

# Moulage

by *Arthur J. Burks*



*The First Money was Hot but the Second Batch was—Bloody.*

**F**OR weeks Jake Darter had been like an animal, hiding in the thicket near the old man's shack. He had come out at night to steal food from cars in the freight yard, and to find out just what was going on in the world—and to curse himself when he found out.

That bank-knockover job had been well done, no doubt about that. But his usual bad luck had stayed with him. He'd picked up

new money, and they had the numbers of the bills. He couldn't spend it anywhere, not for years, maybe. And there were forty thousand dollars' worth of it. If he could get away to Chicago and make the right connections he might get two thousand dollars for it. But Chicago was a thousand miles away. It might as well be a million.

So, he couldn't spend the money, he couldn't replace those tell-tale shoes of his,

and he couldn't very well go barefoot—not at his age. And if they ever caught him with these shoes on!

Yes, he'd left a footprint in a muddy place near the curb when he'd run out of the bank. He'd known about moulage, and that footprints could be checked on as well as fingerprints. But he hadn't noticed that film of silt, left by a recent rain, when he'd gone into the bank. Hadn't given it a thought when he'd run out, got into the stolen car, and got away with the money. He'd left the car and doubled back in his tracks, keeping to the hard concrete of the road.

Then he had gone into the woods to hole up. He had grinned when he had first read the newspaper account about the fellow who had sworn he had been held up by the bandit and forced at pistol's point to take him a hundred miles away from Janisville. Jake Darter hadn't held up anybody. He had just crawled into the brush and hidden, like a sick animal. And he had held onto his hot money for dear life. He hadn't killed anybody to get it, but he had a record and they'd give him life, anyway. But not if he could really get away.

And he had that figured out, too. This old man in the shack in the clearing, at the edge of the lake. The old guy was a miser. He hid his dough under the floor of his shack. He took it out every night and riffled it through his fingers. Had some jewels, too. And he started at every sound, and clutched at his money as though it had been his heart's blood, which maybe it was.

Jake Darter knew, because he had looked through the window one night and seen him playing with the money and the jewels. But Jake hadn't been interested then. That was before he knew the dough he had stolen was listed, and the police had a cast of his right foot.

He'd simply slunk down to the shack to see if there were any food to be had.

But when he saw the miser he knew there wasn't. The old man starved himself to save his money. Darter didn't know how he got the money, and he didn't really care.

Darter knew all about the series numbers and the moulage, for he had managed every night to get the local newspaper. Someone threw it into the trash cans at the end of the streetcar line. He'd seen the enlarged photograph of the moulage. Also his last picture, taken when he had been in stir.

Tonight, he decided, would be a good night for it. The sky looked threatening. If he knew anything about weather there would be plenty of rain and it wouldn't be a nice night to be out in the weather. But rain would wash out footprints. He was, he realized, getting an obsession about footprints.

Darkness came, with flurries of wind, rattling the leaves. Jake Darter had made up his mind to get the old man's dough and get away to some big city where he could handle the hot money, and have something to live on while he was at it. There wasn't much that the old miser had—probably not more than a couple of grand, at the outside. And the jewels were likely family heirlooms that weren't worth anything.

One nice thing about it, nobody ever came to see the old guy—nobody. And if he had any friends he didn't go to see them, either. The set-up was perfect. Maybe it would be a week before—but no, the old man would probably go for the cops right away. He wouldn't telephone, for he didn't have a telephone.

Darkness came down, and Jake Darter set out for the shack. Rain was beginning to fall, and the wind had risen almost to the intensity of a gale. It would be soft tonight. There'd be nobody around, anywhere. People would stick close to their homes.

The light was on in the old shack. Bentham Rice, the faded letters said on the mail-box at the end of the trail, though he

doubted if the old man ever got any mail. He'd never seen him even look in the box.

Jake Darter didn't have a knife or a pistol. But of course he could handle an old man easily. It would be a cinch.

IT WAS pouring down rain when Jake Darter reached the shack. He would have to fix it so he could spend the night in the shack. The old gent could stand being tied up that long. And Jake Darter wouldn't be spending the whole night out in the rain. He circled one end of the lake, and wondered as he did so why Bentham Rice had built his shack practically on the beach.

He looked through the window. The old man had his dough out of the hole in the floor. His face was a grinning, bewhiskered mask. He looked like a nut of some sort. And his lips moved, as though he were talking to himself.

Jake Darter didn't see any sense in wasting time. He shoved the door open and went in, kicking it shut behind him. The rain came down harder. It literally roared on the shingled roof, as though it had just waited for him to get inside.

"Never mind putting the dough back in the hole, Pop," said Jake Darter. "I'm going to borrow it. I may even pay you interest!"

That was a good joke, but the old man didn't see it. The old man, he was sure, never went anywhere, so it made a cold chill run down his spine when the old man spoke in a kind of whistling, frightened voice.

