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Jones



A Detective Story of New York
in 1981 by Ray Cummings

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Bandits of the Cylinder

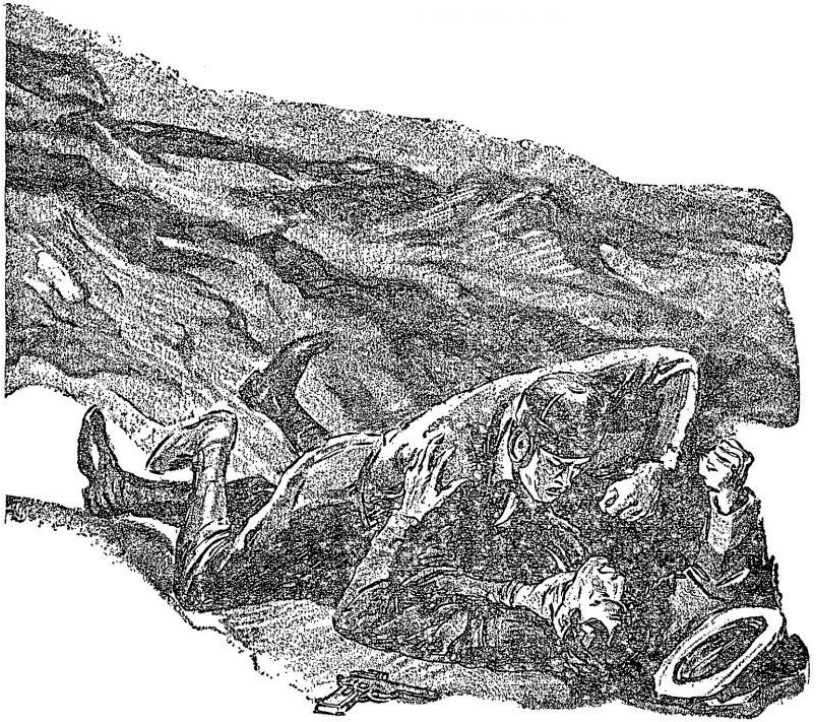
Ray Cummings

Author of "Tama, Princess of Mercury," "Tama of the Light Country," etc.

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Science plays a great part in crime, in the America of 1981, but Franklin Dirk of the secret service finds that nerve and brains are still all-important





Jac pinned down the murderous prowler

CHAPTER I. BLUE RAYS OF DEATH.

Dirk and I both saw the flash—the small blue beam of a ray-gun on a shadowed rise of ground ahead and to the left of us. I shoved on the brakes and slowed down.

“A shot, chief!”

“Yes. Looked like it.”

Then we saw three more. They seemed coming from the doorway of a small house set in a grove of trees a few hundred feet back from the traffic viaduct. Some one was standing up there firing into the night.

Dirk leaned over and shouted: “Unfold the wing! We’d better hop up there and find out what’s going on.”

We were rolling along the viaduct at twenty or thirty miles an hour. It was about 3 A.M., and there chanced to be no cars passing in this segment at the moment. I turned a switch. The wing came out over us, but still I held us to the road.

There were shouts coming from the little hill now—an uproar there.

“Jac, look! Somebody making off!” We saw the blob of a figure running down the hill away from the house. “Lift us!” Dirk added. “Land in there—see what the devil it’s all about.”

The house was a trifle ahead of us and to the left. I put on the power and raised us off the road. We skimmed over the viaduct parapet and missed the first of the tall elm trees by inches. There was no moon this night. The house on the brow of the hill showed vaguely in the starlight. The shouts up there had suddenly stopped. But we could see the escaping figure slanting down the other side of the hill.

“Land us!” Dirk repeated. “There’s an open space—over by that path! Drop us down!”

We seemed to fallen into some sort of a crime. Franklin Dirk, my chief, was at this time consulting criminologist in government service. We were returning this night in 1981 to our office in Great-New York from a week’s vacation in Canada. Under Dirk’s vehemence I brought our Bat down with a bump into the soft ground of what seemed to be a flower bed.

The wheels mired in and the up-tilting stern tumbled us out; but we had done that so many times before that we landed safely like cats on our feet.

Dirk had his gun in hand. “There he goes, Jac! Under that line of trees!” Dirk was off on a run. He flung back at me: “Don’t shoot him—can’t tell what the devil

this is. Head him off—over there to the left by the wall.”

There was no danger of my shooting any one. My gun was locked up in the car; it would have taken me ten minutes to unpack it.

“Watch yourself,” Dirk shouted. “Keep back—go down by the end of the wall!”

I ran that way. The figure had momentarily disappeared. Dirk slipped into a heavy clump of shrubbery. I lost sight of him; then I saw him drawn up cautiously behind the trunk of a tree. The stone and concrete wall was a barrier before me. It was twelve or fifteen feet high—too smooth and too high to mount. Our quarry undoubtedly had not climbed over it.

I dropped flat into a little hollow and lay listening. The fugitive had to be near by, for we had seen him come down this slope. Our abrupt arrival had sent him plunging off toward the wall, and when he found he couldn’t climb it there was no time to get back past us.

From two hundred feet to the side of me suddenly came Dirk’s voice.

“Hi, there! Stop, or I’ll flash you! Stop, I say!”

A man’s figure came lunging from a thicket almost directly at me. He had seen Dirk, but not me. Dirk’s blue beam flashed into the trees over our heads with its simultaneous little thunderclap. I rose up as the fellow passed and caught his legs. He came down with a bump; the gun in his hand was knocked away from him.

We rolled in the hollow. I am a pretty solid six-footer; this antagonist felt considerably smaller. He threshed and banged at my face with his fists, but I had him pinned in a moment and was sitting on his chest when Dirk dashed up.

“Good enough, Jac! Lift him up. Watch out for his weapons.”

I climbed off him and yanked him to his feet.

“Put your hands out,” I told him.

“Search him, Jac,” said Dirk.

“I got no weapons,” the fellow panted.

“He had a gun, chief. It’s on the ground over there.”

Dirk picked up the gun. I snapped the steel over our captive’s wrists.

“You got no right doin’ that,” he protested.

“Haven’t we?” said Dirk. “That can come later. What were you doing up at that house?”

He was a slim, pale-faced fellow in his early twenties. He stared at his feet sullenly while Dirk searched him. He had no additional weapons. Nothing on him at all that seemed criminal.

From up at the house a man was calling down to us. “You down there—what

are you doing?"

"We'll go up," said Dirk. "Come on you. What's your name?"

But our prisoner only stared at us dumbly. We pushed him between us up the slope of the hill toward the house.

"Don't want to talk, eh?" said Dirk.

I laughed. "He's been nipped before, chief. He's busy thinking."

"I wasn't at the house," the fellow said abruptly.

"No?" I retorted. "Where were you running from, and why?"

"I was crossin' the hill. I seen shootin' an' it scared me so I ran."

"That all?" Dirk demanded.

"Yes, that's all. You let me go. I done nothin' you can nip me for."

"We'll see what they say at the house," said Dirk.

It seemed a more or less routine burglary. The house was occupied by a bachelor, one Robert Rance. He was a government employee in the Postal Service—a traffic director of the vacuum tube cylinders in the Yonkers Division. He lived here alone with one manservant named Jelks. The servant had been awake, had heard a noise downstairs. He came softly down just in time to see a man's figure getting out through a broken window oval.

"Was it this fellow?" Dirk demanded.

Jelks could not say. He had rushed to the window, shouting and firing his flash-gun. He had thought he saw two figures, running in different directions down the hill.

