

The Black Star

A Detective Story

BY

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THE BLACK STAR



CHAPTER I



AN AIDED ESCAPE

WINDS whistled up the river, and winds whistled down from the hills, and they met to swirl and gather fury and rattle the city's millions of window-panes. They carried a mixture of sleet and fine snow, the first herald of the winter to come. In the business district they swung signs madly back and forth, and roared around the corners of high office buildings, and swept madly against struggling trolley cars. They poured through the man-made cañons; they dashed out the broad boulevards—and so they came to the attention of Mr. Roger Verbeck, at about the hour of midnight, as he turned over in his warm bed and debated whether to rise and lower the window or take a chance with the rapidly lowering temperature.

“Beastly night!” Verbeck confided to himself, and put his head beneath the covers.

He slept—and suddenly he awakened. A moment before he had been in the midst of a pleasant dream; now every sense was alert, and his right hand, creeping softly under the cover, reached the side of the bed and grasped an automatic pistol that hung in a rack there.

From the adjoining room—his library—there came no flash of an electric torch, no footfall, sound foreign to the apartment, nothing to indicate the presence of an intruder. Yet Verbeck sensed that an intruder was there.

He slipped quietly from the bed, shivering a bit because of the cold wind, put his feet into slippers, and drew on a dressing gown over his pajamas. Then, his pistol held ready for use in case of emergency, he started across the bedroom, taking short steps and walking on his toes.

A reflection, entered the room from the arc light on the nearest street corner. This uncertain light was shut off for an instant, and Verbeck whirled quickly, silently, to find another man slipping up beside him: It was Muggs—a little, wiry man of uncertain age, who had been in Verbeck's employ for several years, valet at times, comrade in arms at times, willing adventurer always. Muggs bent forward until his lips were close to Verbeck's ear.

“I heard it, too, boss,” he said. “Somebody in the library!”

Verbeck nodded; they crept nearer the door. Inch by inch, Verbeck pulled aside one of the curtains, until they could peer into the other room. A gleam from the corner arc light penetrated the library, too. It revealed the interior of the room in a sort of semi-gloom, causing elusive shadows that flitted here and there in such

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now. The motor cyclist left his place of seclusion and walked forward slowly, head bent as if against the force of the storm.

“Home, Muggs!”

The man who had taken Muggs' place reached forward as he heard the words and found the seat beside him occupied. And for the second time that evening he turned swiftly and discharged a cloud of vapor from the pistol he carried. For the second time also that vapor rendered a man unconscious instantly.

“Great! Walked right into the trap!” It was the motor cyclist who spoke. He got into the car and aided his companion in putting the second unconscious man in the rear, under the robe. “Better let her out now!” he went on. “We've got 'em both—Verbeck and Muggs. I reckon we caught 'em off their guard. They didn't expect to get that vapor stuff right here on the boulevard. Great idea of the boss to always give a man what he doesn't expect! I guess this'll put a crimp into young and handsome Mr. Verbeck. Nail the boss, will he? Huh!”

The other had turned the roadster, and now it darted up the boulevard at a speed perilously near the limit allowed by city ordinance. From the mouth of the alley darted the light truck, and took up the pursuit. The driver of it was chuckling again, evidently at the ease with which the Black Star's men had made Verbeck and Muggs captives.

The Verbeck roadster led the way up the boulevard, and, after a time, turned into a side street. Down a long hill it dashed, with the light truck following less than a block behind. Traffic was passing in both directions, but the speed of roadster and truck did not diminish to any great extent.

Now the residence district was left behind, and the two machines were passing through the dark wholesale district. Here the truck dropped a short distance behind, and its driver glanced around frequently to see whether any other machine was following.

And then a railroad crossing was reached, and the roadster was forced to stop against the gates while a long freight train was pulled slowly by. The truck drove up and stopped behind it. The driver got down and stepped across the sidewalk and into a cheap saloon on the corner there. He came out again almost instantly, puffing at a cigar he had purchased. He stood beside his truck, looking at the train, shaking the raindrops from his coat collar. The two men in the front seats of the roadster glanced at him, but apparently he gave them no attention.

The end of the train rattled past; the gates began to lift. The roadster started slowly forward across the tracks. The man who had been driving the truck gave a quick spring—and landed on the rear of the roadster, where there was a broad bulge in the body, with an extra wheel lashed upon it. Top and curtains were up; the men in the roadster could not see him.

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They were in the poorer part of the city now, and presently at the end of the paved streets. Here there began a road that curved along the river, and, after striking this road, the man driving the roadster got all speed possible out of his machine. The other crept into the rear end, lifted the robe, gave the two prisoners fresh shots from the vapor gun, and then bound and gagged them.

On and on they rushed through the night, the wheels hurling mud in all directions, the brilliant headlights cutting a path through the darkness.

They came to a bridge, and so crossed the river. Here the man who rode on the rear end of the car was exposed twice as it flashed under the bridge lights, but no bridge tender observed him. It was a bad night—the tenders merely stepped to the doors of their tiny houses, saw that a motor car was passing, and let it go at that.

On the other side of the river, the speed of the car decreased. After a time the machine was driven from the main road into a sort of lane. Here the going was slower yet, for the mud was deep and the roadbed cut into deep ruts. The car lurched from side to side in such fashion that the man who rode behind was almost hurled off.

He could hear the men in the car talking now.

“Nearly there—better dim the headlights,” one of them was saying.

Instantly the headlights were dimmed, and in the semidarkness the car plowed on through the mud. Now it approached an old house, from one window of which a light flashed. The car was stopped. The man who had been riding behind dropped off into the mud and crept through the black night toward the fence.

One at a time, the two unconscious prisoners were taken from the roadster, carried through a gate up a walk, and to the front door of the old house. A bell would tinkle, the door would be opened, the prisoner handed over. After that had been done, the roadster, with all lights out, was turned around and left in front of the gate. Then the men who had accomplished the abduction entered the house, and the one light that had shone from a window was extinguished.

Now the man who had been crouching against the fence moved rapidly, yet with extreme caution. He crept past the gate, and where a great tree threw its branches over the fence he vaulted over. Standing against the trunk of the tree, he waited for a time in silence, listening intently for some noise that would tell of a human being near. He heard nothing but the moaning of the wind, the beating of the river against the shore, the soft patter of the rain on the leaves.

He crept forward again, a few feet at a time, and finally reached the side of the house. He listened near a window, but could hear nothing. He found the window fastened, went on to another, and found that locked also.

Now he sensed something near him, but it seemed to be animal

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rather than human. His hand dived into a pocket and came out with one of the Black Star's vapor guns. With his back against the side of the house, he listened and waited.

He was sure now that he could hear breathing. Then he made out two eyes glaring at him in the darkness. Those eyes seemed to flicker for an instant, and in that instant the man lurched quickly to one side.

A body fell against him; he heard a snarl. He sank to his knees, grasped a hairy throat, discharged the vapor gun, and felt the body relax. His hands worked swiftly in the darkness on a mission of exploration. He was chuckling again as he got upon his feet. So the Black Star did not depend wholly on human beings to guard him—he had trained dogs!

Should there be another dog, he might sound an alarm before the vapor gun got in its work. The prowler knew that, and so he hesitated no longer, but hurried around the end of the house. Here he found a cellar window unlocked. A moment later he was inside the house.

He had an electric torch in a pocket, but feared to flash it here. Again he listened for a time, and then felt his way around the wall, and so came to a flight of steps. Up these he crept, to find a locked door at the top.

Once more he listened, and seemed to hear voices coming from a distance. He reached in another pocket, drew forth a key of peculiar shape, and worked at the lock of the door for some time. On the other side a key fell out with a clatter. He waited fully a minute, scarcely daring to breathe, but decided at the end of that time that the noise made by the falling key had not been heard.

Now he turned the knob, and presently opened the door half an inch. Bit by bit he threw it back, and finally stepped into the room. He closed the door behind him as carefully as he had opened it, and even searched and found the key and locked the door again. Hurrying noiselessly across the room, he entered another, and finally passed into a narrow hallway. He carried the vapor gun in one hand now and his electric torch in the other. At any instant, he knew, discovery might come. Some place in that hall a door might be opened, and light flood it. He was liable to stumble against one of the Black Star's men in the darkness. When he reached the other end of the hall he stopped to listen again. Once more he heard voices coming as if from a distance, and decided that they came from some room on the second floor. He was bold enough to flash his torch once now, and discovered a rear staircase. To this he made his way, and up it, and into a hallway on the second floor.

Now he felt that he was on more dangerous ground. He could hear the voices plainly, and could locate the room from which they came. Toward the front of the hall a thin streak of light streamed from beneath a door.

