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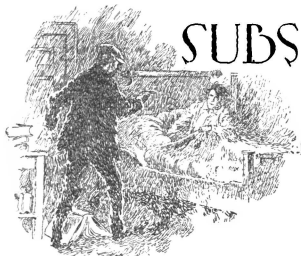
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# SUBSTITUTES

by Robert J.  
Pearsall

*Author of "Mastery," "Ghost-Ruled," etc.*

**B**EHIND the drawn blinds of the protected "Pacific Club," wherein Wassner and Keating had become acquainted, courtesy between visitors was a rule that was enforced. Another no less rigid rule was that a meeting there did not necessarily imply recognition elsewhere. Men met, matched wits and luck, and thereafter passed each other on the streets without nodding if they liked, and with no offense. Such-like, judging from their visible circumstances, should have been the way with these two, the banker-promoter and the gambler; but there were in Wassner's life certain other elements, invisible and sinister, that drew him to Keating.

Old-time piracy was a more or less certain game, governed by a code of a sort; but modern piracy, being played with hidden and less scrupulous weapons, has no code and no surety. The absence of a code Wassner had accepted long ago; but it was only recently that he had discovered that other lack. They were brothers of the black flag of finance—a clan that is passing—who had chased him from the sea of deception into narrow waters underlaid with the sharp rocks of disaster.

Seeking to escape, he had found himself headed for a maelstrom. The warning had come to him straight. Still twisting and turning, he had encountered Keating, and hope.

So he had invited Keating to his bachelor home, not without suggestion of another purpose than companionship. They sat there, dapper, self-sufficient youth and nervous middle age, talking on indifferent subjects, while all the time Wassner studied Keating from behind half-closed eyelids. A handsome, mobile face with a hint of a smile on the lips at times and a glint of the devil in the eyes; a reckless face, touched a little with hardness and cruelty, and lightly with some personal worry—that was what Wassner saw. Surely it should not be hard to make a confidant of such a man.

But thrice Wassner, trap-lipped and cautious, approached the subject that lay on his mind, and shied away again while the air of the study grew heavy with the reek of cigars which he was forever lighting and which as often turned cold between his teeth. And finally Keating furnished a sure opening by the recital of a difficulty of his own.

In a word he was broke; and the Old Nick

himself—in Keating's words—would be hard put to it to find a way out of that plight that he wouldn't take.

"You mean it?" queried Wassner, moistening the corners of his lips with his tongue.

"You heard me."

And Keating's face grew still harder and his eyes more inscrutable, as if a curtain had dropped over them.

"Still, you've been winning," murmured Wassner.

"If my winnings had matched your losses I'd be fixed. But I suppose"—enviously—"that was merely chuck-a-luck to you."

"Now that," said Wassner with his thin, predatory face darkening and his lean shoulders slumping forward, "that is where you're mistaken."

Hook-nosed and jutting of jaw, he stared into the electric fireplace, looking like a picture of defeat, or a freebooter planning fresh conquest.

"What!" exclaimed Keating. "You, too!"

His lips remained parted in amazement.

Whereupon Wassner seemed to brace himself, and, turning to Keating, completed his revelation.

"Yes, I too. The fact is, Keating, I'm ruined. Gambling at stocks, at cards—madness!"

He threw away his cigar and began to beat with his fingers a devil's tattoo on his knees.

"Everybody'll know it in a week," Wassner went on after a moment more calmly. "You've noticed my worry lately. Well, it's over the consequences of it. Mine is a private bank as you know; but it's got hundreds of small depositors and stockholders. People that trusted me, and every one of them's a tragedy. Are you beginning to understand why I've spoken several times tonight of—of suicide?"

"Well, yes," said Keating rather callously. "But I don't see how that'll help the small fry out of the skillet. Not of course that I'd worry much about them myself."

"Ah!" hesitated Wassner; and then, forcing the sentence, "That's where you come in."

"I!"

"Well, of course there's a reason why I'm telling you this. And there is a way—I admit it's partly cowardice, partly that I can't face the thing—but there's a way that my suicide may be made to benefit these others too."

"Insurance, eh?"

