

Crime's Client

By
Guy Fleming



Little did Sam Hawke think that when he took that measly two-hundred-dollar assignment, he would be doubling for death.

HE WAS a round little man with an enormous stomach. He stood in front of Sam Hawke, grinning, and a gold tooth winked out from a pursed mouth under the waxed tips of a mousy brown mustache.

Hawke had not heard him enter. He sat with his feet up on the desk and focused

the stranger between the broad tips of his shoes, taking in the sharply creased striped trousers, the swallow-tail coat, the fawn-colored spats, and the yellow Malacca walking stick

"Let's try it again," Hawke said. "Go out and knock first."

The fat little man laughed. "Ha! A

prime sense of humor, my friend. That's what I like."

Business had been slow and the man might be a prospective client, so Sam Hawke dropped his feet to the floor, lifted inquiring eyebrows and waited.

The little man seated himself gingerly on the edge of a chair with his chin propped on the Malacca stick and aimed his blue eyes at Hawke.

"Would you like to make a hundred dollars?" he asked abruptly.

Hawke held out his hand. The man produced a single crisp century note from a well-heeled wallet and flipped it on to the desk.

"Good." He nodded vigorously. "That's fine. That's what I like. Not too many questions. Get your hat and your gun and let's go."

Hawke did not move. "Where?"

"The Miner's National Bank."

"What for?"

"I have to get some stuff out of a safe deposit box."

Hawke folded the bill and tucked it neatly into his vest pocket. "So heavy you need help?" he asked.

The fat little man made an impatient gesture. "Not at all, but it's valuable stuff and somebody may try to take it away from me."

"Ah," Sam Hawke breathed. "Then there may be a little shooting."

The stranger shrugged. "It's a possibility."

Again Hawke extended his hand. "That C note needs some companions. Four more of them. My skin is very valuable and I wouldn't want to get it punctured for a measly hundred dollars."

Bright spots of color flushed the chubby cheeks. The blue eyes frowned. The round figure popped off the chair.

"Give me back my money," he snapped angrily.

With a flip of his thumb Hawke shot him the wadded bill. The stranger hopped toward the door, stopped with his hand on the knob, then turned and faced the detective.

"The whole thing may take less than half an hour;" he said. "Also there may not be any shooting. I'll give you two hundred dollars."

HAWKE recognized the signs. There was a flat finality to the man's voice. He nodded crisply, said: "It's a deal," and took the proffered money. He got up, planted his hat firmly on his head, got the .38 automatic from his drawer, examined the cartridge clip, then dropped the weapon into his holster sling.

The Miner's National Bank was three blocks away. They had covered one street and were halfway along the next when it happened. A taxi came roaring down from the corner, slewed with screaming brakes toward the curb. A hand was shoved out the window. The hand held a gun.

It all happened so fast neither Hawke nor the fat man could do one single thing about it. The gun barked and jerked back, and a lean tendril of smoke was immediately swept away by the backwash of wind.

Sam Hawke dropped like a third act curtain. He kneeled on one leg and hauled at the .38. But by the time he got it out the taxi was careening around the corner out of sight. He turned to look at the fat man.

His client was lying limply on the pavement, stubby legs out-spread. The color had drained from the flabby cheeks. His eyelids were squeezed tightly shut. Hawke felt the man's wrist. It was beating like a dollar watch. And then he saw the derby which had rolled over against the cornerstone of a building. A tailor could not have cut a neater hole than the one the bullet had made.

Two sharp slaps against the man's cheeks brought him around. People were beginning to form a semicircle, watching in open-mouthed and morbid fascination.

"Scat!" Sam Hawke snarled. "Scat!" He heaved the fat little man to his feet and steered him through the crowd.

"W-what happened?"

"You fainted. Somebody took a shot at you."

The little man grasped Hawke's arm. Hawke was surprised at the strength in those short dimpled fingers. "Let's get away from here—quickly."

