob heard the faint click of the switch. His body was hurtling forward with a momentum impossible to stop and he crashed almost headlong into the steel partition at the end of the car.

Bob was dazed by the shock of the impact and he dropped to the floor, too bruised to move for a moment.

Then a finger of light sought him out. The tiny ray was almost blinding in its brilliance and the beam swept Bob's face as he struggled to get up. He was on his knees and facing the mysterious beam when there was a sharp blow on his face. The impact was not hard, but there was no mistaking that he had been struck.

[98]

A sudden nausea swept Bob and he felt his power of control ebbing rapidly. He tried to cry out, but his tongue seemed to swell and stick in his mouth. His arms dropped at his sides and he felt his knees wobbling. In spite of everything he could do he collapsed on the floor of the observation car.

The last thing Bob remembered was the thin beam of light which still sought him out with relentless steadiness and then a mocking laugh, heavy and daring, that might easily have come from the lips of Joe Hamsa had he been on the Southern Limited.

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CHAPTER XI DOUBLE DANGER



Bob never knew just how long he was unconscious, but it must have been at least half an hour before his mind started to clear and he felt some one shaking his shoulders.

His head pounded painfully and it was difficult for him to lift his heavy-lidded eyes. Some one moistened his lips and his tongue felt better. He tried to talk, but some one cut him short.

"He's coming around now. Lift him into a chair."

The command was obeyed and Bob felt himself being carried into a chair. Faintly he heard the steady clack of train trucks and he knew that he was still on the Southern Limited.

When his eyes finally focused and his blurred vision cleared he saw the train conductor leaning over him. A Pullman porter was just behind and in the background another trainman could be seen.

[100]

"What happened?" It was the voice of the train conductor.

Bob shook his head. He was still too weak to answer that question, but his eyes shot toward the end of the car as though he half expected to see a hand move around the corner and grope for the light switch. In his ears the mocking laugh he had heard still echoed.

"Where are we?" asked the young federal agent, and when the conductor answered Bob knew that the Limited was far behind its usual fast schedule into the southland.

Bob looked sharply at the trainmen.

"Have you seen anything of the man in lower nine in the last hour?" The question was sharp and he saw the look of surprise that passed over their faces.

Denials were quick and emphatic. Quite definitely they had not seen Joe Hamsa on the Limited.

Bob shook his head. That was strange for he was sure that it was Hamsa's voice he had heard in the car just before he lost consciousness.

[101]

"Tell us what happened," urged the train conductor, who was more than a little disturbed at the misfortunes which were befalling the passengers on the Limited that night. One federal agent had been taken suddenly ill, another passenger had disappeared, the train had been flagged down at a lonely station for a telegram, and now the second federal agent had been found unconscious in the observation car. It was, admitted the trainman, too much for him to untangle.

Bob felt more like talking now, and he told his story briefly.

"I turned toward the forward end of the car just in time to see some one's hand groping around the corner for the light switch. I jumped for the switch, but the lights were snapped out before I could reach it."

Bob paused for a moment, then went on.

"I crashed into the steel partition at the end of the lounge section of the car and fell down. Before I could get to my feet whoever had turned off the lights snapped on a small but very brilliant flash light and focused it on my eyes. Before I could get to my feet there was a sharp impact on my face. It was just as though some one had struck me a sharp blow. After that a wave of nausea swept over me and that was the last thing I remember until a few minutes ago."

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The conductor's worry was reflected on his frank face.

"The flagman, coming back from the head end, found the car in darkness and when he turned on the lights he almost fell over you. I was pretty worried, but the porter told me that you acted like your friend this afternoon and I knew he was coming around all right so it wasn't as bad as it might have been."

"Just before I lost consciousness," went on Bob, "I heard some one laugh and I would have sworn it was the voice of Hamsa, the man who has disappeared from lower nine."

"Couldn't have been," declared the conductor. "I've been all over the train and know he isn't aboard."

"Then who could have turned off the lights in this car?" demanded Bob and the conductor shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment.

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"I'll be glad when we're at the end of the division," he said. "This thing is getting my nerves. Next thing I'll be seeing ghosts. You fellows must have eaten some tainted food."

"No, that's out. Neither my companion nor I had a meal together before we got on this train this afternoon and he was taken ill before the evening meal was served in the diner."

"That's right," agreed the conductor. "Well, you puzzle it out. I guess that's your profession."

Bob got to his feet. His legs were still a little shaky and the porter hurried away for more coffee. When it was brought Bob drank two more cups of the hot liquid, then he walked up and down the car several times.

"If you can rustle up a sandwich out of the diner, I'll feel better when I get some more food in my stomach," said Bob, and the porter went out to fill his request.

The conductor turned to the flagman.

"Don't leave this car again, except when you have to get off to protect the back end at flag stops," he ordered. "I don't want any more mysterious attacks on this train while I'm in charge of it."

[104]

Then he looked at Bob, who was still white around the lips.

"Better get to bed and enjoy a few hours sleep, young man. You're starting to look like a fish that's been out of water too long."

"I'm coming along all right," declared Bob. "As soon as I have a sandwich I'll feel better. I'm convinced that Hamsa is on this train some place and I'm going to find him."

The conductor stared at Bob as though he thought the young federal agent was mentally unbalanced. Then, shaking his head and muttering to himself, he started forward to continue his greatly interrupted work on his reports.

The porter came back with a tray on which were two large, thick, meat sandwiches and a glass of

milk and Bob sat down in the observation car to enjoy the late lunch.

The flagman, at the back end of the car, was inclined to be more talkative than the conductor.

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"Everyone on the train's shaky tonight," he confided. "We got a message we picked up on the run a few minutes ago and a fast freight that's been coming along right after us wasn't able to find any trace of Hamsa along the stretch of road where we know he disappeared."

"How fast were we running along that section?" asked Bob.

"Never under fifty, and most of the time between fifty-five and sixty-five."

"Then a man wouldn't have much chance of jumping from the train without such serious injury that he would be unable to get away?" pressed Bob.

"I should say he wouldn't. At the very least he would get a broken leg and he wouldn't be able to get far from the right-of-way in that condition. And remember that it's been storming hard ever since yesterday afternoon."

Bob knew that the trainman was right. It would have been almost sure suicide to have leaped from the speeding Limited and he was more convinced than ever that Hamsa was somewhere aboard the train.

[106]

"We've been over every car from head to rear and back again," said Bob. "Have you any idea where he could hide?"

The flagman removed his cap and scratched his head.

"He didn't go through the baggage car?" he asked.

"No," replied Bob.

"How about under the steps in the vestibules? Did you lift all of the traps?"

Bob's startled expression was sufficient answer to the flagman, who got hastily to his feet.

"No, we didn't look under the traps," admitted Bob.

"Then we'd better get busy. We can do it alone, working ahead through each car."

The flagman started for the back end of the train, evidently intent on checking the trap doors on the observation platform when a sharp call from Bob stopped him.

"Hamsa isn't going to be an easy man to take if he's hiding under one of the traps. Wait until I can go forward and get a gun out of my bag."

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"I'll wait," agreed the flagman, who obviously had not thought that they might encounter armed resistance.

Bob, running lightly, sped through the two forward Pullmans and into car forty-three. His own Gladstone was still under the berth in which Tully was sleeping so heavily.

The young federal agent bent down and dragged it out. He knew just where he had put the gun and his hands sought it after he had opened the bag. But the weapon was not where Bob had placed it and a new feeling of anxiety gripped him.

With desperate hands he rummaged through the bag. The gun and box of cartridges he had placed there were gone!

Bob picked up the big bag and carried it to a berth further down the aisle where he snapped on the seat lights. Once more his hands ran through the clothing which filled the bag.

The revolver was gone, but the rifle he was taking south with him was intact, although the ammunition for it was missing. Some one had looted the bag and in doing so had left Bob defenseless against any armed attack.

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The discovery that his own bag had been searched so disturbed Bob that for a moment he forgot the important confidential papers on the smuggling case which he had placed there.

When he recalled them, he started another search of the bag, turning clothes topsy-turvy in his search for the envelope and the precious information which it contained.

Bob searched both sides of the Gladstone with a heart that grew heavier with apprehension as each second passed. There was no question now—his own confidential papers had been stolen.

His hands went to the inner coat pocket where he had tucked the telegram warning them against Hamsa. When he drew them out his hands were empty. Even that message had disappeared and Bob knew then, without question, that Hamsa was somewhere on the train.

With the telegram from Washington in his possession and the knowledge that the federal agents were closing in on him, Hamsa would be doubly dangerous and Bob was unarmed.

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CHAPTER XII A NEW MYSTERY



Bob sat in the berth for a time, thinking what to do next. He was certain that Hamsa was on the train and he knew that the other was capably armed, for he had Bob's own revolver and there was no question but that he would use the weapon if his hand was forced too far.

Bob got up and walked back to lower five where Tully was in a deep sleep. His traveling companion's bag was in the rack above his berth and Bob reached in and pulled it out into the aisle, letting the heavy curtains fall back into place.

He went through the bag methodically, for Tully's gun should have been there. Bob

[111]

searched every article in the bag twice, but the hunt was fruitless. There was no weapon there. Hamsa had done a thorough job of disarming the federal agents.

Bob replaced Tully's bag and then returned to the observation car where the flagman was waiting for him. He spread his empty hands in an expressive gesture.

"Some one's been through my bag and my gun's gone," said Bob. "Whoever it was also went through the other agent's bag for he's been disarmed."

The flagman's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not so keen about going on with this search unless we're armed," he declared.

"Any guns of any kind on the train?"

"The baggage man up ahead has one, but I don't suppose he would loan it to anyone."

"There's no harm in trying," decided Bob, and he started forward through the train once more.

The conductor was in the last coach forward and Bob quickly explained what had happened. The trainman went ahead and tapped on the door of the baggage car.

It was opened cautiously and the baggage man stuck his head out.

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"What do you want?" he demanded gruffly.

"Let us in," cried the conductor and they stepped into the baggage car as a curtain of rain swept down off the roof of the train.

Bob displayed his badge and then told what he needed.

"I can't let you have my service gun," replied the baggage man, "but I've got a .22 target pistol I always carry along in my bag. You can have that if it will do you any good."

"It's pretty light. But it will be better than nothing," decided Bob as the baggage man obtained the weapon and handed it to him.

"The only clip of cartridges I have for it are in the gun," he explained, "so be careful on the ammunition if you get in a tight place."

Bob and the conductor returned to the forward coach.

"Which end of the train are you going to start from?" asked the conductor.

"We'll go back to the observation car and work forward," said Bob. "The flagman is back there waiting for me."

[113]

"I'll go with you. I want him to stay on the back end and protect us if we have to make a sudden stop. The track is getting soft and there's a fast freight that's pounding along after us too close for comfort. I don't want them piling into the back end of the Limited on a night like this."

It was late as they started back once more and most of the passengers in the day coaches, curled into grotesque attitudes on the seats,

were asleep. In the Pullmans the solid rows of green curtains swung to and fro as the train sped southward.

Bob thought of the possibility that Joe Hamsa might be hiding in one of the unoccupied berths, but he knew that the train crew had made a thorough search of each berth.

Standing a lonely vigil in the observation car had done little to help the jumpy nerves of the flagman and he was obviously relieved when he found that the conductor had decided to help Bob in the search of the vestibule steps.

"Better turn down the lights in this car," advised the conductor. "All of the passengers on the Pullmans are in bed."

[114]

"Nothing doing," insisted the flagman. "This is one night when I want plenty of light in this car and I'd just as soon have plenty of company of the right kind. I thought I heard some one moving around several times."

"You've been reading too many mystery stories," jeered the conductor.

Bob led the way to the rear platform of the train and they stepped out into the raw bluster of the night.

The young federal agent took the target pistol out of his coat pocket and slipped the catch off the safety while the conductor focused the beam from his flash light on one of the traps in the floor of the vestibule.

The flagman, his foot poised to kick the catch, saw Bob nod and the next second the trap door swung upward as unseen springs provided the momentum. They stared down at the empty steps and the rays of the flash light, penetrating even beyond, showed the ends of the ties as they projected beyond the rain-swept ballast.

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Down went the trap door and the flagman turned to the other side of the platform. Bob felt his heart beating harder. Actually he hardly knew what he would do if the trap, flying upward, were to reveal the hunched figure of Joe Hamsa.

The flagman kicked the release lever and the door sprung upward. Once more they stared at vacant steps and an endless row of marching ties.

They returned to the observation car.

"Hope you have a nice party," grinned the flagman as Bob and the conductor started forward to continue the search of the vestibule steps.

"Seems like kind of a foolish thing to do," grumbled the conductor.

"That may be, but I'm convinced that Hamsa is still aboard this train and the vestibule steps are the last place I can think of," retorted Bob.

Four more traps were opened without success and they walked through another Pullman. Finally they came to car 43, where Tully was sleeping soundly. Their search at one end of the car was without result and they walked down to

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lower five.

One curtain in the berth seemed to be caught and pulled back inward. It was this which attracted Bob's attention and made him pause. He leaned over to adjust the curtain and just then the train lurched sharply and he was thrown into the berth.

Bob attempted to brace himself and keep from falling on the sleeping Tully, but his efforts were without avail and he dropped rather heavily into the berth.

