



An Inside Job

By NEIL C. MILLER

Peculiar cases demand peculiar methods.

IT wasn't so very long ago that my private and personal affairs came under the temporary supervision of the police. This unfortunate condition came about in spite of every precaution on my part. It seems that some criminally inclined person had pried the top off the safe in "One Eyed" Mike's pool hall and removed therefrom a sum of money amounting to five hundred and sixty dollars. The papers reported the loss as nine hundred; but the papers don't know as much about that robbery as I do.

Well, anyhow, the police were called upon the scene and, after measuring the footprints in the dust and giving the wrecked safe a Bertillon examination, they announced that the job had been perpetrated by one James E. Black. Through a queer coincidence, that happened to be my name. It grieved me to think that my friends on the detective bureau should consider me so penurious as to wreck a safe for a paltry five hundred and sixty dollars. But they did.

Having thus settled the question of who stole the money, these lion-hearted guardians of the law began to itch with a desire to interview me. They were curious to know why I had taken the money

and what I had done with it and if I had any appointments or other business which could not be postponed for about five years. Upon my part, I had no desire to divulge this information. I did not wish to be interviewed. I wanted only to be left alone. I craved solitude above all else.

My desire to avoid publicity caused me to fall back on all manner of deceptions and subterfuges. I changed my rooming house three times on as many successive days. And once I had landed in a room which pleased me, I stuck to it like I had two broken legs and a case of lumbago. I became a hermit, shunning all human companionship. Only after midnight did I venture out of doors in quest of nourishment and current events.

This procedure continued for two weeks, while the police occupied themselves with molesting and annoying my friends in a futile attempt to discover my whereabouts. During that time I read the newspapers and slept, and slept and read the newspapers. But there is neither pleasure nor profit in such an existence. After the first three or four days it began to bore me to death. At the end of the first week I began to think seriously of giving myself up, if only for the purpose of having

somebody else to talk to.

But before I had time to carry out this intention, I was released from my self-imposed incarceration. There comes a warm evening when I'm sitting in the window looking out over a dirty street and smoking more cigarettes than are good for me. Then my alert ear perceives the sound of furtive footsteps in the hallway outside my door. There come three quick knocks and a scratch.

"Come in," I whispers, breathing easy again. The door opens slowly and a low-slung individual slides in. He ain't much to look at, but he sure is an efficient cuss. First thing he does is to glide across the room and purloin a couple of cigarettes from my package. He lights one and sends inquisitive glances into all corners of the room.

"Telegram," says he, as soon as he's finished his reconnaissance. To bear out his statement, he fishes out a yellow envelope and tosses it to me. He treats himself to another cigarette and eases toward the door. There he pauses and gives the room another nervous once-over.

"Big Kate says yuh should drop around tonight if yuh need any help," he announces. "Night, Jimmy."

The door closes behind him, and once more I am left alone. The telegram is addressed to Katherine McGuire, but a glance discloses the fact that it concerns me. It says:

Get hold of Jimmy Black. Send him to Hilldale on first train. Bring tools. Good job. William Hearn.

That's all; but it wasn't half enough. Of course I knew Billy Hearn. He designated himself as a private and consulting detective; but that didn't mean a thing. What this so-called detective wanted with me was more than I could figure out. But there's no telling about Billy. He'd make an interesting study for a psychoanalyst.

Well, I puzzled over the matter until one o'clock, and finally decided that Hilldale couldn't be any worse than my own room. I gathered up a few necessary tools and headed for "Big Kate's."

"Big Kate" runs a kind of a rooming house about six blocks away. Her dump is a meeting place for all kinds of crooks and criminals. I've seen some of the highest class crooks in the country sitting on broken-backed chairs in her kitchen and drinking her homemade beer out of stew pans. In

her spare time Kate runs a kind of information bureau and protective agency for her clients. Also, she knows of more places in which to dispose of a few bits of jewelry than Tiffany ever heard of.

I approach "Big Kate's" from the rear, as is usual. There's a light burning in the kitchen. I crawl through a backyard full of boxes and cans and climb the back porch. A peculiar knock on the door is sufficient to bring Kate.

"Come on in," she invites. "Nobody here but me. I'll get a bottle of beer."

When she's got the contents of the bottle poured out into a pan, Kate gets down to brass tacks. "What about it?" she demands, leaning heavy on the table.