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He managed to slip into the room adjoining that from which the light came. After listening for some time there, he flashed his torch again. The room was large, bare, dusty. On one side were two windows, the panes filmed with dirt. On the opposite side from which he had entered was another door, with some old curtains hanging before it.

He crept across to this door, careful that the boards of the floor did not creak with his steps. He bent and peered through a keyhole into the room beyond. He did not chuckle now, for a chuckle might have meant disaster, but he did smile, and the expression on his face was one of lively satisfaction. He had arrived at an opportune moment.

Caution remained with him, however. He hurried back across the room and locked the door with the key from his pocket. Then he journeyed to one of the windows and made sure that it was unlocked and that from it a man easily could drop to the ground. That done, he went back to the keyhole again and bent down to watch.

As he took up his position a deep voice came from the other room, a voice that seemed to be issuing orders in a tone that meant the speaker generally had his orders obeyed instantly.

“All ready now! Bring those two back to earth, and we’ll have the show!” the voice said. “Number Ten, get out of the house and down to the river and see that everything is prepared. It is now nine-thirty o’clock, and we want to leave about eleven.”

CHAPTER XXVII

IN BLACK STAR’S HANDS

THE man who peered through the keyhole saw a large room, furnished lavishly. The furniture was massive and antique; the rugs on the floor were valuable; tapestries of rare worth were there; cut glass was on a heavy buffet at one side of the room; an antique lamp standing near the center of the room shed an uncertain yellow light that made some things look grotesque and others fantastic.

At the end of a long table and beside this lamp stood the Black Star, his robe and hood and mask in place and the star of flaming jet flashing on the hood. Behind him was the blackboard upon which he wrote orders to those of his band not enough trusted to hear his voice. To one side were six members of the band, each dressed in black robe and mask.

On two chairs a short distance in front of him, their hands and feet bound and their mouths gagged, were the two prisoners of the roadster. As the man of mystery watched, one of the Black Star’s followers approached the chairs, and for an instant he held a small sponge beneath the nostrils of each of the two men.

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He stepped back near the others. A moment passed, and then Muggs groaned and opened his eyes. Those eyes seemed to flash fire when he took in the scene.

“Well, my dear Muggs, here we are again,” the Black Star said, laughing a little. “You regain consciousness a second sooner than Mr. Verbeck, as I have noticed before. That, I presume, is because you are a tougher specimen of humanity.”

“You—you—” Muggs stammered.

“What’s this? Your gag has slipped? That is well, for I was about to have it removed, anyway. So you can talk, eh?”

Muggs waved his head from side to side and caused the gag to slip again.

“I’d talk to you with my fists if I had th’ chance!” Muggs said.

“There you go again—always violence! I have wondered many times how Mr. Verbeck can put up with you. Ah, Mr. Verbeck is in the land of the conscious again, I perceive!”

Muggs turned his head and looked at the man beside him. Then he faced the Black Star again.

“Them ropes on his arms are too tight and that gag’s chokin’ him,” Muggs complained. “You treat me rough if you want, but you treat my boss decent or I’ll have somethin’ to say to you some time.”

“You scarcely are in a position to threaten just now, Mr. Muggs,” the Black Star replied, laughing. “However, Muggs, it is not my intention to cause Mr. Verbeck any great degree of physical discomfort. Mental discomfort, of course, is another thing.”

He made a motion, and one of his men hurried forward and removed the gag. He looked at the ropes, too, but shook his head as he regained his former position at the Black Star’s left.

“There, Muggs, are you satisfied?” the Black Star asked. “Your beloved master has had his gag removed, and may talk or shriek to his heart’s content. My man indicates, however, that the ropes are all right. You cannot tempt me, Muggs. Once, or twice before you and Mr. Verbeck were able to unfasten your bonds. I want nothing like that to happen to-night.”

He walked around the end of the table and toward the two prisoners, and he laughed aloud as he looked down upon them.

“Well, Roger Verbeck, here is the Black Star’s new headquarters,” he said. “You often have wished to see the place, I believe, so take a look. You still think you can match wits with the Black Star, eh? I have done as I threatened. I have had you and Muggs abducted, and I am going to take you along to-night when we do our little trick, and then leave you unconscious on the spot for the city to laugh at. Aren’t you about ready to admit that the Black Star is too crafty for you?”

“Scarcely,” came the reply in a firm voice.

“Why, my men tell me it was like kidnaping babies to get you and Muggs to-night. It really was a shame to do it: So you are going

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to continue your efforts to capture me, eh?"

"I am—certainly!"

"Um! Your voice almost has the note of fear in it. You do not seem as sure as you did the last time I had the pleasure of entertaining you for a few minutes."

"A few minutes is right!" Muggs put in. "You've got your dirty hands on us three times now, but you've never kept us longer than a few minutes. And you'll not keep us to-night—"

"I fear you err, my dear Muggs. I am taking no chances with you or your precious master to-night. As I live, Mr. Verbeck, your face appears changed. Your cheeks are somewhat thinner. That comes, I suppose, from living in continual fear of me. Let me see! Um! It has been about three weeks since I informed you of my intention to abduct you and make you a laughingstock again. You've been worrying about it all that time, eh? Been fearing to sleep or eat or ride abroad? Small wonder your face is thinner and your voice expresses fatigue."

"He's been off his feed!" Muggs blurted out. "And he's had a bad cold. You needn't think me, or my boss, either, would let anything you said throw a scare into us!"

"Indeed? Had a bad cold, eh? I truly am sorry I did not give you this little entertainment when you were in good physical condition. But everything is prepared, Mr. Verbeck, and also you neglected to inform me you had a cold and wanted to discontinue this fight until you were better."

The Black Star laughed again as at a good joke, and Muggs growled imprecations deep down in his throat, but the other man merely looked the Black Star straight in the eyes and remained silent.

"I trust you understand the program, Mr. Verbeck," the master criminal went on, his laugh at an end. "It has been about six months since you made your foolish boast that you could capture me. You should know by this time that it is an impossibility. However, you have had some excellent fun trying it, and I have enjoyed the battle immensely. But now, it must end. It is getting to be a bore."

"Really?"

"Exactly. You're a sportsman, I believe. I'll make a deal with you. If Roger Verbeck does not capture the Black Star within the next twenty-four hours, after being right here and seeing the Black Star's headquarters, and being taken by the Black Star to the scene of to-night's crime—then Roger Verbeck gives his word of honor that he'll stop his feeble attempt and not bother the Black Star more."

"Roger Verbeck does nothing of the sort!"

"Still determined, eh? Very well. Then, Mr. Verbeck, we are going to take you and your man Muggs with us. We're going to give you a dose from a vapor gun and leave you where the crime is committed, as I said we'd do. We'll give the alarm ourselves and have

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the police find you two there unconscious. Then let the public laugh! I fancy you'll hear a howl go up for you to be ordered off the case. I'd not be surprised if you were hounded out of this town, which has been your home all your life."

"I think not."

"Which shall you do—make the deal I proposed or be made a public laughingstock again?"

"I make no deals with a crook!"

"And what's more, you're wastin' your breath," Muggs put in. "You leave my boss alone! He's about half sick. He's said a hundred times that you'll get too fresh some day. Some day you'll overlook a bet, make a mistake, and then he'll get you. And I'll be right there, I hope when the gettin's got!"

"You are a very boisterous man, Muggs," the master criminal said. "You'd be very vicious, I imagine, under some circumstances. Please do not be so violent. I abhor violence."

"You're right; you'll abhor it if I ever get my hands on you proper!" Muggs exclaimed.

The Black Star brought the palms of his hands together sharply.

"Enough of this chatter!" he commanded. "We have scant time before leaving here for the scene of the evening's festivities. You have decided, Mr. Verbeck, to be made a laughingstock! Very well!"

"And where is this to take place?" came the question.

"Ah! Roger Verbeck thinks I fear to tell him in advance, does he? Why, sir, I'm even tell you every detail of the proposed crime, if you wish. You are most certainly my prisoner, and cannot warn the police, and, could you, it would avail those stupid police nothing. One could steal the buttons off their uniforms and they'd not know it until the next day."

"I'm listening!"

"Such impatience!" the Black Star exclaimed. "Attend me closely, then, Mr. Verbeck—you also, Muggs. Little good it'll do you! It is my intention to-night to reap a harvest of some three hundred thousand dollars in money and securities. Quite ambitious—that? Merely an ordinary task for the Black Star, I assure you."

"You're the original shrinkin' onion!" Muggs declared

"Silence, please, while I explain. The money and securities I mentioned are in the vaults of the National Trust Company. Those vaults are impregnable, it is said. This is a joke, of course. With us it will be as easy to get that fortune as it would be to purchase a new cravat."

