

***FRANK
L. PACKARD***



***THE WIRE
DEVILS***

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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I.

The Secret Code

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Two switch lights twinkled; one at the east, and one at the west end of the siding. For the rest all was blackness. Half way between the switch lights, snuggled close against the single-tracked main line, the station, little more than a shanty and too insignificant to boast a night operator, loomed up shadowy and indistinct. Away to the westward, like jagged points sticking up into the night and standing out in relief against the skyline, the Rockies reared their peaks. And the spell of the brooding mountains seemed to lie over all the desolate, butte-broken surrounding country—for all was utter silence.

And then there came a sound, low at first, like a strange muttering from somewhere to the westward.

It died away, grew louder, was hushed again—and broke into a sustained roar. Came then the quick, short gasps of the exhaust—it was a freight, and a heavy one. And suddenly, from up the track, circling an intervening butte, an electric headlight cut streaming through the black. It touched the little station in a queerly inquisitive way in the sweep of its arc, lingered an instant over the platform, then swung to the right of way, and held there, the metals glistening like polished silver ribbons under the flood of light.

Straining, panting at its load, reddening the sky as the fire-box door was flung open, the big tenwheeler stormed by, coughing the sparks heavenward from its stack. The roar in the still night grew deafening, as boxcar, flat and gondola,

lurching, swaying, clanking, groaning, an endless string, tugging at one another, grinding their flanges, screaming as they took up the axle play, staggered with a din infernal past the lonely and unlighted station.

The roar sank into a gradually diminishing murmur. The tail-lights winked like mischievous little red eyes in the distance—and vanished.

All was stillness and that brooding silence again.

And then a man's form, like a black shadow in the darkness, rose from the trackside, and crept to the platform, and along the platform to the station door.

The man bent forward, and the round, white ray of a pocket flashlight played upon the lock. He examined the lock for an instant appraisingly, then drew a bunch of skeleton keys from his pocket, and, selecting one of the number without hesitation, unlocked the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him.

The flashlight swept in a circle around the interior of the little station. There were but two rooms—the small waiting room which he had entered, and in which he now stood; and, partitioned off from this, the door open, a still smaller inner room, the agent's office. He moved at once into the latter, and his flashlight, swiftly now, searched around the walls and held upon the clock. It was six minutes to ten.

"Pretty close work!" muttered the man. "Six minutes to wait."

The ray travelled now over the operator's table, and from the table to the switchboard. He reached out, "cut in" the office circuit, listened for an instant as the sounder began to chatter—then the ray swept over the table again. Under a newspaper, that the day man had apparently flung down at haphazard on leaving the office, he found a pad of telegraph blanks, from which, evidently wary of the consequences of

using a pad with its resultant tell-tale impressions on the under sheets, he tore off a sheet and laid it down ready to hand before him.

This done, he nodded complacently, sat down in the operator's chair, tilted the chair back, put his feet up on the table, and coolly picked up the newspaper. It was the evening edition of the *Selkirk City Journal*, that had presumably been tossed off at the station by a charitable train crew of some late afternoon train out from the city. He held the paper in one hand, the flashlight in the other, scanned the page, which happened to be an inner one, cursorily, turned it over, and suddenly leaned forward a little in his seat. He was staring at the headline at the top right-hand corner of the front page.

**NOTORIOUS CRIMINAL RELEASED FROM SING SING
POLICE ARE WARNED THAT MAN MAY BE IN THIS
VICINITY
HARRY MAUL, ALIAS THE HAWK, KNOWN TO BE IN
THE WEST**

The telegraph sounder chattered volubly for an instant, as though to challenge and silence the raucous ticking of the clock, and ended in a splutter of wrath, as it were, at the futility of its attempt. The clock ticked on. There was no other sound. And then the man spoke aloud.

"That's me," he said. "The Hawk." The paper rattled in his hand. There was a twisted smile on his lips in the darkness. "I guess I'm pretty well known."

The Hawk's eyes fixed on the text, and he began to read:

"It is reported that Harry Maul, better known to the police as the Hawk, safe-breaker, forger and thief, one of the cleverest 'gentleman' crooks in the country, who is at large

again after a five-years' penitentiary term, is somewhere in the West.