"I dunno, Kate," says I dubiously. "Of course I'm willing to go and all that. Billy Hearn is a good friend of mine, even if he does do a lot of unorthodox detecting. The question is, how am I going to get there? I might as well walk into a police station as to show my face around any of the train gates."

"Pooh!" says Kate, with a mighty snort. "Is that all that's botherin' you?"

"Ain't that enough? Please pass the beer, Kate."

"Big Kate" hoisted herself to her feet and lumbered out of the room. I hear snatches of a telephone conversation; then she comes back, her fat Irish face beaming.

"Everything's jake," she announced. "Friend of mine's comin' after you in his car. He'll drive you out to some little burg and you can catch the train from there. How's that? Have some more beer, Jimmy."

That was that. I absorb a couple more bottles of beer, and pretty soon there comes a sad and melancholy creature who answers to the name of Henry. Henry ain't over-strong on the conversation, but he sure shoves a nasty accelerator. He dodges around side streets and alleys until we get outside the city; and then he bounces that speed demon of his all over the country roads. I just hang tight to my seat and sadly review my misspent life. After a while he skids to a stop and, after the dust settles, I perceive that we are in the midst of a town.

"Get out here," orates Henry, speaking like a telegraph. "Railroad station two blocks to your right—night train to Hilldale in fifteen minutes—see yuh again."

"What for?" I asked. But the only reply I got was the roar of the exhaust and a barrage of dust as

Henry shot off into the night.

If you've never seen a burg like Hilldale at the unearthly hour of five a.m., don't go away thinking you've missed anything. But if you have, you will have some conception of my depressed feelings as I sauntered to and fro along the lonely station platform. There wasn't a living soul in sight. Even the train crew had not appeared overanxious about staying.

So I stood alone and forsaken on the station platform, and smoked cigarettes and wondered why I was here and what the blazes had happened to the reception committee. I figured that as long as Billy had been the cause of me abandoning the old familiar scenes to jostle with the merry rustics, he might at least have done me the honor of meeting me at the station.

But nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, there comes after a while a long, loose-looking individual who seems to be in the habit of sleeping in his clothes. He stands there on the end of the platform and sizes me up like I'm the first civilized human he's ever seen. Then he fumbles around in his pocket and brings forth a piece of paper which appears to contain some mighty interesting reading. He scrutinizes it closely, then looks at me and nods slowly.

"Howdy," I greets, thinking to put him at his ease.

"Hullo," he mutters, without going into any extremes of cordiality. "Your name's James Black, ain't it?"

"Occasionally," I responds, thinking that this rustic gentleman is Billy's emissary. "However, I am not particular as to names."

"Did you come from the city this morning?" queries the man.

"I did—but I wish I hadn't. Home was never like this."

He refers to his document again, meanwhile biting off a liberal hunk of eating tobacco. For a long time he just chews and reads, with an occasional glance at me. Finally this procedure gets on my nerves. I walk over and tap him on the shoulder.

"Listen," says I. "You evidently came to the depot with the intention of finding a man named James Black. I am it. I am the one and only. Now, what about it? We've been standing here for at least fifteen minutes, and I've absorbed all the scenery which is suitable to my nature. If we're

going anywhere, let's get started, and you can read that thesis on the way."

"Well—I guess you're the feller all right," he said slowly. "Still, I don't like to make no mistakes in a case like this. This here identification paper don't say nothing about you having a gold tooth in front."

"It wouldn't be delicate," I reminded him. "But I'm the man you're looking for, so lead on. What I crave is action. If you're going to lead me anywhere, lead on before an eastbound train appears and tempts me."

"All right," he sighs. "As long as you insist that you're James Black and demand to be taken along, I guess it's all right. Remember you're bringin' it on to yourself."

I thought that was a funny crack at the time he pulled it, but inside of fifteen minutes I could hardly discern any joke in it from any angle. We ambulates up the street for three or four blocks without discovering any of the natives. Then we come to a halt in front of a new two-story brick building. My guide unlocks the door and lets us in.

We stumble through a kind of office and then out into a narrow corridor. The illumination ain't the very best, and before I have an opportunity to discover my destination I am in it. Yes, sir. I am in it, and the door is shut behind me. And the door had bars on it.

"What's the idea?" I demands briskly.