"You're some modest violet!" said Muggs.

"Keep quiet, Muggs, and hear the plans," the Black Star said, his eyes glittering through his mask. "Within the past two months there has been formed in the city a new lodge called the Knights of Certainty. When one understands things that title is rather a good joke. Many good men have heard of the order and wondered why some

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one did not ask them to join, I presume. The membership was strictly limited. Members of my own band form the lodge.”

“And you’re the supreme boss crook!” Muggs said.

“Another remark, Muggs, and you get the vapor gun. Mr. Verbeck, you’d better warn your man to remain silent!” The Black Star evidently was getting angry.

Muggs turned his head and found his fellow prisoner indicating that he was to be quiet. Muggs obeyed.

“It would be a difficult task to get into a meeting of the Knights of Certainty,” the Black Star went on. “We’re mighty particular who sees things. I may mention that, from the moment we hired our hall and put in furniture, the room has been under close guard, one of our own men even doing the janitor work. This hall is on the third floor of the American Building, adjoining the National Trust Company. We have been making our preparations nightly, of course, working from our hall. Some excellent carpenter and mechanical work has been done, and now, when we wish, we have merely to pass through a wall to a stairway and then make our way over a trail we have prepared to the vaults of the bank and loot them.

“Everything is prepared, I assure you. At this moment my men are in the uniforms of the watchmen, and doing their work. There will be no one to molest us. The vault locks have been fixed so that a few turns of the knobs will unlock them, and yet an expert would swear that time locks and other protections are in perfect working order. It has taken us some time to get this state of affairs prepared, but the reward will be well worth our trouble. The bank received a heavy gold shipment two weeks ago. Negotiable securities are piled in the vaults. The bank, in addition, always carries a heavy cash balance, for it has numerous branches and small affiliated banks. Yes—I fancy we will be well repaid for the work we have put on it.”

“If you get the stuff!” said Muggs.

The Black Star whirled toward him, and one of his men stepped forward, but the master criminal decided to let the remark pass. He walked to the head of the table and glanced at his watch.

“We start in half an hour,” he said. “Number Six, go down to the river and inform Number Ten to be ready to get away instantly.”

Once more he faced his prisoners.

“How do you like my new headquarters?” he asked. “Only a few chosen and trusted men of mine come here. This is a ramshackle old house, but I have three rooms fixed up comfortably. And there are things of value in it, believe me! I find it advisable to dispose of loot slowly. I’d hate to flood the market and lower prices.”

He laughed again, and once more turned toward his men. For a moment he conversed with them in whispers, ignoring his prisoners. A bell tinkled presently; the Black Star touched a button on the end of the table, and a few seconds later the man who had been sent away returned.

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“Everything ready, chief,” he reported in a low tone.

“Ah! Number Four, telephone Main 5782, ask for Gregg, and say that Mr. Stewart will have four cases of eggs to-morrow. That will tell those at the other end that we are starting.”

The man designated moved swiftly across the room to the telephone and sent the message. The Black Star waved a hand, and another man approached the two prisoners, a vapor gun in his hand. They twisted and turned in their bonds, but the gun did its work; the Black Star laughed again as their heads fell forward.

“Clever Mr. Verbeck and clever Mr. Muggs,” he said. “Their attempts to capture me are childish, to say the least. Get ready now, for we must be off.”

The men removed their robes and masks and put on overcoats and soft hats. The Black Star took off his robe, but his hood and mask remained in place, and the overcoat he donned had a wide collar that, when turned up, effectually hid his face. No one, without looking at him squarely under a bright light, could have seen the mask.

The master criminal waved, his hand, and his men picked up the two unconscious prisoners. He led the way, and they followed, and the last man out turned off the light. Their steps sounded in the front hallway, the door latch clicked—they were gone.

The man who had been watching all this through the keyhole chuckled aloud now, and presently he opened the door with his key and slipped into the headquarters room.

There he stood for some minutes to listen, for he wanted to be sure that he was alone in the house, and then he crossed the room to the telephone, took down the receiver, and called a number in a soft voice.

The number was that of police headquarters.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE POLICE LAUNCH

DOWN on the bank of the river a speedy launch was concealed under overhanging trees. Two men were waiting in it when the Black Star, his other followers, and the two prisoners arrived. The prisoners, still bound, were stretched on a robe in the bottom, the Black Star and his men got aboard, and the launch slipped almost noiselessly out into the stream and started down it toward the city.

The craft showed its lights properly, but it kept away from all other vessels, and the men aboard crouched down low and spoke in whispers. In time the two prisoners groaned and opened their eyes, the effect of the vapor having worn off, and at a sign from the Black Star one of his men inspected bonds and gags and made sure that

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they were secure. The Black Star did not want any slip this night with a fortune at stake.

“Your attitude this evening puzzles me, Mr. Verbeck,” the master criminal whispered in a sarcastic tone. “You do not seem to be your usual self. Three or four times now I have had you as prisoner, and we have exchanged some conversation, and while I cannot say that I know you well, yet you do not seem the Verbeck of old. Apparently you have given up the fight; you are passive. Been worrying, eh? Afraid I’ll abduct your fiancée, as I almost did once, and through her force you to join my band? Stop your silly attempt to capture me, Verbeck, and your worry will end. No? Very well, then!”

Muggs gurgled behind his gag at this baiting of his comrade, and the Black Star laughed at his ineffectual attempt to speak and at the angry glint in his eyes.

“Nor do you seem to be up to standard, my dear Muggs,” he went on. “I am disgusted with you this evening. Here you have been in my power for a couple of hours, and have not made a violent move. Generally you manage to slip your ropes by some clever means. Losing your fighting spirit, are you?”

Muggs gurgled again, and the Black Star laughed softly and turned away.

“We do not go into a wharf,” he told his men. “We will take no chances of the police being informed and in wait for us. We stop at a certain place and transfer to touring cars. Get those fantastic robes from the locker and dress Verbeck and Muggs in them. We’ll mask them, too, and so, when we reach the city, if any one gets inquisitive we are merely initiating two gentlemen into the Knights of Certainty.”

They were halfway to the city now, and his men began carrying out his orders. Suddenly the engineer of the launch growled something, shut off the power, cut out all the lights, and let the craft drift

“Police launch!” he hissed over his shoulder.

Up the river and directly at them rushed a high-powered craft that was hurling back the water from her bows. Her searchlight was sweeping the river. The Black Star growled orders, his men stretched beside him on the bottom, and the engineer hurled quantities of sacks over them. Then he snapped on the lights again and started the launch forward slowly, for he would be able to escape suspicion that way better than if discovered by the searchlight and found to be drifting without lights burning.

For a moment the searchlight rested on the launch, which continued on its course. The police craft swung in and headed directly for it. A hail came across the water. The launch was slowed down and the police boat stopped almost alongside.

“Who are you, and where are you going?” an officer demanded.

“This is the launch *Speedy*,” the engineer replied. “I’m runnin’

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to th' fish market with a load o' sacks. What's th' matter?"

"Seen any other launch?" the officer demanded.

"Nope!"

"How far have you come?"

"From the mouth o' th' river. Good fishin' there now."

"I'll come aboard and look you over," the officer said.

The police boat started slowly and swung nearer. In that instant the Black Star's engineer acted. He threw on the power and dropped, for the wheel was locked. The screw churned the water and hurled a great wave at the police boat

Behind, the men in the police boat were shouting, and a fusillade of revolver shots spattered around the Black Star's craft. But the police found themselves at a disadvantage. The Black Star's launch was swifter, and the police boat was headed the wrong way and had to be turned. While the turn was being accomplished, the firing continued, and the searchlight kept the prey in sight but that prey was gradually putting distance between itself and the boat behind.

The Black Star's boat was a hundred yards in the lead by the time the police launch had straightened out and taken up the chase in earnest. The grim race was on, with the police firing at times, and the searchlight always playing on the vessel ahead. The Black Star had crawled from beneath the sacks now, and was directing operations.

"All the speed you have, and get around the bend," he ordered. "We can leave the boat and take to the touring cars. We'll be lost in the city before they can telephone headquarters or get cars and trail us!"

The bend in the stream was not far ahead now, and the master criminal issued further orders. The two prisoners were treated to shots from the vapor gun again. The siren of the launch shrieked a message to the men ahead waiting with the touring cars.

Around the bend—and the launch dashed for the shore. As it was reached, the police boat came into view, its searchlight trying to pick up the quarry. The Black Star and his men tumbled out, carrying the prisoners. From the road a short distance away came the honking of an automobile horn.