Bob expected Tully to cry out, but there was no answer from the other young federal agent and Bob, struggling to his feet, parted the curtains and with the conductor peering over his shoulder, looked in.

The bedding had been thrown carelessly to the back of the berth and Tully was missing!

[117]

CHAPTER XIII GOING ON



Bob turned and stared at the conductor with unbelieving eyes.

"He's gone!" said Bob mechanically.

But it couldn't be possible for only a few minutes before he had looked in at Tully when he had examined the contents of his bag in the search for a weapon. Tully had been sleeping deeply but peacefully then.

"Maybe he walked up ahead to get a drink," suggested the conductor. But there was little actual hope in his voice that this had happened.

"Get ahead and see if he's there," ordered Bob and the conductor hurried away.

Bob threw back the curtains in the berth and looked for some evidence of a struggle for he was convinced in his own mind that Tully had never left the berth of his own free will. For one thing Tully had been too ill to get up and do any walking on the train.

[118]

The conductor returned promptly. There was no sign of Tully in the head end of the Pullman.

Bob rummaged through the sheets and blankets on the bed and his hands suddenly came on something firm. He drew the object out of the bedding and gazed at it under the rays of the berth light which he had turned on. It was a leather covered blackjack.

"This spells trouble in capital letters," said Bob as he drew out a clean handkerchief and turned the blackjack over. "Some one slugged Tully and then carried him out of his berth. This train is haunted."

"I'm beginning to believe so myself," agreed the conductor. "Who could have carried him away?"

"There's only one answer to that—Hamsa," asserted Bob. "What I want to know is what happened to Tully?"

The conductor shook his head in glum perplexity. Events were happening too swiftly for him to comprehend. First valuable papers had been stolen, then a gun, and a federal agent had disappeared from his berth. The trainman would welcome the end of the division and his run.

[119]

The brakeman, coming back from the head end on his rounds, stopped in the Pullman.

"One of you fellows leave the vestibule door up ahead open?" he asked.

"No," replied Bob sharply.

"Well, some one did. I closed it when I came along."

A look of apprehension flitted across Bob's face.

"Which vestibule was open?" he demanded.

"Left hand one on the car just ahead," replied the brakeman.

Without further questioning, Bob dashed ahead, a mounting fear tugging at his heart.

The conductor and brakeman followed him through the car and out into the vestibule where the steady clacking of the trucks beneath the Pullmans filled the air.

Bob stepped across the gap into the car ahead. There was a splotch of water on the steel floor of the vestibule where the wind had lashed the rain in while the door was open.

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"This the door that was open?" asked Bob.

"Right. I closed it less than a minute ago," replied the brakeman.

Bob dropped down to his knees and examined the floor of the vestibule. At first there appeared to be nothing unusual there, but his sharp eyes finally caught sight of a small, dark spot. It was soft and fresh and he touched it with his fingers.

Bob drew his hand back where the light was better and examined the dark marks on the tips of his fingers. From behind came an involuntary gasp from the brakeman.

The dark spots on Bob's fingers were blood and the young federal agent looked up at the trainmen with eyes that were hard and piercing.

"Stop this train!" he ordered. "Tully Ross has been thrown from the train. We've got to go back."

The conductor was silent for a moment, staring at the dark stains on Bob's fingers. Then he shook his head.

[121]

"We can't stop and go back. There's a fast freight following right behind us and they might ram us. We'll have to run to the nearest station with a night operator. Then we can get word back to division headquarters."

"But we've got to stop. He may be seriously

injured.”

The conductor looked at his watch. Just then the air brakes went on and streams of sparks flew from the wet trucks underneath.

“We’re slowing down now for Robertson where we take on water. There’s a night operator there. We can send a message back and get new orders.”

The brakeman threw open the vestibule door on the right side and almost before the train came to a stop Bob and the conductor were running forward.

When they reached the small station Bob dictated the message and the conductor told the operator to rush it through.

“That freight’s only ten miles up the line. It’s at Quasqueton now. Maybe we can catch it,” said the operator.

[122]

Bob nodded and the operator pounded his key hard with a desperate call for the night man at Quasqueton. It seemed ages before there was an answer. Actually the Quesqueton operator answered in less than a minute.

“Hold the freight,” snapped back the operator beside Bob, and just then the dispatcher at division headquarters chimed in and wanted to know what it was all about.

The story was snapped over the wires as the bent fingers of the operator at Robertson tapped out the facts. The answer from the dispatcher came sharply, first a message to the freight.

“To enginemen and trainmen of extra X703 South. Use all precautions in moving from Quasqueton to Robertson to find federal agent believed thrown from Southern Limited. Report immediately upon arrival at Robertson.”

That message was followed by one to the Limited to proceed. The night operator copied this quickly and handed the thin tissues to the conductor, who was buttoning up his coat before going back into the desolation of that wild night.

[123]

“Going on with us, or will you stay here and wait for the freight to come through and report?”

Bob hesitated. If he remained at the lonely station he would have first hand information if Tully was found by the freight crew. On the other hand, he was convinced that Joe Hamsa was still aboard the Southern Limited and that he had on his person the confidential documents on the smuggling ring which had been stolen from Tully and Bob.

The decision was made quickly.

“I’m going on the Limited. What’s our next stop?”

The conductor named a junction thirty miles down the line.

“Will the freight be in here by the time we reach the junction?” Bob asked the night operator.

“It will at the rate the Limited is running tonight,” replied the operator. “Quasqueton is

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reporting the freight out right now.”

“Let’s go,” called the conductor.

The trainman hurried outside and Bob banged the door after him. The federal agent went back to the Pullmans while the conductor ran forward with the orders for the engineer. A minute later the Limited hooted shrilly and once more started southward.

[125]

CHAPTER XIV THE LIGHTS GO OUT



Back in the Pullman from which Tully had vanished Bob took off the coat which had protected him from the storm. He sat down opposite the berth and carefully examined the target revolver. An eerie feeling ran along his spine. He felt as though some one was watching him and he turned and scanned the windows of the Pullman. But that was impossible for the Limited was already running better than thirty miles an hour and no one could possibly have clung to the side of the train.

The conductor came back through.

“I’m going to finish that search,” declared Bob, and the trainman, without further comment, joined him.

Working together and moving cautiously, they raised up the trap door on every vestibule clear up to the baggage car. There was no one hidden on the steps.

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“If there was ever anyone there, he got off at Robertson,” said the conductor.

But Bob shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said firmly. “What would a man stop there for? It’s miles from any other town, and there are no good highways nearby to make a get-away in a car.”

“Maybe you’re right, but there’s no one on this train.”

Bob wasn’t so sure. A crafty man such as Hamsa had shown himself to be could have moved to the shelter of one of the rear vestibules while the Limited was standing at Robertson for Bob had checked these vestibules before the train stopped there.

“I’m going to work from the front to the back,” declared Bob, and the conductor looked at him suspiciously as though thinking that the strain of the night might have unbalanced Bob. But he went along without complaint when the federal agent started the hunt again.

Car by car they inspected the train. The small dark spot they had found in one vestibule had dried and Bob didn’t dare think what might have happened to Tully. While there was no love lost between them, Bob had no desire to see any harm come to the other.

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As they entered the observation car, the Limited started slowing down.

The conductor, pressing his face against one of the rain-washed panes of glass, peered ahead.

"Junction showing now," he said as Bob stepped in after inspecting the trap doors on the observation platform.

A red lantern was being swung at the junction platform and the minute the Limited drew to a halt beside the cinder platform Bob and the trainman started running forward.

A night operator, swathed in a heavy storm coat, greeted them.

"Message from Robertson for Bob Houston," he told the conductor. "Fine thing to make a man deliver telegrams at this time of night."

The conductor didn't bother to answer the operator's complaint but handed the message to Bob, who tore open the envelope and read the brief message inside.

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"Man you reported missing found by freight crew. Has cut on head and is bruised. Otherwise appears okay. Proceeding on to junction aboard freight."

Bob breathed a sigh of relief for he was honestly glad to know that no serious harm had befallen Tully.

"Are you going on with us or will you stay here?" asked the conductor.

Bob hesitated for only a moment.

"I'm going on," he decided, for he knew that Tully would be placed in good hands by the railroad people and could proceed on alone to his assignment as soon as he felt well enough. In the meantime, Bob was still convinced that Joe Hamsa was somewhere aboard the Limited for he knew that Hamsa's destination, like his own, was somewhere along the east coast of Florida and he felt sure that Hamsa would lose no time in attempting to reach it. In view of that, Bob felt the gangster would continue on the Limited.

Two short, impatient blasts sounded up ahead and the Limited jerked into motion as Bob and the conductor swung back onto the train.

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Bob had the borrowed revolver in one hand and as he swung up after the conductor one hand slipped on the wet handrail and he nearly fell. To save himself he grasped the railing with the other hand and dropped the gun just as the Limited rolled over a small culvert. It was impossible to stop and retrieve the gun and Bob was unarmed for a second time that night.

"I guess the fellow you're hunting has disappeared for good," said the conductor as he lowered the trap in the vestibule.

Bob, shaking the rain off his coat, nodded absent-mindedly and the trainman went forward while Bob returned to the Pullman. A queer feeling went through his body as he walked down the silent car. It was from this car that their confidential documents had disappeared and it was from the very berth that Bob had

intended occupying that Tully had vanished.

The porter was evidently keeping as far away from the car as possible for he failed to answer Bob's summons. However, a berth farther down the car had been made up and Bob decided to slip off his shoes and lie down there to rest.

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With a little relaxation he might be able to think better; perhaps even to unravel all of the strange events which had taken place on the train since it had left Washington.

The Limited sped southward steadily and the clicking of the trucks soon lulled Bob to sleep in spite of his efforts to keep awake.

The young federal agent had no idea how long he had been asleep when he awoke suddenly with the breathless blackness of the car all around him. He rallied his thoughts.

The lights in the car had been on the last he could remember, for he had not drawn the curtains of his berth.

Bob sat upright in the berth and waited. The trucks were still echoing the pace of the train and Bob thought that the porter might have snapped the wrong switch.

Then he heard a movement down the aisle and knew instantly that some one was in the car.

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Could it be Hamsa? That was the first question that flashed through Bob's mind.

The federal agent gathered his feet beneath him. There wasn't even time for him to grope under the berth in quest of his shoes for he could hear the stealthy approach of the intruder.

Bob strained his eyes in an effort to detect the movement of the marauder but the darkness of the car was too dense. He could only wait, but he felt that he had an advantage now, for he would be able to take the other by surprise.

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CHAPTER XV IN THE AISLE



The Limited heeled sharply as it struck a curve and the whistle moaned a warning through the wetness of the night. A street light flickered by and in the flash of light that penetrated the car Bob caught a fleeting glimpse of a man in the aisle. The figure of the intruder was heavy and he was hunched forward. There had been no chance to recognize the face, but Bob was sure now that the other man in the car was Hamsa.

Another street light shot a beam through the windows and it played squarely on the face of the man in the aisle. It was Hamsa!

Bob felt in his coat pockets for something to defend himself and his groping hands came on the blackjack which Hamsa had used on Tully. There was the grim hint of a smile on Bob's lips as he slipped his right hand through the leather

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thong on the leaden slug. He now had both an effective and dangerous weapon and he knew he would be justified in using it.

Once more there came the streak of light in the car as the Limited roared over another crossing and Bob saw that Hamsa was nearer, almost at the head of the berth.

With his muscles tense and his whole body balanced, Bob waited for another flash of light from the street which would give him an opportunity to strike down the intruder. Then the clatter of the trucks over switch points told him the train was out of the village. Whatever happened from that point on would probably be in utter darkness unless the porter happened to come back into the car and turn on the lights.

The Limited settled down to its steady stride again and Bob, tense and crouching waited. His breath was coming in short jerks and he was afraid that his heart was pounding so hard its beats would be audible to the other who was intent on catching him by surprise in the darkened berth.

By straining his eyes Bob finally made out the approaching shadow that was Hamsa. He drew back his right arm and waited.

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Hamsa came nearer, treading cautiously lest he alarm the youth he believed was sleeping soundly in the berth.

Suddenly a beam of light shot out from Hamsa's hand as he turned on a flash light, but the rays fell only on the rumpled bedclothes.

Bob heard a smothered exclamation from the other and before Hamsa could swing the beam of the flash light around in search of him he struck forth with the blackjack.

Just as Bob swung the weapon the trucks hit a sag in the track and the young federal agent was thrown partially off balance. He had aimed at Hamsa's head, and although his blow missed that the weapon crashed down on his shoulder and Bob heard a sharp cry of pain.

He jerked back the weapon and struck again and again. Each time he heard a cry of pain and then the flash light thudded to the floor and its beam went out.

They went at it hand to hand then, Hamsa wresting the blackjack away from Bob and hurling it to the far end of the car. The other man was much older and twice as heavy as Bob, but he was not as lithe and his fists could not move as rapidly.

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It was a bitter struggle there in the narrow, darkened aisle of the Pullman. Hamsa kicked out viciously and the blow caught Bob in the stomach. He felt sick all over and dropped into the aisle, crouching there and seeking temporary shelter until he felt able to resume the battle.

Hamsa bent down and searched for the flash light and Bob lashed out at him with one foot. The blow caught the other in the face and was answered by a startled exclamation of pain and rage.

Then Bob's own hands came upon the flash light. He picked it up and his fingers sought the little button which controlled its beam of light. Bob turned on the light and the rays swept down the aisle, coming to rest on the battered face of Hamsa.