Hawke flagged a cab and they pulled away just as a panting, perspiring cop hove to and anchored nervously on the fringe of the milling throng. They spurted away, but before the driver had time to slip into a third gear, Hawke breathed a stop order against the back of his neck. The cab rocked to a stop in front of the Miner's National Bank.

Pasty-faced, the fat man craned a quick glance up and down the block. Then he darted across the sidewalk through the open portal like a spider after a fly caught in the center of its web. Hawke followed with dignity.

He had his own account here, and he waved at Nulty, the square-jawed, iron-haired guard. He followed his client down a flight of marble stairs terminating in a dead-end of gleaming steel bars. A tall, stoop-shouldered attendant with a paternal manner, known to Hawke as Pop Worden, looked out at them and smiled. Beyond him were the long rows of inch-thick steel compartments containing several hundred safe deposit boxes.

"You wanna open your box again, Mr. Hawke?" The attendant asked.

"No, Pop, just keeping a friend company."

WORDEN keyed open the gate, squinting puzzledly at the fat man. "Don't quite recollect—" he started to say.

The fat man interrupted with: "I don't have a box here. I want Mr. Edward Aldrich's box."

Pop Worden frowned. "You got a power of attorney?"

"Yes. Here it is."

"You got Mr. Aldrich's key?"

The fat man produced that also.

Pop Worden pressed a button. In a moment a heavy-set, pompous man whom Hawke recognized as Robert Oakley, the branch manager, appeared. He clamped a pair of pince-nez glasses to the high bridge of his prominent nose, took the paper from Worden and examined it like a pawnbroker appraising a diamond.

He looked up. "Everything seems all right. The power of attorney is properly notarized. You may proceed, Worden."

The attendant moved down the aisle, stepped up on a squat ladder, inserted two keys into the small swinging door marked 4001, and drew forth a long brown metal box. He piloted the way to one of the tiny cubicles used by depositors to examine their valuables. He snapped on a light and hurried back to the front gate.

"Wait here," the fat man told Hawke, and yanked the door shut behind him.

Sam Hawke propped himself against the wall, fished out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. This promised to be an easy two hundred dollars. Obviously another attempt to polish off the fat man would not be made until he'd been delivered to his destination. Hawke took his second puff of the cigarette and that was the last. The next instant he was hit by a truck, lifted off the floor, and tossed five feet to the other end of the corridor.

All this was accompanied by the ear-splitting roar of a thunderous detonation. The door of the cubicle burst outward in

splinters. A pall of thick, gray smoke blossomed into the passage. And then for a moment there was silence, the deep silence that always follows an explosion.

From a distance, and through the buzzing in his ears, Hawke heard the thin cry of voices. He got to his feet, feeling as if a steam roller had run over his chest. His upper lip was moist, sticky, and when he touched it he saw that his nose was bleeding.

He hung against the wall, reeling, then slowly things came back into focus. People crowding around him. Pop Worden was white-faced, trembling. Oakley, in a state of high, nervous excitement, grabbed Hawke's arm, jabbering:

"What is it? What happened?"

Hawke swallowed, pointed a mute finger at the door-less cubicle, then suddenly plunged toward the opening. He came to a dead stop at the threshold and his stomach sickened and turned over. Behind him Oakley uttered a gurgling sound. A slender blond clerk fell to the floor in a faint.

Hawke turned away fast. One look had been enough. He was not a magician. He could do nothing for the fat man now. And in order to bury him they'd have to scrape him off the walls.

At the sound of heavy steps pounding down the corridor he looked up. At least three police cars must have disgorged such a load of cops. In the foreground, beefy, red-faced, hard-jawed, was Sergeant Hedrick. He snorted at sight of the private detective.

"I might've known you'd be here, Hawke. Wherever there's trouble there's you."

Hawke took the crimson handkerchief away from his nose, focused a cold look on the sergeant, and said nothing.

"All right," Hedrick snapped. "What happened?"