Then the searchlight struck them, and the police launch turned and headed for the shore. More flashes of flame split the darkness, and bullets whined through the trees and underbrush.

But the Black Star and his men were in the dense woods now and hurrying along a narrow path that led to the road. They reached the two waiting motor cars and tumbled in, and the automobiles started toward the city.

The police were just leaving their boat and rushing into the woods, flashing their pocket torches, their revolvers held ready, calling to one another. They reached the road in time to hear the roar-

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ing of two motors and to see two cars disappearing down the highway. They wasted another fusillade of shots, and then hurried back toward the boat

CHAPTER XXIX

BLACK STAR TAKES A TRICK

THE Black Star rode in the first car with his two prisoners and three of his trusted men, and the others followed in the second car as close as safety would permit.

Both chauffeurs got all the speed possible out of the machines they drove. The police had been left behind for the time being, but there was danger of them getting to a telephone in some way and sending an alarm to headquarters. If the Black Star's autos were headed off as they were entering the city, disaster might follow. If they could gain the city's streets and separate, undoubtedly their chances for getting to the lodge hall unobserved would be excellent.

The Black Star was not worrying about the police. He deemed it a coincidence that the launch had run upon him. He believed the officers had been looking for river thieves, and that they would continue to look for them. He did not think for a moment that the police in the launch were looking for the Black Star and members of his band. How could that be possible? How could the police know that this was the night the Black Star had chosen for a crime and that he would be coming up the river in a launch?

"We'll be at th' bridge in a few minutes," the master criminal's chauffeur warned.

"The road curves up to the bridge," the Black Star replied. "I do not think it possible that word could have been sent ahead, but it is well to be prepared. Slow down as you reach the curve and shut off your lights. The car behind will do the same. We'll stop this side of the curve and investigate."

On dashed the cars, and presently the Black Star's chauffeur decreased his speed, forcing the chauffeur behind to do the same. The lights of the two cars went out; they rolled along the road with scarcely any noise, and presently came to a stop.

Here the road ran close to the river, and by getting from the car and walking a hundred feet the master criminal could look down at the bridge. He took one of his men with him and went to make his investigation. He saw at a glance what was happening.

The police, it was evident, had reached a telephone. The bridge at the moment was swinging open. And when it was open it remained so, though there was no boat in sight to make the passage through. And, as the master criminal watched, he saw the police launch darting up the river. Its searchlight flashed upon the bridge,

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and its siren bellowed. It turned toward the shore and touched. The police sprang out and ran up the bank. The Black Star could see them reach the floor of the bridge and run along it to the tender's shanty. Then they scattered, hiding among girders and along the bridge approach.

"Um! Very clever!" the Black Star said to his man. "There is only the one road, too. We drive at a furious pace on to the bridge; we see the draw open, and we stop—and the clever police spring out and make us all prisoners. Very clever—except that I anticipated it."

"Maybe we could turn around and get back to our launch," his man suggested.

"Fool! In the first place, we'd lose valuable time, and then when we did come up the river, we'd have to clash with the police boat again. Also, my brainy friend, if our launch is where we left it, you may be sure there is a police guard there waiting for us to return. If you happen to have any brains, try to use them."

The Black Star's man gulped and kept silent.

"Go back to the cars and have all the men come here, bringing Muggs and Verbeck," the master criminal ordered.

The man obeyed; within two minutes all were grouped around the Black Star, and the unconscious prisoners were on the ground at the foot of a tree. The Black Star explained their predicament.

"You chauffeurs, get back in the cars, turn on the lights, and drive on to the bridge," he instructed. "When the police question you, simply say you have been out to that road house on the river bank earlier this evening—which will be true—and not finding fares there, or prospects of any, are on your way back to the city. Admit you heard firing back on the road, and saw men rushing through the trees. Say you didn't stop because you were afraid of being held up—there have been several automobile holdups in that vicinity recently. And argue with the police as long as possible, while we do our part."

The chauffeurs hurried away. They ran some risk, they knew. They might be put under arrest, but they had little fear of that. Both held licenses as public chauffeurs, and they had established the road-house alibi on the master criminal's orders. And, if held, the Black Star would see that they were bailed out—and then they'd simply jump their bail.

"We're going through that bridge and to the city, and we're going in the police launch," the Black Star told the others. "That'll be rather rubbing it in, but the police deserve it. I'll write a letter to the papers afterward, telling just how we did it. There is only one man in the launch. We must seize it and make a quick get-away. Run under the bridge and straight up the river. We'll desert the police boat a short distance down the stream. I've arranged for two taxicabs to be there. I wasn't exactly sure where it would be best to leave our own launch, and I always prepare for emergencies."

He led the way through the brush on the bank of the river. They

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had but a short distance to go, and they were directly opposite the police boat and about a hundred feet from it when they heard the two automobiles run up on the bridge and stop at the command of a policeman.

The Black Star was a wise general; he did not send all his men forward at once. Had he done that, the engineer of the launch would have been suspicious and instantly sounded an alarm. The master criminal selected one man, and had him walk boldly through the brush and down to the launch. In the semidarkness the engineer of the launch would believe him to be one of the plain-clothes men returning with orders.

The Black Star's man was within a dozen feet of the boat before the engineer was aware of his approach, for he was busy with the searchlight. He turned when he heard the man splashing through the mud at the edge of the river, and before he could ask a question he received a shot from a vapor gun and collapsed in the bottom of the boat, unconscious.

The searchlight had been playing on the bridge approach. The Black Star's man swerved it aside for a moment, and then back into position, thus notifying his master that his work had been accomplished.

Down through the brush crept the Black Star and his men, carrying their two prisoners. They reached the launch and boarded it, and the master criminal's engineer hurried to his machinery. The police engineer had been tossed out on the shore.

But the escape was not to be made without trouble. There was a captain in charge of the police squad who thought quickly. When the two empty automobiles reached the bridge, and the questioning of the chauffeurs began, this captain ordered half his men to return to the launch and go back up the river to look for traces of their quarry. They broke through the brush just as the launch's engineer was put on the shore.

The mere sight of men aboard the launch was enough to tell the police what had occurred. They charged forward, shooting wildly and yelling alarms to their companions up on the bridge. Bullets smashed into the sides of the craft as it backed slowly away from the shore. The engineer was doing his best, but he could not turn and put on speed until safely away from the shallows.

It was a perilous moment for the Black Star and his men. The criminals returned the fire, but made no attempt to hit their targets, for the master crook's orders always stood against inflicting wounds or causing death, unless it was absolutely necessary. Crouching in the bottom of the launch, they waited for the engineer to back out into the stream. More police were hurrying down from the bridge, and soon would be firing at the launch. And they would be able to keep up their volleys until the launch was some distance away, endangering the Black Star and his men and prisoners every moment

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of the time.

But the master criminal, it appeared, though he pretended to abhor all violence, was no physical coward. He sprang to his feet, away from the protection of the bulwarks, and jumped forward to the searchlight. While bullets rained around him he reached the light and turned it. It flashed straight into the faces of the foes on the shore, blinding them at that short range, making them easy targets, and rendering them incapable of aiming at the men on the launch.

Some continued firing in the path of light; others sprang for cover in the brush, expecting the men on the boat to fire a volley. The laugh of the Black Star rang out; he continued playing the light on them. The launch was out in the stream now and turning; a moment later the engineer gave her the maximum amount of speed, and she dashed beneath the bridge and toward the city.

“Too bad our prisoners could not have been conscious and enjoyed this little battle,” he told his men. “Really, Muggs and Verbeck are not in the thick of it at all to-night. Generally they cause a part of the trouble, but to-night all our trouble has come from others.”

He chuckled as if well pleased with himself.

“Some joke this—stealing the enemy’s boat,” he observed.

CHAPTER XXX

MUGGS IN ACTION

FOR fifteen minutes they ran in silence, and then the Black Star went forward and stood beside the engineer.

“Put in at the alley between National and Washington Streets,” he ordered. “Out with your lights, and make as little noise as possible. The two taxicabs should be waiting at the end of the alley. Get ready, men, and pick up Verbeck and Muggs. We don’t want to lose any more time—we’ve lost enough already.”

He was not chuckling now; he spoke in a stern voice, and his men knew that the Black Star was thinking only of the big-planned crime now, of getting the money and securities from the vault of the National Trust Company and removing the fortune to his headquarters. Then the band would scatter as usual, and in the morning the police would discover that the lodge hall of the Knights of Certainty had been a crooks’ workshop and the robbery made possible because of it—but they would make the discovery too late, as usual.