It was not until then that Bob realized how powerful had been his own blows for it was obvious that his assailant was in distress. Now if he could land a real knockout he would be able to leave Hamsa long enough to summon assistance from the trainmen.

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Bob started down the aisle, but pulled up short when Hamsa drew a gun from his coat pocket. The young federal agent, unarmed, was in no position to face a man with a gun and he tried to duck behind a seat. But Hamsa fired a snap shot and the flash light, shattered by the bullet, dropped out of Bob's numbed hand.

The tables had been turned. Where Bob had held the advantage a moment before with the flash light, Hamsa, aided by the darkness and his gun, was in a position to win.

But he had evidently had enough of hand to hand encounters for one night and Bob heard him running toward the rear of the car. A moment later the door of the Pullman slammed shut.

Bob stepped out into the aisle and massaged his right hand. It prickled sharply as the blood flowed back into the fingers which had been bruised by the flash light as the bullet had torn it out of his hands.

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Then Bob took up the chase, for he felt sure that Hamsa must be seeking his hideout on the train. If he could trace him to it, he would summon the trainmen to assist in the capture.

Bob stepped cautiously into the rear vestibule of the car. There was no one there and the door to the next Pullman was open. He hastened inside and met a startled porter in the aisle.

"Did a man just go down the aisle?" asked Bob.

"Yes, sir, Boss, and he looked like he'd been in a fight."

"That's the fellow I'm after," said Bob. "Run up ahead and get the conductor and any other trainmen you can. Tell them to get back here as fast as they can."

Then Bob hastened down the aisle and the porter, willing enough to leave the car, went forward to carry out Bob's instructions.

The young federal agent hastened through a second Pullman where the lights were low and finally stepped into the observation car. So far there had been no trace of Hamsa and no indication that he had sought shelter under one of the trap doors in the vestibules.

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Bob entered the observation car cautiously. The lights had been turned down and he stopped at the head end of the car and snapped on all of the switches, a torrent of light illuminating the interior of the car. Even the observation platform at the back end leaped into view as a special light out there came on under the magic

touch of the switches.

Bob stared hard at the back of the car. The door to the observation platform was open but beyond that he could see a man's legs dangling, apparently in midair. Bob threw caution aside then and raced toward the half open door at the rear of the car. The legs were being drawn upward, twisting and kicking as the man attempted to pull himself onto the roof of the observation car. This then was Hamsa's hiding place—on the roof of the rear car of the train!

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CHAPTER XVI FIGHTING FOR LIFE

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Bob leaped through the door and grabbed at Hamsa's legs. The other man kicked viciously, but Bob wrapped his arms around the legs and hung on. Once he had a good grip, he started pulling the other man down.

Hamsa was big and he was powerful, but the steady pull from below weakened his grip on the steep rungs of the ladder which led to the top of the car and Bob could feel himself gaining. In less than a minute the other man would be down on the platform beside him and by that time the trainmen should be on hand to help him subdue Hamsa.

There was a strange exultation in Bob's heart for he felt sure now that he was about to make the first capture in what he felt was to be the clean-up of the international gang of smugglers. It made little difference whether Hamsa had been trailing them south or whether they had encountered each other by accident. The message from Washington had indicated that Hamsa was deeply involved and Bob was determined to make the capture.

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The steady pull Bob put on Hamsa's legs and the tightness of his grasp was relentless. Slowly the other man was weakening and Bob braced himself and prepared to release Hamsa's legs and cut loose with a half dozen hard punches when the other man finally dropped to the observation platform.

There was a commotion at the head end of the car and Bob shifted his head just enough to see the train conductor and brakeman, followed by a wide-eyed Pullman porter, hurry in.

Hamsa kicked convulsively with his legs, but Bob tightened his grasp. Then, without warning, without giving Bob a chance to get set, Hamsa suddenly released his hold and dropped. It all happened so quickly that Bob later found it a little hard to remember just what took place.

On the split second while he was dropping to the observation platform, Hamsa must have seen the trainmen charging down the aisle of the car, for when he landed, he was a bundle of tremendous energy that seemed to explode in Bob's face.

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Great, bear-like arms wrapped themselves

around Bob and the young federal agent felt himself being lifted upward. For a moment he was helpless, too surprised even to attempt to struggle, but a sharp cry from behind him caused him to try to strike out with his feet for beneath came the sudden rumble of the trucks on a trestle and he knew that Hamsa, in a last desperate effort, was attempting to hurl him from the rear platform of the train.

The young federal agent wrapped his own arms around Hamsa and clung to him desperately. If Bob went, Hamsa would go with him. Of that he was certain. The rail of the platform struck Bob's hips and he felt himself being forced backward. It was sickening to hear the rumble of the trestle beneath and a flood of rain beat down on his face, drenching the upper half of his body.

Then Hamsa gave one last, tremendous shove and Bob knew that he was going over the edge of the railing, but Hamsa was going with him. The speed of the Limited had slackened, but it was still doing at least twenty miles an hour when Bob and Hamsa, locked arm in arm, went over the rear platform. Bob closed his eyes for the shock of striking the trestle would be terrific. If he could only remain on the bridge there would be some chance of rescue for the trainmen had seen them go over the back end and would hurry back in a searching party.

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As they left the train, Bob managed to get one last twist with his toes and as they fell, he was on top. The drop from the train to the trestle seemed endless. The clatter of the train trucks had dimmed, but a whistle up ahead was blaring an alarm.

Then they struck the trestle—struck it hard and rolled over once. The fall dazed Bob, but through his foggy mind he could hear the rush of water somewhere below.

Hamsa had rolled away from him but it was too dark to see just where and Bob clung to the wet steel of one of the rails. He was too weak and shaken to think of attempting to get to his feet and back of him he could hear the shriek of the air brakes as they clamped down on the wheels of the Limited and brought the Southern to an emergency stop just beyond the edge of the long trestle.

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CHAPTER XVII INTO ANGRY WATERS



Bob ached in every muscle and he wondered, as he lay there on the trestle with the rain beating down on him, if the dangers of being a federal agent were worth the rewards. Then he swept that thought aside. Of course it was worth it, for he was on the side of right and honor—a side for which many a sacrifice could be willingly made.

As he lay on the bridge, trying to rally his senses and waiting for enough strength to flow back through his body to enable him to sit up, Bob's eyes became more accustomed to the rain and

the night. He tried to pick out the form of Hamsa, who must be close to him, for the other man had been underneath when they fell. The shock had been severe enough for Bob and he wondered if the other had been seriously injured.

Finally Bob's straining eyes picked out the form of the other man. He was some feet away and beyond the outside rail of the trestle—on the very edge of the bridge where a false move would plunge him into the rushing waters below.

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Bob tried to move, but he was still too weak and Hamsa was a dozen feet away. He wanted to reach him and pull him away from the edge.

Someone at the end of the bridge was shouting and Bob turned his head to see a group of trainmen, lanterns in their hands, making their way out on the long trestle. They were coming cautiously for the long rain had made the timbers slippery and treacherous.

As the trainmen moved out on the bridge, Bob's eyes went back to Hamsa. To his surprise the other man was moving, struggling to sit up, and Bob called out a warning.

"Don't move, Hamsa!" he ordered. "You're under arrest. Stay where you are or you'll fall off the bridge."

There was no reply from the other, but he continued his struggle to sit up and Bob tried to drag himself closer to the man he had placed under arrest. There was no strength left in his own arms or legs and he could go only a foot or two.

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The glow from the lanterns of the approaching trainmen now penetrated the blackness and Bob could see Hamsa's face turned toward him.

"You're clever, Kid," growled the other, "but you're not going to arrest me this time. I'll see you later and when I do, watch out!"

Then the other turned and deliberately rolled to the edge of the trestle.

"Hamsa, you're under arrest!" cried Bob. But he knew the words were futile for the only reply was a mocking laugh. Then Hamsa disappeared over the edge and seconds later there was the dull splash of a heavy body striking the water. Bob thought he heard the mocking laugh once more, but he couldn't be sure.

Then the trainmen, led by the conductor, reached the scene.

"Where's the other fellow?" demanded the conductor.

Bob pointed to the darkness below.

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"He just rolled over the edge," he said.

The startled conductor went to the edge of the trestle and swung his lantern over the side, but only the rush of dark waters could be seen.

"That's the last you'll see of him," he said. "This stream is on a rampage and only a powerful man could get to shore."

Bob nodded, but he was not sure about the conductor's surmise that he had seen the last of Hamsa for he was both a powerful and resourceful man.

The trainmen helped Bob to his feet and assisted him back to the Limited.

"I guess now you'll be content to go to bed and give us a little rest," said the conductor when Bob reached his own berth.

"I've got to get off a telegram first," replied Bob. "Give me the name of that stream and the correct time."

The conductor supplied the information and Bob wrote a brief report of the night's events and addressed it to Waldo Edgar, the chief of the division of investigation back in Washington.

"See that this message is dispatched at the first stop," said Bob. Then he turned, crawled between the crisp, cool sheets, and dropped into a deep sleep of exhaustion.

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CHAPTER XVIII PICKING UP CLUES



When he awoke the Limited was pulling into the train shed at Jacksonville and his uncle, Merritt Hughes, was waiting for him on the platform.

The older federal agent jumped aboard the Limited before it came to a full stop and hastened down the aisle to the berth where Bob, still the only occupant of the car, was partially dressed.

"How are you, Bob?" There was real anxiety in the question as Merritt Hughes looked down on his capable young nephew.

"I'm a little stiff, but otherwise all right," grinned Bob. "My bag is under the berth. See if you can find a clean shirt for me."

"Never mind the shirt now. I want to know what happened last night. We got only the briefest word from Washington over the wires and Condon Adams left before dawn for the hospital up the line where they took Tully."

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"Is he all right?" asked Bob.

"I understand he'll have to stay in bed for a couple of days."

"What about the man we knew as Joe Hamsa?"

Merritt Hughes shook his head.

"There are no reports on him. There's a large searching party out looking along the banks of the stream where he disappeared, but it looks like we've seen the last of him."

Bob wished that he could have had the confidence his uncle displayed in believing that Joe Hamsa was gone forever.

At his uncle's urging, Bob recounted in detail everything that had taken place after the Limited left Washington.

"So Hamsa hid out on top of the observation car?" mused the federal agent. "Well, that's a new one for me. No wonder you failed to find him even though you went through the train several times."

Bob motioned toward his bag beneath the berth, "Now how about my shirt? Then some breakfast, and I'll be ready to go along on my assignment."

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"You'll do nothing of the kind. You're going to spend the rest of the day in bed in my room at the hotel. Tomorrow we'll talk about your going on to Atalissa. I'm not sure that I want you to go there alone. It's a tough little town. People know too much there, but they won't talk. Either scared or in league with some illegal racket."

"And you figure the racket is the jewel smuggling?"

Merritt Hughes nodded gravely.

"This thing is big, Bob," he went on. "As you know from the confidential report you got, we feel sure that only a few men are actually involved in the ring, but they must be men of great daring and resourcefulness, for they have managed to elude some of the best detectives."

"Then it seems kind of foolish for me to tackle it," said Bob, half to himself and half to his uncle.

"Not at all. A new, younger man may have some ideas that older men in the service would not have. You've had one break in getting Hamsa out of the way and we're sure that he was linked with the gang."

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"I guess there's no question about that for he stole the confidential reports Tully and I had."

"Then what does that mean to you?" asked Bob's uncle.

The younger agent, struggling to button a shirt collar that was too tight, stopped and sat down on the edge of the berth.

"In the first place it means that he wanted to find out just what the federal people knew about the operations of the gang. Then it appears pretty obvious that he didn't want any more federal men nosing around Atalissa and Nira."

"Right in both cases," agreed Merritt Hughes. "Now what?"

"Well, it follows that there must be some good reason for this interest in federal operations, and all I can figure out is that the gang is getting ready to smuggle in a large amount of gems."

"Go to the head of the class; you've had a perfect score. The question now follows, what shall we do?"

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"Are you going to try to demote me now?" grinned Bob.

"No, I'm just trying to find out how far along the way you'll get by sound deduction and logic."

"Then I'd say that we ought to go through with our original plans and that Tully and I proceed on to our assignments at once with additional agents held ready to back us up if we get in a jam or things break wide open and we need help."

"You're not worrying about Hamsa having escaped from the river and getting word to the others in the gang?"

"Of course I'm thinking about that angle, but that's a chance we'll have to take," replied Bob.

"We'll make the decision tomorrow. There may be some further advices from Washington by that time."

Bob finished dressing and his uncle picked up his bag and together they walked out into the train shed.

"Breakfast is going to taste good to me," said Bob. "Don't waste any time in getting there."

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"Then we'll eat at the restaurant in the station," decided his uncle.

Breakfast was served quickly after they placed their orders and Bob ate the meal with real relish. Corn cakes with a thick coating of maple syrup especially pleased him and he had a second order.

After the meal was finished, they walked through the main waiting room of the station and to the taxi stand just beyond where Merritt Hughes signalled for a vehicle, and they were soon speeding toward the hotel.

Bob, still stiff and sore from his encounter the night before with Joe Hamsa, leaned back against the cushions and enjoyed the trip, for this was his first visit to Florida. The streets were broad, the homes hospitable and life seemed to move at a more leisurely pace than it did in the northern cities with which he was familiar.