"You're James Black, ain't you?" counters my guide.

"I am. But what's that got to do with it?"

"Well, son," says he, with a sly smile, "you're wanted by the police up at the city. They sent me a wire sayin' you was headed this way and askin' me to place you into custody—them's the exact words. Now, I reckon I got to wire back to 'em and tell 'em you're here."

And the worst of it was that I had walked right into it of my own free will and accord. I had insisted upon the old boy escorting me up to his nice new jail! And now it was back to the city to give out that long-postponed interview to the guardians of the law. I guess I deserved it.

If you were ever in a small-town jail, you know that the facilities for amusement and entertainment are just about nil. I managed to kill a couple of hours by kicking myself around the little six-by-eight cell and shaking the bars like old Monte Cristo used to do. But it didn't get me anything.

Along about noon, the loose-connected jailer comes back and serves me with a mess of irrational rations from the beanery across the street. He sits outside the cell while I pretend to eat, and I absorb considerable local information.

First off, he tells me that he's the town marshal and has had the job ever since Gideon Henneberry got drunk and locked himself up in his own jail.

"That was six years ago," he adds reminiscently. "Sheriff Block had to come down and let him out. Pore old Gideon; it was about three days before we found him, and he was well nigh starved to death by that time. People around here decided they couldn't afford to have a marshal who was always lockin' himself up in jail; so they fired Gideon and gave me the job."

So he rambles on and on with his local anecdotes. I finish consuming the so-called meal and light a cigarette. And after a while, he gets down to some more recent history.

"Had a big robbery over to Hastings couple o' days ago," he announces. "There was a party goin' on and the people who was givin' the blowout had a lot of jewelry on display. Van Deusen, I think the people's names was. Anyhow, they had about five or six thousand dollars worth of diamonds and so forth laid right out where everybody could see 'em."

"Van Deusen is a millionaire," I informed him.

"Eh? Well, anyhow, along about midnight, or maybe it was a little later, they was all dancin' and carryin' on when suddenly the lights went out. They were only out for a couple of minutes; but when they went on again, every one of those diamonds an' things was gone! Ain't that awful?"

"It is," I agrees. "I should think they would have hired somebody to guard those jewels while they were on display."

"Oh, they did. Sheriff Block and two deputies was right on the grounds all the time. But the crook got by 'em somehow."

"And they haven't arrested him yet?"

"Not yet. Sheriff Block is over there now, workin' on the case. Says he'll have his man inside of twenty-four hours. But I'm guessin' that a feller that's slick enough to get past Block an' two deputies knows better than to stick around these parts. Shouldn't wonder if he's in the city by this time."

And that remark starts my mind wandering off so that I lose all trace of what he's telling me. It

occurs to me that it won't be long until I'm back in the city. I asks the marshal if he, by any chance, has forgotten to send the telegram. No such luck.

I tries him with tact, diplomacy and finesse, even offering him the whole of my bank roll if he will neglectfully forget to lock the door of my cell. But there's nothing doing. He gives me to understand that he's a faithful and incorruptible public servant, and that no amount of filthy lucre can tempt him to betray his trust.

"Besides, there may be a reward for you," he adds, thoughtfully. And that settled it. He takes the dirty dishes and his departure, while I begin figuring on who's the best lawyer for me to hire.

Along about sunset I get a little diversion in the way of a race between a big red roadster and a motorcycle. I don't have a very good view on account of there being so many buildings in the way; but I sure get an earful at the finish.

The outer door of the village hoosegow slams shut and I hear voices.

"Third time yuh been pinched for speeding in this town," accuses one voice. "Hope the judge soaks yuh hard enough this time so you'll learn to do your speeding somewhere else."

"Wouldn't think of it," replied another voice. "No other town has such nice smooth pavement or such courteous and polite police officers. Shall I take my same old room?"

"Don't be funny," snaps the first voice. "I'm gettin' sick and tired of havin' to listen to your wisecracks every time I arrest you. Same name as before? Same age? Same address? All right. Come on."

They troop out into the hall and the recent arrival is dumped into the barred chamber next to mine. He surveys his surroundings critically and asks the attendant what the blazes they did with the cigar butt he left there the last time he called.

"Aw, shut up!" grunts the jail keeper. "Try your funny cracks on the judge in the morning." And with that, he turns the key in the lock and disappears. That leaves me alone with the other prisoner.