They would find little black stars pasted in the lodge hall and on the vaults, and none of the members of the Knights of Certainty would be seen again. The Black Star and his men would leave behind a couple of hundred dollars’ worth of furniture—and take away between two and three hundred thousand in coin and negotiable securities. And the next blow perhaps would be struck in a different

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section of the city and at an unexpected moment, as usual.

The lights of the launch went out, and her speed was cut down until she scarcely crept through the water. Closer and closer she slipped to the shore, inside the shadows of large warehouses. She passed the end of a street, went in closer, and came finally to the alley. Silently the men lashed her to piling there.

The two taxicabs were waiting, and the transfer to them took but a few minutes. With curtains up, they crept to the mouth of the alley, turned into a street, and sped along it toward the business district. There was nothing unusual in the appearance of the taxicabs. A score of police officers would have glanced at them once, and then turned away. Repeatedly they were held up at crossings by the theater and café crowds passing. They were caught in traffic jams, but their chauffeurs puffed at cigarettes and waited nonchalantly until they could go ahead.

They reached the front of the building where the Knights of Certainty had their hall, but did not stop there. They went into the alley and pulled up at a little side door. One of the men got out, rapped on the door, and gave a password when a slot in it was opened. The Black Star and his men got out, glanced around, carried their prisoners from the cabs, and went into the building. The door was closed again; the two taxicabs drove away.

An elevator made two trips to the third floor, and the Black Star and his men entered the lodge hall. Guards took up the positions that had been assigned to them. The doors were bolted securely; the windows had been fitted with opaque glass and heavy curtains.

"Well, here we are," the Black Star said. "Mask, gentlemen! Now bring our prisoners back to life, and we'll let them see how easy it is to take money."

While his orders were being obeyed the master criminal went to one of the walls and pressed against a certain spot there. A section of the wall swung out, and in the aperture a masked man stood.

"Everything all right?" the Black Star asked.

"All safe, sir," came the reply.

"The watchmen—"

"Not a hitch there, sir; they are all unconscious and our men in their places. We have reported regular for four hours, and not a suspicion at headquarters or they'd have investigated before this. The patrolman on the beat even looked in at a window once and waved at our man on the first floor."

"Excellent!" the Black Star said, rubbing his hands in satisfaction.

He walked back to the end of the room. His prisoners were revived now and had been placed side by side in chairs before one of the curtained windows in the rear of the hall.

"Ah, Mr. Verbeck and Mr. Muggs!" the master criminal smirked. "You are conscious again, then? 'Twas a pity you didn't

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see the little fight we had with the police. I'd tell you all about it, but we haven't the time to spare, and you can read about it in tomorrow's papers. Well, here you are in the hall of the Knights of Certainty. You see the aperture in the wall? My mechanics have arranged a passageway between the walls of the two buildings. We have a sort of glorified dumb-waiter, and by its use can descend to the first floor of the National Trust Company's building. Simple, eh? I regret I cannot explain the method we are going to use to get into the burglar-proof vaults. Did it become public property, the manufacturers might invent some means of counteracting it. Kindly sit still, gentlemen, while I have my men prepare the way."

He deliberately turned his back and walked to the center of the hall again and called his men to him, all except the guards near the doors. He issued instructions, and two men hurried to the aperture in the wall and disappeared. The Black Star was the commanding general now, and his followers were eager to obey.

For fifteen minutes perhaps he paced the floor, glancing at his prisoners now and then, and often stopping to issue some whispered instruction. Then one of the men he had sent below returned.

"All ready, sir," he reported.

"The vaults are opened?" the Black Star asked.

"Yes, sir, and every strong box. All you have to do is take out the swag, sir."

"The suit cases are there and ready?"

"Yes, sir."

"Two of you carry Mr. Verbeck to the dumb-waiter, and we'll descend with him," the master criminal commanded. "Sorry I cannot take you at the same time, my dear Muggs, but the capacity of our dumb-waiter is limited. I'll have you taken below before we are through, though. In the meantime, sit calmly on your chair."

He laughed as he turned toward the aperture in the wall, laughed again as two of his men carried the bound and gagged prisoner as if he had been a log of wood, and chuckled as he saw the anger flashing in Muggs' eyes. The Black Star, his helpless prisoner, and his two men disappeared, and the aperture in the wall was closed.

Those who remained glanced at Muggs, but did not approach him, and made no offer to taunt him. They left that to the Black Star. All except the guards at the two doors and one who peered through a slit in the curtain at a front window, gathered in the middle of the room and spoke in whispers.

Muggs tugged at his bonds for the hundredth time, and realized that he had been bound well. There was no hope of slipping from these ropes. Here was no broken glass upon which he could saw the ropes, as Roger Verbeck had done once. Nor could he manage to get his fingers into a hip pocket and extract a knife that opened with a touch of the thumb and cut his bonds with that as he had done

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once before when in the Black Star's hands. Back at the master criminal's headquarters he had been searched and his knife taken from him.

He racked his brain for an idea that would lead to release, and could think of none. On the first floor of the adjoining building, he guessed, the Black Star and his men were filling suit cases with the wealth of the National Trust Company, and a helpless and raging prisoner was being forced to watch the crime and endure the taunts of the Black Star at the same time. If only he could be free and have a good automatic in his hand—

He glanced at the Black Star's men again; they were not even looking in his direction; they knew well, he supposed, that he could not make a move. He could only sit in the chair against the curtained rear window and look straight ahead, absolutely helpless.

He imagined that he could hear a slight noise outside the window, but it was not repeated. If he could have seen, he would have noticed that the point of a sharp knife pierced the heavy curtain directly behind him, and where none in the room could see. Working slowly, cutting an inch at a time, that knife made a slit half a foot long.

Then Muggs heard the slightest suggestion of a whisper.

"Muggs! We're here to help, but must move carefully. I'm going to cut your ropes and slip you a gun. Hold your arms tight so the ropes won't fall away until you're ready. Steady now!"

Muggs might have shrieked his happiness had not the gag prevented. He didn't pretend to know the owner of the voice, and he didn't care much, so that it was a friend. One thing he did know—it was not the voice of Roger Verbeck. And it was not the voice of old Detective Riley, who had helped Muggs and Verbeck several times in their effort to take the Black Star. It was a strange voice, but welcome for all that.

Muggs felt a knife sawing at the ropes that bound his wrists together behind him. He caught the ends as the ropes were severed, and held them so that they would not drop away and alarm the Black Star's men before his feet were free.

The knife was working on the ropes that bound his feet now. It was slow and tedious work, and at times the knife was still. Finally Muggs felt the last rope give, and he heard the whisper again.

"I'm going to slip you an automatic. Stick 'em all up and hold 'em while we break in behind you. If we make a false move we'll lose. Is the Black Star still below? Wiggle your fingers if he is."

Muggs wiggled his fingers by way of answer, and almost immediately he felt the butt of an automatic pressed against his palm.

"Now!" the voice whispered.

None of the criminals were facing Muggs. He stretched his arms and legs once to restore circulation, and then sprang from his chair.

"Hands up!" he shrieked, and leveled the automatic.

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Every man in the room whirled to face him at that command. One reached for a weapon, and Muggs shot over his head. Behind him the window was shattered, and there was a sudden commotion as half a dozen uniformed policemen, a lieutenant at their head, tumbled into the lodge hall with guns held ready.

“Keep ’em up!” the lieutenant warned.

Another of the Black Star’s men reached for a gun, and the sergeant dropped him. Another darted quickly across the room, and the bullet that went in his direction missed its mark. He reached the wall—and the light switch.

The lights went out.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN THE BANK

THE forces were about even, and these men of the Black Star’s organization whom he had taken into his inner circle, and, in a measure, into his confidence could be expected to put up a brave fight to save themselves and their master from capture or death. They knew how the public regarded the Black Star and his band; they knew what a jury would do to any one of them who stood in the prisoner’s dock, and that the judge would give the limit of imprisonment to any declared guilty.

So, as the lights went out, there came a scattered volley from the criminals, who had darted to different parts of the lodge hall. Muggs and most of the policemen, however, anticipating that volley, had thrown themselves flat on the floor, and they fired at the flashes and changed their positions quickly.

Again volleys were exchanged, and shrieks of pain told that some of the bullets had found human marks. The lieutenant was bellowing his commands, urging his men to guard doors and windows. In the darkness it was impossible to tell policeman from criminal, and both sides ceased firing.

There came a rush, and some of the Black Star’s men reached the door that opened into the hall and threw it open. They were met by a stream of light from the corridor, and saw more policemen standing there awaiting them, their weapons held ready; there was no escape that way.