“The crime wave that has recently been sweeping over Selkirk City and its vicinity, and particularly the daring and, in too many cases, successful outrages with which the railroad officials and detectives have been called upon to cope of late, may, as a very plausible theory, have lured the Hawk here as to a promising field in which to resume his criminal operations. Certain it is that, while we have been the victims of a band of mysterious desperadoes for some time past, the last week or so has seen a very marked increase in the number of crimes that have been committed—a significant coincidence with the Hawk's release from Sing Sing.

“A twenty-thousand-dollar diamond necklace was stolen from a private car two nights ago; there was an express car robbery on Monday of this week; and a sleeping car was thoroughly and systematically looted the night before. True, it is mere conjecture to connect the Hawk with these in any way, since the gang that has been operating in this neighbourhood has proved itself quite capable of all and more than this without any outside and highly specialised assistance, and it would appear is in no whit inferior in resource and devilish ingenuity to the best, or worst, that Sing Sing has to offer in the shape of this so-called Hawk; but, out of conjecture, one question naturally suggests itself.

“Granting the presence of the Hawk, is he here as a rival of the criminals of whose existence we are already only too well aware, or is he one of them through old-time associations before Sing Sing put a temporary check upon his activities?”

There was more—a virulent outpouring of wrath at the intolerable extent to which the community, its life and

property, was being endangered, and a promise of summary vengeance upon the criminals if caught.

“Quite so!” murmured the Hawk, lowering his feet slowly to the floor. “I guess it wouldn’t be healthy to get caught around these parts. I have a feeling that it would be the nearest telegraph pole instead of a trial!”

He tossed the newspaper back on the table. The sounder, spasmodic in its chatter, for the moment was still. All was silence, profound, absolute. Then the clock struck, loud, resonant, smashing through the silence, startling. And at the same instant the sounder broke into a quick tattoo. The Hawk snatched a pencil from his pocket, and jerked his body forward—then relaxed again.

“Stray stuff,” he muttered. “Got in ahead of him. We’ll get it in a minute now.”

Pencil poised in his hand, the flashlight playing on the blank sheet of paper before him, the Hawk waited. The sounder ceased—and almost instantly broke again, rattling sharply through the room. The Hawk nodded, as his pencil began to travel across the paper.

“‘mtlky’—stroke at five. Two-three-one tonight,” he said aloud.

Without pause, without hesitation, without the slightest indication of spacing to break its continuity, the sounder rattled on—and finally, as abruptly as it had begun, it stopped.

On the sheet of paper the Hawk had written this:

mtlkyeqodktrpcvkqlmtp kpwrtrgtftuqcyqtnt tsghv
ukopgfkxtiku kqprelcn rcatocuvgdaf gumttlvgpvjf
qwucpmtfkip uckjihg vqptkijvrsa wvpxodtt dgtqprg qplqosd

He reached out for the pad, tore off another sheet, and in two parallel columns set down the letters of the alphabet, one column transposed. There was a faint smile on his lips,

as he turned again to the cipher and began to write in another line of letters under the original message.

“I wonder what Poe and his predominant ‘e’ would do with this!” he chuckled. “‘Combi’—stroke two. Key letter—stroke three.” He frowned the next instant. “What’s this! Ah—stroke three, instead of one.” He completed the transposition, stared at the several lines which were now scattered with vertically crossed-out letters, whistled low under his breath, and a grim look settled on his face.

The message now read:

—combi—natio—ninup-perdr—eftsi—dediv—sion—al
paymasterdesk—fousan dinsaj—feton-ight-autnum—beron-
eonjob

Mechanically, he separated words and sentences, and, eliminating the superfluous letters, wrote out the translation at the bottom of the sheet:

“Combination in upper drawer left side divisional paymaster (’.) desk. Ten thousand in safe to-night. Put Number One on job.”

The Hawk stood up, “plugged out” the station circuit, and, gathering up the two sheets of paper he had used, put them in his pocket; then, leaving the door of the operator’s room open behind him, as he had found it, he stepped out from the station to the platform, and, with his skeleton key, relocked the station door. He stood for a moment staring up and down the track. The switchlights blinked back at him confidentially. He listened. The eastbound freight, from which he had jumped some twenty minutes before, would cross Extra No. 83, the westbound way freight, at Elkton, seven miles away, but there was no sound of the latter as yet.