"Well," said Dirk, "maybe this is one and the other got away."

"I never was in here," said our prisoner. "I know nothin' about it."

The uproar had awakened Rance. He had rushed down to find that the little strong-box in his lower corridor had been broken into.

We looked the box over now. It seemed quite a small affair. The lock mechanism was melted away by a hydrogen heat-torch.

"Nothing stolen," said Rance. He smiled lugubriously. "Nothing except my last pay—ten pounds of gold leaf. Everything else seems intact. I seldom keep valuables in here anyway. The bank is the best place for them—serves me correctly for keeping that gold leaf here overnight."

Rance was a tall, wiry man of forty-odd, or perhaps older, with black hair gone prematurely gray. He stood before us in dressing gown and slippers.

"Nothing else stolen—Jelks evidently frightened them off." He eyed our prisoner, who stood sullenly staring at the floor. "Who was with you? What is your name, young man? Why break my strong-box? Did you think I had treasure in it? How did

you know that gold leaf was here? And what did you do with it?"

"I didn't break it, I tell you. I got no torch—nothin' like that. I wasn't even in here. You can't nip me for crossin' your hill outside."

The interior of the strong-box was littered with Rance's personal papers strewn around it. Old Jelks was on his knees restoring them to order.

"What are you going to do with this fellow?" Rance asked us. "Do you have to hold him?"

"We'll see what Tarrytown says," Dirk decided. "It's their affair, not mine."

I used Rance's audiphone for connection with the local Tarrytown police commander. We shoved our prisoner before the mirror-grid and turned a light on him; but the Tarrytown chief had never seen him before.

"I'll fly a man right over for him," he told us.

"Will you prosecute him?" I asked Rance, as I disconnected.

The postal official shrugged. "What for? A bundle of gold leaf, which has vanished? Ruining my strong-box, if you can prove that he did it?"

Dirk and I left as soon as the local policeman arrived. The prisoner had all the marks of a professional criminal, but his identity was certainly a secret, for that night at least. The tattooed writing of his signature on his forearm said "John Allen," but under the microscope we could see at once that it was a forgery. And his fingertip tracteries were all artificially distorted.

"That got done when I was ten years old," the fellow volunteered. "I was workin' in a laundry an' burned them fingers."

"Well," said Dirk, "it's none of our affair, Jac. Come on."

Rance thanked us for what we had done; the local policeman took John Allen away to hold him on general principles and for investigation of suspected submerged identification.

The dawn was at hand when I lifted the Bat out of Rance's flower-bed and fluttered us back to the viaduct. In fifteen minutes we were lolling into the main north entrance of Great-New York.

"Wonder who that fellow was," I said out of a silence.

"I don't know and I don't care," yawned Dirk. "So far as you and I are concerned, that's the end of it."

But it wasn't. It was only the beginning.

CHAPTER II. THE MAN OF A THOUSAND GUISES.

At two past noon the next day I had had my sleep out and appeared at the office. Dirk was already before his desk. His mirror-grid was illumined and he was in earnest conversation with our big chief, Harrington, at the Washington headquarters. The image of Harrington's red face showed how earnest he was; but his microscopic voice was submerged by the mufflers so that only Dirk could hear it.

As I entered Dirk was saying, "Of course we'll go after it, Harrington. . . But please say nothing to Tarrytown—absolute secrecy. Yes, send me the Chameleon's latest type-disk." He laughed. "Well, it won't do us much good to see how the Chameleon looked four years ago, but send it anyway."

What could our Tarrytown affair have to do with the Chameleon? I had never seen this famous criminal, but I knew him well by reputation. For ten years he had terrorized the country with every manner of violence. Upon a dozen proved charges he was indicted; and a score more were laid to him and his under-men. But the under-men were few in number, and elusive. The Chameleon himself was more so. Then at last he was caught and sentenced to the extreme penalty of solitary idleness for life. But within three months he escaped. By some trick of disguise he had walked calmly out of the prison. It was so disgraceful an escape that the chagrined officials had never been willing to explain how it really happened.

That was four years ago, and the Chameleon had never been heard from since—save that every violent crime for which the police could produce no culprit was charged against him.

Dirk snapped me out of my thoughts. He had disconnected from Washington.

"Sit down, Jac. We've got plenty on the schedule now. That little Tarrytown business of early this morning has Washington somewhat heated up. It's about the Chameleon."

"What about him? You're not making out to tell me that was the Chameleon we caught?"

"Don't be witless," Dirk retorted. "The Chameleon is a much taller man. And older. He's a master at submerging identification, but you can't shorten the length of your skeleton—not many inches, anyway. Nor can you lower the blood pressure. Nor soften up brittle arteries. But that fellow we caught is about the next thing to the Chameleon. That's Jimmy Walsh they are holding up there in Tarrytown."

I had not heard of Jimmy Walsh, but Dirk rolled open his desk and laid all the records before me. Walsh had been connected with the Chameleon for several years. He had been the Chameleon's underling in several affairs—but when it came to a court of law, technicalities stopped the proof. Walsh was technically squared with the law now; he had served a short term for forged tattooing and was honorably discharged.

“That's Walsh we caught, certain enough,” Dirk went on. “I saw his type half an hour ago—the pictures look just like him and every skeleton measurement is the same.”

“What has that to do with us?” I demanded.

Dirk grinned. “Harrington has just assigned us to the job of capturing the Chameleon. Forty pounds of gold leaf as our personal reward if we happen to do it. Want your quarter share, Jac?”

I did indeed.

But there seemed not much to start on. This Jimmy Walsh, his wife Fanny—a girl not yet twenty, but with a six-year criminal record—and Fanny's older brother, one Jake Pratt, were, according to official belief, the Chameleon's closest and most active underlings. Walsh was now held in Tarrytown, but Fanny and Jake Pratt were at liberty.

“Probably all three of them were involved in this morning's burglary,” Dirk said. “The girl and Pratt were outside and sent Jimmy in—and the two outside got away. They could have done that; run down the other side of the hill just as we rolled up.”

Breaking into the strong-box of a traffic superintendent of the Postal Service! It suggested some activity of the Chameleon. A projected mail robbery? We thought so.

There was indeed, more than a fancied basis for such a belief, which Dirk now disclosed to me. The Tarrytown police had made a thorough search of the Rance grounds shortly after we left. The stolen gold leaf was still missing. But a heat-torch was found, quite evidently the one with which Jimmy Walsh had broken into the strong-box. And with it was a paper which Dirk now spread before me.

“What he did with the gold leaf is a mystery, Jac. But obviously he had no time to connect with his outside companions. And with us chasing him, he hid the torch and this paper—hid them down by the wall in the shrubbery as we were closing in on him.”

The folded paper was a diagram crudely drawn in ink—a plan of the intricate arterial system of postal vacuum tubes as they converged at Switch-pit 22, in the

Yonkers Division.

“Seems to show a good many of the secret switching combinations,” Dirk commented.

“Walsh purloined this from Rance’s strong-box?”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?”

“What does Rance say?”

“He hadn’t missed it in the confusion—that litter of papers in his box. It isn’t an official document; merely a sketch Rance was making for himself. He’s been studying a way of improving the switching facilities in his division. This is just a rough sketch memorandum he had made.”

Dirk replaced the diagram in his desk. “Rance has been warned to say nothing of this. No use our theorizing too closely, Jac. The gold leaf may have been what Walsh was really after. Or it may not. To me, it looks like the Chameleon. Something more important than a little routine burglary.”

“What are we going to do about it?” I demanded.

