

THE BLACK MASK

A MAGAZINE OF MYSTERY, THRILLS AND SURPRISE

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Issued monthly by

PRO-DISTRIBUTORS PUBLISHING COMPANY, Inc.

25 West 45th Street, New York, New York

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION \$2.00

SINGLE COPIES 20 CENTS

Western Advertising Office, Wrigley Building, Chicago, Ill.

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Pro-Distributors Publishing Company, Inc.

Entered as second class mail matter, March 1, 1920, at the Post Office
at New York, N. Y., under act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A.

The Vault

By Murray Leinster

I

THE window slid up easily—too easily—and Mike waited a long time, listening, before he made a move. The whole huge pile of the factory was still. There were no lights anywhere, except that dim one by the gate through the stockade. Lying quite still in the darkness, Mike waited. There was no sound, no ringing of alarm bells, no bustle of activity anywhere. The manufacturing plant of the Whitney Jewelry & Watch Company remained as it had been before, a vast, still pile of brick, with empty-eyed windows staring blankly at the night.

And yet. . . . That window had opened very easily. Mike meditated, his little eyes gleaming in the darkness. Then he saw a tiny flicker of light in the distance. The window he had opened was at the end of a long corridor, and he saw the watchman walking unhurriedly away from him. The watchman's legs threw monstrous shadows from the lantern he carried. Mike could not see his face, but he could see the uniform and note the absolute leisure and confidence with which the man was moving. He paused, as Mike watched, and inserted his key in a watchman's clock. He turned it, registering his presence and vigilance on a strip of paper within the mechanism. Then, casually, he went on his way. In a few moments he turned a corner and was lost to sight.

Mike grinned to himself in the obscurity. With monkey-like agility he

scrambled through the open window, making no sound. Once within the walls of the factory he waited another long minute for a noise. Distant and hollow, he heard the watchman's footfalls, unhurried, methodical, as he made his round.

Then, softly, Mike lowered the window. He wore rubber-soled shoes. His eyes were those of a cat, and his ears were attuned to the slightest warning of danger, but he heard no faintest sound—not even his own footfalls—save the distant, regular steps of the watchman. The watchman wore creaky shoes.

Like some night-flying moth the intruder slipped through the corridors of the untenanted factory. All about him there were smells. Oil—that would be the delicate lathes where precious metals were worked. Once he smelled fresh paint. And there was that curious odor of freshly mopped floors. The scrub-women had come after the closing of the factory and done their work. Then he smelled faded flowers. Someone had brought them and put them in a glass of water, and they had been left.

Mike paid little or no attention to smells. The place he sought was on the second floor, in the rear—the colossal vault where all the precious things in which the factory dealt were gathered for safety during the night. He made his way there, silently. Every little while he stopped to listen for the unvarying footfalls of the watchman. They went on, unsuspecting and confident.

Through an arduous and twice inter-

rupted apprenticeship in his chosen trade—interruptions spent perforce behind stone walls—Mike had had drilled into him just two things. One was the fatality of haste. The other was the necessity for scientific, painstaking attention to detail. Therefore, Mike let his flashlight slip over the huge surface of the vault door with barely a pause. He knew the watchman would look in on it as he went downstairs. Primarily, he was looking for a place to hide during that moment.

There was a door in the room which contained the vault, but Mike was not certain but that the watchman would return through it. He swept his light around the room—keeping it low, lest it flash out through a window—and regretfully decided against remaining. He went out again, swiftly and silently, looking for a hiding-place.

He found it in a washroom, and listened from there while the watchman retraced his steps, coming downstairs again, going to the vault and throwing the glow from his lantern against it, then clumping off heavily to the lower part of the factory.

Mike emerged from hiding. He inspected the vault room with greater care. He would have to work in snatches, between visits from the watchman, and he did not want to have to tap the man on the head. There are a great many systems of burglar protection, and one very popular one signals the nearest police station when a watchman fails to ring his time clock at the appointed intervals. Mike did not desire the intrusion of the police, but he wanted a nearby niche to hide in.

The watchman's footsteps died away. Mike waited to be sure, then opened the door he had noted. To be exact, he did not quite open it. He merely turned the knob, and a heavy weight leaning against it thrust it the rest of the way open, caromed clumsily against him, and

fell with a curiously cushioned crash to the floor.

Mike's hair stood on end. In the fractional part of a split second he knew what had struck him, and he bounced into the air to alight noiselessly a full five feet away, ready for anything. But the thing lay still upon the floor, breathing.

Slowly and cautiously Mike sent a momentary dart of light at it. What he saw at once reassured him and frightened him, because it was the last thing he could possibly have expected. It was a man—which he had known—but it was a man with his hands and feet bound together with leather straps, and so entwined with ropes that he could not even writhe. There was a gag in the figure's mouth, and its eyes were staring wildly about.

Mike was still for perhaps two seconds, while his brain raced. Then he sent a tiny pencil-beam at the vault door. It was closed, solidly. No one had been before him. But there was a man bound hand and foot. . . .