"In there," Pop Worden said pointing.

Hedrick craned his neck, spared a brief glance into the annihilated cubicle, brought his neck back quickly, and wet his lips.

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Hawke brought him here," Oakley volunteered. "He had a power of attorney to open Edward Aldrich's box."

Hedrick's gaze swung back on Hawke. "Client of yours?"

Hawke nodded. "Yes."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know."

Hedrick's brows hiked up and his jaw jutted forward belligerently. "Don't be coy, Hawke. This is murder."

Hawke shrugged. "I'm serious, Hedrick. The guy came into my office, offered me two hundred bucks to protect him while he transferred some valuables. He didn't tell me his name and I didn't ask. He took Aldrich's box and walked into that cubicle. The box must have been loaded with nitro, fixed to go off when the lid was opened. He wasn't in there a full minute when the blast came.

"That's all I know about it. Except somebody took a pop at him with a gun out in the street a little while ago. The finger was on him and I guess he had to get it sooner or later."

ONE of the cops brought the tattered remnants of a wallet to Hedrick. The sergeant made a cursory examination of the contents.

"Timothy Priest," he said. "Bachelor, retired." He snapped an order to another of the harness bulls. "Get homicide. Call the medical examiner. And have the morgue send up the meat wagon."

By that time Sam Hawke had stemmed the flow from his nose. He reached over and appropriated the hand-rolled silk handkerchief from Oakley's breast pocket,

patted his mouth with it.

"May I make a suggestion, Hedrick?" he asked, and continued: "Look up the records and see who was the last man at Aldrich's box. Obviously, that's who loaded it with explosive."

Hedrick snorted. "I know my business. Get me the files, Oakley."

The manager nodded to Pop Worden, and the stooped figure moved back toward the anteroom. He came back with a startled look on his face.

"They're gone," he said hoarsely. "The cards are gone."

The pince-nez fell off Oakley's nose and broke on the tile floor. His jowls gave a convulsive twitch and he gasped: "Impossible!"

"They're gone," Worden repeated dumbly.

"Nothing like this ever happened before," Oakley groaned.

"Now wait a minute," Hedrick said harshly. "What's missing?"

Oakley blinked. "It's like this. You see, when the holder of a safe deposit box wants access to it, he must sign a card. In that way we cross-check signatures. It also gives us a permanent record of every visitor. It seems those cards have been stolen. I'll have to make a thorough investigation. Somebody's going to get fired. We can't have anything like this going on in—"

"Shut up!" Hedrick interrupted. "There'll be an investigation, but you won't make it. We're gonna—hold it, Hawke. Where the devil are you going?"

"Out," Sam Hawke said innocently. "You don't need me and I want some fresh air."

"You stay here, or I'll slap a pair of cuffs on you. You're under suspicion, too."

"Me?" Hawke's long face writhed into an amazed expression.

"You bet. How do I know you didn't wait till Priest opened the box, then conked him and planted a small bomb in the room?"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Hawke. "You don't mean that."

Hedrick grinned very unpleasantly. "Maybe not, but stick around."

Sam Hawke shrugged resignedly.

Like the snap of a rubber band Oakley erupted into excitement. "I have it. I have it." He was practically dancing. "A couple of weeks ago another stranger opened Mr. Aldrich's box with a power of attorney. A young chap. The paper is probably in my desk." He rushed off as if a tornado were howling at his back.

Hawke exchanged glances with Sergeant Hedrick, then looked at Pop Worden. "Remember anything about that, Pop?"

Worden's seamed face was screwed up in thought. "Why, come to think of it, I do. I had Mr. Oakley check up and then I gave this young chap the box. He kept it in one of the cubicles about five minutes."

"How did he look when he came out?"

Worden seemed to be scraping back into his memory. "'Bout the same, I guess. He didn't seem nervous or anything."

"Remember if anybody else asked for Aldrich's box after that?"