"How do you like the new jail?" he asks politely.

"It was alright until just recently," says I significantly. "Things have come to a pretty pass when a man can't even enjoy a siesta in jail without having his immediate vicinity contaminated by the presence of nitwit detectives. Honest, you make me

sick, Billy Hearn. It was a sorry day in my life when I first laid eyes on you.”

“The feeling of regret is mutual,” he replies. “What are you in for?”

“For the convenience of the city authorities,” I snaps. “A fine mess I got myself into by trying to help you out.”

“Your rhetoric is rotten,” he declares, lighting a cigarette. “Too bad I missed you at the station. I drove at top speed all the way from Hastings in order to keep our assignment.”

“You kept it,” I snorted sarcastically. “Are you working on the robbery case in Hastings?”

“The Van Deusen robbery,” he nods. “Funny affair. I have encountered many difficulties. Sheriff Block swears that he was not more than ten feet away from the diamonds at the time the lights went out. His two deputies were stationed outside, where they had a clear view of all sides of the house. No one left; but when the lights went on again, the jewels were gone.”

“And so they called in the greatest detective of them all,” I sneered.

“Now was that nice?” Billy stretches himself at ease on his bunk and lights another cigarette. “I sent for you, Jimmy, because I needed your talents to complete the solution of the mystery.”

“And my talents will do you a helluva lot of good while we are both in jail,” says I. “Also my skill will be of great benefit to you while I am on my way back to the city in the custody of two big burly detectives.”

“Such pessimistic thoughts are not conducive to rest and relaxation,” he replies. “If you will forego your usual practice of speaking out of turn for about ten or fifteen minutes, I shall endeavor to repudiate and deny certain thoughts and allegations which have arisen in your inferior mind.”

“Allow yourself the privilege of free and unhampered speech,” says I. “But if I should be so discourteous as to drop off to sleep, you need not waken me. I won’t be missing anything that will cause me any concern.”

So Billy and I regale ourselves by chewing the rag back and forth for three or four hours, and after a while I drop off to sleep. I ain’t used to many late hours in succession and I had been up all the night before. Anyhow, I sojourn in the land of Nod for an hour or so. I am awakened by the feel of something hard prodding me in the back.

“Hist!” comes a faint whisper.

“Hist yourself,” I retorts. “And then go on to sleep.”

“It is now ten-thirty,” whispers Billy. “The villagers sleep the sleep of the just and the righteous. So let us then be up and doing, as the poet says. There’s dirty work to be done at the crossroads this night.”

“Let it be done,” I retorts. “While I’m in my present predicament, the crossroads don’t interest me none. Honest, you make me sick, Billy. Things have come to a pretty pass when a man can’t even sleep peacefully in jail on account of the brainstorm of his fellow prisoners. If you had any consideration—”

But my pretty speech ends in a sudden gasp of amazement. I hear a fumbling sound and pretty soon the door of my cell swings open. Billy steps in and lays a firm hand on my arm.

“Shut up and come on,” says he. “We have an unpleasant duty to perform before the dawn of another day.”

“All right, Houdini,” I assents willingly. “We can’t leave this jail any too soon for me.”

But do we leave it? Not so you could notice it. There, with the light of freedom shining in my face, Billy switches me to the right and up a long flight of cement stairs. We finally wind up in a little office on the second floor.

“Here we are,” says Billy, lighting a cigarette. “There’s a safe over in that corner and I want it opened as abruptly and as silently as possible.”

“Just a minute,” I interrupts. “Before we begin the opening exercises, there are a few little questions upon which my mind craves enlightenment. I crave information as to how you managed to open the doors of our cells.”

“Experience, my boy,” orates Billy. “If a guy don’t learn a few things about a jail after being locked up in it three times, he’d better pick himself a new jail. Anyhow, I opened the cells and; it’s up to you to open the safe. Please be expeditious.”

I had a lot more questions to ask, but Billy motions me to work. While he seats himself in a window overlooking the street, I give the safe the once-over. It’s just one of those old cast-iron things and I hate to waste my superior talent on it. Sure I opened it; by the simple stunt of knocking off the combination dial and pushing the tumblers back.