“Whatever we do must be absolutely secret,” Dirk said. And though our office was insulated against electrical eavesdropping, instinctively he lowered his voice. “I made light of the whole affair. Not a word to any one in Tarrytown that we’re on the trail of the Chameleon.”

“We’re not—yet,” I said.

“No, but we will be,” Dirk returned. “I’ve got a premonition, Jac—call it what you like—that this is going to lead us into something. But news travels fast underground. If there’s any sign that we’re making a move, if any one knows that we’re interested in this Jimmy Walsh, the Chameleon will hear of it inevitably and be on his guard.”

“What are they doing with Walsh up there?”

“He’s locked up awaiting trial for burglarious entry into the home of Robert Rance—which probably won’t be proved. And for forged arm-signature, which will doubtless send him to Albany Prison for a year. If we don’t pay any attention to Walsh—”

The red incoming message light flashed on Dirk’s desk.

“I’ll take it, chief.” I opened the audiphone.

“Cylinder in mail class AA from Washington for Franklin Dirk now arrived by mail flyer XL at Bennett Field.”

“Coming from there by vacuum?”

“Yes. Expected arrival at your office in four minutes. This is advance notification speaking.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“The type-disk of the Chameleon,” said Dirk as I disconnected. “Tell the switch-girl outside that if it’s a small enough cylinder have it routed here to our desk.”

Our little vacuum tube terminal opened with a hiss in the specified four minutes and the small copper cylinder tumbled out.

“This type-disk of the Chameleon was made four years ago,” Dirk said as he took out the disk. “Here he is—look him over, Jac.”

I dimmed the office lights while Dirk put the disk in the projector. The full-length mirror-grid on the wall glowed presently with the life-size moving image of the Chameleon. He stood there in his knitted prison suit, smiling at us sourly. Across his forehead the superimposed phosphorescent letters of his name showed for a moment—John Carter. Then his voice came from the magnifier.

“I was born in the State of Ohio thirty-two years ago, and my name is John Carter.”

He rolled out the official formula with a queer lisp in his voice. And as I stared, his eyes seemed to meet mine. There was irony in his eyes as though he were telling me that he realized I knew that lisp in his voice did not belong there, but how could I prove it. He stood erect, with arms outstretched in the official attitude. Yet there seemed a strange twist to his shoulders, and he held one of them higher than the other.

“I am not guilty.”

He said it with a sudden rasp. The lisp was gone. And as though this were a sardonic jest, his whole figure seemed to shrink. His knees bent; his shoulders hunched, with his head thrust forward, and his body twisted so that he seemed a full two feet shorter. A leering, grinning cripple.

I stared fascinated.

“I am not guilty.”

The face was suddenly distorted; every muscle in it trained to abnormal mobility. The jaw was crooked; the cheeks raised so that the twisted mouth was set in a snarl; the tip of the nose was raised; and even the eyeballs seemed protruding as they glared at me.

“I am not guilty.”

It ended with a croak of eerie laughter; this grinning, horribly sinister little cripple grimly jesting. And then as the type faded, he slowly straightened, shaking off his pseudo-malformation in a fashion gruesome to watch. There was a dumb blankness of expression on his face as the type-disk reached its end, and our mirror went dark.

“Well,” said Dirk, “that’s how he looked four years ago. And that’s his character—proud of his ability.”

I drew a long breath. It seemed as though something menacing had been here with us, and I felt unutterable relief that it was gone.

“He should have been an image actor,” I said, “With a talent like that—”

“He was, ten years ago. But he found crime more profitable.” Dirk put the type-disk in his desk. “I will ask you, Jac: have you any impression now what the Chameleon really looks like?”

“No. For a fact, I haven’t.”

“Nor has any one else. After that type-disk was taken they began removing the wax from his face-tissues. His jaw-bone, nose-bridge and cheekbones had been cut down. With the wax gone his thin face looked like a man seventy or eighty.”

Dirk smiled at me. “You can’t go around melting the cellu-wax out of people’s faces and measuring their bones to see if they might be the Chameleon.”

But there was one way he could be easily identified. Dirk produced an X-ray photographic print.

“His left leg, Jac. Take a look at this.”

In his youth the bullets of an old-fashioned machine gun had smashed away a good portion of the tibia, and a ten-inch segment of the bone had been replaced by a metal plate. The X-ray photograph showed it clearly in the lower front of his left leg.

“He cannot very well falsify that,” said Dirk. “And it’s conspicuous enough to show on any fluoroscope.”

We talked that afternoon until nearly dark. There seemed almost nothing upon which we could make a start. But picking up a trail is often like that. You grope by trial and error until you hit something; and then what to do next is generally fairly obvious.

What we did was to go to the grounds of Rance’s place secretly that night, equipped with the regulation police electro-magnetic shadow cloaks, and put the diagram of Switch-pit 22 back where it had been found. If Walsh’s wife or brother-in-law had been outside while he committed the burglary, we reasoned that they might come back here now and see if he had been able to hide what he had stolen.

But we waited all night, and nothing happened. At dawn, invisible within our cloaks, we slipped away.

And the next night it was the same. Meanwhile Walsh remained in the Tarrytown jail, and no visitor came to him. His wife, her brother, and the Chameleon himself, if they were concerned in this, were certainly wary.

“We’ll have to think of something else,” said Dirk. “If Fanny Walsh knew where that paper was hidden, she might try coming to get it.”

“We can’t very well tell her, can we?” I demanded sarcastically.

But Dirk did not smile. “Not very well. Especially since we don’t know where she is, and don’t dare even show we’re interested. But Walsh might tell her if he knew how to do it secretly.”

Dirk’s plan for our next move was coming to him while he talked.

“See here, Jac, with a clever disguise and you committing some petty crime, I can get you into Walsh’s cell as a full-fledged criminal. You’ll have to go easy—I imagine he’s sharp as a knife blade. But you could show him how to communicate with the outside world, in case he should want to.”

The thing as Dirk explained it seemed feasible, and the next day we tried it.

CHAPTER III. THE HIDDEN MESSAGE.

Walsh stared at me with interest. "What you in here for?"

His keen gaze gave me a momentary quiver. Would he recognize me? But the cell was fairly dim. What Walsh saw was a ragged, disheveled fellow with a day's growth on a pale face, and bloodshot, watery eyes. One of the most useful talents a detective in government service can have is skill at ventriloquism; and I had no fear that he could recognize my voice. The line of my nose-bridge was temporarily heightened, which changes any face to a surprising degree.

"Me?" I said with a snuffle. "What's it of your business? What I told them nippers is all anybody gets out of me."

Whatever friendliness I could get from Walsh I knew must come from him, not me. For a day I was surly and uncommunicative. Suspicious of him, as though he was trying to worm out of me something that he could tell the nippers to help convict me.

He laughed at that, and let me alone. But it is normal to talk when you are shut up together with the law as a common enemy. Gradually I talked, a rambling tale of drug smuggling and peddling and I think I acted with a fair convincingness that a little cocaine now was what I needed to clear my fogged brain. Walsh also talked a little—lies probably, for I was always conscious that a move from me would have sprung him into wariness.

Then Dirk, with his tall slim figure bent nearly double and a hump on his shoulder, came to visit me. The precaution screen of fine wire mesh was kept between us; but we were allowed to whisper together, with a guard watching. Walsh sat uninterested in the cell corner.

Then Dirk left, and our guard with him.

"My partner," I told Walsh. "Did you see the hump on them shoulders?" I laughed. "He can fool any of these nippers with that hunchback look. He's Ollie Greenberg! What they wouldn't give to know that, eh?"