The stoop-shouldered attendant hunched his shoulders. "You know how it is here, Mr. Hawke. Maybe a hundred people come in every day. I don't remember from week to week."

Hawke nodded, then looked up as Oakley came wheeling down the corridor, triumphantly waving a sheet of paper. Sergeant Hedrick snatched it out of his hand.

"Yep, this is it. Jerome Connel. He had a look into the box three weeks ago. We got to get a line on him and pick him up."

He looks like our man.”

But two seconds later Hedrick was shoved into the background. The homicide squad arrived and with them a staff print man and photographers. They took over like the Nazis took Poland. From the questions they asked Oakley, Sam Hawke learned that Edward Aldrich was an investment broker, highly successful at one time, but doing little business now, although he was reputed to have salted away a considerable pile of government lettuce.

LIEUTENANT NULTY of homicide was a tall, lean whippet of a man with searching gray eyes, prominent temples, and from having seen too much death in one lifetime, a bitter seam of a mouth. Since a number of Sam Hawke’s cases had held their element of violence, the two men had often been thrown into contact.

And so it was not unusual that when Nulty finally stood before Edward Aldrich, Sam Hawke had a place at his side.

All that was visible of Mr. Edward Aldrich was a gaunt, bony face into which were set a pair of opaque eyes with no more expression than a professional gambler’s. The rest of him was concealed by the heavy bedclothes which were drawn up to his chin. The bed itself was shaded by an old-fashioned canopy. The little Jap man-servant who had admitted them had faded silently out of the room and closed the door behind him.

“Tashito said you were policemen.” Aldrich’s voice was a dry monotone.

“That’s right,” Nulty said.

“What do you want?”

“To ask you some questions.”

“Relevant to what?”

“The questions first,” Nulty said. “You have a safe deposit box at the Miner’s National Bank?”

“I have.”

“When was the last time you were there?”

The colorless lips twisted into the semblance of a smile. “Sorry, my dear sir, but I will not answer without benefit of counselor at least until I know why you’re asking.”

Nulty gazed at Hawke. The latter shrugged. Aldrich was within his rights. If he desired not to answer that was his prerogative. This was not a courtroom and he could not be punished for failure to answer. It was clear, moreover, that Aldrich was not a man who could be easily bullied. Nulty started to speak, but Sam Hawke forestalled the question with one of his own.

“Did you know a man named Timothy Priest?”

The bony face screwed itself into an expression of rage. He half lifted himself out of the bed, and rasped through clenched teeth:

“So he went and blabbed, did he?”

“He did.” Hawke nodded wisely.

“All right. Then indict me and get it over with.”

Hawke wet his lips. He must tread carefully, feel his way, retain the impression that he knew far more than was actually the case. He smiled quizzically.

“Priest had plenty on you, didn’t he?”

“Enough,” snapped Aldrich.

“Blackmailing you?”

“You can put it that way, if you like.”

Sensing the direction which Hawke’s questions were taking, and not wanting to be left behind, Nulty entered the inquiry.

“You were tied down in bed, couldn’t get up to procure money for the payoff, so you gave him a power of attorney to open your safe deposit box.”

Aldrich shrugged against the white satin pillow.

“You knew,” Nulty said, “what would

happen when he opened the box.”

“I most certainly did.”

Nulty’s eyebrows jumped up in a surprised arc and his eyes widened.

“*You did?*”

“Emphatically. He would find fifty thousand dollars in negotiable securities, and ten thousand dollars in cash. Enough to keep him quiet for the time being.”

“Oh.” Nulty’s voice expressed disappointment.

Hawke said: “Several weeks ago you gave a power of attorney to a man named Jerome Connel. Who was he?”

“My confidential secretary.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I fired him.”

“Ah,” breathed Hawke dreamily. “Had you been to the box after that?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because,” cracked Nulty, losing his patience, “that box was loaded with nitroglycerin which exploded and murdered Priest.”