The light made it possible for the police to shoot again, and two of the criminals went to the floor badly wounded. Others ran to the front windows, but there was no way of escape there, for it was three stories to the ground; nor could they reach the rear windows and fire escape, for the police were on guard there.

They were cornered in the lodge hall, and knew it. To each of them came the thought that prison was better than death—for no

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murder was charged against the Black Star's band. And they had faith in their master and his organization—arrest did not mean prison necessarily.

“Throw down them guns, or take it!” the lieutenant commanded.

One of the Black Star's lieutenants groaned, threw down his gun, and put up his hands. Then the others followed his example. They couldn't understand how the police happened to be there—the Black Star had almost always managed to lead them astray before. They began wondering how it fared with the Black Star and the others on the floor below.

“Once too often this gang has tried to put over something!” the lieutenant said as his men snapped handcuffs on the crestfallen criminals. “We've got you this time, and you'll do a long stretch each.”

“We was only holdin' a meetin',” one of the men replied.

“Yeh? I know all about that meetin'. Masks on your faces, and the Black Star and some more down in the bank, and Muggs bound and gagged in a chair—and you was only holdin' a meetin'. Down to the wagon you go now, and straight to the hoosgow!” Muggs was not listening to this tirade of the lieutenant's. No sooner had he seen that the battle was over than he had raced across the hall to the wall where the Black Star had touched a hidden button and caused an aperture to show there. He pressed the wall frantically, but with no result. He covered every square inch of it near where he had seen the Black Star put his hand, but no opening appeared.

“Needn't waste time there, Muggs, if you want to get to that Verbeck man of yours,” he heard the sergeant saying. “There's some trick about it, of course, or it wouldn't belong to the Black Star. We were outside the window on the fire escape, and saw him open that, and heard what he said. So we'll just guard this end here, in case they should open it and try to come up. The lower floor is guarded, too, and they'll be mixing things there in a minute; they're waitin' until Black Star gets his hands on some money and stuff. We want to get him with the goods, see? Men. all around the block, too—a mouse couldn't get away. We've got him this time!”

“How'd you know?” Muggs demanded.

“Don't ask me! Some tip to the chief—and it sure was a correct tip. Two thirds of the night relief is scattered around this block right now. Here's where we clean up. By George, I'm sorry you and Verbeck didn't do it!”

“Didn't we?” Muggs snarled.

“You wouldn't have done much, I guess, bound and gagged the way you were—just been left here for another joke. Nope! The police get the credit for this—the police and whoever tipped this off. One of the Black Star's men did it, I suppose—some one that was sore at him for something.”

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"Guess again!" Muggs snarled. He didn't fancy this belittling of Roger Verbeck by a lieutenant of police.

He turned and hurried across the hall and into the corridor, and sped down the stairs. He wanted to get around to the other side of the block and see what was transpiring in the National Trust Company's building. He had forgotten the fantastic robe in which the Black Star had dressed him, and the laughter of one of the policemen in the hall brought it to mind. Muggs tore the robe off and growled his imprecations, and ran on as the policeman laughed again.

At the entrance to the building an officer held him up with leveled weapon, not being sure of his identity. Muggs lost time until another lieutenant appeared who knew him and ordered his release. He reached the street, sprinted for the corner, darted around it, and reached the front of the bank.

Everything seemed quiet there. Half a dozen policemen were standing on the sidewalk, and there seemed no commotion inside.

"Why don't you get in? Why don't you do something?" Muggs wanted to know. "Standin' here like dummies that ain't got—"

"Easy there, man!" one of them replied. "We're doin' something, all right You just wait here with us until we get the signal."

"Wait nuthin'!" Muggs exclaimed. "I'm goin'—"

"Wait, Muggs! We know the Black Star is in there and what he's doing, and we know he's got Verbeck in there. Take it easy—we've got it planned and we'll get him with the goods."

"You'll let him get away with half of what's in the vaults, that's what you'll do!" Muggs stormed. "I've seen that gent work before. You just let me get in there! I've got a score or two to settle with him!"

"You'll have to wait "

He was interrupted by the blast of a whistle. Instantly the officers were active. They sprang to the big double doors of the bank and crashed them open and tumbled inside. Others who came running took up their stations outside to watch every exit. Muggs was the second man through the front door.

It was dark inside, save where some light came through the windows from the street. The police flashed their torches and charged through the main room and into the office section. They tumbled over low partitions and scrambled over tables and desks and chairs, working their way back of the cages toward the vaults.

There had been officers stationed inside the building before the Black Star and his men arrived to begin operations, and they were in the front of the charge. It had been the chief of police who had given the signal on the whistle. Through a glass partition he had watched proceedings until what he judged was the right moment to act. He was eager to catch the master criminal with loot in his hands, to get such evidence that there would be no possibility of a mistrial

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or acquittal.

There was the sound of crashing glass as the partitions went down. There was a loud command for the Black Star and his men to throw up their hands and surrender.

There came a deafening crash, and a cloud of vapor rolled toward the police. Some inhaled it and fell; others, guessing what it meant, tried to hold breath until it passed, though it half blinded them and made their eyes smart and torrents of tears run from them.

Over the noise and confusion rang the mocking laugh of the Black Star. Through the gas cloud they could see him retreating, shielding himself with the body of his bound and gagged prisoner. Three men who retreated before him carried two heavy suit cases between them.

Shots rang out, but none fell. Those of the police who had not been rendered unconscious by the gas bomb charged again. They saw the Black Star back into a little side corridor, saw him hesitate a moment by the wall, put his hand against it, and saw an opening appear.

Through this opening his men darted. He stepped into it himself, still using his prisoner as a shield. Then the opening closed.

“We’ve got him—got him!” the chief cried. “Our men are watching the top of that between-the-walls business he built, and we are watching the bottom. He can’t get out. He’ll give up or he’ll stay there and starve. And if he doesn’t give up mighty quick we’ll go in after him.”

Muggs grasped the chief by the arm and opened his mouth to speak, but the chief was quicker.

“I know, Muggs,” he said. “The scoundrel’s got Verbeck in there. But we’ll get ’em—and I don’t think he’ll hurt Verbeck.”

CHAPTER XXXII

A NARROW ESCAPE

WHEN the Black Star had entered the aperture in the lodge hall, and the panel closed behind him, he flashed his electric torch around the interior of a space about five feet long and three wide.

“Notice our ingenuity, Mr. Verbeck,” he said. “Here we have constructed, as I remarked, a sort of dumb-waiter between the walls, of the two buildings. It took considerable time, and great care was necessary, but the job will be profitable for all that. Every bit of material had to be smuggled into the lodge hall, but we did it without the stupid police suspecting anything was wrong.

“I am sorry that I cannot remove your mask and gag and discuss this bit of work with you, but you might shriek and call down our

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foes. Kindly give me your close attention now. You see this small cable running through the corner? I pull on it like this—similar to the old-fashioned elevators, you see. And down we go!”

The little box arrangement crept downward slowly as the Black Star chuckled his satisfaction. There was not the slightest noise; the holes even had been greased so the cable would slip through silently. Inch by inch the box descended. It was insufferably hot, and the air was bad. None spoke a word until the descent of the box stopped, and then the Black Star turned to his prisoner again.

“We are at the bottom,” he said. “You see this small button here? It is connected with an electric-light signal that we installed, and when I press it a certain number of times it conveys a meaning to one of my men in the bank. The little bulb light, I assure you, is cunningly hidden. You see, I am prepared for everything, Mr. Verbeck. Perhaps that is why I am so successful.”

He reached out and pressed the button. There was a wait of half a minute, and then a green bulb glowed in the top of the box.

“Ah, the coast is clear!” the Black Star said. “We are about to take a fortune in money and securities from the strongest bank in the city, Mr. Verbeck, from a bank that boasts its vaults cannot be opened by burglars.”

The Black Star chuckled again, and then pressed against the wall. An opening showed before them, and one of the Black Star’s men stood just outside, masked.

“All ready, sir,” he reported. “The suit cases are on a table before the vault’s door and you have only to open that door and step inside.”

“The watchmen are on duty?”

“In front on the two upper floors, sir, and in the rear on this floor at this time. He has to punch his report box there in ten minutes.”

“Guard the corridor, then. I want only the three men with me in the vault room. Should there be trouble, use the back exit, and leave this for me and those working with me.”

He stepped out as he ceased speaking, and the men behind him carried the prisoner between them as they had on the floor above. They were in a narrow side corridor that ran from the offices to an alley entrance—an entrance used by directors when they attended a meeting, and by bank officials when they desired to get out of the building without seeing some undesirable.

Along this narrow corridor they walked slowly, bending low when they came to a place where light came through the windows from the street. They opened a door and passed through an office, opened another door, and were in the vault room.