"But unfortunately," said Wassner in a lowered tone after corroborating Keating's guess with a nod, "all of my policies contain a clause protecting the companies from loss in case of suicide."

Keating, whose penetrating eyes glowed curiously when Wassner was not looking at him, has as yet seemed neither particularly shocked at Wassner's suggestion, nor aware of how out

of keeping it was with Wassner's apparent character.

"That is unfortunate except for the companies," he said. "But I don't see where I fit into the play."

"And yet," asserted Wassner, "it was really you that suggested the thing. I admit I puzzled a long time, trying to find a way around that clause."

"I guess I'm not the first man that's discovered that it isn't easy to figure out a manner of suicide that can't be detected. Leave one clue and the insurance detectives grab at it; and if they find another, there's their case. They're argus-eyed, those fellows, and no mistake."

"Well, then, without going into details, I failed entirely to think of any way of killing myself with my own hands that didn't leave a chance for discovery. That being disposed of, what remained?"

"To sensibly give up the idea, of course."

"No," said Wassner, his grim voice sinking ever lower. "To kill myself by the hand of another man."

AT THAT, and for the first time, Keating recoiled, so sharply that it seemed he must have already divined Wassner's startling next words.

"By your hand," Wassner concluded.

"You're mad!" cried Keating, but with not as much repugnance to the idea in his voice as might have been expected. "I'll not—"

And he started up.

"I'm sane, and you will, of course," replied Wassner with cold composure. "If I didn't know that d'you suppose I'd make the proposition? Sit down, please."

And after a moment Keating slowly complied.

"Why, as I've said, it was really you that gave me the idea," pursued Wassner. "You remember your claim that it should be easy to kill and get away with it without a risk. It was in connection with that other argument of yours, about the easy possibility of mistaken identification after death, the possible substitution of bodies and so on—but that doesn't matter."

"What I'm asking of you isn't murder. It's justifiable suicide, if there ever was such a thing; and you're only my tool, as a pistol would be. Your hand substitutes for mine. There's five thousand dollars in it for you, and you will do it."

It was sophistry, but it was well put, and Keating seemed to waver, while an avid twist came into his flexible lips.

"You will pay five thousand dollars—to me—to kill you?"

"I will," said Wassner, as if registering an oath.

"Why, man, it would be funny if—"

"If it wasn't serious. Now look here!"

Wassner hitched his chair closer to Keating's. Presently their heads were close together like conspirators'; and they were talking in tones that didn't carry beyond the little circle of greenish light cast by the study lamp. Urgence followed argument.

With his face looking more and more wolfish, its crooked lines of greed contradicting every one of his words, the speculative banker and promoter pleaded with Keating in the name of his reputation and business honor, and for the sake of widows and orphans and modest homes threatened with ruin, to enter into this curious agreement. And every few minutes he dangled the offered reward of five thousand dollars before Keating's receptive mind.

"We'll arrange it this way," he said. "A thousand tonight when you agree. The money's here, ready. And four thousand more when the thing's done."

"But how am I to get it after you're dead?"

"I've thought of that too. I'll send the four thousand in currency by registered mail to any address you give me in New York. You'll see me send it tomorrow. If I'm dead by the following morning it's yours. If I'm not, I'll hold up delivery of the package by wire."

"Well, that's safe for both of us," replied Keating.

Wassner was sure of Keating from that moment.

Finally Wassner rose and led Keating into the front hall, up a flight of stairs and to the bedroom in which the murder which would be no murder was to take place. It was part of the perfection of Wassner's scheme that he should depart in no way from his regular routine in order to accommodate his assassin.

Fortunately Wassner lived alone except for an old housekeeper who slept in a far wing of the house, so Keating would run no chance of being observed while in the discharge of what was now naively called his "mission." As for any clue he might leave behind him Wassner himself suggested a perfectly safe means of destroying it.

Wassner would leave a can of coal oil handy in his closet, which liquid tinder Keating would put to its obvious use. After giving the flames time to get well started, Keating would phone in the alarm from a down-town telephone box, thus making sure of the housekeeper's escape.