Which meant nothing to Walsh. But it was a confidence from me, and perhaps it had its effect.

"Nobody comes to see you?" I suggested.

"No."

"What, they don't know you're here? Or maybe you got no friends?"

“Maybe.”

“For me, if’n I had a girl—which ain’t so—I’d send for her.”

It seemed to me that he started. But at my earnest, naïve look he laughed.

“Write her a letter,” he said sarcastically, “so the nippers can read it?”

I leaned down over him. “Got a better way than that. I was in wunst, had a forty-pound platinum ingot tucked away in a dump on Staten Island. My partner—this Ollie Greenberg—he was watched so he couldn’t get near it. But we got another guy to go—passed him the word secretly.”

I could see that Walsh was interested; I hoped he was thinking of his wife Fanny and that diagram which he had hidden on the Rance grounds.

But he only grinned with further sarcasm. “What you do? Write a letter in invisible ink, maybe? Of course the nippers never heard of that!”

“Better’n that. I was locked up. Ollie couldn’t be seen talking to the guy who was going after the platinum, and we was in a hurry, so we paged him on the public news-mirrors. Simple, eh? So simple and easy that it worked.”

I was trying to persuade Walsh to let Dirk, in the guise of Ollie Greenberg, page Fanny and give her a message.

Walsh said abruptly: “If I had a friend he wouldn’t answer no public pagin’. He’d naturally think it was some trick.”

We knew this was so with Fanny, for since I had been locked up here Dirk had tried a public personal page-call for “Fanny Walsh.” No one had responded. With the hundreds of bulletin mirrors in the metropolitan area she might have seen it and stepped into the nearest cubby to be connected with whoever wanted to talk to her, but she did not.

“No,” I told Walsh now. “Nobody with brains would be fooled. But we paged this here friend of ours with a fancy name. Clever, eh? It was a name nobody but us ever called him. See the idea?” I waited to let it sink in. “When he seen it on the page-board he knew it had to be a message from me.”

Blank silence was all I got from Walsh, and I dropped it. But the next day when Dirk arrived to visit me again, Walsh suddenly came to life.

“Listen,” he whispered. “How about this Greenberg fellow takin’ a message out for me?”

My heart leaped. We had it at last.

“I guess he will. A page call?”

“Yeah.” He stared into my eyes. “Can we trust him?”

“What’s to trust? You ain’t going to tell Greenberg where a big bar of platinum is? I wouldn’t trust—”

“Heck, no. Listen, you tell him this: ‘Page Kitten Claws.’ That’s a girl, see? She’ll know that’s from me. If she comes on the audiphone just let Greenberg tell her Jimmy says, ‘Paper by the wall in a hurry.’”

We had it! Within two hours the jail commander yanked me out of that cell, and so far as Walsh was concerned, that was the end of me.

“You think she’ll answer it?” Dirk demanded.

“Walsh seemed to think so. Nothing to do but wait, is there, chief?”

It was about midnight. We sat in our office in the mid-Manhattan area, waiting to see if any audiphone connections would be made with “Kitten Claws.” Over all the great metropolitan district, wherever there was a public name-mirror—at corridor corners of every pedestrian level, at the terminals of all the escalators and lifts, and at vantage points to be viewed by all the passing traffic—under the segment C, the name “Kitten Claws” was glowing for a few seconds at intervals of less than a minute.

It had been there for two hours now without result. One of the mirrors was visible from our office. Through the window oval, across a spider balcony we could see the ten-foot glowing grid set against the opposite wall of the arcade close under the city roof. The roster of names was constantly changing: there chanced now to be only a few under C. “Caw, William.” “Celgrade, Frances.” “Claws, Kitten.”

It winked at me silently. Vanished, then came again. Would she see it somewhere? Would she chance answering it?

My heart leaped as our audiphone call sounded. Dirk was upon it with me at his elbow. He gave audible connection, but not the visible.

I heard the microscopic incoming voice:

“Central Paging Service.”

It was our quarry!

“Registered as wanting Kitten Claws,” Dirk briefly responded.

The connection clicked. A low contralto voice said:

“I am Kitten Claws. Who wants me?”

She did not give us the visible contact. Was this Fanny Walsh? Neither of us were familiar with her voice and we could not tell.

Dirk said quickly, “I am a friend—you would not know me, but I am Ollie Greenberg. I got a message from Jimmy. To-day I seen him in Tarrytown.”

The voice said, “Jimmy who? I don’t know any Jimmy.”

“Anyway, I give it,” Dirk insisted. “Jimmy says, ‘Paper by the wall in a hurry.’”

She repeated, “Paper by the wall in a hurry. Is that all?”

“Yes. From Jimmy; you should understand.”

The audiphone clicked and went dead. She had disconnected and hurried away.

Dirk hissed for the wave sorter.

“That call I just had from Central Paging Service—what was the location of the talker?”

“One minute, please.”

“I can’t give you a minute,” Dirk protested. “You ought to have the information ready for me—I registered an advance request for it.”

“One minute, please.”

“Give me Sorter A-4060,” Dirk demanded. “Do it quickly.”

A-4060 presently gave us the location. “Kitten Claws” had spoken from a cubby in a distant section of the Brooklyn district.

“Thank you,” said Dirk. “Get our paraphernalia together, Jac. Let’s start away.”

It seemed reasonable to assume that Dirk had just been talking to the wife of Jimmy Walsh. She had been, presumably, on the Rance grounds that night of the burglary. She would remember the stone wall; and now she knew that Jimmy had purloined the paper they were after and hidden it by the wall. She would, we both felt, make an effort now to secure that diagram.

“In a hurry,” I said. “Walsh added that to his message. Why—”

“Because,” said Dirk, “after these several days which have passed, it’s perfectly possible that the scheme, whatever it is, matures to-night. The Chameleon wants that diagram to-night! Fanny will go get it—in a hurry, as Jimmy advised. When I gave her the message just now, she repeated it after me. ‘Paper by the wall, *in a hurry.*’ Jac, she quite unconsciously stressed those last three words. She’ll get there as quickly as she can. She’s way off in Brooklyn, but just the same we’d better snap after it if we expect to get there first.”

We had our equipment ready in a moment. The Bat was housed on a take-off platform of the city roof almost directly above us. We went up in the lift, caught an escalator niche and were at the platform in three or four minutes.

We were equipped now with the electro-magnetic police shadow cloaks, our flash-guns, microphonic eavesdropping ear-grids and similar devices; and I carried a small fluoroscope for the making of X-ray images out to a range of some fifty or sixty feet. If Fanny came and secured the diagram we hoped to follow her to the Chameleon.

Once on the city roof we found that the night was clear—an almost cloudless starry sky, with no moon. Starting this way openly from our office, it was possible

that we would be followed.

“We take no chances of that,” Dirk said as we climbed into the Bat. “Have to risk losing a little time and make sure we shake off anybody who’s after us.”

The traffic starter appeared to clear our send-off.

“Destination Martinique,” Dirk told him. “What level can we use to-night?”

“Tail-wind at eighteen thousand,” he informed us. “But that fool insect of yours is too small. You’ll be annoying to the checkers, coming down for fuel so much.”

“That’s not for you to worry over,” Dirk retorted.

We lifted into the starlight and took the south through lane at eighteen thousand feet. The big craft went by us as though we were standing still. We had only gone a few miles when Dirk put out our lights.

“We’ll take a chance on not getting caught at this, eh, Jac?”