He turned then, and, jumping from the platform to the track, swung into a dog-trot along the roadbed. The Hawk

smiled contentedly to himself. It was all timed to a nicety! A mile or so to the west, the right of way rose in a stiff grade that the way freight would be able to negotiate at no better speed than the pace at which a man could crawl. He could make the distance readily, board her there, and the way freight would get him to Selkirk—and the divisional paymaster's office!—by about midnight.

He ran on, the swing and ease of a trained athlete in his stride. And, as he ran, he took the sheets of paper from his pocket, and, tearing them into small fragments, scattered the pieces at intervals here and there.

He reached the foot of the grade, and paused to look back along the track, as suddenly from behind him came the hoarse scream of an engine whistle. That was the way freight now, whistling perfunctorily for the deserted station! He had made the grade in plenty of time, though the nearer to the top he could get the better, for the freight, requiring all the initial impetus it could attain, would hit the foot of the grade wide open.

The Hawk broke into a run again, glancing constantly back over his shoulder as he sped on up the grade. And then, when he was well on toward the summit, opening the night like a blazing disk as it rounded a curve, he caught the gleam of the headlight. It grew larger and larger, until, beginning to fling a luminous pathway up the track that, gradually lengthening, crept nearer and nearer to him, he swerved suddenly, plunged down the embankment, and, well away from the trackside, dropped flat upon the ground.

The engine, slowed, was grunting heavily on the incline as it strained by the spot where he lay; there was the glimmer of the front-end brakeman's lamp from the top of one of the forward cars—and, with a quick, appraising glance to measure the length of the train, the Hawk, on

hands and knees, crawled forward, and up the embankment, and, in the shadow of the rolling cars themselves, stood up. There would be sharp eyes watching from the cupola of the caboose. He laughed a little. And not only the train crew there, perhaps! The railroad detectives, at their wits' ends, had acquired the habit of late of turning up in the most unexpected places!

A boxcar rolled by him, another, and still another—but the Hawk's eyes were fixed a little further along toward the rear on an open space, where, in the darkness, a flat car gave the appearance of a break in the train. The flat car came abreast of him. He caught the iron foot-rung, jumped, and, with a powerful, muscular swing, flung himself aboard.

The car was loaded with some kind of carriage, or wagon, tarpaulin-covered. The Hawk crawled in under the tarpaulin, and lay down upon his back, pillowing his head on a piece of timber that blocked the carriage wheels.

The train topped the grade, gained speed, and roared on through the night. Occasionally, during what was close to a two-hours' run, it stopped at intermediate stations, and the Hawk peered furtively out from under the tarpaulin to locate the surroundings, with which he appeared to be intimately familiar; and once, nearing the end of the run, as the faint-suffused glow from the city's lights in the distance showed under the shadows of the towering peaks, he spoke aloud, "Ten thousand dollars," remarked the Hawk pleasantly. "Nice picking for a few hours' work—ten thousand dollars!"

II. The Ten-dollar Counterfeit Note

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The Hawk crawled out from under the tarpaulin and dropped to the ground, as the freight, slowing down, began to patter in over the spur switches of the Selkirk yard. He darted, bent low, across several spurs to escape the possibility of observation from the freight's caboose; then began to make his way toward the roundhouse ahead of him. He would have to pass around behind the roundhouse in order to get up opposite the station and the divisional offices. The Hawk glanced sharply about him as he moved along. He dodged here and there like some queer, irresponsible phantom flitting amongst the low, myriad red, green and purple lights that dotted the yard; and he carefully avoided those other lights, the white lights of the yardsmen, now bobbing as the men ran up and down, now swinging from the footboard of a passing switcher, that seemed to be unusually ubiquitous—for the Hawk was secretive, and for certain good and valid reasons was possessed of an earnest desire that no stranger should be reported prowling around the railroad yard that night.

He reached the roundhouse, stepped close up against the wall to take advantage of the security afforded by the shadows, and began to circle the building. The Hawk was treading silently now. Halfway around the building he halted abruptly, his head cocked suddenly in a listening attitude toward a small, open and lighted window on a level with his shoulders, and in order to pass which he had just been on the point of stooping down.

“I think,” said the Hawk softly to himself, “I think this sounds as though it interested me.”