The light played upon him again. He was a young man, dressed as if he were a clerk or a bookkeeper in the factory. His eyes blinked and stared imploringly at Mike. There was some message, some terrible message, that he struggled to convey, but the gag prevented him. Mike watched him for an instant in mounting uneasiness and suspicion. That window had slipped up too easily. . . .

Suddenly there was a tiny creaking, as of a board stepped upon. Mike heard it, catalogued it and had dismissed his obvious refuge in an instant. Someone was coming, softly, toward the spot. Perhaps the watchman, alarmed by the crash. He would certainly find the bound man, but it might be that he would waste precious time releasing him.

Tensely Mike swept the walls again.

He could not go out the main door. He would run into the watchman. The one door he had noted was that of a closet. There was another, close beside the back of the vault.

Dense blackness fell. A shadow but little deeper than the darkness about him, Mike flitted across the room. He vanished, utterly without sound.

Then a faint scratching sound. The bound man was struggling to release himself, struggling with a terrible desperation and a horrifying futility. Mike, crouched down in a tiny book-closet, heard it. He was keyed up to an incredible pitch, every nerve quivering like a tightly strung wire. Mike was no longer intent upon robbery. One of the first rules of your old-time safe-cracker is to go through with a job only when everything is right. Mike was as suspicious of the unexpected as any wild animal. Just now his only desire was to get away—peacefully, if possible, but to get away.

He lay still. The scent of books and dust came to his nostrils, but he did not dare make a light to see. He smelled, too, that curious, rubbery smell of new electric insulation. There were wires in the closet somewhere, newly placed. Mike lay still.

Then he felt, rather than heard, someone enter the vault-room. There was a door between him and the newcomer, but he knew the instant that the other man entered. There was a moment of silence. Mike saw an infinitely faint glow through the keyhole. Someone was using a flash.

II

FROZEN in utter stillness, Mike listened for the watchman's exclamation of astonishment at sight of the bound man on the floor. Instead, he heard only a faint murmur. Then he caught words, faintly amused.

"Just got out, Jack, eh? I heard you fall. Out of luck, though. The watchman was in the other building. I saw him go in. He didn't hear you."

Then little noises as if the helpless man were being turned over—inspected to make sure the bonds were firmly in place. Then Mike felt that the last-come man was somewhat relieved.

"Don't know how you got loose, Jack," said the voice, as before kept lowered, "but you didn't do any harm, anyhow. And the watchman won't be back for an hour yet. I'll be getting to work."

There was a sound like a groan, as if the bound man were trying to make some sound or plea; but footsteps crossed lightly to the vault.

"Wondering, Jack, who I am, or did you recognize me?" The second man had stopped before the vault door. Mike heard an infinitely faint rustling, as of thin rubber being manipulated. He guessed at rubber gloves. "I think you must've recognized me when I slugged you. Anyway, since I asked you to wait a minute after office hours and then hit you with a sandbag, you must have guessed, while you've been waiting, that I was responsible for the matter."

There was a little pause and a slight snapping sound, as if an elastic had been flicked into place.

"Yep, Jack, I'm Saunders, your boss. Don't mind telling you, now, because you're not going to split on me. I'm going to loot the same—clean, this time, and quit. By the way, Jack, I'm putting on rubber gloves, but, rather curiously, they'll leave your finger-prints on the safe knob. You see, I've done this twice before. Once I got away with a lot of bullion and a few indifferent stones. That was a year and more ago and everyone's grown careless since then. I managed to plant it so the watchman was suspected. He's in jail now. And then, once, I fixed up the

matter so that a theft of some finished stuff was discovered while I was on vacation. They never suspected me. But this time I'm going to clean out the works, all the bullion, all the stones, and tomorrow's payroll."

The unknown's voice changed, and grew intent. Mike, in the dusty little closet, could hear a muted, musical tinkle, as he spun the combination knob.

"Got your finger-prints some time ago, Jack, when you knew nothing about it. I brought 'em out, photographed them, and contrived to fix them on the ends of these rubber gloves. I've run 'em through my hair, so they'll be slightly oily, and they'll convict you completely of opening the safe. I'll have to use a microphone, myself, to hear the tumblers fall."

Mike was listening with a curious mixture of fear and indignation and curiosity. He, himself, had a microphone apparatus in his pocket, which he had intended to use. The other man had beat him to it. Mike began to revolve a misty scheme for following the other man and taking his loot away. There was a clanking as of tiny bits of metal being fitted together.

"I rather think, Jack,"—the voice became amused,—"that you're thinking of the trap that's fixed for any man who breaks into the safe. Aren't you?"—A moment of silence— "So that even if someone gets inside the vault, when he touches one of several things he'll set off a switch, have the doors swing shut and lock on him, and ring a loud bell in police headquarters? I suggested that, Jack, and I was the one who was strong for the bell. I told 'em a burglar would be smothered in here in two hours, but with the doors closing fast on him to catch him, the police could get here, let him out and save his life, and catch him with the goods. But you forget there's a switch to run that burglar-trap on."