FOR the space of several seconds absolutely no change came over Edward Aldrich’s gaunt death’s-head of a face, and then his mouth spread into a slow grin. He said, rolling the words over his tongue and relishing them with the approval of a wine taster:

“So Priest is dead. Good. Very good. In fact, splendid.”

Nulty didn’t like that. He didn’t like it one bit. He could see nothing good or splendid in murder, and his lean jaw lengthened.

“Not so very, my friend,” he said. “Because we’re going to hold you under suspicion of murder.”

“*Me!*” The word cracked out like a gunshot. “Get out. Get out. You haven’t got a warrant. You haven’t any proof. Tashito! Tashito, come here.”

The door opened as if the little sloe-eyed Jap had been waiting for such a summons. He slid into the room, stepped to one side of the door and bowed politely from the waist. His smile showed teeth as white and even as piano keys. And when he spoke his voice was a soft, sibilant whisper.

“Thanking you to leave, gentlemen. Master not well.”

Spotches of angry color heightened Nulty’s cheekbones. “Wait a minute,” he blustered. “You can’t—”

The rest of it was lost between suddenly locked teeth. Exactly when the Jap reached for the gun neither investigator knew. But abruptly it was pointing at them from out of a tight brown fist, small, compact, utterly deadly. The brownish eyes held a cold, faraway look, but the smile remained as it had been.

“Not liking to shoot policemen,” he said. “Exit, please.”

Hawke moved fluidly forward and the gun wavered, picked a pin point directly over his heart.

“Get out, gentlemen,” Aldrich growled.

Hawke had the usual instincts of self-preservation. He did not know how far the Jap might go, and he never took chances unless vitally necessary. This was, after all, Nulty’s affair. Hawke had his two hundred dollars, and considerably more time than a half hour had passed since he’d started on this thing. And that was all Priest had promised the matter would take.

He let his shoulders drop. “You can stay if you like, Nulty. I’m leaving.”

And with as much dignity as he could muster under the circumstances he stalked out of the room. Nulty’s breath was warm against the back of his neck.

“I’ll be damned!” was all the lieutenant said.

Absently, Sam Hawke pressed the elevator button. When the car came up he followed Nulty inside and spoke to the operator.

“Did Mr. Aldrich go out today?”

The operator was a young kid with a ready tongue. “Yeah, early this afternoon. Came back about two hours ago.”

Lieutenant Nulty inhaled deeply. Hawke was satisfied.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“Got trouble with his legs. Don’t know what, but the Jap almost has to carry him.”

Hawke gave the kid a dollar. That would make a friend of him, and perhaps later sew up his testimony. Out in the street, he waved impatiently at Nulty’s prodding questions, headed for a drug store, flipped the pages of a telephone book, then locked himself into a booth. In two minutes he emerged, flagged a cab and settled down beside the lieutenant.

“What’s up?” Nulty demanded.

“This. Aldrich still maintains an office. I called there and asked for Jerome Connel’s address.”

“Aldrich’s former confidential secretary?”

“Precisely. We’re headed there now.”

NULTY rubbed the tips of his fingers together. “You heard what the boy in the elevator said. Aldrich went out. That gave him an opportunity to try to head off Priest and put a bullet into him before he had a chance to go to the bank and clean out the safe deposit box. What do you think, Hawke?”

Hawke nodded. “Exactly what I had in mind. But first let’s talk to Connel. Probably he knows enough about Aldrich’s affairs to shed considerable light upon the trouble between Aldrich and Priest.”

Jerome Connel was a rabbit specimen with a bald head, nervously darting eyes,

and a habit of continually clicking his tongue against his upper plate. He answered the doorbell dressed in a flannel robe and dragging the crumpled remains of a newspaper at his side.

Ensnared in a frowzily upholstered easy chair, he welcomed the opportunity to talk about and against his former employer. He was, in fact, eager to do so.

“You knew Timothy Priest?” Nulty asked.