The hotel, a modest sized structure, was done in Spanish architecture and his uncle had two rooms on the fourth floor looking down on an inner court where there was a spacious swimming pool flanked by stubby palm trees.

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"Now for a shower bath and I'll feel like I really wanted to live again," said Bob.

"I've got several reports to make out and mail to the bureau in Washington," said his uncle, "and I'll get them out of the way while you're taking your shower."

Bob undressed and adjusted the spray in the shower to his liking. For ten minutes he relaxed under the soothing flow of the water and when he finally emerged his muscles were not as sore and tight and his head felt clearer. As he rubbed his body briskly with a heavy towel, one thought troubled him. What had caused the sudden illness which had befallen Tully and later had nearly struck him down on the train? While he dressed, Bob told his uncle about these incidents.

"You say you felt something like a sharp blow on the face before you became ill?" asked the older

federal agent.

"That's right."

"Then you were gassed."

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CHAPTER XIX THE WARNING



"Gassed!" exclaimed Bob incredulously.

"Certainly. Tully got a full-sized dose and you probably got only half a one, which accounts for the varying degrees of your illness and nausea."

"But we couldn't have been gassed," replied Bob.

"Oh yes you could. Modern crooks sometimes turn to science to help them and I know as a fact that small amounts of gas, which make the victim desperately ill, can be obtained in thin glass capsules. These capsules are so small they can be flipped off the end of a finger or thrown in some other manner with great accuracy. If they strike near the nose, the impact shatters them and the gas is released, causing a violent illness which usually makes the victim unconscious."

"That's what happened," cried Bob. "Why your explanation fits perfectly, only I didn't get a full dose. Perhaps there was too much fresh air in the car I was in."

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"The pellet of glass might have struck you a glancing blow," suggested his uncle.

"How can you defend yourself against this?" asked Bob.

"The only safe way would be by a gas mask, but now that you know such things can happen you can be on the lookout. If you ever feel a similar impact that arouses your suspicion, don't breathe, but rush to some other spot before you take another gulp of air. That should enable you to escape the gas."

"I'm going to remember that," promised Bob.

"Better take a nap now. After you wake up you can type out your detailed report for Washington," advised Merritt Hughes.

Bob didn't especially relish the idea of sleeping when he felt he should be on his way to Atalissa, but he was thoroughly relaxed and a great fatigue had crept over him. So it was with real gratitude that he crept in between crisp sheets. He was asleep in less than a minute. Some time later his uncle looked in and pulled down the shades at the windows. Later he went out for a time, and when he returned Bob was still in a deep sleep. It was late afternoon before Bob finally roused from his slumber, but he felt much like his former self. Of course there were a few bruises and several strained muscles, but he could walk without creaking in every joint.

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Bob dressed and went into the adjoining room which his uncle occupied. The federal agent had gone out several hours before, but his portable typewriter was on a low table and Bob sat down and started to work on his report which was to be air mailed to Washington.

The report was lengthy for Bob went into great detail and the afternoon faded into early night. He snapped on a desk light and continued with his work. When he was through he straightened up and stretched his arms for he had been hunched over the typewriter for more than an hour and a half.

Bob leaned back in his chair and read the report with care, correcting an occasional error which he had made in the manuscript. That done, he addressed a large envelope, and went down to the desk in the lobby where he secured air mail stamps and learned that by prompt mailing the letter would be delivered in Washington the next morning.

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Bob was hungry, but he waited for a time for his uncle. Now that he was thoroughly rested, he was anxious to make plans for the trip to Atalissa. After waiting in the lobby for half an hour, Bob went into the dining room which opened to the right, leaving word where he could be found.

A supper with a fresh fish steak as the main course appeased his hunger and he ate leisurely. A newsboy, walking through the restaurant, attracted his attention and he purchased an evening paper, scanning the headlines while he completed his meal with a chocolate sundae.

Bob wondered if the reporters had been tipped off by the trainmen as to what had taken place the night before on the Southern Limited. He searched every page of the paper, but there was no mention of the disappearance of Joe Hamsa.

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It was nearly mid-evening by the time Bob was through with his meal and he returned to the lobby, inquiring for any possible information about his uncle.

"He left about four o'clock," said the clerk on duty. "I happened to see him step into the street and he turned to the right. I'm positive he hasn't been back since then."

Bob thanked the clerk for the information, meager though it was. It would do no harm to go for a stroll and he stepped out into the street. Like his uncle had done, he turned right on a street which led down to the water front.

He soon found himself in a poorer part of the city. Street lights were far apart and their globes dirty. Houses and shops seemed to be hiding and the men who went along the street did not look up.

Two policemen strolled by and Bob whistled for he knew what it meant when officers made their beat in pairs. He doubted whether his uncle had visited this district and he turned and walked back to the hotel.

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A clock was striking ten when Bob re-entered the lobby. He was almost at the elevators when the clerk called to him.

"Telephone call just coming in for you," he said.
"You can answer here if you wish."

Bob hastened over to the desk. It must be his uncle, phoning to tell him that he had been detained.

Bob picked up the instrument which the clerk handed him and placed the receiver to his ear. A gruff voice spoke, "Is this Bob Houston?"

It was a strange voice and Bob tried to catalog its timbre, for it was pitched unusually low.

"This is Bob Houston speaking," he replied quietly.

"Then listen to what I've got to say. We've got your uncle and we'll get you and any other federal men who attempt to trail us. Get off this case and stay off if you ever want to see him alive again and you can tell that to Washington."

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CHAPTER XX MEAGER HOPES



Before Bob could reply he heard the receiver on the other end of the line click. He whirled to the hotel clerk.

"Any idea where that call came from?" he asked.

"No."

"Get the chief operator for me at once," said Bob, pulling out his badge to speed the clerk's efforts. To the chief operator Bob explained who he was and what he wanted.

"Hold the line," said the telephone official.

Bob leaned his elbows hard against the desk. He needed the extra support for he had suddenly gone weak all over. There had been grave menace in the throaty voice which had come over the wire and he did not doubt the truth of the threat.

It was entirely possible that his uncle had been captured by the smugglers they were trailing and Bob knew, after his encounter with Hamsa, that they were perfectly capable of using the most drastic means to put out of the way any obstacle to the success of their plans.

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The chief operator spoke again.

"Your call came from a pay station in a drug store near the water front."

Bob obtained the name of the drug store and he whirled away from the desk and ran outside to the taxi stand. He jumped into the first cab and gave the address of the drug store.

"Step on it driver. I'll clear you with any traffic officer that stops us."

"I've heard that story before," grunted the driver as he shifted the gears.

"This talks," said Bob, shoving his badge into view of the driver.

"You said it, mister," said the taxi man, and the cab leaped ahead as he trod heavily on the accelerator.

The cab wove in and out of a web of traffic, then shot away down a dark street, took several corners on two wheels, and after threading through several narrower streets, drew up beside a well lighted corner drug store.

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"Wait here," ordered Bob, jumping from the cab and hurrying into the store.

Two clerks were on duty and Bob addressed himself to the older man.

Motioning toward the telephone booth at the rear of the store, he fired his first question.

"Give me a description of the man who put in a call from here not more than fifteen minutes ago."

The man to whom Bob addressed the question appeared to resent his intrusion, and his reply was far from courteous.

"You've got the wrong place and besides I don't like you."

That touched off Bob's temper and his anger blazed.

"Give me the information I want and give it to me at once or you're going on a quick ride to jail. Who phoned from that booth?"

At the same time Bob revealed the metal shield in his hand which identified him, and the entire attitude of the clerk changed.

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"Why didn't you tell me you were a federal man in the first place?" he grumbled.

"I want to know who made that call," insisted Bob.

"Well, I didn't pay a whole lot of attention. There were a couple of other customers in the store. He was kind of tall, and about thirty-five I'd say."

"What kind of clothes was he wearing?"

"He had on a coverall suit and a dark hat."

"How about his hair and eyes. Was there anything on his face that would make it easy to identify him?"

The younger clerk spoke up.

"I noticed his low, deep voice," he said, "and there was a little scar just in front of one ear."

"Which one?"

The clerk turned half away from Bob as though assuming the position in which the stranger had appeared to him.

"It was the left ear," he replied. "I'm sure about that now."

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"Notice anything else about him? Did he appear

nervous or in a hurry to get away?"

"He wasn't exactly nervous, but after he came out of the booth he didn't linger around."

"Did he have a car?"

"No, he walked in here, but just after he left I heard a motorboat getting under way. You know it's less than a block to the water front."

There was no more information to be gained from the clerks in the store and Bob returned to the street where the cab was waiting.

"Roll on down to the water front," he told the driver.

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CHAPTER XXI SPECIAL AGENT NINE



Along the river the docks appeared deserted and there was not even a watchman in sight. Bob returned to the cab.

"Wheel for the central police station and don't lose any time," he commanded.

The cab shot away and Bob sank back into the seat, his head in a whirl. Somehow, he felt sure, the tangled threads would weave into a pattern that he could solve, but he had to admit that right now he was up against a seeming impasse.

The cab driver broke almost every speed record in Jacksonville that night and more than once they averted smashed fenders by the narrowest of margins.

A police siren shrilled behind them and the driver looked over his shoulder.

"Motorcycle cop coming," he cried.

"How far is it to the station?" asked Bob.

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"Two blocks."

"Then keep on going."

The driver pressed the accelerator to the floor boards and the cab leaped ahead, ran through a red light in spite of the waving arms of another traffic officer, and then shrieked to a stop before the central police station.

Behind them the siren rose and then fell as the motorcycle officer wheeled to the curb.

"Smart guys, smart guys," he yelled. "Look where you stopped?"

Grinning, he pointed to the sign which designated the building as the police station.

"Just go right on in and make yourselves at home. You'll be there long enough. I'm going to slap half a dozen traffic charges against you."

Bob had no time to waste words with a traffic officer.

"Come on in and place all of the charges you want to," he snapped, motioning to the taxi driver to accompany him.

Once inside the station, Bob hastened to the main desk where a night captain was on duty.

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"I'm Bob Houston, special agent nine of the Department of Justice," he explained, displaying the badge which he held in his hand. "It was necessary for me to reach here without loss of time and the driver of my cab ran through some red lights. Please see that any charges against him are dismissed."

The night captain nodded and waved the motorcycle officer aside.

"Why all the hurry?" he asked.

"My uncle, a federal agent, walked out of the hotel this afternoon and failed to return. A few minutes ago I was warned that unless the federal men were taken off a certain case, he would never be seen alive again."

"Think it was a fake threat?"

"No. It was serious enough. I traced the call to a public booth in a drug store down near the water front. The clerks were able to give me only a fair description of the man who made the call, but one of them told me a motorboat had started down river shortly after the man left."

"Any description of the boat?" pressed the night captain.

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"There was no one along the water front."

"Then I'm afraid it's going to be tough to pick up that boat. It's as black as pitch tonight, but we'll see what we can do."

"I'd like to use a private room where I can phone Washington," said Bob and the officer pointed to a doorway to the left and rear of his own desk. Before he entered, Bob paid his taxi bill and handed the driver a generous tip.

Once in the private room, Bob dropped into a leather upholstered chair. Calling long distance, he asked for a certain number in Washington that was called only when something of the utmost importance happened.

"Lines north are busy at present," said the operator.

But the information Bob had could not wait and he asked for the chief operator. In quick, terse sentences he explained who he was and the importance of his message.

Faint clicking sounds could be heard in the receiver, then Washington answered and Bob knew that his call was being given the right-of-way over everything else.

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A quiet voice asked, "Who's speaking?" and Bob knew that he was in contact with Waldo Edgar, the grim, efficient head of the government's greatest man-hunting division.

"This is Bob Houston. I'm at the central police station at Jacksonville. Merritt Hughes, my uncle, has been kidnaped within the last few

hours.”

“What’s that?” There was explosive energy in the question which was hurled back over the wires.

Bob repeated his message, elaborating a little this time.

“But Bob, that’s impossible.”

“I thought so too, at first,” confessed Bob, “but after that warning phone call I changed my mind.”

“Call your hotel again. I’ll hold the line.”

Bob stepped outside and from another phone got in touch with his hotel. There had been no word about his uncle, the clerk assured him, and Bob returned to the private room, where he relayed the news northward.

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He heard Waldo Edgar’s breath suck in.

“What have you done?” came the question, and Bob was ready.

He told of his own attempt and added that he had enlisted the aid of the Jacksonville police.

“That’s right as far as you’ve gone,” said his chief. “Unfortunately a big kidnaping has broken in the midwest and all of the extra men are concentrated there. Condon Adams will be back in Jacksonville shortly after midnight and you must get in touch with him.”

There was a brief pause while the federal chief mulled over plans for his next strategy.

“This isn’t going to be easy to do, Bob,” he said, “but I’m counting on you going to your assignment at Atalissa at once. This gang must be about to pull off a really big job and I have a feeling the disappearance of your uncle is a step to keep federal men from concentrating further south along the coast. Get all of the information you can and turn it over to Condon Adams when he arrives. Then you continue south and Adams will take up the search for your uncle. As soon as additional men can be spared, they will be sent to aid you.”

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CHAPTER XXII A HARD ASSIGNMENT

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It was a hard assignment to take, but Bob acquiesced. He would have preferred to remain in Jacksonville and search for his uncle, but he realized the logic in Waldo Edgar’s deductions.