As the door swung open, Billy dove in and dragged out a black bag about the size and shape of my tool kit. I looked about to see if there was any

loose money, but none appeared. Meanwhile, Billy had dragged the bag over to the window and was examining it in the moonlight. As I reached his side, he straightened suddenly.

“Hush!” he whispered.

I hushed. And then I heard the same thing he did—footsteps coming up those cement stairs. I turned quickly to the window and discovered that it was as heavily coated with bars as the cell I had just vacated. Meanwhile, Billy had disappeared, taking the bag with him!

Closer and closer came those footsteps. I crawled back into a corner, and I can tell you that I wasn't feeling any too healthy at that instant. Then suddenly a flashlight shines all over me.

“Ha!” orates a nasty voice. “Put your hands up!”

I obeyed without comment for something seemed to whisper to me that the man with the nasty voice had a disposition to match it. The flashlight wavers over the wrecked safe and the man groans. Also, he divests himself of a couple of double-action cuss words.

“Where's that bag?” he demands, shoving the revolver into a tender portion of my anatomy.

“What bag?” I asks innocently.

“You know what bag. Come on, produce!”

Well, Billy had the bag and Billy had thoughtfully disappeared. I could not produce the bag. Neither could the man with the nasty voice. He prodded me hither and yon through all the various rooms on the second floor without finding either Billy or the bag. From time to time, when especially irritated, he would jab me with the exit end of the forty-five and profanely remind me that something unpleasant would happen to me unless I produced his bag.

Then we adjourn downstairs to continue the search. In the corridor, the man pauses and caresses his chin reflectively.

“Look here, young feller,” says he. “I may as well tell you that you cannot possibly break out of this building. You can't gain nothing by your attitude. You may as well come clean, and save yourself a lot of hard luck. If you don't, numerous unpleasant things is very liable to occur to you before morning.”

“Got a match?” I inquires.

“Naughty word!” says he explosively. “Well, I ain't goin' to fool with you no longer. I'm goin' to lock you up in a cell while I go lookin' for that bag. And if I don't find it, there'll be a job for the

coroner in the morning. Get that?”

So the man with the nasty voice shoves his revolver into my ribs and herds me over to the door of the cell I had just vacated. I had several uncharitable thoughts pertaining to Billy about that time. But a moment later, I had recalled them.

Just as the man with the nasty voice turned to open the door of the cell, a dark figure flashed out of the shadows and laid a heavy fist on his chin. The flashlight and gun clattered to the floor. So did the man with the nasty voice. Billy and I dragged him into the cell and locked the door.

“Many thanks,” said I. “You have undoubtedly saved me from another undue incarceration. But now that all has been said and done, let us be on our merry way. I don't take kindly to your degenerate practices of robbing jails and beating up jailers. Not only that, but the town of Hilldale is beginning to pall upon me. I have no overwhelming desire to meet the delegation which is coming down from the city upon my behalf. Therefore, I would suggest that we leave our fallen foe as he lies, and make our departure as abruptly and expeditiously as possible.”

“Not so fast,” drawls Billy, through a screen of cigarette smoke. “I fear that even our admittedly exceptional ability would prove unavailing against the locks, bolts and bars with which this building is surrounded. Has it never occurred to you that people who build jails generally strive to make them burglar proof?”

“Do you mean that after all we've been through we can't get out of here? Do you insinuate that after picking the locks on the cells and tearing the safe to pieces we have to stay right here in this building along with all the evidence and vestiges of our crime?”

“Your perception is improving,” nodded Billy. I don't know why I didn't kill him.

But there comes an inspiration. It occurs to me that the man with the nasty voice is very likely equipped with the necessary keys with which we might effect our release. This idea I confides to Billy.

“All right,” he says, sitting down and lighting another cigarette. “Go on in and search him if you want to.”

But at that instant strange noises began to come from the cell. The man with the nasty voice had evidently regained his interest in life. He came over to the door of the cell and glared at us through the

bars while he verbally reviewed the lives of our ancestors and made arrangements for our future lives. I decided that I would not go into the cell with him.

“Anyhow,” says Billy, cogitatively, “there’s no great rush about our getting out of here. They can’t do anything to us.”

“Not much,” I agree sarcastically. “If there happen to be any laws in these parts that we haven’t broken, it’s just because we’re newcomers. You make another crack about them not doing anything to us and I’ll commit a crime so awful they’ll hang me.”