The manner of the killing itself was to be left to Keating's discretion; and Wassner agreed to make the operation easier for both Keating and himself by taking a strong drug that would ensure slumber through the night. It was of course clear that the house should be well darkened, and that Keating should receive a pass-key.

A wind-harried rack of clouds was driving across the sky when a little later Wassner and Keating shook hands upon their incredible

compact and parted at the front door. When Keating was half-way to the car-line a pale moon broke through those clouds, half-illuminating a night that was soft with the promise of rain.

Upon Keating's mobile face was a smile, somewhat grim, daredevil perhaps, but lacking harsher qualities; and it turned into a chuckle when he tucked the crumpled bills that Wassner had given him into a pocket inside his vest. Back in the house Wassner spoke softly into the telephone a Judas message, the reply to which pleased him; and then, rubbing his lean hands together with nervous satisfaction, repaired to the library to await another caller.



AT NOON of the following day Keating and Wassner met by appointment in the post-office lobby, where the matter of the registered package was attended to. Mid-afternoon Keating paid another visit to the Wassner home. He knew he would be alone in the house, for from a room across the street which he had rented he had watched patiently until he saw the housekeeper leave. Although Wassner had furnished him the pass key to enable him to enter the house that night, this earlier use of it was not according to program; nor did Wassner know that Keating continued to watch the house until a little before midnight he entered it for the killing.

By then it was raining, a thin drizzle that settled slowly, thickly opaque as a fog; and no one could have seen Keating as he stole across the street. Silently as a wraith he passed up the steps, inserted the pass key in the door and noiselessly turned it.

Entering, he stood for a moment as if listening with all his senses, with every nerve and fiber of his being. There was no sound nor movement in the house; the darkness was as impenetrable as Wassner had promised him it would be; and presently, moving thus blindly but with no uncertainty of action, Keating reached the bottom of the stairs and began at once to ascend them, cat-footed.

Each step he planted his feet lightly, bearing his weight upon the stairs with imperceptible gradations, so that not a single creeping sound betrayed his assassin-like approach. At the top of the stairway he stopped and listened again.

Now the stillness was not quite complete; from down the hall in the direction of Wassner's room there came the audible evidence of a man asleep. He wasn't snoring, but the breathing was loud enough, a harshly monotonous sound.

Keating drew a long breath, which seemed to indicate relief. Then, still guarding against any noise with supernatural sensitiveness, he crept down the hall until he came to the door of the room.

By that time he had withdrawn a revolver

from the side pocket of his coat. Holding it ready, he turned the door-knob with his left hand. The door swung open on noiseless hinges, which Keating himself had oiled.

The bed of the sleeper was the faintest patch of white against the blackness of the room. As if some subconscious warning of this invisible, unheard menace had come to him he stirred uneasily, breathing irregularly.

Keating raised his revolver and crept forward until he was about four feet from the bed. Now he could see the vague outlines of the sleeper's head against the white pillow.

He recalled that very near where he stood was a small table laden with books. He felt for that table until he found it. Then, steadying himself with his left hand on the table, he took deliberate aim at the sleeper's forehead.

A book large as a dictionary, dislodged somehow by Keating's hand, slipped from the table. Keating snatched at it, not quite managing to stifle an ejaculation of dismay. But he only succeeded in accelerating its fall; and the sound of its contact with the floor, in that dead silence, was like the crack of doom.



AND he who was supposed to be Wassner, self-dragged to facilitate his own killing, sat up in bed with the swift awakening that hints of a hunted life.

Motionless then, his breath coming in gasps, he stayed there terrified, afraid to investigate the sound that had broken his dreams until a hint of its possible meaning seemed to come to him, and he whispered hopefully—

"Wassner?"

But at that same instant Keating also whispered that name in astonishment and some reproach, which last would seem to be deserved by the man who had evidently forgotten his compact.

And Keating went on:

"I've got you covered, Wassner. I'll shoot if you say the word. Serve you right if I shot anyway. This wasn't the bargain by a — sight. You were supposed to stay asleep."

"What!"

It was an exclamation of amazement so great that it drove out fear, and it wasn't Wassner's voice.