“Put Mr. Verbeck in that chair at the end of the table and facing the door of the vault,” the Black Star whispered to his men. “I want him to have the privilege of watching operations. Then, when we are

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done, we'll pin a nice little note to his breast, put him to sleep, go away, and telephone the stupid police to come here and find him. And then the public can have a laugh."

His men obeyed him, and the Black Star turned to the door of the vault. He chuckled again as he reached a hand forward, grasped the handle, and swung the heavy door open. He looked back at his prisoner and waved a hand in derision, and then stepped into the vault.

The others could see his torch flash, and presently he came out.

"A very good haul, I imagine," he announced, and began piling packages of bank notes into one of the suit cases. "I am gathering the big bills—haven't time to bother with such things as fives and tens at first. Perhaps, if we have time, I'll take a few packages for the men. Now for some more."

Six trips he made into the vault, and each time he came out with his arms filled with bundles of bank notes, which he put into the suit case. On the seventh trip he carried two bags of gold coins and put one in the first suit case and locked it, and then threw the second sack in a corner of the second suit case.

Securities were the next things he went after. He filled the second suit case with bonds, even stopping to flash his torch over them and discard those of small value or such as would not be easily negotiable.

"You see how simple it is, Mr. Verbeck, when a man with brains plans things?" he asked. "Quite a bit of wealth here, what? More than many ordinary men would earn during their lifetimes. And I take it as an evening's diversion, after some weeks of preparation, of course, and make it, instead of a lifetime's work, only one bit of work out of many good ones. I am going to make one more trip. I have heard of a certain diamond necklace that is kept in this vault, and I want it, if it can be found quickly. If I do not get it to-night I'll have to rob this place again, and I have made it a rule heretofore never to strike twice in the same place."

Even his own men marveled at the man's composure. Here he was robbing the strongest financial institution in the city, entering a vault considered impregnable, and without showing the slightest nervousness. Apparently he was in no great hurry to get away. He might have been a man in his own home, showing his friends treasures taken from a private safe.

Then came the sound of a distant shot, the sound of breaking glass, a man's shriek. The Black Star hurried from the vault and stood listening, and the faint light from the street showed that there was some concern in his countenance. One of the watchmen came running in from the corridor.

"The red signal!" he exclaimed. "The signal from the lodge hall!"

"Quietly, quietly, my man," the master criminal said. "Nothing

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ever is gained by getting into a sweat when quick thinking is necessary. Give the signal and go out the rear way—all of you.”

“But you, sir?”

“I’ll take care of myself—go! Undoubtedly those fools upstairs are frightened at nothing.”

But a fusillade of shots from the lodge hall above gave the lie to his words.

“Something appears to be wrong,” he said. “I suppose we may as well get out of here and into our between-the-walls box. Pick up the suit cases, men. I am sure I don’t imagine what has happened. There is no way in which the police could have been informed. If you were not my prisoner now, Mr. Verbeck—but you are, and so is Muggs. I was going to bring Muggs down here and leave him with you, but he’ll have to miss this share of the fun, I think. One moment, Mr. Verbeck, until I decorate your breast with a sarcastic note.”

He reached in his pocket and brought forth the note he had prepared, and stepped toward the prisoner, reaching to his lapel for a pin.

“We’d better hurry,” one of his men suggested.

“Are you afraid, when I am here beside you?” the Black Star demanded. “Such a man has no place in an organization like mine.”

“I’m afraid for you, sir—that’s all.”

“Your solicitude for my welfare overwhelms me. Start on, my man, and I’ll be with you almost instantly.”

The three men started toward the door with the suit cases. The Black Star bent forward to pin the note on the breast of the man before him. And then the chief’s whistle came.

With the crashing in of the front door of the bank, the Black Star was a changed man. He grasped his prisoner by the shoulders, jerked him from the chair, and dragged him across the room to the office door. Through the offices police poured in upon him. His hand dived into his pocket, and came forth, holding a round object about the size of a tennis ball. He hurled it on the floor in front of the advancing foes.

There was a roar as the bomb struck, a hiss as the cloud of vapor spread. The Black Star laughed mockingly, and backed toward the wall, shielding himself behind his helpless prisoner’s body. He touched the wall, and the opening appeared. He went in, still carrying his prisoner, and in the little box he laughed again, aloud, and tugged at the cable.

“Quite a bit of excitement, Mr. Verbeck,” he observed. “But here we are, safe and sound, and with the suit cases filled with loot. Now I wonder what brought those police down upon us. I suppose I’ll have to go through my organization and ask a few questions. And if there is such a thing as a traitor—ha!”

He tugged at the cable again, and the box ascended.

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“Listen to the poor fools pounding on the wall!” he exclaimed. “They will have difficulty, I imagine, finding how that opening is caused. You notice, my dear Mr. Verbeck, that when I opened it either above or below, I press the wall with my hand. That is merely a trick, should some one be observing too closely. As I do that, I touch the real spring with the toe of my shoe. Men can press with their hands all day and not find it.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

PUZZLED POLICE

AS he ceased speaking, the Black Star turned suddenly and gave his prisoner a shot from the vapor gun. His own men evidently had guessed what was coming, for they turned their faces away, and each held a small sponge to his nostrils, for in that close space the vapor seemed twice as heavy.

“Quick, now!” the master criminal instructed his men. “I don’t know how it happens that the police came down on us, but they’re here, and I suppose the block is surrounded. We can’t go up, and we can’t go down—yet. The men upstairs must have been overcome, since the fighting has stopped, and the bank is full of police. So we’ll try the halfway station.”

He tugged at the cable, and the car stopped. He flashed his torch on the wall, and then pulled the cable again and forced the car to ascend as slowly as possible, while he looked closely at the wall.

“Here’s the scratch we made,” he said finally, and stopped the box. He pressed against the wall, and a new aperture showed. “In with you,” he instructed, “and don’t forget the loot.”

The three men stepped past him and into a tiny room that had been constructed between the walls, halfway from the first floor to the third. The Black Star followed, turned to tug at the cable and send the box on to the top of the shaft, and then closed the opening and turned to face his three men and his unconscious prisoner.

“Here we are!” he said. “Speak in whispers now, and we’ll be all right. We have some ventilation here, and you may smoke if you wish. This little room was connected with an airshaft in the building, you’ll remember. You see what forethought does? I had this constructed just for such an emergency. The percentage of chance was against it ever being needed, but I thought it better to take no chance, and you see what it has meant. That is why I always win. I prepare for every possible contingency.”

The police, at that moment, were trying it. Down below, the chief was ordering his men to hammer through the wall, since they were unable to find the spring that released the panel. Those above had been unsuccessful in their search for the spring, too, and both

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above and below officers were smashing at the wall with axes, trying to cut their way through.

Down in the bank, Muggs was raging.

"I knew you'd let him get away!" he cried. "I knew it!"

"We've got him trapped," the chief answered.

"How do you know it? Ain't you got some respect for the Black Star's schemes by this time?"

"We'll get him—you're worrying about Verbeck, that's all. I don't think he'll hurt your boss."

"The Black Star'll get out some way!"

"Take it easy, Muggs," the chief advised. "We've got the entire block surrounded. Every door and window is being watched. Why, I've even got men watching the sewer connections. Not a rat could get out of this block without being seen and caught"

"Yeh? We had him surrounded in a house once out on the river, and didn't he get to the roof and streak it away in an aeroplane?"

"Well, you may be sure he hasn't any plane on the roof of this building, Muggs. He couldn't have driven it here and landed—he'd have been smashed to bits, and, besides, some one would have heard or seen him. An aeroplane makes a noise. And he didn't have any on the roof at supper time, because one of the watchmen we found bound and gagged lives up there, and he just told me he'd seen nothing suspicious. We've got him in a trap, I tell you."

The wall crashed in, and the men fell back, half expecting to face a fight with the Black Star and his men. But their torches showed them a dark shaft running up between the walls and a cable in one corner of it, and that was all.

They cleared away the debris. Up in the lodge hall the other policemen smashed through the wall, too, and sent a shower of bricks and plaster down. Through the shaft they held conversation with those below.

"That box business is up here, chief, but she's empty," one of the men called.

"What's that—empty?"

"Not a sign of anybody in it or anything. It was at the top of the shaft."

The chief sputtered a moment in impotent rage, and then shouted his orders up the shaft.

"Two or three of you get into that blamed thing and come down, and you examine the walls every inch of the way. Keep your torches going and have your guns ready. I tell you they've got to be in the shaft somewhere!"