“That would be very nice,” says Billy, pleasantly. “But the fact remains that we will suffer no punishment for what we have done. In the morning, I shall be compelled to donate the sum of fifteen or twenty dollars to the city treasury. I trust that will be sufficient recompense for the use I made of the streets.”

“Your theory is all right,” says I. “But the good people of Hilldale probably won’t cater to the idea of having their nice new jail all cluttered up. Most jails are awful particular about having prisoners running about at night, cracking safes and assaulting men who belong to the house staff. Next time, I wish you would pick a more suitable place for your parties.”

“It’s no party,” says Billy defensively. “We have been engaged in the solution of the Van Deusen jewel robbery. We have recovered the loot and arrested the culprit. It may surprise you, my friend, to learn that the noisy party who we have with us this evening is none other than Andrew Block, the sheriff of these parts. I suspected him from the first; but my job was to recover the jewels. This has been accomplished with neatness and dispatch. In the morning, we’ll turn the sheriff over to the proper authorities, return the jewels to Van Deusen and collect our reward. We shall step forth into the world, with the light of Freedom in our faces, and in our hearts, the glowing knowledge of a good deed, well done.”

“Where do you get that ‘we’ stuff?” I inquired. “It appears that in the mazes of your stupendous mentality, a very important and significant fact has been lost. Namely, I would recall to your mind the details of my incarceration. With all the eloquence at my disposal, I have told you the story of how I came to this village to assist you. I have related how I was met at the station by a disconnected

individual, who led me into this den, and locked the door on me. Also, I have confided in you the information which I gleaned from him; namely, that certain powers in the metropolis are so anxious to see me that they wired this man to retain me in his custody until they arrive. What’s your answer to that one?”

“They’ll never come,” says Billy, as he carelessly lights a cigarette.

“That’s what they said about prohibition,” I counters.

“Jimmy,” says the great detective, blowing rings of smoke toward the ceiling, “it is necessary, in dealing with peculiar cases, to resort to peculiar methods. Indeed, it is necessary to become unethical sometimes. In the solution of the present case, it was necessary for me to have a companion who possessed a working knowledge of safes.”

Billy blows a couple more rings; then points the lighted end of his cigarette at me. “That was you,” says he. “You were the expert who was to assist me. All right. It was further necessary that this expert should have access to the safe upon which he was to operate. I fixed that—”

“What? Do you mean that—”

“Sure. I sent the message asking that you be picked up immediately upon your arrival. My plans called for your presence in this jail; so I politely asked the town marshal to put you here. Furthermore, I composed another message which will be sent this morning. This later telegram informs the marshal of Hilldale that the genuine James Black has been apprehended, and that you are doubtless innocent of any offense against the laws of the land. That will let you out, my friend. The city police will never come for you because they don’t even know that you are here.”

“But this yokel cop wired ‘em and told ‘em I was here,” I object.

“But being a yokel cop, he did not send the wire to the chief of police. That telegram will be delivered to The City Detective Agency, at 314 Commercial Building. That’s *my* office, Jimmy boy.”

“Billy,” says I, dazedly, “I don’t know whether to kiss you or kill you.”

“Let’s play pitch instead,” suggests Billy, nonchalantly drawing out a deck of cards. “I stole these in the sheriff’s office,” he explains glibly.

It was about eight o’clock in the morning when the loose-gearred marshal came in with the glad

tidings that my presence was no longer desired, and that I was free to depart at any time. Any surprise the marshal may have felt at discovering Billy and I in the same cell was quickly dissipated when he found the doughty sheriff cursing in the next one.

“Where to?” asks Billy, as I arise and prepare to shake the dust of the Hilldale hoosegow from my feet. “My car’s outside, and if you’re heading my way, I’ll give you a lift, just as soon as I pay my fine and attend to a few little details which pertain to the sheriff.”

“If you’re going to the city, you are going alone,” says I. “I’ve had enough excitement to last me for a while. And any time you want to send me my fee for last night’s work; just address it to General Delivery, Hilldale. I’ll be here for the next month, or at least until a few of my acquaintances up at the city have forgotten me. Give my regards to the boys; but keep my address to yourself.”

And forthwith, I trotted over to the hotel, hired a room, and spent the rest of the day in bed.

Now, you tell one.