Mike, listening, found himself sud-

denly cold all over. If he had opened the huge vault,—as he was confident he could do,—he would never have thought of anything like that! He would have gone in, only anxious to secure his loot and depart before the watchman's return. With luck, he would have been able, he thought, to get the big doors closed so his burglary would have gone unnoticed until morning. But when he went in, he would have touched one of a number of concealed springs. The huge doors would have swung to, relentlessly, upon him. He would have been trapped in an air-tight tomb, to batter futilely at the armor-plate barriers until the police came.

He was to get another shock.

"This afternoon, though," said the soft voice outside, interrupted now and then by the infinitely faint musical sound of the spinning knobs, "I did a little work on that wiring. The doors will work, but the alarm won't. The police will not be notified that a burglar is caught in the vault."

Sweat came out, cold and clammy, on Mike's skin. He would have been caught in there! He would have strangled! Hunched upon the floor of the smelly little book-closet, he shivered in uncontrollable terror from sheer horror at what he had escaped. Again he longed to get away from the factory, at any cost.

"Most through," said the abstracted voice, outside. "Wonder why I'm telling you, Jack? You see, I need the stuff in there. Need it in my business. I'm going to take it, but I don't want to have detectives chasing around to try to find the thief. With your finger-prints on the knob, they'd look for you, of course, but you might have proved an alibi to make 'em look farther. And also, Jack, you're too damned fascinating. I was getting along pretty well with Ethel, until she met you. I want to get you out of the way. With

you dead, she'll marry me, sooner or later. I'm going to tap you on the head again, Jack, and put you in here. The doors will close on you. In the morning they'll find that you opened the vault, passed out quite a lot of stuff to a confederate, and then by accident touched off the alarm that closes the doors. A sandbag doesn't leave any sign, and I used straps to tie you up so there'll be no marks on your wrists. I've thought of pretty nearly everything, Jack. I've even taken out all the pencils and fountain pens from your pockets. I've no notion of your writing an accusation of me while you're in there; also I don't want to kill you before you go in there. I want you to show the signs of dying from—er—the natural cause of being locked in an air-tight vault. . . . Ah. . . ."

There was a series of tiny clicks, then a faint creaking. Mike, in his hiding-place, with the smell of dust and books and new-placed rubber insulation in his nostrils, knew that the great doors had swung open.

There was a pause, and the little snap of a watch-case.

"Watchman's due in half an hour. Plenty of time."

The voice stopped.

The man seemed to be listening. That was what Mike would have done. He lay utterly and completely motionless, barely breathing. He was queerly afraid of the man he had not seen. Perhaps because of that, Mike felt a sudden cramp in one of his legs, a sharp, tingling, shooting pain. He could not run on a leg like that. It might give way beneath him.

"All clear," said the voice, with a certain ghastly cheerfulness. "But in case you're thinking that I might set off the trap, Jack, I'd like to mention that after I had you neatly trussed up, I pulled out the switch. It's in that little closet back there. I shall turn it on after I've

got the stuff out—and then the doors will close on you. But first I'll tap you on the head, and put you inside."

Mike shivered. The smell of insulation. . . . The switch was in the closet in which he was hiding! In a little while more the unknown would come in where he was! Sheer panic came over Mike. It was with a terrific effort that he calmed himself, trying to figure out an escape from the inevitable struggle. The other man would open the door. He, Mike, was inside. At best there would be a struggle. At worst. . . .

III

MIKE'S whole body was bathed in sweat at the thought of himself thrown inside the vault with armor-plated doors inexorably shutting out every atom of fresh air. He clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering. The man outside took on the aspect of a monster. To Mike, he was something more or less than human. Mike might be a criminal, and could visualize,—shrinking,—the thought of killing a man in making a getaway, but not the deliberate strangling of a man in cold blood, for the covering of his tracks. That was the other man's plan.

There would have to be a struggle, a fight of some sort. Mike's leg throbbled horribly. He doubted that it would support his weight. And in an instant or two more he would inevitably be fighting. One way or another, he was bound to be in terrible danger. If he shot the other man, the pistol-shot would raise an alarm. If he did not shoot. . . .

He heard a faint thump on the floor.

"One load," said the voice outside. "Two or three more, Jack, and I'll skip." The voice, already soft, became muffled as its owner went into the vault. "Here's the payroll. Nice packet, in itself. I've a good twenty minutes left. You realize what will happen, Jack?

He looked back through the window he had left, his breath coming hurriedly, uneasily. He saw a faint glow a long distance away. The watchman was making his rounds again. Mike saw the confident, assured steps of the man by the light of his lantern. His legs threw monstrous shadows on the walls. He went on his way unhurriedly, reached a time-clock and extracted a key. He inserted and turned it, registering his presence and vigilance upon a strip of paper inside the mechanism.

Then, casually, he went on his way.

"Brother," Mike apostrophized the unconscious figure, "I just hadda shock. Two other fellers had their shocks. An' now, ol' top, you're in for yours. Here's hopin'."

The watchman turned a corner and was lost to sight, but his steady, even footsteps came dully to Mike's ears. He was climbing the stairs, and he wore squeaky shoes.

Mike slipped quickly and quietly away.