“Keep in close touch with me, Bob, and if it looks like things are going to break down the coast, we’ll get help to you. Keep your chin up now, and give them all you’ve got.”

The receiver on the far end of the line clicked and Bob hung up the instrument he had used. The night captain stuck his head in the door.

"I've sent word to the coast guard to keep a close watch for any unusual boat. Maybe they'll be able to turn up something."

"But we don't know it was an unusual boat," protested Bob.

"Well, we didn't have any description and I had to tell them something," said the policeman.

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They returned to the main desk. The night captain was curious.

"Lot of federal men coming in?" he asked.

But Bob was noncommittal. He would be going further south in a few hours and the search for clues here would be turned over to Condon Adams. One thing he did need, was a good revolver and ammunition for the rifle.

He made known his wants to the night captain.

"It isn't the usual thing, but I guess we can fix you up," said the policeman.

He called another officer to take charge of the desk and led the way into a rear room where there was a whole rack of guns.

"Look these over and take your choice."

The night captain opened the case and Bob tried half a dozen revolvers in his hand until he found one that was balanced to suit him.

"This feels like a good gun," he said. "I'll take it."

From another case the captain produced a generous supply of ammunition.

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"There's a range downstairs if you'd like to try your marksmanship," he volunteered.

Bob knew that in the coming hours he might find himself in a position where a trusty gun would be a life saver and he accepted the captain's invitation.

His finger was steady and the pressure on the trigger smooth. As a result he turned in a surprisingly good score and the policeman whistled when he saw the card Bob shot out.

"Good work, boy. Anytime you get tired of this federal manhunting just let me know and I'll see that you have a job here."

"Thanks a lot," replied Bob. "I may have to call on you if this case isn't solved successfully."

When they returned upstairs the captain rummaged through the ammunition chest and finally found some cartridges which would fit Bob's rifle. A shoulder holster was also borrowed and Bob adjusted the straps so that it fitted neatly under his coat.

After thanking the night captain for his assistance, Bob returned to the hotel. Another inquiry at the desk revealed that there had been no word from his uncle and Bob went upstairs.

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His body was tired from the strain of the last few hours and he took a warm shower, topping it off with a cold spray that sent the blood tingling through his body. Then he dressed in fresh

clothes and stretched out on the bed for a little relaxation before going to the train to meet Condon Adams.

Bob would have preferred to remain in Jacksonville to lead the hunt for his uncle, but he knew that Adams was both capable and ruthless and when a federal agent was kidnaped, personal feelings which Adams might have toward his uncle would vanish.

Bob mulled over the preceding events and the disappearance of his uncle strengthened his belief that Hamsa had survived his fall off the trestle and into the flood waters the night before. If Hamsa had not survived, Bob doubted if his uncle would have been abducted for he knew that Hamsa would be afraid of the results when his uncle and he got to comparing notes.

The feeling that some momentous activity by the smugglers was under way grew as Bob lay there on the bed. The leaders were desperate and yet courageous enough to attempt to do away with two federal agents and having failed to do that had kidnaped a third.

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Bob got up and scanned a map of Florida which he had obtained. His finger ran along the coastline until he came to Atalissa. Then he traced on down to Nira where Tully had been assigned. It was a desolate, sparsely inhabited section of the coast—an area which in centuries before had probably been a favorite hiding place for bands of pirates who had roved the Spanish main. Numerous indentations dotted the coast, offering ample shelter to men who were afraid of the law.

With a start Bob noticed the time. It was after eleven o'clock. He was taking no chances and he adjusted the shoulder holster, filled the chambers of the revolver with shells, and slipped on his coat.

At the desk downstairs he left word for the clerk to take any message which might come for him. Then he sped toward the station in a taxi. When he arrived at the terminal he found that the train Condon Adams was coming on was half an hour late, for the tracks north were still soft from the heavy rain of the preceding night.

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Bob sat down to wait for the arrival of the train and as the minutes slipped away he had the feeling that he was under observation. The hair along the back of his neck tingled and he wanted to turn around and stare at those back of him. Instead, he moved once or twice as though restless and finally stood up, stretched, and strolled over to the magazine stand, where he could turn around and see the entire concourse.

Bob picked up a magazine and skimmed through the pages with fingers that turned the sheets mechanically while his keen eyes roved over the room. Finally he came back to a lightly built man who had been leaning against a radiator somewhat to the right and back of the bench on which he had been seated.

The man was dressed in a poorly fitted dark suit, wore a cap, and moved restlessly. He was the only one in the scattered gathering of people in the station whom Bob would suspect of being there to watch him.

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Just then the lights flashed over an incoming train board and Bob turned and walked toward the train gates. Passengers started coming through the gate and among the first was the bulky form of Condon Adams. Bob called to him and Adams turned aside.

"How's Tully?" asked Bob, who was really concerned over the condition of the young federal agent.

Condon Adams' face lighted up, for he was genuinely fond of his nephew and Bob's inquiry touched a soft spot.

"Getting along fine," he said. "Oh, he's pretty sore and all that, but he'll be able to continue on his assignment in two or three more days."

"It was a tough break," said Bob and Adams nodded.

"What's been going on?" he asked.

"Plenty," replied Bob. "My uncle was kidnaped earlier this evening."

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Adams dropped his bag and whirled to Bob.

"What's that?" he demanded, as though unable to believe the words.

"My uncle disappeared this evening and everything points to a kidnaping by this gang of smugglers we're after," explained Bob.

Condon Adams threw back his head and laughed, but it was a grim sort of laugh that sent chills down Bob's neck.

"Well that's good," snorted Adams. "Merritt Hughes, ace federal manhunter, kidnaped. I suppose I'll have to hunt for him now instead of the kidnapers."

"I guess that's about the size of things," replied Bob slowly. "I've been in touch with Washington. I'm to go on south to Atalissa on my original assignment and you are to take up the hunt here for him. I've already got the Jacksonville police on the case. When Tully comes out of the hospital, he is to continue to Nira as first ordered."

"Let's get some coffee," said Condon Adams as they walked past the entrance of the station restaurant.

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The older federal agent slid his traveling bag into a corner and dropped down into a chair.

"What a mess to get into," he said, half to himself and half to Bob. Then he looked up.

"Your uncle means quite a lot to you?"

Bob nodded. "You know he does. He got me into the service and he's pretty much of an older brother to me."

A waitress took their orders before Adams spoke again.

"Then you know how I feel about Tully; he's kind of a kid brother to me. But that's getting away from what I started to say. Your uncle and I have always been rivals in the service. One of us would solve a good case and then the other

would win on the next one. He's never liked the way I got in through a little political help, but on the whole I've done a pretty good job. Gosh, I wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to him to take him out of the service."

"He may be out for good now unless we can find him," said Bob bitterly.

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"That's just it, and Bob, differences are going to be forgotten for the time. Why I wouldn't be happy if your uncle and I weren't in some kind of a scrap to see who could solve a new case. We'll find him and we'll find him soon."

"Then you'll work a hundred per cent on the case?" asked Bob.

"Day and night," promised Condon Adams, reaching across the table to clasp Bob's hand firmly in his own and Bob knew that the older agent was a man of his word and highly competent in his own peculiar way.

Cups of steaming coffee were set before them as well as the plate of doughnuts which Adams had ordered. They attacked the lunch with a will and Bob, draining his cup of coffee a few minutes later, caught another glimpse of the slender, slouching figure he had seen in the main waiting room.

"Don't turn around," he said to Adams, "but when we get up, look at the little fellow in the dark cap and suit. He's outside looking in the window. I had a feeling in the station he was watching me."

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Condon Adams reached for the checks and stood up. In reaching for his traveling bag he was able to turn toward the broad glass window and get a good view of the man Bob had described.

"I've never seen him before," said Adams, "but he doesn't look like a very savory character."

He paid the bill for their lunch and as they stepped out of the restaurant and looked for a cab, the man in the dark suit sidled up to them.

"You guys federal men?" he asked.

Bob and Condon Adams whirled toward him.

"What of it?" barked Adams.

"I was just askin'. If you are, I've got a message for you."

"Who from?" it was Bob now.

The little man shook his head.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "Fellow down on the water front gave me a note to give to the federals. Said one of them was at a hotel. When I inquired there I learned he'd gone to the station so I came along and thought I'd try you."

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He reached for an inner pocket and too late Bob divined what was happening. The street they were in was quiet now and suddenly there was danger in the air.

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CHAPTER XXIII
SNAP AIM SCORES



Before Bob could reach for his own gun, the little man had whipped a snub-nosed automatic from a shoulder holster under his left shoulder and his eyes gleamed in the dim street light.

“How nice of you to tell me you were federals; saved me a lot of trouble. Smart guys, aren’t you? Well, get going toward that car on the other side and don’t make any bad steps.”

A cold rage gripped Bob. They had fallen into a neat trap and probably would soon be as helpless as his uncle, who had been kidnaped earlier in the evening. In the meantime, the smugglers would have ample time to run in a large sum of gems. Since they were willing to take the desperate chance of abducting three federal men, the amount must be tremendous.

Condon Adams started to set down his traveling bag, but a sharp command from the little man stopped him.

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“Carry that bag and carry it carefully,” he snapped. “You guys are going for a long boat ride.”

They walked rapidly across the street. In fact, Bob was in a hurry to reach the car. For some reason they had not been searched and if he could get inside the sedan he might be able to slip the revolver out of his shoulder holster. Condon Adams lagged a little; perhaps suspecting what was in Bob’s mind.

The door of the sedan opened as they neared and Bob saw a man slouched at the wheel. There was no one else in the car and Bob stepped into the sedan, his muscles tense and his nerves cold.

“Stop!” the command was quiet but deadly and Bob halted halfway to the seat.

“Back up and back up slow; I’m taking no chances on gunplay.”

The driver of the car sat up quickly.

“Ain’t you searched them, Benny?” he asked.

“Shut up,” snapped the man on the pavement and Bob, stepping back gingerly now, caught a glimpse of the man with the gun. There was just a chance of success for a desperate play and he took the chance.

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The gun in the shoulder holster was unfamiliar as was the holster, but Bob was half hidden by the darkness of the interior of the sedan. His right hand, moving like a flash, grasped the butt of the gun. Without attempting to pull it from the holster, Bob simply elevated the muzzle and pulled the trigger.

He fired by instinct as much as anything and a flash of flame stabbed the night. On the echo of the shot came a sharp cry and the man on the pavement leaped backward, his own gun replying.

Bob fired again and through the haze of smoke and the acrid smell of burning cloth saw the little man tumbling. The driver of the car swung toward Bob, but before he could get into the scrap, Bob jerked the gun from its holster and clubbed him over the head with the barrel. It was a savage blow, but he was dealing with men who knew no mercy themselves. The driver slumped forward in his seat and Bob, gun in hand, leaped from the car.

Condon Adams, who had been able to draw his own weapon, was leaning over the man on the street.

"Great work, Bob. I thought they were going to get away with this for a while."

"Is he hurt badly?" asked Bob.

"Well, I don't think he's going to be doing any more mischief for a good long time. Your first one caught his right shoulder and the second one took his left leg—that's what I'd call disabling a gangster."

"It was spot shooting. I didn't have time to aim," explained Bob.

"Then I hope I'm not the target when you really aim," said the older federal agent.

CHAPTER XXIV AT THE HOSPITAL



A policeman on duty at the station, attracted by the shooting, came on the run and Condon Adams flashed his federal badge.

"Get an ambulance and get this man to a hospital. See that a heavy guard is placed at his bed. We'll take the fellow in the car down to the central station with us and make a personal report."

The federal men remained on the scene until an ambulance arrived. In the meantime Condon Adams had handcuffed the driver of the car, who was now regaining consciousness. He pushed him into the back seat, tossed in his own traveling bag, and with Bob driving the car, they started for the police station.

The trip was uneventful and they parked the car in front of the station where a few hours before Bob had telephoned the news of his uncle's abduction to Washington. The same night captain was on duty and his eyes widened when he saw Bob and Condon Adams with their handcuffed prisoner.

Before the policeman could ply them with questions Condon Adams explained what had happened.

"Throw this fellow into a solitary cell; I'll question him after I get back from the hospital," he said.

"What charge shall I book him on?" asked the

policeman.

"Attempted abduction of a federal officer," snapped Adams, who then turned toward Bob.

"We'll get over to the hospital now and see if the fellow you clipped with a couple of bullets is ready to talk."

They hurried outside the station, but Adams stopped short when he saw the sedan at the curb.

"I forgot all about the car," he said. "It's probably stolen. I'll report it to the captain."

By the time the older federal agent was back Bob had a cab waiting at the curb and they told the driver to speed them to the hospital.

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"If we can get either one of these fellows to talk, it may be the break that will open up this case," mused Adams as the cab roared along the now almost deserted streets.

They pulled up at the hospital where a dim light glowed over the entrance. There was no general admittance at that hour of the night, but continued ringing of the bell brought an orderly and they gained admission.

Condon Adams revealed their identity to the night supervisor and asked the condition of the man who had been brought in.

"He's resting fairly comfortably," said the nurse. "The bullet in his shoulder has been removed and the one in his leg will be taken out in the morning."

"Case serious?" pressed Adams.