He crept cautiously forward, and from the edge of the window glanced inside. It was the turner’s “cubbyhole,” or office. The door was closed, and two men were standing there, talking earnestly. The Hawk’s face, dimly outlined now in the window light, smooth-shaven, square-jawed, the eyes and forehead hidden by the brim of the slouch hat that was pulled forward almost to the bridge of his nose, set with a curious and significant smile. It was not a bad place for a private conference! He had thought he had recognised the voice—and he had not been mistaken. The big, heavy-built, thin-lipped, pugnacious-faced man was MacVightie, the head of the railroad’s detective force; the other, a smaller man, with alert grey eyes, his forehead furrowed anxiously, whose clenched hand rested on the table, was Lanson, the division superintendent.

“I don’t know, damn it, MacVightie!” Lanson was saying savagely. “I don’t know what to think, or believe—I only know that a Pullman hold-up one night, a twenty-thousand-dollar necklace stolen the next, an express car looted, and several other little pleasant episodes all jammed one on top of the other, means hell to pay out here and nothing to pay it with, unless we can do something almighty quick!”

“Any more of those messages?” inquired MacVightie—there was an ominous abstraction in his tones.

“Yes—to-night.”

“Make anything of it?”

“No,” said Lanson; “and I think it’s about time to put a kink in that little business, whether they mean anything or not. This cat-and-mouse game we’ve been playing isn’t—”

“We’ll get back to that in a minute,” interrupted MacVightie quietly. “Here’s a little something else that may

possibly fit into the combination.” He reached into his pocket, took out his pocketbook, opened it, and handed the division superintendent a crisp new ten-dollar note.

The Hawk’s lips thinned instantly, and he swore sharply under his breath.

“What’s this?” asked Lanson, in surprise. “Phony!” said MacVightie laconically. “Counterfeit!” Lanson turned the note over in his hands, staring at first one side and then the other. “Are you sure? I’d take it any time.”

“You’d have lots of company with you”—there was a sudden rasp in the detective’s voice. “Pretty good one, isn’t it? The East is being flooded with them. Two of them showed up in the banks here in the city yesterday, and one to-day.”

Lanson frowned perplexedly.

“I don’t get you, MacVightie,” he said.

“Suppose they were being struck off around here,” suggested MacVightie curtly. “I don’t say they are, but suppose it were so. They’d likely be shoved out as far away from this locality as possible, wouldn’t they—back East, say. They’re so good that a jag of them got by before they began to be detected—and now suppose we assume that they’re beginning to sift back around the country.”

“Well?”

“Well”—MacVightie caught the superintendent up quickly —“I didn’t say I could prove it; but, coupled with the fact that I happen to know that the police have traced the work back to somewhere west of Chicago, I’ve got a hunch that the gang that is operating around here and the crowd that is turning out the phony money is the same outfit. The Lord knows”—he smiled bitterly—“they’re clever enough! And to go back to those messages now. If there was anything in them at all, anything more than some irresponsible idiot tampering with a key somewhere, we were face to face, not

with a mere gang of train robbers, but with an organised criminal league as dangerous and powerful as has ever existed in this country—and that’s what made me hesitate. We couldn’t afford to take any chances, to start out after a mare’s nest, and we had to make as nearly sure of our ground as possible before we played a card. We went on the principle that if it was only somebody playing the goat, he’d get tired of it before long if no one paid any attention to him; if it meant anything more than that, he’d keep on.” MacVightie’s pugnacious face screwed up into a savage grimace. “Well, maybe this counterfeiting idea has had something to do with deciding me, but, anyway, I’m satisfied now. He *has* kept on. And I’m satisfied now that those messages are a cipher code that the gang is using, and that our cat-and-mouse play, as you call it, instead of being abortive, is exactly what’s going to land our men for us. That’s one thing I came to tell you to-night—that I’m ready now to take the gloves off on this wire game.”

Lanson smashed his fist down on the table top. “Good!” he exclaimed grimly. “I’d like to make things hot for somebody, and it’ll at least be easy enough to catch whoever is using the wire.” MacVightie shook his head.

“Oh, no; it won’t!” he said evenly. “I didn’t mean to give you that impression, and don’t you make the mistake of under-estimating the brains we’re up against, Lanson. I’m no expert on telegraphy, that’s your end of it, but I know they wouldn’t sit in on any game where they didn’t hold trumps up their sleeves. Get me? Now let’s see what it looks like. As I understand it, these messages, no matter from what point on the division they are sent, would be heard on every sounder on the line—that’s right, isn’t it?”

“Yes—sure! Of course!” agreed Lanson.