"Jake Darter! The man they're lookin' fer! And gittin' set to murder me! Well, go right ahead and murder, Jake Darter! I'd rather be dead than lose the money I've spent my life slavin' fer! Didn't ya git enough outa Janisville County Bank?"

"Yeah, Pop, but it's hot money." Jake felt better. After all, it didn't really matter that the old man knew.

Jake felt he must have realized from

the beginning that he was going to have to kill the old codger to get away with this. He had accepted it now as inevitable. And old Bentham Rice gave him no choice, practically. He flung the canvas sack with the money and jewels in it, back down the hole. He was surprisingly fast in his movements. He grabbed up a poker in his hand and rushed Darter.

"No hoodlum is going to rob me, Jake Darter!" he screamed. "I've slaved too many years!"

The old man swung the poker. Jake Darter ducked, but the old man had good coordination. Even as Jake ducked, he shifted the arc of the blow with the poker, and it struck Jake Darter alongside the head. Jake saw stars. A cold, savage anger burned in him. He caught the poker in his big right fist and yanked it away from Rice. It slipped from his own hand and flew through the dirty window. The sound of the rain and wind came in, louder than before.

The old man attacked him frenziedly with fists and feet and teeth. Jake Darter, blood streaming down his neck where the poker had broken the skin, tried to reason with him.

"Take it easy, Pop! I'll give you twice the amount in hot money. The bank will fix you up, sure."

"Won't do it! You mean to kill me! I can see it in your eyes!"

HIS nails were scoring Jake Darter's face, ripping, tearing. Jake drove a left to the old man's nose. Rice went skittering back, trying to get his heels on the floor, and came up hard against the far wall. For a moment it looked as though he were out. But Darter hadn't got the money bag out of the hole before the old man was right back at him.

Jake noticed that water was seeping into the hole where the sack was. The money would get wet if left in there. He tossed it into

a corner as the old man came on. The old guy wasn't much more than half Darter's size, but he was surprisingly strong. He tried for Jake's eyes with his thumbs. He got his heel behind Darter's knee and spilled him.

Mad clear through, Jake slugged him again, harder this time, with a left and a savage right. The old man, seeing the blows coming, got his hands about Darter's neck and hung on. And Darter couldn't shake or slug him loose. He tried, savage, drumming blows. The old man's ribs were like a washboard, and they gave with every blow of Darter's fists.

Darter's eyes began to dim. Of course, it may have been the kerosene lamp. Realizing he couldn't break the old man's desperate grasp on his neck, Jake shot his own hands to Rice's neck, locked his fingers behind the old fellow's head, and started squeezing. But Rice didn't let go, not yet. Instead he seemed to clutch even tighter. Darter began to shake the thin old body, like a terrier shaking a rat.

Still the frail body hung. Darter concentrated on choking, choking, until the old man should simply fold up, go limp. He tightened his grip, kept on shaking—and wondering why the light should keep on getting dim. Probably the old guy didn't put more than enough kerosene in it to keep the wick wet. And then, the light went out entirely, and things got pretty hazy for Jake Darter. So hazy that he didn't know even that he kept right on squeezing and shaking.

When Jake Darter regained consciousness the roaring of the rain was of cloudburst proportions. It hammered on the roof, a deluge. The wind shrieked about the eaves. And the skin of the old man's neck, still tightly gripped in his two hands, was cold. It was difficult for Darter to release his stiffened fingers from about the scrawny neck.

He got up in the dark, fumbled in his own pocket for his waterproof matchbox. He could hear water, incidentally, gurgling under the floor of the shack.

He lighted the lamp. It flickered and smoked, but when he found a small kerosene can, its spout stopped by a potato jammed over the end, he filled the lamp, and the light burned higher. No need worry about light through the windows. A man a dozen feet away couldn't see the light through the rain. Perfect weather for a getaway.

JAKE DARTER looked down at the old man's face, holding the lamp so that the light was right on him. The old boy was grinning, as though the last thing he had done in life was to chuckle over some joke—some joke on Jake Darter. Jake got the money and counted it. Five grand, a lot more than he had expected. Good, usable money. He wouldn't get that much out of his hot dough.

The stones were small diamonds, he thought, though he didn't know much about rocks. If he were smart he'd throw away the hot stuff, and go on with what he had now.

But he didn't. He'd already robbed, and he might as well get what he could out of it. Whatever it was, added to the old man's cash and stones, he could keep going for a long time on it. Give people time to forget about that moulage business, that footprint he had left in front of the bank.

He opened the door, cupping the top of the chimney with his left hand. The wind almost blew him backward across the floor. The lamp almost went out. But he had seen enough. Black water swirled about the house. The house was up on rocks, but the water must be within a couple of inches of the floor. It looked as though the night itself were one big lake.