"I say that I've come to do as I agreed, but—Good Lord!"

The man in the bed had pressed a button, and the room was flooded with light. From under his pillow he had plucked a revolver; but as he looked squarely into the muzzle of Keating's gun he made no attempt to raise it. Not did he need to, for after a moment Keating slowly lowered his own.

And the two—Keating and the pallid, high-foreheaded, narrow-featured man whom he had found in Wassner's bed—regarded each other, both with the eyes of stupefaction.

"You're not Wassner!" gasped Keating as if he could not believe the evidence that was before his eyes.

"Do I look like— Say, what's this?"

Swiftly the man swung two pajama'd legs out from under the covers and sat on the side of the bed.

"Nothing, I guess," replied Keating feebly. "A mistake. Wassner intended to sleep here tonight, didn't he? Because he hired me to come here and—"

"Like — he intended to," rasped the other with the beginning of understanding and rage in his close-set but powerfully gleaming eyes. "What's that talk of hiring? What did he hire you to do?"

Keating stuttered his reply, his words tumbling over each other, the hand with which he held his gun trembling:

"He hired me to kill him—you—I don't know. He said he'd be here, drugged. Ruined, he said he was. It was the insurance—he wanted his insurance for his creditors. And you— Did he know you'd be here?"

"Did he know? The —! I should say he did."

Then Wassner's involuntary proxy in his appointment with Death fell into a fit of low and passionate cursing that was the more terrible for his evident effort to restrain himself. And after staring at him a moment as if slowly absorbing the situation Keating joined him in his imprecations against Wassner.

"So that was the game, eh?" snarled Keating after epithets failed him. "To get you killed. But why did he want to? And how did he work it to get you into his bed?"

"I was to take his place here for a week," blurted the other. "He said— But you— Oh, —, you're one of us or you wouldn't be here. I was to play sick under his name. He said there was a doctor and nurse coming in the morning, who were both fixed. I was to be pronounced too sick to see visitors or even the housekeeper. Danger of contagion; see?"

"An alibi for Wassner. The records would show him safe here in bed while he— What an infernal simpleton I was to believe him!"

"An alibi for Wassner while he was really doing some business somewhere else, eh?"

"Yes, that was Wassner's stall."

"Queer!"

Keating uttered this word in a peculiar tone, which might have been either exclamatory or inquiring.

"Queer! What's that?" And the other suddenly darted at Keating a look that was lowering and distrustful.

"Why, isn't it?" queried Keating innocently. "But I begin to understand now. Instead of an alibi Wassner really wanted a getaway. A perfectly safe getaway. After it was burned

with the house your body would certainly be mistaken for his.

"Officially he'd be dead; really he'd be gone with the proceeds of whatever game you two were working. And with what he could rake out of the remains of his busted bank, for I suppose that part of his story was true. He is bankrupt, eh?"

"If he hadn't been he wouldn't have come in with me," said the other morosely. "And one other point you've missed is that he wanted to get rid of me, the only man who knew of our little side game. But I'm talking too much. You—"

"You sure are," interrupted Keating. "What's all this to do with getting Wassner?"

"The murdering cur!" growled the other. "I will get him, too. I think I know where he'll be. Unless he's already gone from there. But there's a chance anyway. I—"

"Count me in too," rasped Keating. "Lead me to him, and I'll show you what we do to such men where I come from."

The sallow-faced man was already dressing in a great hurry and a greater rage; but at that he looked around.

"Just where do you come from, pal?" he asked curiously.

"Chicago, last week."

And Keating glibly recited a history of his immediate past and recent acquaintanceship that was quite different from the story he had told Wassner or his other intimates in the semi-respectable Pacific Club.

"Well, I guess you'll do. It's a new gunman's stunt, hiring out to a man to kill his own self, but I guess you'll do. You can call me Roark. By the way, just how was Wassner to pay you?"


Keating told him.

Roark, in spite of his rage, grinned.

"Five thousand dollars! You've got one thousand, and you saw him mail four thousand to New York. And you think—"

Mockery had crept into his voice; but now he seemed to remember that Keating might possibly be useful, and he changed his tone.