"I wouldn't say so," replied the nurse cautiously, leading the way down the darkened corridor to a room where the lights were aglow. She opened the door and they stepped in, a nurse who had been near the bed rising as they entered. A policeman on the other side of the bed did likewise.

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"Don't make him talk too much," cautioned the night supervisor.

Bob looked at the man who had attempted to kidnap them. His face was thin and marred with a sneer.

"You fellows can save your breath. I won't talk," he said, an unpleasant whine in his voice, and Bob catalogued him as a dangerous man when armed, but one who was weak physically.

"We'll see about that," said Adams confidently. "The boys down at the station are working over the fellow who was driving for you. If you don't talk here, we'll work you over when you get out."

Bob knew that was only a threat, but he was interested in the reaction in the face of the man on the bed and he saw a weakening of the lines around the mouth as though the thought of physical punishment was unnerving.

Condon Adams must have sensed the same thing for he advanced with a threatening gesture of his fists and the man on the bed cringed away

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from him.

"You can't hit me," he cried.

"Maybe not, but I'd like to," scowled Adams, and Bob knew that the older federal agent was sincere in that.

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CHAPTER XXV BOB GETS READY

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Adams plied the wounded man with questions, but all of the answers were evasive and he finally turned to Bob.

"We'll let him go for tonight. I'll come back and see him tomorrow and I'll see him alone. I can make him talk."

They left the room after admonishing the policeman on guard to remain on the alert for any attempt to free the wounded man.

Out in the hallway Condon Adams confessed to his disappointment.

"I thought maybe he'd break and talk. He's a weakling. I'll get it out of him later."

"How much later?" asked Bob.

"That's just it. I don't know. It may be too late to help in the hunt for your uncle."

Down on the main floor of the hospital once more they telephoned for a taxicab and when it appeared, gave the driver orders to go to Bob's hotel. They were silent on the trip back into the heart of the city and when they reached the hotel Condon Adams registered for a room on the same floor as those of Bob and his uncle.

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Bob went directly to his own room and made a final inspection of the articles in his Gladstone bag. The rifle and ammunition appeared intact and he removed the revolver from the shoulder holster, cleaned it carefully and refilled the chambers.

After that was done he inspected his coat. It appeared ruined beyond repair for the revolver bullets had torn through the cloth and sparks from the burning powder had extended the area of the damage.

Bob removed the suit he had been wearing and got into the comfortable and rough and ready corduroys which he had brought with him. He laced up his boots and then adjusted the shoulder holster, making sure that it would swing free in case he faced any other emergencies similar to the one which had confronted them a little more than an hour before.

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Condon Adams tapped on the door and then came in.

"About ready to start for Atalissa?" he asked.

Bob nodded.

"I can get a southbound local at 3 a. m. After about three hours I change to an accommodation train that finally winds up at Atalissa somewhere around noon. Not a very pleasant ride, but I don't want to attract attention either by breezing in there in a car or a boat and as the roads are none too good, I think the train is the best bet."

"How about communications out of the village? You may need help in a hurry?"

"I haven't checked up on them," confessed Bob.

The older federal agent went to the telephone and after a lengthy conversation with the hotel clerk, secured the desired information.

"The telegraph office at the railroad station is open from eight o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the evening. The phone exchange, which seems to be pretty much of a one horse affair, closes at nine o'clock in the evening. If anything happens after that you'll have to get the operator out of bed in order to get a call through. I'm making my headquarters here. Let me know the minute anything turns up."

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"I'll do that," promised Bob, who, while he could not exactly warm up to Condon Adams, felt sure that the older man would bend every effort toward the recovery of his uncle. "I'll let you know where I can be reached in Atalissa so you can get news to me the minute Uncle Merritt is found."

Condon Adams glanced at his wrist watch.

"You haven't much time to lose if you're going to make that southbound local."

Bob looked at his own watch. It was 2:45 o'clock. He closed his Gladstone bag and tightened the straps. Condon Adams walked ahead of him into the hall and then as far as the elevator.

"Don't take too many chances, Bob, and keep your chin up. This thing is going to come out all right."

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CHAPTER XXVI "DON'T MOVE!"



Bob wished that he could feel the confidence of Condon Adams' words as he stepped into the elevator and dropped toward the main floor. At the desk he turned in his room key and then took a taxi to the same station where earlier in the night, in company with Condon Adams, he had captured two of the suspected gem smugglers.

The young federal agent purchased his ticket for Atalissa and the agent cautioned him about the change at the junction. Then Bob picked up his bag and walked through the now practically deserted waiting room and out into the train

shed where a stubby, three car train was waiting for the final call of "booo-ard" to start its jerking journey southward. An express car and a combination baggage and mail car were behind the engine while the rear car was a dimly lighted coach.

Bob climbed up the steps. The seats were of green plush, and halfway up the interior of the car was a wooden partition which marked the forward end of the coach as the smoking compartment. There were only two people in the rear half and Bob turned one seat over so a double seat would be available. Then he stuck his ticket in his hat band, folded up his corduroy coat for a pillow, and curled up to make the best of the lonely trip to Atalissa.

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The federal agent had dropped into a light sleep when the train started. He roused up long enough to hear it roll over a bridge and then he went back to sleep, failing to hear the conductor when he removed the ticket from the band of his hat.

The local jerked and stopped and then jerked into motion again. This operation was repeated a number of times, but Bob slept heavily through it all, for his body was near exhaustion. It was well after dawn when he finally moved and he groaned softly as the blood started flowing once more through his cramped legs.

Bob sat up and massaged his legs and arms. It was quite clear out now and the local was rocking along a desolate stretch of Florida east coast. Somewhere along the line the other passengers had left the train and Bob was now the only occupant of the coach.

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He got up and walked to the water cooler. Fortunately there was an ample supply of water and after bathing his face and hands with the cool liquid, he felt much refreshed though ravenously hungry.

Up ahead the engineer blasted his whistle for a highway crossing and Bob felt the air brakes go on, the old wooden coach jumping around in protest as the speed dropped sharply. They clacked over switches and Bob, looking ahead, could see a weather beaten station, on the other side of which another train was standing. This, he concluded, must be the junction.

The conductor, coming back from the baggage car, gave Bob his train check.

"Don't have many passengers going to Atalissa," he said. "Them that wants to get there usually go by car or boat."

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The local rocked to a creaking halt and Bob, his Gladstone in hand, stepped down on the cinder platform.

The accommodation which was to take him the rest of the way to Atalissa was on the other side of the station. The engine, an antiquated little affair, looked about like a teakettle, but the two freight cars and the passenger car on the back end were standard size equipment.

The conductor, in faded blue overalls, looked at Bob's ticket.

"Guess you're the only passenger," he said.
"Well, we might as well be going."

"How about breakfast?" asked Bob.

"Hungry?" asked the conductor.

"Just about starved," confessed Bob.

"Well, we stop at Ainsworth about ten miles down the line. There's a little place there where you can get a bite to eat."

There appeared to be nothing else to do so Bob climbed up the steps of the old wooden coach and put his Gladstone in the first seat at the rear. The engineer whistled a wheezy "high ball" and the conductor swung up on the back end as the accommodation started its daily run for the seacoast.

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The air in the coach was stuffy and Bob found it pleasanter on the rear platform, watching the track wind away in the distance and they swung around curves and chugged their way up steep grades. It seemed incredible that in such a peaceful appearing country there must be located the headquarters for a relentless band of smugglers.

The second stop of the accommodation that morning was at Ainsworth and as the train slowed down for the station, the conductor came back and spoke to Bob.

"We'll be here about fifteen minutes. That ought to give you time enough to get something to eat. Restaurant's right back of the station."

Bob estimated that Ainsworth must be a village of some two hundred souls and he was dubious about the quality of the food which he would obtain, but when he stepped inside the eating house he was agreeably surprised by the cleanliness and an elderly woman took his order with pleasing promptness.

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Bob took a cold cereal, and ate it with relish while eggs and bacon sputtered on a stove in the kitchen. When they were ready he ordered coffee and several doughnuts.

"Don't need to hurry too much, they won't go away without you," reassured the woman who waited on him.

But Bob finished in ample time to enjoy a leisurely walk back to the train. When he reentered the day coach he was surprised to find another occupant, a large, heavy-boned man with a faded mustache and thinning hair. What surprised Bob even more was to see a badge on the other's vest and he strolled forward through the car. His eyes opened a little wider when he saw that the badge worn by the other said, "Sheriff."

The water cooler was a convenient place to stop and Bob, studying the other man in leisure, drank two cups of water.

Suddenly the sheriff spoke.

[205]

"Now that you've about sized me up, what's on your mind, Bud?"

Bob almost fell over backwards for he had tried

to make his observation of the other man altogether casual.

"Nothing," he managed to reply, but the word failed to carry conviction.

"Not trying to dodge the law, are you?" asked the sheriff, and Bob noticed that a perfectly capable looking gun was holstered under the other's right shoulder.

"No," said Bob.

"Then why are you carrying a gun?"

Bob started, almost guiltily, and his face flushed.

"That," he retorted, "is none of your business."

After the words were out he could almost have bitten his tongue in two for if the sheriff pressed him for an answer, he would be forced to reveal his identity and such things as local sheriffs being involved in crime was not altogether unknown.

"I'm making it my business right now," snapped the older man and before Bob could move, a gun appeared in the other's hands. [206]

"Put up your hands and turn around. Do it slowly and you won't be hurt, but if you make one false move, I'll let you have it." [207]

CHAPTER XXVII SHERIFF McCURDY TALKS



There was nothing else for Bob to do and with his hands raised high above his head, he turned slowly and faced the water cooler. He could imagine how Tully Ross would have chuckled if he could have seen his predicament now.

Firm hands whisked the gun out of the shoulder holster and Bob heard the sheriff step back.

"Turn around slowly now, but keep your hands up."

Bob obeyed the command and the sheriff waved him toward a seat on the opposite side of the car.

"Now that you've got my gun, you'd better let me explain," said Bob.

"You can do your explaining in jail," retorted the sheriff. "No big-town gunman is going to run another trick on me." [208]

The last words were said with grim determination and Bob saw the sheriff's jaw muscles tighten.

"Turn up the lapel of my coat and you'll find that you're making a mistake," pressed Bob. "I'm an agent of the bureau of investigation of the United States Department of Justice."

"You're just a kid," scoffed the older officer.

"Turn up the lapel of my coat and see what's there. This thing has gone far enough," insisted Bob.

There was something in Bob's voice which forced the sheriff to act and he reached over cautiously and turned up the lapel of Bob's coat. The small badge which was revealed there brought an instant change in his attitude and he lowered the gun which he held in his hands.

"Looks like I've made a bad mistake," he said. "I'm sorry, but after what I've been through you can't blame me."

The sheriff, who introduced himself as Abel McCurdy, handed the gun back to Bob and the federal agent, after breaking open the gun and looking at the chambers, returned it to his shoulder holster.

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"What's happened?" asked Bob, for he recalled that only a minute earlier the sheriff hinted at some trick of which he had been the victim.

"Oh, it's kind of a crazy story and I don't suppose it would interest a federal man," replied the older officer.

"I'm interested in anything that's going on around here," said Bob.

"Then you may run right smack into trouble," cautioned the other, and he shook his head a little sadly. "That's what was the matter with me—too interested in other people's business."

"Tell me what happened," pressed Bob, for he had a feeling that in some way or another the sheriff might be connected with the smugglers who were known to be operating around Atalissa.

"There's been some strange things going on along the coast," began the sheriff, "and I've been trying to figure them out, but I didn't have much luck until last night when I was south of Atalissa. A big touring car came roaring along the road and I stopped it. Car was going too fast."

"What happened?" asked Bob.

[210]

"Too much," admitted the sheriff. "Fellow driving got out, but when he did he had a machine gun in his hands and I wasn't any match for that even though I'm a pretty good shot with a revolver. He handcuffed me with my own handcuffs and made me get into the back seat and then drove off like mad. After a while he stopped and blindfolded me, and then went on for a time."

"What did he look like?" asked Bob.

"Well, he was kind of short and heavy, I'd say." The sheriff went on with his description of the man who had kidnaped him and before he was through Bob was convinced that the other was Joe Hamsa.

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Bob felt it was time to reveal his real mission to the seacoast and in clear, brief words he told the sheriff why he had come down from Washington and what had gone on since he had started south.

"You mean to say they had the nerve to kidnap your uncle, a federal agent?" asked the sheriff.

"I'm sure they have him and the only thing we know is that the start away from Jacksonville was made by boat."

The sheriff nodded.

"That would be a good way. Why, I can think of half a hundred good places to hide a man along this section of the coast." Then the sheriff went on to explain that shortly before dawn he had been dumped unceremoniously out of the sedan after being released from the handcuffs.

"Can you remember any stops?" asked Bob.

[212]

"Only one. We must have been very close to the ocean, for I was sure I could hear the sound of the surf."

"Any idea in what direction you traveled?"

"Nothing that would help much. I was about two miles from Ainsworth when I was dumped out, and I went in there and got another gun and then decided to take the train to Atalissa for I was only about a mile from there when I was kidnaped last night."

"Did you hear anything unusual when you stopped where you thought you could hear the surf?" pressed on Bob.

Sheriff McCurdy was silent for a time.

"Yes, there was one thing—a humming that was faint and then increased in strength and finally died away."

"It might have been a 'plane," suggested Bob.