“Of course,” Connel nodded vigorously. “He was one of our principal clients, and—”

“Clients?”

“Yes. Priest was a rather wealthy man. He placed some very valuable securities into Aldrich’s hands for investment.”

“Did Aldrich invest it advantageously?”

“Ha!” Connel snorted. “And again—ha! He certainly did. Advantageously for himself.” He let his plate slip, then snapped it back against his gums with his tongue. “Mind you, gentlemen, I have no proof that Aldrich was actually dishonest, but during the last year he kept making money while his clients kept losing it.”

Hawke said: “Tell us about it.”

“Well, I think Aldrich used to buy up worthless securities for a song. These he would credit to the accounts of his clients. Their original securities he would appropriate for himself after some very shady paper manipulations.”

“Besides Priest,” Hawke inquired, “can you name any of his other clients?”

Connel shook his head, gave them a wily smile. “That is what I was trying to find out when Aldrich sacked me. He kept his files pretty secret and—wait a minute, yes, there was one man he gypped rather badly. I know because this man came to the house one day and threatened to get the district attorney to investigate Aldrich.”

"His name?"

"Maybe you know him. Robert Oakley, manager of the Miner's National Bank."

Nulty stiffened and flashed Hawke a significant look. Hawke's lean-jawed face was blank and innocent.

"Tell me," he said softly, "when you opened Aldrich's safe deposit box under a power of attorney, did you see any cash in it?"

The lids blinked rapidly over Connel's nervous eyes. He was silent a shade too long, then his tongue darted out and moistened his lips. Some of the color fled from his face and he came up out of the easy chair, shaking.

"Money?" he said. "Cash? I should say not. If Aldrich is trying to imply that I stole the money from his box he is a liar. A double-barreled liar—and I will push the words down his throat."

Hawke pursed his lips. "Easy, Connel, take it easy. One more question. Do you know for certain whether Aldrich visited his box after you were there?"

"He certainly did. Two days later. I know because I was with him. If any money was missing, why didn't he complain then? Why didn't he, I ask you?"

Hawke shrugged and his eyes were half closed with a dreamy look in them. "I'm not sure, but we're going to investigate a little further along those lines. Get dressed, Connel."

The bald man spluttered like a dud firecracker, but when Lieutenant Nulty suddenly produced his service special and cracked an order, he jumped toward the bedroom, dropping his upper plate on the frayed carpet and scooping it up as he went.

ROBERT OAKLEY'S office in the Miner's National Bank contained a number of hostile figures. The tension in

the room was drawn as tight as a violin string. Seated in a corner, with a pair of crutches propped against the chair, sat Edward Aldrich, lips tucked inward at the corners of his gaunt face. His opaque eyes disdained even to favor the others with a look.

Two pairs of eyes glared at him hatefully. Connel was fumbling nervously with his hat. And Oakley, much of his pomposity shattered by the recent catastrophe in the bank, stood opening and shutting his fists.

Sergeant Hedrick, still on duty at the bank, was guarding the door with his mountainous body. Lieutenant Nulty sat on the edge of the desk, waiting for Hawke. And five minutes later Hawke entered the room, the sleepy look still in his eyes.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," he drawled, "but I was going over several of the accounts in the bank." He turned to Aldrich. "Your Jap brought you here. Where is he now?"

"In the lobby, waiting."

Hawke nodded to Nulty and the latter ordered Hedrick to fetch Tashito. Hawke did not wait before commencing. He waved an admonishing finger at Aldrich.

"You were not at all co-operative," he said. "You refused to budge and so Nulty had to book you for murder in order to get you here. You may live to regret that, Aldrich. And then again, you may not. It is my belief that Connel stole some money from your safe deposit box. Was there any in it when of you foolishly permitted him to open it?"

"There certainly was. Several thousand dollars. And it was not foolish because all of my employees are bonded."

Hedrick opened the door and ushered Tashito into the room. The little brown man was still wearing the same indomitable smile, all his teeth showing

ivory-white. Hawke jerked his thumb at a chair.