"Well, if he don't die he'll be apt to beat you to it. No wonder you're keen to finish your job. You just come along with me."

 WHEN the two got outside they found that the drizzling rain had changed into a torrential downpour. On their way to the car-line they encountered no other pedestrians on the swimming sidewalk. Under a dully flaring street-light they waited, wet to the skin and chilled to the bone. From time to time Roark cursed luridly under his breath.

Keating was also patently impatient. Again and again he stepped out into the middle of the street, searching the long stretch of pavement, slate-colored and empty, for the light of a car.

None came, but luck favored them, nevertheless.

Presently a night-hawk taxi, inbound and empty, whirled down upon the two lonely figures. Keating hailed it with an upflung arm; Roark muttered something to the driver that Keating could not catch; and the machine bore them on toward the business section at a speed that was dangerous.

The rain beat against the hood of the vehicle with a steady drumming noise that would have drowned any ordinary conversation. Once Keating, pitching his voice high, asked Roark—

"Where are we going?"

"South of the Slot—well out. You'll see when we get there."

Down-town their speed was checked somewhat by a thin tide of traffic. But presently the taxi turned to the right, left the smooth pavement and bounced on over the cobbled streets of the factory district.

After about fifteen minutes of this the machine stopped; and Keating, nudged by Roark, opened the door and stepped out upon a narrow street flanked by towering brick and wooden walls, and empty of any sign of life.

Roark paid the driver and led the way into a black doorway.

"We'll wait here until he's gone."

The machine spun around and departed. Roark touched Keating's elbow; and the two left the partial shelter of the doorway and rounded a corner into an alleyway that would have been malodorous on any other than this night of downpour.

"Your gun? Is it dry?" Roark asked with sudden anxiety.

Keating grunted an affirmative.

"Water-proof pocket," he explained.

"So!"

There was approval in Roark's voice.

The alleyway, which was on the edge of a passing factory section, led them into a silent web of side streets with infrequent, flickering corner lamps, dismal as black-bordered lanes in some city of the dead. Here were shops with boarded windows and tumble-down dwelling-houses, and over all, deserted factories bent their heads like mutes at a wake—a somber memorial of the recession of the city's trade. Here also, Keating realized, was the one district where a nefarious business would be aptest to remain unmolested; and he was not at all surprised when Roark presently stopped before a set of wooden steps which led down into a basement.

"It's here he'd come," he muttered hoarsely in Keating's ear. "A'course, he may've left, but— Mind your steps now. We don't want to warn him. You understand."

Keating nodded with swift comprehension. Rendezvous guarded with electric buzzers were nothing novel to him.

Roark descended the steps, pressing close against the wall to the right and planting his feet with meticulous care. Keating followed him. There was a door at the bottom, and a keyhole in the door, through which a thin pencil of light shot out.

Roark pressed his ear against the door and listened. He snarled, a tigerish sound, deep in his throat, that barely reached Keating's ears.

"He's here, the ——"

Roark had already drawn his revolver. Now he produced a key, and, holding it in his left hand, turned it in the lock. If there was any sound Keating could not hear it.

Keating, tense-muscle, with nerves strung tight, leaned toward Roark as if involuntarily; and his hands seemed to strain toward his companion. Then a widening shaft of light flared out upon Keating; Roark had opened the door and stepped inside, and Keating followed him. The door closed again; and outside there was now nothing but the night and the rain, and a slow movement somewhere that suggested the furtive stirring of men.

Inside, Keating and Roark stared about a great, cement-walled basement room, cluttered with wooden packing-boxes and nauseous with the smell of chemicals. In Roark's narrowed eyes was the cold light of murder. Keating was on tiptoe, alert, inquiring-eyed. His glance fell and hung for a moment on the electric switch to the left of the door that presumably controlled the two lights in the center of the room. He looked away from that switch speculatively toward the pile of packing-cases that extended like a barrier half-way across the room, near its farther end. His right hand held the butt of his revolver, which lay in a rubber sheath inside his coat; but he did not draw it.