We went up as high as the Bat would safely climb, made off to the west, and then dropped. If any one had any ideas of checking our route, we had probably shaken them off.

It was about 1 A.M. when we got the Bat safely hidden on a dark side road less than a mile from the Rance place. And in ten minutes more, enveloped in our shadow cloaks, we were crouching in the darkness of the thick shrubbery by the stone wall near where the diagram was hidden.

The paper was still there. We turned over the stone under which it was hidden so that the place would be more obvious. Had Fanny come, failed to find it, and gone? We did not think so.

The Rance house was dark and silent. There seemed no one but ourselves prowling the grounds. An occasional aëro passed overhead; and a few vehicles rolled by on the near-by viaduct.

For perhaps thirty minutes we crouched within our cloaks. The current was silently throbbing through the magnetized fabric. Hoods covered our faces; our hands were black-gloved. At a distance even as close as a few feet light rays striking us would be bent around the aura of the magnetic field created by the cloak current, so that to the eye of the beholder, the background behind us would be visible. Thus, to that beholder we could not be seen. It was far from perfect invisibility, but it served upon all ordinary occasions and here in the starlight we had no fear of detection save that we might make some sound.

Half an hour. Then three-quarters. Were all our calculations wrong? Would no one come in answer to the lure?

Dirk abruptly gripped me. “Look there!”

From down by the viaduct base the figure of a woman with flowing braided hair briefly showed in the starlight as she moved along the edge of the Rance grounds, coming toward us.

“Fanny!” I whispered.

“Yes. Probably.”

Then suddenly, from the shadow of a tree farther up the hill, we saw a man’s figure lurking. Some one else upon the silent scene. Some one watching, not us, but the oncoming woman.

Dirk’s gloved hand touched me. “A man up there. See him? And look down by the viaduct!”

Fanny, if it were she, was not alone. A small winged car rolled up the viaduct and stopped fairly near us. A man’s figure climbed from it. Evidently this was the car in which the woman had arrived. The man called softly, and the woman momentarily stopped and turned back.

We were too far away to distinguish the words, but in a moment I had my microphonic eavesdropper connected. The woman and man met at the foot of the Rance grounds. I caught in and heard their greeting.

“Fanny, wait! I’ll go with yer.”

“You better stay with the car.”

“It’s all right if we hurry.”

“Listen, Jake, don’t let’s take any chance. Jimmy thought I better do the lookin’. If he’d thought you, he’d have said so.”

“To the devil with that.”

They headed together for the foot of the wall, leaving their aëro on the viaduct. Fanny, and her brother Jake Pratt! They had not seen the lurking figure up the hill. That figure was still there, shielding himself behind a tree. Who was he?

Dirk whispered, “I don’t want to capture Fanny and Jake. Let them get the paper and follow them. We can board their car, hidden in the tail.”

They were still two hundred feet from us, coming toward the lower end of the wall, evidently intending to search along it up the hill. We had scuffed up the ground and made the hiding place of the diagram fairly obvious. They would find it. Everything was going as we planned it ought to go, save for this third watching figure; Who was he?

Dirk suddenly whispered, “Jac, creep up on that fellow up there. When you get within fifty feet, shoot the fluoroscope. Just a chance—”

The Chameleon? Could it be? The thought gave me a shock. I had supposed he

and Walsh were allies.

Dirk was pushing at me. "Get the X-ray of him. And then get up on the viaduct. I'll meet you there."

I started away boldly through an open patch of starlight, since I was invisible and need only avoid moving the shrubbery, or making a noise. The man up the hill was still standing motionless behind the tree-trunk, but from the angle I was approaching I could see him plainly. I got within two hundred feet. Then one hundred. Behind me Fanny and Jake, undoubtedly unaware that they were observed, had reached the wall and were poking along it.

I had the fluoroscope ready. Seventy feet—still I was a little out of range. The man behind the tree abruptly broke cover and began moving up the hill directly away from me! Had he become aware of my approach? I did not think so. He moved furtively, as though to avoid Fanny and Jake seeing him, but not with undue haste.

I increased my pace. But I came to a line of shrubbery; I had to force through it with caution. The man up the hill gained on me; I lost sight of him once or twice. Then I saw that he was running. And from the point I had now reached a small aëro-car with extended wings was disclosed half hidden by a clump of trees. My quarry ran and leaped into it.

I abandoned all caution. But I was too far away; I had been taken by surprise. I checked my run. I stood, baffled and chagrined while the car with its lone occupant swiftly and silently rose, sailed over me and was gone into the starlight.

I recovered my wits to see that down the hill Fanny and Jake were standing near where we had hidden the paper. They, too, were staring at the disappearing aëro. And then they began a sudden retreat for the viaduct. Dirk was close to them, no doubt. Panic swept me. They would board their car and be gone before I could reach it.

I lunged down the hill at a run. But for all my haste I was too late. Fanny and her brother reached their car. I climbed frantically to the viaduct, but I was a hundred yards down it. The aëro came rolling at me, and the best that I could do was leap aside to avoid being struck. It went past at forty miles or so an hour—too fast for me to dare attempt to board it. I stood flattened against the viaduct parapet. I saw Fanny and Jake seated together in the forward riding pit. The tail-space seemed empty. Was Dirk, shrouded in his invisible cloak, crouching there?

The car lifted as soon as it had passed me. It sailed up from the viaduct, into the starlight, following the direction of the other aëro, which, with its single man occupant, had eluded me on the hill and winged away only a few moments before.

For a minute I stood alone on the viaduct, wondering if Dirk would make his

presence known. The Rance house up the hill was still dark and silent. These activities seemed not to have aroused its inmates. I could think of no reason for fearing visibility. I snapped off the current in my cloak, and doffed the hood. Dirk, if he were around here anywhere, would see me now on the viaduct, standing by the parapet rail. The night was still starlit, though now, off by the northern horizon, I noticed a rising bank of black clouds, suggesting a coming thunderstorm.

I stood revealed at the parapet for a moment, but no signal came from Dirk. Then a thought struck me. If he were riding the tail of Fanny's car, he would have realized, just as they were starting, that I was too far up the hill to reach them in time. I moved now along the viaduct to the place where the car had been resting. And there on the pavement was Dirk's message to me—a little crumpled sheet of paper with words he had had time to scribble and drop for me to find.

JAC:

I am with them. Going to Switch-pit 22 Yonkers—now! Take our Bat and come quickly.

DIRK.

The Bat was nearly a mile away, hidden on a side road. I raised my hood, switched the current into my cloak and went off at a steady jogging run. I found the Bat lying unmolested. But ten minutes or more had passed. Could I get down into the sub-basement of the great city and to the switch-pit in time to help Dirk?

I lifted the Bat from its hiding place and soared aloft, heading southward for the Yonkers district.

CHAPTER IV. TRAPPED IN A PLANE.

As Dirk afterward agreed, we had miscalculated our actions there by the stone wall of the Rance place. When once I left Dirk and started up the hill, there was no way that he could recall me. For a few moments he lay quiet, watching the oncoming Fanny and her brother. They advanced, seeming quite unaware that any one else was there. From Dirk's angle he could see the figure up by the tree, though they could not.

Fanny and Jake reached the foot of the wall and began searching the ground along its base, moving now directly toward where Dirk was crouching. Presently, with his unaided ears, their low voices were audible. They saw the patch of ground where we had scuffed it, and the overturned stone; and they pounced upon the diagram.

There was a moment when Dirk was wholly absorbed watching Fanny and Jake. They were no more than ten feet from him; he could see and hear them plainly. Jake flashed a little hand torch upon the paper eagerly.