Then he stepped back and waited. The cable moved, and by glancing into the shaft the chief and his men could see that the box was descending slowly. The chief turned to send a captain outside to warn the men who surrounded the block that closer watch was to be kept.

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"They're in this block—and they can't get out without being nabbed!" he declared.

And then the box struck the bottom of the shaft, and with a sigh of relief a lieutenant and two men crawled out.

"Not a thing!" he reported. "We examined every foot of the walls, and there isn't a crack nor a hole a mouse could get through. The top of the shaft is solid wall, and so is the bottom. The Black Star and three of his men went in there and took Verbeck with them, and they've gone up in smoke or something!"

"You're a fool!" the chief retorted.

He got in the box himself with two men, and went up and came down again, and confessed himself bewildered. Reports came in from the streets that not a person had left the block. The Black Star and the others, it seemed, had melted into thin air and drifted out and away.

The Black Star at that moment was chuckling softly and assuring himself that his prisoner was not regaining consciousness. He had used the vapor gun in the box before reaching this hole in the wall, because he didn't want his prisoner to know where he had been. For the Black Star intended having his little joke.

He and his three men had held their sides to keep from laughing aloud as the police went up and down the shaft, so close to them at times that they could hear the muttered curses of the officers.

"The entrance to this little room was the best job of all," he said. "They could look right at it and not see it, and, if they did see it, they couldn't get in."

"But we're due for quite a rest here," one of his men complained.

"Don't get nervous," the master criminal warned. "We are due to get out of here before daylight, and don't you forget that. Don't think that I intend to stay here all day to-morrow, waiting for to-morrow night. If we did we might find that the stupid police had sealed up the bottom and top of the shaft. That'd be lovely, wouldn't it?"

He chuckled again as his three men shuddered at the thought of being interred alive. He went to the wall and pressed against it, and the panel slid back three or four inches. Leaning forward carefully, the Black Star glanced down.

He could see the flashes of the police torches at the bottom of the shaft and he could hear Muggs and the chief in a lively argument. Glancing up, he saw the flash of a torch at the top. He reached out, knowing that his hand could not be seen unless several torches were flashed down the shaft at the same time, and pulled at the cable. The box began to ascend.

It was halfway to the hole in the wall before the chief noticed it, and then, thinking the men above were raising it, he shouted for them to lower it again. While they conversed by shrieks and yells,

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the Black Star brought the box opposite the sliding panel and gripped the cable there.

The men below and the men above tugged at the cable, but the box remained in place. The Black Star, still chuckling, took pencil and paper from his pocket and scribbled a note, and pinned it to the breast of the unconscious man before him. Then he tumbled his prisoner into the box.

“Go down to your friend, the chief, and mystify him, my dear Mr. Verbeck,” the Black Star said. “You have not indulged in much action this evening. I trust the chief will unbind you, and that when you regain consciousness you’ll join in the chase.”

He chuckled again, tugged at the cable, and sent the box downward, and then closed the panel and sat down beside his men.

“Listen now, and you’ll hear a roar!” he exclaimed.

“But how are we goin’ to get out, sir?” one of the crooks asked.

“Don’t worry about that. What time is it?”

The man flashed a torch and glanced at his watch. “It’s almost two o’clock.”

“Ha! Then we’d better get out of here within the hour. It’ll be daylight by four-thirty, and I want to be back at headquarters before then. You know how I am going, of course.”

“I know how you’ll go if you get out of here,” the man replied. “Getting out of here is what is worrying me.”

“Don’t worry—it causes gray hairs. Listen!”

They could hear a commotion at the bottom of the shaft. The box had reached its destination, and the bound, gagged, and unconscious man had been seen and taken out.

“It’s Verbeck!” the chief cried. “He’s doped, or something!”

“Vapor gun!” Muggs explained.

“Then they’ve sent him back to us. But where did he come from? Answer me that! He didn’t come from the top, and there’s no place between here and the top where he could come from. Unbind him, you men, and take that gag off. Maybe he can tell us something when he gets rid of that vapor dope. What’s this—a note?”

One of the men held his torch, and the chief read it swiftly:

DEAR CHIEF: Here is Roger Verbeck safe and sound. Since you don’t seem able to make very much war against me, perhaps you’ll revive Verbeck and let him get into the game. I’ve kept him pretty quiet to-night. I’m sending him to you out of the sky, my dear chief, you might say. At least, you don’t know where I am sending him from, and cannot find out. I don’t know how you got on my trail so swiftly to-night, but it didn’t save the bank from losing a vast sum, and didn’t help you much, did it?

“If I ever get my two hands on that man he’ll never live to stand trial!” the chief promised. “Verbeck conscious yet? We’ve got to look into this business. I tell you the Black Star’s somewhere in this

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building. He's somewhere in that shaft "

"But he can't be," a lieutenant protested. "There isn't a place in the shaft where a man could leave the box."

"Nevertheless—"

"Verbeck's come to!" one of the men cried.

They knelt beside him, aided him to sit up, tried to get him to talk. They shot questions at him as bullets come from a machine gun, and he waved them away.

"Where did they take you, Verbeck?" the chief demanded.

"I—don't know. I've been unconscious—"

"All the time?"

"They did it—just after the box started up. That's the last I knew—until now."

"They're in that shaft!" the chief cried. "I'm going up again to see!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CHIEF

THE head of the police department, knowing that a crowd surrounded the block now, and that news had gone abroad that the Black Star and some of his men had been cornered, and that certain newspaper reporters were standing by and waiting to see whether the police would be made again to look like fools, grew frantic. Also, his determination to capture the Black Star increased. He had his men drive every one out of the bank building and guard the offices and corridors, and, leaving four men to guard the bottom of the shaft, with two others, he got in the box and started to ascend.

The Black Star, from his post above, heard the chief issue these orders, and knew the box was on its upward journey.

"Couldn't be better," he told his men. "Only four at the bottom of the shaft now. You know we have to go, of course? Hurry through the corridor to the narrow flight of stairs in the rear, and climb!"

"But—" one of his men began.

"Silence, fool. The box is almost opposite us!"

The chief and his two men were ascending slowly, examining every inch of the walls with their torches. They stopped for a moment just outside the panel, but evidently saw nothing to make them suspicious, for the box continued its ascent

It went on until it was at the top, and there the chief held a consultation with his men, and examined the lodge hall's walls, making certain by questioning the men on guard that it would have been impossible for the Black Star and his men to have passed through the room without being seen.

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inch shorter than the other and slightly thinner in the face.

"Here is the explanation, gentlemen," Verbeck said. "I discovered that the Black Star was having me shadowed night and day. The men who shadowed had to report some time, of course. I got the idea that if I could get some one to take my place I might shadow the Black Star's shadow and so find his headquarters. When he threatened three weeks ago to abduct me and let me witness his next crime, I realized that here was my chance. Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to my cousin. His father and mine married sisters—perhaps that is why we look so much alike."

"Your cousin!"—the chief gasped.

"He has been living out West. I wrote him full details, and he came on to help me. I smuggled him into my house and let him take my place. He went out with Muggs, visited my fiancée in my place, went to my clubs a bit. Only Muggs was in the secret, for I didn't want to take a chance of having that secret leak out. And I shadowed the shadow, waiting for the abduction, and to-night it came. Mr. Black Star, I came here on the rear of my own roadster, which carried your prisoners. I put your watchdog to sleep and entered this house, and I've been here since. I overheard your plans and telephoned the police as soon as you had left.

"I wanted to be in at the death, of course, but knew I could not get back to the city in time. And I had a suspicion that you'd escape the police at the last minute, as you had so many times before—so I remained here, waiting for you, and when you came I succeeded in making you my prisoner. While you were gone I examined the house and found many interesting things.

"In your excitement at planning and carrying out a big crime you made a mistake, Mr. Black Star—you didn't use your eyes, didn't observe closely. You took my cousin for me. That's all. And now you must pay! Oh, yes! I must decorate you as you have often in the past decorated me."

He took a bit of paper from his pocket and he pinned it to the Black Star's breast while the master criminal sputtered his wrath. It read:

MR. BLACK STAR : Never depend on the eyes of others but use your own. Because Muggs drove a roadster and my cousin looks like me, your men took it for granted that my cousin was me, and you let it go at that. That was your mistake. ROGER VERBECK.

"Now, chief, take your man," Verbeck concluded. "And don't let him get away this time. And you, Muggs, go out and get the roadster ready. We're going home! There is a telephone, chief, if you want to give the glad news to the papers."

Muggs turned toward the door. The adventure was over, Muggs knew. He was no longer comrade in arms—now he was chauffeur and valet and all-around man to Roger Verbeck—until that young

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gentleman should feel the call of adventure again.