Of course the water wouldn't be deep, and he could wade through it. But could he? He knew this territory, these lowlands. With water over it, that ground in front of the door would be quicksand. He'd sink out of sight if it grabbed him. He didn't dare risk it.

He shut the door, went to the other side

of the house, held the lamp high and looked out the window. Back water there, too. Moreover, the shack was jittering a bit, as though the ground under it were being eaten away. Not that that would matter much. The floorboards were solid enough. Even atop quicksand they would stay up, hold him safe.

But he couldn't go out—not until the rain stopped and the water from the lake went down. That shouldn't be long. It had a good outlet, and when the rain stopped the lake would drain fast enough.

Save for personal discomfort—and he had found himself able to stand a lot of that, these last few weeks—he could wait until the coast was clear. He couldn't leave, but by the same token nobody could come to him.

Meantime, he could start figuring things out. He took a look at the old man's shoes. If he could exchange . . . but no sooner had he looked than he knew it useless. The old man had small feet. Nothing here to help him. He had to stick to his own shoes. He blew out the light and sat down in the only chair. He wasn't very nervous, but there was no sense in looking at the white-whiskered face of the man he had killed unless it were necessary.

THEY'D be after him, the law would, when Rice was found. But who would they be after? They already had figured Jake Darter a thousand miles away from here. He could travel a mere fifty miles away and be safe as in a church. With five grand to use until he could fence the hot money.

The hot money! He took that out of his clothes and riffled it in the dark. It felt good. He could take his time while he spent the five grand. Chances were nobody in the world knew that Bentham Rice had all that money. There'd be no description of Rice's dough broadcast. Cops and dicks had to know about money and sparklers before they could send out descriptions.

Everything was going to work out all

right. His conscience didn't bother him in the least. After all hadn't the old man attacked him?

Gosh, how the rain hammered. It smashed against roof and the surface of the lake—the lake was all around the house now—making a terrific racket. Water leaked through the roof and splattered on the floor. Warm rain went down the back of his neck, and he moved away from the leak.

The creaking of the chair was dismal. Then water began falling somewhere else, with a sound that made him think it must be hitting Bentham Rice in the face.

Hours it went on. There was something monotonous about the rain, something soporific. But the trembling of the house and the swirling of black water about the foundations kept him awake a long time. But the wind and the rain spelled safety for Jake Darter while they lasted. So, he slept.

He slept hard. Maybe he wouldn't have if he hadn't slept so badly for the last week or two, on the ground, or on pine needles, when every sound had snapped him awake.

It was the cessation of the rain that wakened him. And it was still dark. But he began to get himself together. Made sure of the money. He listened for sounds of water. None gurgled about the shack now. The lake's draining stream was taking off the surplus fast enough. It would soon be time to go.

Had he left any fingerprints anywhere? He was sure he hadn't, except maybe on the old man's neck, but he had squeezed him with his fingers outside the shirt collar. The canvas bag wouldn't retain prints. The poker had gone out the window, had probably sunk through to China by now.

ALL he had to do was wait until dawn began to come through the sky from the east. Then he'd be on his way, through the woods and across roads, traveling fast to get far enough

away that he could take a chance on showing himself, and with money enough that he wouldn't have to touch the hot stuff.

He could scarcely wait. Now that it was time for him to be going he realized how tough it had really been, even while sleeping, to be spending time there with the man he had killed. He'd probably feel, for a, few weeks, as though Bentham Rice were chasing him, calling for the cops with every step, trying to give him up to justice.

Lighter and lighter the world became. He could now see the face of the murdered man, there on the floor. Jake Darter opened the door when he could see the lake, and that the shore of it was now fifteen or twenty feet away. Then a horrible realization dawned on him.

For a long time he stared out, his heart turned to stone. Far away he could hear voices of people coming this way. Not that it mattered when they caught him, so it might as well be now or a year from now. For catch him they certainly would!

Fury at the trick fate had played on him made him a little crazy. He cursed as he scattered the hot money all over the murder room, throwing it wildly everywhere. Some of it fell on the old man's face. Rice seemed to

be peering at him, with horrible coquetry, from below a ten-dollar bill—one of those ten dollar bills with the publicized serial number.

What had happened was something he should have foreseen. Anybody should have foreseen it. Especially after what had already happened to him—the moulage of that one footprint.

He was trapped!

Time had nothing to do with it. The sun coming up, drying the ground, would merely set the evidence as solid as concrete. Sooner or later they would find him.

He couldn't throw his shoes away. They'd find them if he left them in the shack, or in the hole whence the money had come. If he went barefoot they'd run him down through the first person who saw him barefoot.

He read his own doom just outside, all around the shack. No matter what he did, he doomed himself with the first step he took. And yet, there was nothing outside, really, that he hadn't expected to see.

*Except, all around the shack, and extending out from it for many yards, there was a two-inch layer of silt, as though spread there for the sole purpose of recording the footprints of a murderer whose right foot was, in moulage, part of his police record!*