"This is it, Fan!"

"What's it say?"

"Plan of Switch-pit 22, Yonkers. That was the one, wasn't it? That dirty rat, pushin' us down to ten per cent. This'll fix him."

He pored over the paper, but Fanny reached for it.

"Give me," she demanded.

"Leave it alone."

"Jimmy said 'in a hurry.' Maybe that might mean, to-night. Ain't it in the code there somewhere? The time an' the cylinder. He said—"

"I'm lookin'. But it—"

"Give me," the woman repeated.

"I got it. That dirty rat, this'll fix him."

"To the devil with that, Jake! What time, an' what cylinder number?"

"It's cylinder P-288, leavin' the North-Central Depot at 3.50 A.M. That gets it to Switch-pit 22 at about 3.56. An' it's to-night! Fan, it's less'n an hour from now. Quick as we can get there—I'll be damned! Look up there, Fan!"

They both turned to gaze up the hill, and Dirk turned with them. The man I was chasing was visible as he ran into the open, disappeared into a hollow and a moment

later up came his aëro, sailing away to the southward. It astonished Fanny and Jake, and alarmed them. That they knew or guessed who the man was and where he was going was at once apparent to Dirk.

Fanny muttered vehemently: "That's him! I bet that's him! Going to the pit now."

They were passing Dirk, hurrying back to the viaduct.

"Jake, what'll we do?"

"Go there! I'm goin' through with this myself, just like Jimmy planned—the heck with ten per cent. I can handle him. I'll drive a flash through him if he don't like it. You, Fan, you're as good as a man in a fight."

"But, Jake, no killing. You know what—"

They were running now, with Dirk after them. Fanny, in her divided skirt wound tight with leather straps around her legs from the knees down, scaled the viaduct braces like a cat going up a tree. They reached the car and were a moment starting it, during which Dirk was able to climb into the tail-space and scribble me the note. And then they rolled down the viaduct and sailed.

Dirk did not know what had happened to me, but he very well guessed. He lay crouched in the little rectangle of space over the tail. The two in the driving pit were only twelve or fifteen feet in advance of him. The pit-lights were out, save for the opalescent glow of the dial-faces. Dirk could see the two figures fairly plainly; Jake was driving, with Fanny wedged beside him. He had handed her the diagram. She folded it away into the pocket of her dark linen-corded jacket; and then sat calmly coiling the braids of her black hair upon her head. And in a moment, when she had finished, Dirk saw a flash-gun ready in her hand.

Behind Dirk, back over the northern horizon, a storm was coming up. There was presently a distant flash of lightning, and a muffled muttering thunder. The two in the driving pit occasionally spoke, but the thrum of the motors made their voices inaudible.

From his position Dirk could see over the side of the tail, and down to the Hudson River shining in the starlight. They were at some ten thousand feet; it was a ribbon of river, edged by the great docks and the spider aëro platforms, banked with beacon lights. And close ahead now were the rising ramparts of Great-New York. A hundred entrances were here as a choice, but no matter which one Jake selected, it was only a matter of minutes now down into the city to the Yonkers district and Switch-pit 22.

Dirk was trying to map out a course of action. He was, perhaps, for a moment inexcusably careless. He was aware of the distant lightning flashes behind him, and

suddenly he awoke to what had so unexpectedly occurred. Fanny and Jake had murmured together. They abruptly flung up the aëro's cross-wind vizor. It rose like a curtain between Dirk and them.

Dirk had hardly time to move from his wedged and crouching position, with his current-charged invisible cloak enveloping him and a flash-gun in his gloved hand. He was aware of a sudden dip of the aëro, a half loop-roll, and all the heavens and the outskirts of the metal city beneath swooped as the car rolled and then righted itself.

Beyond a corner of the raised vizor-shield, Dirk saw that Fanny and Jake had jumped for the little safety volplane board which hung clipped under the right forward wing. It flashed to Dirk then what had happened. The lightning flares as a background had made him briefly visible. They had discovered him; feared to chance an exchange of shots at such close range; and they were abandoning the aëro, sending it wrecked to crash with Dirk upon the city ramparts.

It all happened so quickly that Dirk had no more than time to climb unsteadily to his feet. The aëro controls were smashed. The car dived wildly.

Jake cut away the volplane. With its solid little cross-wing spread, it sailed off at a tangent like a soaring bird, with Fanny and Jake crouching in its center. As they left, the girl's arm flung up. A white bundle hurled from her hand, struck Dirk and fell into the tail-pit beside him.

A fabric balloon crescent! This Fanny, whatever her brother's motives, did not herself want Dirk to die. She had flung him the rolled fabric which in the absence of a volplane had saved many a pilot's life. Dirk had no more than time to unroll it and fasten its harness upon his shoulders.

He leaped free of the car into the dizzy whirling mingled earth and sky. Dropped, then was caught as the fabric-crescent opened above him. The car went rolling past him like a broken bird. Far away over the river, he saw the dot of the volplane board as Fanny and Jake maneuvered it to safety upon a mid-level causeway of the Yonkers city entrance.

There was a brief moment when Dirk was conscious that he was falling too swiftly. The crescent fabric above him, never inspected by Jake and perhaps inexpertly rolled into that bundle years before, was still half spilled of its air. Dirk jerked desperately to right it, but could not. He was aware of a great spider platform—the headway of an escalator—rushing up to meet him. Uprushing lights—

There was a tearing, crashing impact. All the world went dark.

He recovered to find himself lying on the metal grid of the pavement. A ring of

curious pedestrians were around him; and a pedestrian-traffic officer was kneeling, applying restoratives.

“I’m all right,” Dirk protested weakly. “Get me up. I’m not hurt.”

He wondered how much time had passed. Was it too late now for him to get to Switch-pit 22?

“We seen the chute comin’ down,” said the officer. “Aëro-chute with nothin’ hangin’ from it.”

“I had on an electric cloak, you see,” Dirk smiled weakly. “But the crash made me visible, didn’t it?”

“Yes. Stand up. Can’t you stand? What’s the matter with your leg?”

Dirk had thought he was not greatly injured, but now when he tried to stand his left leg gave way.

He clung to the traffic man. “It may be broken, officer. Or the knee twisted. What time is it?”

“Tri-night plus eighteen. Who are you? Were you in that plane?”

Three eighteen A.M. Dirk realized he had been unconscious only a moment or two. A street emergency light suddenly flashed on, bathing them in its actinic glare. And Dirk saw that a near-by metal pole held an American Press News lens. It was illumined. This scene was already flashing throughout the city on the news-mirrors.

“Officer, I’m Dirk, on government criminal investigation service.” He fumbled with a secret recess of his jacket and produced his identification check. “Get that lens turned off. I’m in the midst of a case. I don’t want—”

A newsgatherer came shoving his way through the ring of staring pedestrians, and held a microphone aloft.

“Get away with that,” roared the traffic man. “This is private.” He added, “I’ll blank that lens.” With his flash-gun he shot a bolt through its wires. The lens-eye went dark.

“Thanks,” said Dirk. “Officer, I can’t walk. But I’ve got to get to the North-Central Depot of the Postal Cylinder Tubes before three fifty. It isn’t far, is it?”

“Quite a ways. I’m takin’ yer.” The burly officer raised Dirk in his arms. “This post here can get along without me. . . Here, you, stop that cage! We’re going down in a rush.”