Then the silence of the place was broken by a barely audible sound—the sound of cautious footsteps. Some one was moving on the other side of the barrier. Some one! Wassner, of course.

Keating glided a little to one side, placing himself out of the line of Wassner's fire, if his fire was directed at Roark. But he continued to study the barrier intently, a question in his eyes, waiting for Wassner to show himself or to fire.

The two occurrences were simultaneous. Wassner's face, livid with hatred and terror, popped up over the barricade; and his revolver, a heavy, old-fashioned Colt, leveled into aim in an angle between two boxes. Something like satisfaction glinted Keating's eyes as he saw that revolver.

Wassner fired; he was answered by Roark; there was a curious difference between the two reports. Roark's shot went wild; for at the moment of discharge Keating had leaped past him toward the electric switch and had jostled his arm.

"——!" rasped Roark. "What the——"

Profounder astonishment checked his speech altogether, for Keating yanked at the switch and the room went black.

Then some one leaped upon Roark from behind and wrenched the revolver from his hand. It was Keating. He bore Roark backward, tripping him, and the two went to the floor, Roark underneath.

There was a jangling of metal. Something cold and hard, like wet steel, touched Roark's hands as Keating fought to force them together.

From across the room Wassner ran toward the writhing heap with silent and deadly intention. The next moment the darkness was lanced with flame from his revolver, fired point blank.

"Keating, you devil, he'll kill us both!"

Wassner emptied his revolver at the two men, and Keating paid no more attention to his shots than he did to Roark's curses. Something clicked sharply—twice. Roark, his hands rendered useless, clung to Keating with a scissors hold of his legs; but Keating tore himself loose. The room flared into light again. Keating whirled upon Wassner, covering him with his gun.

"Now," said Keating, "if you really want to die——"

But Wassner at that moment was regarding him not at all, nor anything but his own emptied revolver, at which he was staring with an expression of bewilderment.

"Don't blame the gun, Wassner," said Keating. "There was nothing but dummy cartridges in it. You see, I used that pass-key of yours twice. Lucky for you you left your armament in the house where I could get at it or there might be a charge of murder against you, as well as——"



IN THE middle of Keating's speech Wassner had glanced toward the door as if measuring his chances; but his eyes fell defeated at the sound of heavy footsteps pounding down the stairs.

"—— you!" he cursed Keating deliberately; while Roark, who stood up handcuffed, glanced from Keating to Wassner and back again, comprehension slowly dawning in his eyes.

"So you're a rat of a detective, an infernal——" went on Wassner.

"Merely a Federal officer," interrupted Keating mildly. "But go on. You've got a right to hate me, I suppose. Though the force has really had you dead to rights for a month—not my doing.

"It was to locate this plant, and the artist, Roark, here, that we put on this play. All I did to you was to have you followed tonight so there'd be no chance of your escape even if

you passed up destroying whatever evidence there was against you in this plant, and carrying away what you wanted of the goods in it. Or in case you tried to leave it before Roark led me to it. As witness this."

And Keating nodded toward the four policemen who had burst in a body through the door.

"You sneak, you liar——"

"Easy, easy!" protested Keating. "After all aren't you a little to blame yourself? If I hadn't sized you up as a man who would do anything for a perfectly safe getaway, this wouldn't have happened. After I did it was up to me to furnish you with a plan, wasn't it? And to see to it that you got information that the bank examiners were coming down on you, and that you were also suspected of this."

And Keating nodded toward the rear of the room.

"Naturally," pursued Keating, "you'd sacri-

fice your confederate here, he being the only man you could swap identities with easily. I suppose the business you promised him that you'd be engaged in while he substituted for you was—well, another little game of substitution. The substitution of bad money for good in the currency system."

"Oh, shut up," growled Roark, "and let's be off. I know when the game's up. You're all right, but this thing's unmentionable."

And he glanced disdainfully at his former partner. Then he turned to Keating again with a faint, twisted smile.

"I hope you'll find that thousand he gave you easy spending, and the other four thousand that's in the registered mail."

"Hardly," said Keating. "Hardly. And yet as good as the stuff I won from him at the Pacific Club. That was a darn good place you picked for shoving the queer."