“And it might be an operator working with them as an inside man; or, with the necessary outfit, the wire could be tapped at any point, couldn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Lanson; “but the minute he starts in, we could begin to ‘ground’ him out.”

“Go on!” invited MacVightie. “I’m listening.”

“We could tell whether he was working east or west of any given point,” explained the superintendent; “and, with the operators instructed beforehand, practically narrow him down to, say, between two stations.”

The Hawk, as he, too, listened, permitted an amused smile to flicker across his lips.

“Um!” said MacVightie. “And would he be aware that this ‘grounding’ process was going on?”

“Yes—naturally,” admitted Lanson. “We can’t prevent that.”

MacVightie shook his head again.

“That doesn’t sound good to me,” he said slowly. “All he’d have to do would be to beat it then—and the next time start in fifty miles away, and you’d have to begin all over again. And, besides, who’s *receiving* the messages? You can’t put any tabs on that. Every sounder from Selkirk City to Rainy River registers them, and all a man’s got to do is *listen*. You see, Lanson, it’s not so easy—eh?”

Lanson frowned.

“Well, what do you suggest?” he asked uncomfortably. “We can stop it.”

“But we don’t *want* to stop it!” returned MacVightie. “We could have done that from the first. What we want is our man now. And it strikes me that the first thing to do is to find out whether one of our own operators is in on this or not. Unless the line is tapped somewhere, it’s a cinch that a station key is being used, isn’t it? Send some linemen that

you can trust over the division. If they find anything at all, they'll find the spot where the messages are coming from, won't they? If they find nothing, we'll know we've got to look nearer home—amongst our own men."

Lanson, in his turn, shook his head.

"Not necessarily," he objected. "We've a number of small stations where there's no night operator. They might have got into one of those. The messages all come through at night."

"Well, I'll call the turn there!" responded Mac-Vightie, with a short laugh. "See that I get a list of those stations in the morning, and I'll detail men to take care of that end of it."

The Hawk drew back a little, shifting his strained position—the amused smile was no longer on his lips.

"And as for that 'ground' business," went on Mac-Vightie, "go slow with it till you get your linemen's report. Don't do any more than try it out with some operator you can absolutely depend upon, say, about halfway down the line. You say you would be able to tell whether the messages were coming from east or west of that point; that'll cut the division in half for us as far as our search is concerned, and that's worth taking a chance on. But don't overdo it, Lanson. We don't want to throw any scare into him—yet."

"All right," agreed Lanson. "I'll start things moving to-night. Martin, at Bald Creek, will be the best man, I guess. I'll send a letter down to him on No. 8."

"And warn him to make no reports by *wire*," cautioned MacVightie.

"All right—yes, naturally," agreed the superintendent again. Then, after a short pause, anxiously: "Anything turned up at all, MacVightie? Any clue to that necklace? The

governor's wife is making a holler that's reached from here to the road's directors down in Wall Street."

"Damn it," growled MacVightie. "I'm well enough aware of it—but the necklace isn't any more important than any one of the other affairs, is it? No; there's nothing—not a blamed thing!"

"Well, what about this Sing Sing convict, the Hawk, that the papers are featuring to-night?" Lanson asked. "Anything in that?"

"I don't know—maybe," McVightie answered viciously. "He's only one more, anyway. This gang was operating before he was released—and it's likely enough, if they're old pals of his, that he's come out here to give them a hand. The New York police say he went to Chicago immediately after his release, two weeks ago. The Chicago police reported him there, and then he disappeared; then Denver spotted him a few days later—and that's the last that's been seen of him. You can make what you like of that. He's certainly been hitting a pretty straight trail west. He wasn't stopped, of course, because he isn't 'wanted' at present; he's only a man with a bad record, and labelled dangerous. We were warned to look out for him, that's all."

"Got his description?" inquired Lanson.

"Yes"—MacVightie's laugh was a short bark. "Medium height, broad-shouldered, muscular, black hair, black eyes, straight nose, good-looking, and gentlemanly in appearance and manner, dresses well, age twenty-four to twenty-six, no distinctive marks or disfigurement."

"There's probably not more than twenty-five thousand men in Selkirk City who would answer to every detail of that!" Lanson commented sarcastically.

"Exactly!" admitted MacVightie. "And that's——"

The Hawk was creeping forward again in the shadows of the roundhouse.