The newsgatherer halted a down-dropping elevator cage. Dirk was carried into it. They dropped swiftly through all the levels into the city sub-basement where they boarded a single-seated car of the underground monorail and were routed in a rush directly for the Postal Service North-Central Depot.

CHAPTER V. IN THE MAIL PASSAGES.

Meanwhile, knowing nothing of all this that had happened to Dirk, I landed the Bat on one of the approach platforms of the Yonkers entrance causeway and rolled into the city. The current was off in my cloak now; I had no wish to startle traffic directors by showing them an apparently driverless car. I found presently a place to leave the Bat, on an upper balcony level of Park 80 in the Yonkers district.

A cage took me into the sub-basement. At this hour just before dawn, the subterranean corridors were almost deserted. There were practically no pedestrians; an occasional passing monorail and a few freight-laden vehicles on the central drive-space. These lower shops were all closed now, their glassite windows dark and barricaded.

I moved along the corridor with my cloak over my arm. The time was 3.40 A.M. I was within close walking distance now of Switch-pit 22. I thought that Fanny and Jake, and Dirk a shadow with them, certainly would have reached there by now.

I stepped into an arcade recess which was dark and secluded, away from the dim blue glow of the corridor tube-lights; and with the current in my cloak again making me invisible, I hastened back into the corridor.

One may travel swiftly within an invisible cloak and with a feeling of comparative safety. The extraordinary penalties attached to the use of these police cloaks have made criminals wary of them, and few indeed have fallen into their hands before the rightful wearer could short-circuit them, burning out the intricate wiring. There was little chance that I would encounter and collide with any one else so equipped. I ran freely down the vaulted lane, and the city noises blotted out my footfalls. I slipped into a monorail car whose lights signified it would stop near my destination—and its few passengers were not aware of me.

At 3.48 I was down in the city's lowest cellar level. The great cellar caverns stretched around me, with yellow spots of light eerie in the gloom. The fetid air—for all the city's boasted ventilating system—was so heavy down here that I could see it hanging in layers. Dripping moisture, despite the modern devices which should keep it clear, hung in glistening beads on the low vaulted roof. The drainage pipes and conduits lay on the wet floor like tangled pythons . . . I saw occasionally groups of repair workers, ghouls prowling in the gloom. Overhead, the transit tunnels were rumbling with trains; and off to the right the Hudson River bed, I knew, was still

higher.

I think that it was just about 3.50 A.M. when I plunged into one of the winding little tunnels designated as a lower entrance to Postal Switch-pit 22. And in a moment more the interior of the pit lay before me.

I stood for a time cautiously pressed against the tunnel wall, peering down into the pit whose floor lay a few feet beneath my level. This was one of the smaller of the many converging centers of the arterial system of inter-city postal transportation. Fifty perhaps of the vacuum transit tubes—each tube some three feet in diameter—converged here. The pit was a low-vaulted circular room some sixty feet in diameter, shaped like the interior of two shallow bowls, one inverted upon the other. There was thus a concave floor and a concave ceiling, with a circular mid-line where they connected.

The pit, as I saw it now, was dimly blue lit. The banks of tube entrances, each capped by its heavy metal shield, stood like staring dark eyes. In the pit center, upon universal joints, were the four electro-magnetic cranes, which, with uncanny precision, seized upon the arriving cylinders as they slid out of their portes, lifted them, swung them dangling across the room and inserted them in the proper departing tubes for their new destination. The great location board, covered with tiny winking lights showing the location of the on-coming cylinders, stood in a crescent to one side. And near it were the banks of switches and key-levers by which the cranes and the tube-portes were controlled.

There were, I knew, times during the twenty-four hours when traffic here demanded the presence of several switchmen. But I had anticipated only one or two would be in the pit at this hour. And Fanny and Jake and Dirk—

I saw, with my first quick glance, that two men were here. One of them—the switchman, evidently the only one on duty—stood, now at his key-levers. He was operating only one crane and the cylinders were arriving fairly fast for him. One lay waiting in its cradle on the floor—glistening bronze like a huge double-pointed cigar, a little less than three feet in diameter at its bulging middle and nearly ten feet long. Another porte popped open and vomited its cylinder, and the crane lifted the first one and swung it away.

Traffic was proceeding normally. This switchman on duty now I had never seen before; but the man standing beside him I recognized at once. It was Rance, superintendent of this division, in charge of this and several others of the Yonkers pits—Rance, from whom a few nights ago Jimmy Walsh had stolen the diagram and, presumably, ten pounds of Rance's personal gold-leaf funds which had never been

heard of since.

Thoughts are insistent things. I had been standing in the little entrance way no more than a few seconds. I recall that it flashed to me that Jake and Fanny and Dirk had not yet arrived. Rance, of course, knew of some treasure-cylinder which was traversing the mails at this hour. He knew its number, and that it was to leave the North-Central Depot at 3.50 A.M., arriving here about 3.56. And since his code paper had disappeared he was personally here now to make sure that the cylinder was properly handled.

With extra guards? I saw, under the electric clock dial, the switchman's routine weapon. And then I saw that Rance and his switchman were not alone here. Two other dark-garbed figures crouched behind the location-board. Hiding there, weapons in hand.

I think I had been about to switch off my cloak current and enter the pit, to join Rance and warn him of the menace from Jake and Fanny. But the surprise of seeing the two crouching figures stopped me. I had at first a vague swift idea that they were menacing Rance and the switchman, but instantly I realized that was not so. Rance could easily see them from where he was standing.

But their furtive, tense aspect gave me pause. And over the clank of the crane and the cylinders, the hiss of the vacuums, I still could hear the voices of Rance and his subordinate. What they were saying gave me greater pause; a wonderment; a feeling that what I was seeing here in the pit was not what it seemed to be.

"Three fifty-three," said Rance. He gestured to the clock. "It should have left the North-Central Depot three minutes ago. It'll start presently." He was gazing at the location-board. "A little late, evidently . . . Keep up with the traffic, Dowling. Don't let 'em collect on you. We don't want the down town inspectors looking our way. Not at this critical moment."

It sounded queer to me. The words, or the way he said them. It gave me pause. I stepped down to the floor of the pit, but I shrank against its wall, crouched under a safety rail, invisible within my cloak.

Dowling was busy endeavoring to clear the floor of three cylinders before others arrived. Rance, with his tall muscular figure garbed in tight leather trousers and a gray suede jacket, was no more than twenty feet from me. His stern-featured face, with the iron-gray hair above it, was plain in the glow of a ceiling light. He was grimly, sardonically smiling. He added:

"Damned traitors, eh, Dowling? Well, if they dare come here we'll give them a surprise." His glance went to the two crouching figures.

What did that mean? He would not be talking along that line, it seemed to me, unless the lens-eye and the microphone over the location-board—by which headquarters down town could see and listen to what was transpiring here—had been cut off. It gave me a shivery feeling to know that we were entirely isolated from the rest of the world.

In a little arcade opening across the pit a figure suddenly appeared. Jake Pratt. He stood with leveled flash-gun.

“Don’t move,” he growled at Rance. “You—by the devil, I’ll flash you dead if you make a move!”

His weapon was upon Rance. Behind him I saw the determined Fanny standing calm as a man with her gun pointing over Jake’s shoulder as he crouched in advance of her.

Rance whirled around. “Oh, so it’s you!”

“Put your hands out!”

“They’re out and up!” Rance’s arms went over his head. “Don’t be a fool—don’t flash me, Jake.”

Fanny’s voice shrilled: “You, Dowling, keep away from your gun! An’ keep that traffic moving. We don’t want any attention brought here at this time.”