"Why, I hadn't thought of that. Sure, that's just what it sounded like."

"The driver of the car got out and came back a little after."

"After the humming had died away?"

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"That's right," agreed the sheriff.

Bob was elated at this news. He felt that even before his arrival at Atalissa he had stumbled upon a real clue and he hoped upon a worthy aid in the doughty southern sheriff.

"Then he went on, later dumping you out of the car?" pressed Bob.

The sheriff agreed.

"He was none too gentle in dumping me out," complained the sheriff. "I'd just like to get my hands on him for a few minutes. Believe me, I'd make his bones ache."

There was no question about the irritation or the sincerity of the officer and Bob couldn't help but suppress a chuckle, for he believed the sheriff perfectly capable of manhandling Joe Hamsa.

Bob felt that the time had come to be perfectly frank with the sheriff.

"I'm down here on a smuggling case," he explained. "I'm going to need your help and I may need it badly."

Then he went on to relate in detail everything that had taken place since he had left Washington, revealing even the kidnaping of his uncle. When he was through the sheriff whistled through his whiskers.

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"I've kind of suspected that something queer was going on south of Atalissa, but there were no complaints and I never was able to pick up anything. You think the fellow who kidnaped me was the man on the train with you when you came south?"

"From your description, I'm positive it was Hamsa," replied Bob.

"Then he's a tough customer if he escaped from that river and got down here so rapidly."

"One thing we've got to remember," cautioned Bob, "is that the gang is compact and apparently extremely well organized."

The sheriff was silent for a time.

"Think that plane landing last night might have brought in smuggled gems?"

"I don't know," confessed Bob. "Everyone in the department has a feeling that the gang is pointing toward one more big smuggling operation. If the gems had come in last night I have a feeling that more than one man would have been with Hamsa to get them. It just doesn't seem logical that one man, even though he might be the leader of the gang, would handle this end of the game. I'd be more inclined to think the contact last night was for the purpose of making final plans."

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CHAPTER XXIX MORE CLUES



The sheriff turned this over in his mind for some time as the train rumbled along the rough right-of-way. Then he nodded and agreed with Bob.

"Looks like you're right. That means we may be in for a busy time when the actual contact is attempted."

"We'll be busy enough, if we can learn where the contact will be made," retorted the young federal agent.

"What about your uncle?" asked the sheriff.

The exultation which had marked Bob's features

vanished.

"I don't honestly know. From the reputation of this gang I should fear the worst, but for some reason I have unbounded faith in my uncle's ability to take care of himself in a crisis. The last we knew was that he disappeared from the waterfront and shortly after that a motorboat sped down the river."

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"Then if a big smuggling operation is under way, it's just possible that he might be brought down here," argued the sheriff.

"He might be taken to their hideout," agreed Bob, "but so far our men have no real clue to that."

"We may be able to pick up something at Atalissa," said the sheriff. "I've a number of friends there who may be able to give me information you never could get."

As the accommodation jogged toward the coast, the country became wilder and they rumbled across narrow bridges that spanned bayous and salt streams. Undergrowth was thick and almost jungle-like. They were in one of the wildest sections of the Florida coast—uninviting, inhospitable, and for years the hideout for lawbreakers of various kinds.

The brakes went on sharply and the little train swung around a curve as the wheels shrieked a protest. Looking ahead, Bob could see a huddle of houses around a large bayou. Beyond that was a narrow opening and further out a glimpse of the blue Atlantic. This, then, must be Atalissa, his present destination.

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The sheriff stood up, and looked at his watch.

"Lucky trip this morning," he declared. "Usually the local has a couple of derailments."

The train pulled up before a dilapidated station and Bob and the sheriff stepped down on a rough plank platform. The only others visible were the train crew and the station agent.

"Town looks quiet," said the sheriff as they started down the one street which was flanked on one side by the clear waters of the bayou and on the other by a long line of buildings, some of them stores and the others places of residence.

The first building, a story and a half structure, was a barber shop and the sheriff turned in here.

"Morning, sheriff," said the barber.

"Morning, Emil," replied the sheriff. "Want you to meet a friend of mine, Bob Houston. Northerner. He's down for a few days loafing and maybe a little fishing. Know anything new?"

The barber, inclined to stoutness and baldness, shook his head.

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"Not even any good fishing left," he sighed.

"Everybody behavin'?" asked the sheriff.

"Just what are you driving at?" the barber asked.

"Nothing special; just thought you might have

heard of something," grinned the sheriff.

"Matter of fact, I have," retorted the barber. "Somebody's been flying around here the last couple of nights with a plane of some kind."

"That ain't so unusual, is it?" asked the sheriff. "We've been used to all kinds of things along this coast."

"Well, that wasn't so strange, but this morning when I was fishing down in Harpey's bayou a boat came through there so fast it was nothing but a black streak and a flash of spray. Blamed thing must have been doing forty an hour."

Bob's eyes glinted.

"Where did it go?"

"Now I was only in a rowboat and I wouldn't know where a speed boat went," replied the barber. Then, seeing the chagrin on Bob's face, he added, "I'd almost be willing to bet that it was heading for Lost Island."

[220]

Bob saw a queer expression flit across the sheriff's face.

"I might have known that's where such a boat would be going," he groaned. "Why couldn't it be toward some other island?"

"I wouldn't know," grinned the barber, who sensed that the sheriff was in Atalissa on some important mission. Bob saw the barber scanning his coat and he wondered if the gun in the shoulder holster was visible. If it was, it would reveal instantly that he was an officer, and not the vacationer that the sheriff had pictured him to be.

"Guess we'll be getting a boat and heading south," said the sheriff. "Just don't say anything to anyone else on what you saw this morning."

"Not a word, sheriff," said the barber, and they left the small shop.

"Queer fellow," nodded the sheriff as they proceeded down the street toward a wharf. "He knows everything that's going on and he protects a lot of people, but when some outsiders come in and start breaking the law, I can always figure he'll tell me the truth."

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"What do you make of it?" asked Bob.

"I'd say that the more men you can get in here, the better it will be. Emil knows something queer is going on at Lost Island and it was just his way of telling me to get there in a hurry. But I don't like that place. It's too lonesome and it's so big a man can get lost on it for days."

"I didn't know there were any islands that large along here," replied Bob.

"It isn't actually an island," explained the sheriff, "but there's water on three sides of it and it's swampy and about as dismal as the last place on earth. Always been a favorite hiding place for men trying to get away from the law."

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CHAPTER XXX
READY FOR ACTION



At the wharf the sheriff dickered for the rental of a boat and a 20-foot craft with a sturdy four cylinder motor was secured. There was nothing speedy about it, but it looked eminently safe.

"We may be gone a couple of nights. I know where I can get some duffel and grub. You'd better send word for more of your men to get in here," said the sheriff, and while he went in quest of the camping supplies, Bob walked back to the station.

He had been warned to use extreme caution in sending out any messages from Atalissa, but there was no time to drive to another town and he preferred to telegraph rather than to telephone.

The message went in code and it took him some time to compose it. Very briefly he outlined what he had learned from the sheriff, concluding, "Now believe Merritt Hughes has been brought to Lost Island and that attempt to bring in large amount of gems will be made soon."

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Bob did not leave the old depot until the telegram was humming over the wires on its way to Washington. Then he returned to the wharf and found the sheriff waiting.

"We'll start at once," said the officer. "I've got a snack put up for our lunch and we'll eat on the way. Save time."

Bob stepped into the bow of the boat where the sheriff had stowed away the federal agent's large bag and the officer jumped into the stern. The motor was turning over smoothly. The sheriff threw in the clutch and they moved away.

The young federal agent looked back at the sleepy village which was strung along the bayou. The barber came out of his shop and waved at them and the man on the wharf, from whom they had rented the boat, watched them, his hands shielding his eyes from the glaring rays of the mid-day sun.

Sheriff McCurdy headed the boat toward the seaway, but before they reached it swung it sharply to the right and they chugged through a narrow passageway that twisted and turned interminably.

[224]

"How under the sun can you find your way through all this maze of channels?" asked Bob, understanding now why it was an ideal spot to carry on smuggling operations.

"Been in this country all my life," explained the sheriff, "but once in a while I get lost. Then I usually just sit still until someone hunts me up."

A larger expanse of water opened ahead of them.

"Harpey's bayou," said the sheriff. "This is where Emil was fishing when that black speed boat came through."

The sheriff put the rudder bar between his legs and unwrapped a package which had been resting on the floor boards in the bottom of the boat. Inside were half a dozen thick sandwiches, heavily laden with butter and with generous slices of cold ham between the bread.

They ate the sandwiches as the launch chugged through the quiet waters of Harpey's bayou. [225]

The sheriff produced a jug of cold water and after a deep drink apiece, they nosed the boat out of the bayou and into another twisting channel, which, while deep, was heavily overgrown with trees which arched above the water until they formed a perfect tunnel.

The air was cool and dank and Bob shuddered involuntarily as he thought of the loneliness which would descend upon such an area when the sun went down.

"How far is it to Lost Island?" he asked the sheriff.

"Depends on just which part we're going to. The nearest point is about eight miles from here."

They went on for some distance without speaking, the sheriff devoting practically all of his time to watching the channel.

A little more than half an hour later he shut off the engine and skillfully guided the boat into a backwater where they would not be visible from the main channel.

Sheriff McCurdy dropped the heavy piece of iron which served as an anchor overboard and Bob was surprised to note that the water was at least eight or nine feet deep. [226]

"Better look over your guns. We may need them in a hurry," advised the sheriff.

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CHAPTER XXXI A BOAT FLASHES PAST



Bob got out his Gladstone bag and opened it, removing the case which held his rifle.

He assembled the gun and filled the magazine with shells. Placing it against his shoulder, he aimed at a spot some distance away when a sharp call from the sheriff stopped the steady pressure of his finger on the trigger.

"Don't take any chances with a shot now giving an alarm to anyone," he warned. "Remember that the men who hide out down here are all wary of any gunshots."

Bob lowered the gun and he knew that his cheeks were burning for, had he thought of the possible result, he would not have attempted a practice shot or two.

The sheriff, probing his own roll of duffel, unearthed a serviceable looking gun.

"Borrowed this from the barber," he grinned. "It isn't quite as fancy a gun as yours but it will carry well and I've used it once or twice before, so I'm used to handling it."

The sheriff drew out his pipe and lighted it, settling back against the gunwale.

"Aren't we going on?" asked Bob.

"Not much use right now," replied the officer. "We'd be spotted in a minute. We'll wait until dusk. Then we can cruise along the island. They'll be sure to have a fire of some kind for the nights are getting chilly."

Bob knew that the sheriff was right, but the thought of inactivity while his uncle was in the hands of gangsters galled his active spirit. However, he made the best of it and tried to doze.

An hour slipped away when the exhaust of a motorboat, evidently coming at high speed, echoed through the lowlands.

The sheriff sat up quickly, glanced at his rifle, and then picked up an oar and paddled their boat closer toward a thicket so that they were well hidden from the channel which passed within a short distance of the bayou where they had sought temporary refuge.

The noise of the oncoming boat was clearer.

"Coming fast," grunted the sheriff, balancing his rifle in his hands.

Bob, crouched in the bow, saw a gray boat shoot into sight in the main channel. It was not more than 200 feet away and only one man was in the boat. With a start he recognized the crouched figure of Joe Hamsa. Then the gray speeder was gone, only a broad, spreading wake remaining to mark its passage.

The federal agent turned to the sheriff.

"We've got to follow him. That was Joe Hamsa."

The sheriff shook his head.

"We're not following him now; still too light. Besides I know he's headed for the island. Listen to him go!"

The roar of the exhaust gradually died away and the sheriff turned to Bob.

"You're sure that was your man?"

"Positive," replied Bob.

Sheriff McCurdy looked at his borrowed rifle once more and Bob saw the deep lines of the peace officer's face tighten.

They remained for another hour in the seclusion of the small bayou and before they started out again the shadows were deepening and the warmth of the afternoon was vanishing.

Sheriff McCurdy started the motor of their boat and Bob pulled up the mud-covered anchor. With the motor throttle well down they started for Lost Island and Bob was thankful that their boat had an underwater exhaust which it was almost impossible to hear.

After leaving the shelter of the bayou, Sheriff McCurdy operated their boat with extreme caution and just before they came within sight of Lost Island he stopped the boat and spoke to Bob.

"We may be poking our heads into a hornet's nest," he warned. "Want to go on or wait until additional federal men can get to Atalissa and we can bring them down here?"

"That might be too late," decided Bob. "We'll go on."

The sheriff started the motor and once more they were in forward motion, the bow of their small boat knifing its way through the waters of a larger lagoon.

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CHAPTER XXXII LOST ISLAND AHEAD



Ahead of them lay a long, low mass of tangled undergrowth.

"Lost Island," said the sheriff cryptically and Bob felt his blood beating faster. It was toward this spot that the black speed boat sighted by the barber had been going and it was also toward this spot that Joe Hamsa had been hurrying in the gray motorboat.

The motor of their own boat died suddenly and Bob looked toward the sheriff, whose face was still dimly discernible in the faint light.

"No more noise; we'll use oars from now on."

Bob helped put the oars in their sockets. There were two pairs and they bent their backs to the task of rowing.

"This may be an all night job," grunted the sheriff, "but it will be worth it if I can catch up with the fellow who threw me out of the car last night."