“Yes, I guess it interested me,” muttered the Hawk; “I guess it did. I guess I’m playing in luck to-night.”

III.

The Paymaster's Safe

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From the roundhouse it was only a few yards to the rear of the long, low-lying freight sheds and, unobserved, the Hawk gained this new shelter. He stole quickly along to the further end of the sheds; and there, crouched down again in the shadows, halted to make a critical survey of his surroundings. .

Just in front of him, divided only by a sort of driveway for the convenience of the teamsters, was the end wall of the station, and, in the end wall—the window of the divisional paymaster's office. The Hawk glanced to his left. The street upon which the station fronted, an ill-savoured section of the city, was dark, dimly lighted, and deserted; the only sign of life being the lighted windows of a saloon on the corner of a narrow lane that bisected the block of somewhat disreputable, tumble-down wooden structures that faced the station. To his right, on the other side of the freight shed, the railroad yard had narrowed down to the station tracks and a single spur alongside the shed. There was no one in sight in either direction.

The Hawk's eyes strayed back to the paymaster's window. The station, like its surrounding neighbours, was an old wooden building; and, being low and only two-storied, the second-story window offered inviting possibilities. From the sill of the lower window, a man who was at all agile had the upper window at his mercy. Against this mode of attack, however, was the risk of being seen by any one who might

pass along the street, or by any one who might chance upon the end of the station platform.

“What’s the use!” decided the Hawk, with an abrupt shrug of his shoulders. “Play safe. There’s a better way.”

The Hawk crept across the driveway, reached the street side of the station, peered cautiously around the corner of the building, and, satisfied that he was unobserved, edged down along the building for a short distance, paused in a doorway, glanced quickly about him again—and then the door opened and closed, and he was standing in a murky passageway, that was lighted only by a single incandescent far back by a stair well.

He stood motionless, listening. From above, through the stillness, came the faint drumming of a telegraph key. There should be no one upstairs now but the dispatcher, whose room was at the opposite end of the building from the paymaster’s office—and, possibly, with the dispatcher, a call boy or two. And the hallway above, he could see, was dark.

Moving stealthily forward, as noiseless as a cat in his tread, the Hawk took a mask from his pocket, slipped it over his face, and began to mount the stairs. He gained the landing—and halted again. It was pitch black here, since even the door of the dispatcher’s room, where there would be a light, was closed.

And then once more the Hawk moved forward—and an instant later, the paymaster’s door at the extreme end of the corridor, under the deft persuasion of his skeleton keys, had closed behind him.

It was not quite so dark here. The lights from the platform and the yard filtered in through the window in a filmy sort of way; but it was too dark to distinguish objects in anything more than grotesque, shapeless outlines.

The Hawk produced his flashlight, and turned it upon the lock he had just picked. It was a spring lock, opened readily from the inside by the mere turning of the doorhandle. He tried it carefully, assuring himself that it could not be opened from the corridor without a key—and then his light swept around the room. It played in its circuit upon the paymaster's flat-topped desk against the wall, and upon a large safe in the corner, near the window, whose polished nickel dial sent back an answering flash under the darting ray; but the Hawk, for the moment, appeared to be interested in neither desk nor safe. The flashlight was holding in a kind of dogged inquisitiveness upon another door close to the window, and directly opposite the safe.

He stepped without a sound across the room, and, reaching this door, snapped off his flashlight. He tried the door cautiously, found it unlocked, and very softly opened it the space of an inch. He listened attentively. There was no sound. He pushed the door open, switched on his flashlight again, and stepped through the doorway. It appeared to be a clerks' office—for the paymaster's staff, presumably. The Hawk seemed to possess a peculiar penchant for doors. The only thing in the room that apparently held any interest for him now was the door that opened, like the paymaster's, upon the corridor. He slipped quickly across the room, and, as before, examined the lock. Like the other, it was a spring lock; and, like the other, he tested it to make sure it was locked on the outside.

"Ten thousand dollars," confided the Hawk to the lock, "isn't to be picked up every night; and we can't afford to take any chances, you know."

He began to retrace his steps toward the paymaster's office, but now, obviously, with more attention to the details

of his surroundings, for his flashlight kept dancing quick, jerky flashes in all directions about him.

“Ah!” The exclamation, low-breathed, came suddenly. “I thought there ought to be something like this around here!”