Jake leaped into the pit, with Fanny after him. But where was Dirk? I expected him to take a part in the scene.

Rance stood motionless, with his arms above his head. “What’s the matter with you, Jake? You, Fanny, what’s all this play-acting for? We’re isolated from down town—don’t worry. I’m not taking any chances. That cylinder’s coming.”

“Damn right!” growled Jake. “Comin’, an’ what’s in it comes to me. You with your damn’ ten per cent—”

“So that’s your game, is it?”

“Yes—that’s our game!” Fanny had snatched the flash-gun from under the clock. Dowling, narrowly watching, went on with his traffic work.

“An’ you’re a damn’ killer,” Fanny put in. “Back him over against the wall, Jake. Get him out of the way. Dowling, you—”

She never finished. It seemed that Rance gave some slight signal. From behind the location-board came the hiss of a shot. It caught Jake, drilled him. His own bolt went wild as he flung his arms up and tumbled forward upon his face. A bolt leaped at Fanny, missed her; and instead of firing, she stood for an instant numb with surprise. Then she threw down her weapon. And she flung herself to the floor upon her brother’s body, gathering his head in her arms.

“Jake, you’re not killed? Jake, speak to me! Oh, Jake! Brother Jake, don’t

die!”

All this had happened in less than a minute. I still crouched, invisible, across the room. The cylinder was coming! Dowling momentarily left his traffic and pounced upon the location-board to verify it.

“There she comes! Five minutes late, but she’s coming!”

Rance and his two followers ignored the body of Jake and the sobbing Fanny.

“Get ready, lads. We’ll have to work fast. . . Dowling, don’t let us get cluttered up. Get rid of those cylinders.”

Where was Dirk? I felt suddenly that everything was up to me. But what could I do? A flash from my gun would kill one of these men, but there were four of them. They would end me in a second once I was discovered.

I became aware that I was clutching my little fluoroscope. Almost without conscious thought my finger pressed its lever. The nearly invisible beam swept the switch-pit. It fell upon the figure of Rance. I made it cling to his legs. And as the bones became visible, I saw the familiar break and the little metal plate.

He was the Chameleon!

I had anticipated for those few seconds that Rance must be the Chameleon. But for my life, had I given it sober thought, I would not have flashed on that fluoroscope. Its faint beam in this pit of shifting lights went unnoticed. But the grid in my gloved hand was not invisible. And one of Rance’s men saw it.

A bolt came suddenly at me. But upon the wrong side, for it very narrowly missed me, hissed against the metal wall and the shock of its electron-aura numbing all my senses. I recall that I tried to straighten. My senses were whirling; paralyzed nerves made my fingers drop the flash-gun. I took a staggering step upon bending, trembling legs.

And I heard the Chameleon’s voice:

“There he is! Grab him!”

The shock of the bolt had disorganized my cloak mechanism. I was visible! The men came leaping upon me and bore me down.

“So it’s the little nipper, is it?”

I remained dimly conscious; temporarily paralyzed. The Chameleon stood bending over me. He recognized me from that morning at dawn when with Dirk I had captured Jimmy Walsh.

“The little nipper! Still looking for that ten pounds of gold leaf I said that Walsh stole from me? Is that it? Or are you after bigger things? Where’s your partner?”

Where indeed? In all the chaos of my confused senses, I could only think of that. Where was Dirk? Would he blunder into this, even as I had blundered?

One of the men kicked at me. “What’ll I do with him, chief? Dead men don’t talk. We don’t want any live bodies left here when we get out of this. And that damn’ woman; two little flashes, now—”

Fanny’s voice came drab, half hysterical from where she huddled over the body of her brother.

“That’s it! Go on an’ drill us both. You, the killer—”

To my fading senses it was all like a distant drama in which I had no part. Movement of grotesque shadows, and voices.

Dowling’s voice: “She’s coming. Two minutes! Less, maybe, she’ll be here.”

“Let ’em alone,” growled Rance. “Dowling, hold out the next cylinder. We’ll put these bodies in it—dead and alive both, why not? And send ’em off.”

“And have this nipper tell all about it?” some one protested. “And the damn’ woman?”

“The devil,” chuckled Rance. “Dowling can wreck them off somewhere in the tube. A little postal traffic accident with dead bodies that won’t tell a thing.”

I felt myself being rolled aside. The treasure cylinder would be here in a minute.

The voices echoed all around me. I understood it all now. The Chameleon had made his diagram for the information of Walsh and the other men, who were to hold up the “innocent” Director Rance, alibiing him; but he had withheld it from Walsh, Jake and Fanny, deciding to risk doing the holdup himself, when there came an argument over the division of the spoils.

Dowling’s voice again: “She’ll be here in thirty seconds, boys. Passin’ the last light now.”

A treasure cylinder, such as very often passes through the mails. It had gold leaf, platinum dust, and negotiable securities in its bags. It was to be diverted now—switched wrongly—to a wrong destination, where in an outlying district other undermen of the Chameleon were waiting to seize its contents and make off in a bandit freight-aëro.

Twenty seconds. The call buzzer from down town Postal Headquarters was vehemently ringing. Rance leaped to it.

“Yes, this is Rance. Yes, everything is all right. Dowling on duty. I’m here with him. . . Yes, some trouble with the image lens and microphone—that’s why we’re isolated. . . Yes, send a repair man—”

He cut off. “Repair man! They’d better send a crew to take our places!”

Dowling’s voice: “Here she comes!”

Across the pit a vacuum porte hissed open. The ten-foot treasure cylinder slid out under the crane.

The Chameleon leaped for it, and called triumphantly: "The label's right! This is it! Lift it, Dowling! Tube 1820 for North Jersey division. Get it away!"

I had a brief glimpse of the sleek glistening bronze cylinder as the crane magnet descended upon it. A man was holding Fanny and me; but the Chameleon and the other man were crowding upon the cylinder. Dowling, across the pit at his levers, swung the crane arm down.

Then abruptly the side of the cylinder slid open! There was an instant when I was aware of a peering face from within the cylinder, gauging the scene here in the pit. The Chameleon and his companion were caught wholly by surprise. They leaped backward and leveled their weapons. But too late! From the cylinder came a flash. Then another.

The Chameleon and the man with him toppled and fell as the bolts struck them. The man holding me jumped to his feet, met a flash and fell back inert upon me. Dowling tried to run, but a bolt caught him.

It was over—a second or two of horror. The pit cleared of its gases and flying sparks. Four men of the city police came climbing from the cylinder. The head and shoulders of Dirk showed as he braced himself against its sides.

"Rather too bad to kill instead of capturing them," Dirk was saying. "But you can't risk exchanging bolts in a place like this. And, Jac, when I fell from that aëro, the quickest and surest way I could get help was to be rushed to the North-Central Postal Depot. We intercepted the cylinder—got the treasure out of it and got ourselves in it." He smiled grimly. "That was one sure way to get here without giving warning."

Fanny was still huddled by the body of her brother. Dirk, upon his injured leg, hobbled over to her.

"Fanny, I have you to thank for throwing me that chute. You don't like killing people, do you?"

She gazed up at him dully. "They killed my brother."

"Yes."

He bent and touched her glossy black hair. "I'm going to get you the lightest sentence I can," he said, gently. "When you and Jimmy are freed, why don't you try living straight for a while?" I have never seen Dirk's face so gentle. "It's a lot simpler and safer, Fanny. And I think it's more your style."

But she did not answer; she just sat holding her dead brother's body in her arms.

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Bandits of the Cylinder* by Ray Cummings]