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The boat, although not large, was heavy and in less than half an hour Bob had blisters on both hands and his back ached mightily.

"Ease up a bit," advised the sheriff. "We'll drift along here and rest."

Bob welcomed the chance to straighten up and he let the oars rest in the oarlocks while he stood up in the boat.

A flicker of light to the left caught his eye and he spoke quietly to the sheriff.

"There's a light to your left," he said. "Stand up and look at it."

Sheriff McCurdy stood up in the stern.

"I expected something like this," he grunted. "Might as well rest a bit, though, for I've too many kinks in my back now to think of a good scrap."

The boat drifted gently and the sheriff told what he knew about the island.

"This is one of the highest parts," he explained, "and one of the driest. Not much swamp right here and the footing should be good. On the other side there's an old pier and a sort of hunting house that was built years ago by some northerners. I expect we'll find the men we want over there."

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Bob was too impatient to rest very long, and at his insistence, they took up the oars again and turned the bow of their boat toward shore.

Moving like a shadow and with as little noise, they guided their craft in toward the island. The bow stuck in soft mud three or four feet from the shore and the sheriff grunted his distaste.

"We'll have to wade in," he complained. "I'll get wet and that will make my rheumatism bad again."

Bob dropped their anchor over into the mud and the sheriff stuck two of the spark plugs from the motor in his pocket, effectively disabling the boat from use.

With Bob in the lead, they dropped over the side. The muck and ooze was cold and slimy and Bob felt his legs plowing in about six inches of the clammy stuff. Fortunately they were ashore in about four long strides.

They paused long enough to loosen the guns in their shoulder holsters and to look at the safeties on their rifles. Then, with the sheriff in the lead, they started for the far side of the narrow island.

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There was plenty of underbrush, but the ground was firm, and by treading cautiously, they made progress without making much noise.

From a little knoll which they ascended they could look down on the other side of the island and the light which Bob had seen from a distance was plainly visible.

It was a torch of some kind and was apparently mounted on a rather tall pole, for the flame flickered in the light breeze which was sweeping in from the open sea.

Moving even more cautiously than before, Bob and the sheriff started down for the camp which they knew must be in the blackness beyond the light.

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CHAPTER XXXIII OUT OF THE NIGHT



It was a dismal adventure and it took real courage to move even another step forward, but Bob was driven on by the thought that his uncle might be on the island and that success tonight would bring about his return and smash the ring of smugglers he had been assigned to break up.

As they neared the light it was plain that the flare was mounted on a pole about twenty feet tall and Bob stopped the sheriff.

"That looks like a beacon for a plane," he muttered.

"If it is, it fits in with your theory that they'll land the smuggled gems by plane," replied Sheriff McCurdy.

They went on, treading easily and giving the circle of light cast by the flare a wide berth.

Against the blackness of the waters of a broad bayou which flanked the other side of Lost Island loomed the outline of a ramshackle structure and though the windows appeared to be boarded up, faint rays of light crept through a number of cracks. Bob half stumbled on a stick and the noise brought the quick baying of a hound.

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"We're in for it now," said the sheriff, and Bob felt that trouble, and serious trouble, was just ahead.

A door in the house was thrown open and against the oblong of light could be seen the silhouette of a man. Then he stepped out into the night, to be followed by a second man, stockier and heavier than the first.

"Stay down," whispered the sheriff. "Maybe they'll miss us. We don't want trouble now."

Before the men could leave the shelter of the house, the low drone of an incoming plane could be heard. Bob turned toward the east. A red and green light, marking the wing tips of a plane, were visible. The craft was low and evidently coming in fast.

Even above the noise of the plane, they could hear a shouted command near the old house, and one of the men who had stepped outside turned on a flash light and raced toward the pier, some distance away. He was followed, at a slower pace by the second man.

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"That's Hamsa, I'm sure," said Bob.

"Let's get inside and see if anyone is there," said Sheriff McCurdy and they moved around so that the house was between them and the pier.

Landing lights of the plane blinked on as it circled over them and once the powerful beams swept down on the clearing, but Bob and the Sheriff, anticipating that, had dropped to the ground behind an old log and were safe, for the moment, from discovery.

"Must be either a seaplane or an amphibian," said Bob as the plane prepared to alight on the water.

"Get inside," urged the sheriff, who would feel better when he had some shelter.

The two men on the pier were concentrating their attention on the plane swinging over the lagoon and the hound which had sounded the alarm was beside them, so it was a comparatively simple matter for Bob to jump across the threshold.

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Inside the door, where only an oil lamp cast faint illumination, he crouched with his rifle in his hands, accustoming his eyes to the light. There was, apparently, no one in the room.

He spoke softly to the sheriff, who was waiting just outside.

"All clear; come on!"

With one bound the sheriff was inside and like Bob he had his rifle ready for instant action.

Squinting between cracks in the wall, the sheriff watched the action in the lagoon. The plane smacked the surface of the water sharply and came to rest several hundred feet from the end of the old pier. The men waiting there put out in a motorboat, making directly for the plane, which was bobbing around on the waves which it had stirred up in the quiet waters.

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CHAPTER XXXIV IN THE SHANTY



Sheriff McCurdy turned from the wall and watched Bob open the door to the second room. He saw the young federal agent drop to his knees and his gun clatter while a choked sob escaped from Bob's lips.

The sheriff crossed the room in several bounds and bent down over Bob, who was kneeling beside the bound and gagged figure of a man.

Without asking questions, the sheriff handed Bob a knife and the ropes and gag were slashed.

"Uncle Merritt, Uncle Merritt," cried Bob. "Speak to me." There was desperation in his voice.

Merritt Hughes opened his eyes and tried to smile. His lips and tongue were swollen from the gag, but the expression in his eyes gave Bob courage.

"We'd better get him out of here," said Bob. "They'll be back and we won't be ready for them."

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Before they could turn, a harsh laugh echoed through the room and the heavy voice of Joe Hamsa lashed at them.

"You're not going any place, boys, except where I want you to and you'll never return from there."

Bob started to move, but a quick command from Hamsa stopped him.

"Don't move kid. I've got a machine gun on you and my finger is nervous. Turn around slowly and don't either one of you try any gunplay."

They started to turn slowly when Bob was amazed by a quick gesture of his uncle's. Hidden in the heavy shadow of the little room which adjoined the larger one, he reached up and like

a flash seized the revolver which was in the shoulder holster. There wasn't even the rustle of Bob's coat as the gun was whisked away and Bob continued to turn slowly toward Hamsa.

The man who had claimed to be a diamond salesman was standing in the doorway, a machine gun in his hands. Behind him was a man with a scar, whom Bob recognized from the descriptions obtained in Jacksonville must have been the abductor of his uncle. To the rear of these two was a slender chap, little older than Bob and with a thin face. He was in a flyer's outfit and in his hands carried a soft leather case.

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"Get their guns, Rap," barked Hamsa, and the man with the scar came forward, his hands patting the sheriff for weapons. The gun was taken from the shoulder holster and the rifle was tossed across the room.

The man known as Rap then turned to Bob and his hands found the empty holster.

"Gun's gone," said Rap flatly and without expression.

"Where?" demanded Hamsa.

"Lost in the brush," fibbed Bob.

The answer seemed to satisfy them and Rap took the rifle from Bob's hands.

"Take this gun and keep those fellows covered while Curt and I check over the stuff he brought in," ordered Hamsa, handing his weapon to Rap while the fellow, whom he had called Curt, strode into the room and placed his black leather case on the rough table.

[243]

Bob gasped as the velvet lined case was opened and scores of gleaming diamonds were revealed. A king's fortune was spread on the table in front of them and Hamsa, an ugly light in his eyes, looked at his captives.

"So you federal men thought you were smart enough for Joe Hamsa?" he chortled. "Well, this is your last assignment. You've seen me and you've seen how we bring in the stuff. This is my last job. I'll make a cool million on it. Think it over."

He turned back to the pile of gems and ran them through his stubby fingers, gloating at the wealth that was on the table.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Curt.

"Sink your plane and the gray boat. We'll use the black one for a getaway and we'll burn this place before we leave."

"How about the federal men?" The flyer gestured toward Bob and the others.

[244]

"Maybe we'll sink them, too," said Hamsa and there was deadly mirth in his words.

The man known as Rap started to laugh, but a sharp explosion back of Bob turned the laugh into a sob and Rap, gasping for breath, sank to the floor.

[245]

CHAPTER XXXV
REVERSING THE TABLES



Hamsa whirled toward the officers, a gun in his right hand. Before he could use it, there was another explosion and Hamsa reeled back against the wall, his right arm hanging limp and useless, the gun which it had held falling to the floor.

“Don’t move!” The command was low and husky, but there was authority in the words and Bob, out of the corner of one eye, saw his uncle step out of the small room to the rear. From this position of advantage he had disabled Rap, the machine gunner, and wounded Hamsa. Curt, the flyer, had his hands in the air.

“Pick up their guns, Bob,” commanded his uncle and Bob picked up the machine gun and the revolver Hamsa had dropped.

“Search them!”

This time the sheriff stepped forward and with hands long experienced in that kind of work, searched even the hats of the others. A gun was taken from the flyer and a stubby but deadly pistol from Rap. These were placed on the table beside the glittering pile of diamonds.

[246]

“Got any handcuffs, sheriff?” asked Bob’s uncle after the young federal agent introduced his ally.

Two small, compact pairs were produced from the capacious pockets of the peace officer. One pair was snapped on Hamsa and the other on Curt and Rap.

While Bob and his uncle went about the task of giving first aid to Rap and Hamsa, the sheriff went down to the old wharf to inspect the boats.

When he returned, the bandaging was done, for neither wound was serious.

“We can start any time you want to,” he informed the federal men.

“Take these fellows down. We’ll be along shortly,” replied Merritt Hughes, and when Hamsa and his allies had been led away by the sheriff, he sat down on one side of the table and motioned for Bob to take a seat opposite him.

[247]

“Let’s hear your side of the story, Bob,” said his uncle as he sat down, massaging the red marks which the tightly tied ropes had made on his hands.

[248]

CHAPTER XXXVI
UNTANGLING THE WEB



It was a strange setting, the rays from the kerosene lamp on the table throwing a soft glow

over the diamonds which were still heaped on the black velvet.

Bob was anxious to tell his own story, but first he wanted to know about his uncle.

"Sure you're all right?" he asked.

"Oh, my arms and legs are still a little numb and I can't talk any too well, but I'm coming around fast now."

Bob launched into a detailed explanation of all of the events which had taken place since the disappearance of his uncle in Jacksonville.

"Luckiest thing that ever happened to me was when I ran into the sheriff," he said.

"No doubt about it," agreed his uncle. Then he went on, "The men we captured tonight are the brains of the gang. From what Hamsa said after he got here this afternoon I gathered that two more members of the gang were picked up by you and Condon Adams last night."

[249]

"That's right," said Bob. "But I can't figure out how Hamsa got down here so soon and I thought he'd never get out of the river he fell into on the way down from Washington."

"Hamsa is a tough customer," said Merritt Hughes. "He has a tremendous physique and was able to swim to shore. Then he chartered a private plane and came south."

"They've been running in the diamonds by plane all the time," said Bob.

"Curt has been their pilot. He's got a fast amphibian and last night he made contact with Hamsa near Atalissa and informed him that a large consignment would be delivered tonight. They were careful to make only the contacts with the smuggled gems here to keep suspicions away from this island."

"Where did Curt get the gems?" Bob wanted to know.

"They were brought over from Europe aboard tramp steamers. Curt would contact the ships well off the coast and then fly the smuggled stuff in at night. They were careful about the type of gems they brought in. Why these diamonds on the table could be sold almost any place without suspicion. In fact, Hamsa actually went around the country peddling them to customers who had no idea that they were smuggled property."

[250]

Bob, leaning back in his chair, looked at his uncle.

"You must have been brought directly here," he said.

"Just as fast as the fellow they call Rap could get me here. Hamsa had been in Washington. Somehow he got wind that Department of Justice men were being put on his trail and he learned that Adams and I had been sent south. It was up to Rap to get us out of the way. Then Hamsa came down and it was just luck that he met you and Tully on the train. What looked like a bad situation for us turned out all right."

Bob chuckled.

“Won’t Tully be sore when he learns that the whole case has been cleared up without him getting even as far as Jacksonville.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Tully, Bob. This is another feather in your cap. Just keep plugging away and you’ll get toward the top in the Department mighty fast.”

Merritt Hughes bent down and gathered up the smuggled gems, wrapping them in the velvet and replacing them in the leather case.

“We might as well destroy this place so that it will no longer be used for such purposes,” he said, and as he stepped out of the door behind Bob he aimed a shot at the kerosene lamp. A sheet of flame spread through the interior of the shanty and the dry wood crackled lustily as the fire ate into it.

The glow of the burning shanty illuminated the clearing and they found their way easily to the old wharf where Sheriff McCurdy and his prisoners were waiting for them. Further out the amphibian was drifting at its anchor.

“We’ll have to leave that for another trip,” smiled Merritt Hughes. “Sheriff, let’s start for town. I’m hungry and sleepy.”

With their three captives in the bow, Bob and his uncle just behind them and the sheriff at the wheel at the rear, they started out of the bayou, another successful chapter written in the bureau of investigation’s war on crime.

THE END

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