From, beside a desk, he stooped and picked up an empty pay satchel; then, returning at once to the other office, but leaving the connecting door just ajar, he dropped the pay bag in front of the safe, and went silently over to the desk—a mouse running across the floor would have made more commotion than the Hawk had made since his entry into the station.

“... Upper drawer, left side,” he muttered, “Locked, of course—ah!” A tiny key, selected from its fellow outlaws, was inserted in the lock—and the Hawk pulled out the drawer, and began to rummage through its contents.

From the back of the drawer, after perhaps a minute’s search, he picked up a card, and with a nod of satisfaction began to study it.

““Left—two right; eighty-seven, one quarter—left; three...” The Hawk’s eyes travelled swiftly over the combination. He read it over again, “Thank you!” murmured the Hawk whimsically—and dropped the card back in the drawer, and locked the drawer.

A moment more, and the white beam of the flashlight was playing on the face of the safe, and the silence of the room was broken by the faint, musical, metallic whirring of the dial. Bent forward, a crouching form in the darkness, the Hawk worked swiftly, a sure, deft accuracy in every movement of his fingers. With a low thud, as he turned the handle, the heavy bolt shot back in its grooves, and the ponderous door swung open. And now the flashlight’s ray flooded the interior of the safe, and the Hawk laughed low—before him, lying on the bottom of the safe, neatly banded

as they had come from the bank, were a dozen or fifteen little packages of banknotes.

The Hawk dropped on his knees, and reached for the pay bag. Ten thousand dollars was not so bulky, after all—if the denominations of the notes were large enough. He riffled one package through his fingers—twenties! Gold, yellow-back twenties!

There was a sort of beatific smile on the Hawk's lips. He dropped the package into the bag.

Tens, and twenties, and fives—the light, in a curiously caressing way, was lingering on the little fortune as it lay there on the bottom of the safe. There was only a pile or two of ones, and the rest was—*what was that!*

The smile vanished from the Hawk's lips, and, in a rigid, tense, strained attitude, he hung there, motionless. What was that—that dull, rasping, sound! It was like some one clawing at the wall outside. The *window!*

With a single motion, as though stirred to life by some galvanic shock, the Hawk's hand shot out and swept the packages of banknotes into the bag. He snapped off his flashlight. The room was in darkness.

That sound again! And now a creak! The window was being opened. Something black was bulking there on the sill outside—and something queerly white, a man's face, was pressed against the pane, peering in.

The Hawk glanced sharply around him. Inch by inch he was pushing the safe door shut. He could not reach the door leading to the clerks' office, for he would have to pass by the window, and—he shrank back quickly, the safe door closed but still unlocked, and crouched low in the corner against the wall. The window slid up to the top, and with a soft *pad*, like some animal alighting on the floor, the man had sprung into the room.

The Hawk's fingers crept into his pocket and out again, tight-closed now upon an automatic pistol. The other's flashlight winked, went out, then shot across the room, locating the desk—and once more all was darkness.

There was not a sound now, save the short, hurried breathing of the other, panting from the exertion of his climb. Then the man's step squeaked faintly crossing the room—and the Hawk, a few inches at a time, began to edge along the wall away from the neighbourhood of the safe.

Then the man's flashlight gleamed again, lighting up the top of the desk. There was a sharp, ripping sound, as of the tearing of wood under pressure, and the upper drawer, forced open by a steel jimmy, was pulled out.

"Birds of a feather!" said the Hawk grimly to himself. "Number One, of the Wire Devils! I didn't beat him to it by as much margin as I thought I would!"

The Hawk shifted his automatic to the hand that was clutching the pay bag, and, with the other hand, began to feel in wide sweeps over the wall above his head. The electric-light switch, he had noticed in that first quick glance when he had entered the room, a glance that had seemed to notice nothing, and yet in which nothing had escaped the sharp, trained eyes, was somewhere about here.

"Dangerous—for both of us—if it's seen outside," communed the Hawk with himself again. "But when he finds the safe unlocked, and the goods gone, there'll be trouble. If he gets a flashlight on me, he's got me where he wants me. Ah—here it is!" The Hawk's fingers touched the switch. He lowered the pay bag cautiously to the floor between his feet, his automatic free in his hand again.

There was a rustling of papers in the drawer; then the man's hand, holding a card, was outlined as though thrown upon a screen, as, with his other hand, he focused his