"Thanking you so much," the Jap said, "but prefer standing."

Hawke nodded. "Now let's get down to cases. Priest was murdered by the very novel method of planting an explosive in your safe deposit box, Aldrich. Did you open the box after Connel?"

Aldrich's thin seam of a mouth pulled into a mocking smile. "Do you expect me to answer that?"

"No, but we have a way of finding out. Hedrick, tell Pop Worden to come in here with the requisition cards." Hedrick left, scowling. He didn't like taking orders from Hawke, but Nulty had made it very clear that the private detective was running the show.

Pop Worden must have been waiting outside, because his stooped figure appeared almost immediately. He extended a white card to Hawke, who took it, glanced at it, then passed it over to Aldrich.

"That is your signature, isn't it?"

ALDRICH frowned at the card and then looked up through narrow-lidded eyes. "Yes, and unless it is a very clever forgery, I would say you are trying to frame me for murder. I did not visit the bank on that date."

Hawke smiled disparagingly. He knew damn well that Aldrich had not visited the bank on that date. The card was an old one, perhaps a year old. All that had been cleverly changed was the date.

"Framed?" he questioned softly. "If so, somebody here in the bank is trying to do it. Didn't you invest some of Oakley's money for him, and didn't you give him a raw deal?"

Aldrich did not answer immediately. Hawke knew exactly what was running through his mind, that it would be better to

accept punishment for fraud than for murder.

"Yes," Aldrich admitted quietly. "I did give him a raw deal."

As if he were suddenly seized with an attack of palsy, Oakley's body began to shake. "No," he cried. "No. You can't put the blame on me. You can't—" He stopped short, a wild light entering his eyes. "How about Connel? Maybe he stole the money and put the bomb in the box so that when Aldrich would open it it would kill him and he'd never be accused of the theft.

"Maybe Aldrich himself planted it and deliberately sent Priest to the bank, expecting him to be killed. He could bribe Worden to steal the cards so we'd never know he'd been here. That's it, he bribed Worden." Oakley spun on the stooped attendant. "He gave you money, didn't he—didn't he—" And lunging forward he curled his hands around Worden's slender neck, shaking the attendant like a cat with a ball of wool.

One of Hedrick's big paws knocked him off. Pop Worden's face was very pale and he ran his fingers around the inside of his collar, loosening it.

Hawke didn't particularly like what he had to do now. He shook his head and said softly: "No, he didn't have to bribe Worden. Because Worden stole the cards of his own accord, to protect himself. Didn't you, Pop?"

The nostrils spread flat against the seamed face and the dull glaze of hatred glowed in Worden's eyes. They darted for an avenue of escape. Finding none, he threw himself against Hedrick who was guarding the door. With the heel of a beefy hand, Hedrick sent him reeling against the far wall.

Nulty's mouth was open. "I'll be damned," he said.

HAWKE shook his head sadly. "It hit me only a little while ago. I suppose there'd been a nibble of suspicion back of my mind all the time, but it only crystallized while I was arranging with Worden to fix the requisition cards. Then I suddenly recalled that he'd neglected to make Priest sign a card for Aldrich's box. Why? That should have been automatic with him, almost a reflex. It was because he was badly rattled when Priest appeared. He hadn't meant to kill Priest. The explosive had been for Aldrich."

"Motive?" Nulty asked. "What was his motive?"

"Well, I looked up his account here in the bank. Two thousand dollars had been withdrawn in one lump. That's a lot of money for a man making only thirty-five a week. I concluded he had asked Aldrich to invest it for him. You did, didn't you, Aldrich?"

The gaunt man nodded.

"And lost it. So Worden decided to get his money back simply by taking it out of your safe deposit box. Who had a better opportunity? While you were examining your valuables he was in possession of both keys. Simple to make a wax impression of yours, then on some quiet day, get the box, open it, clean it out, and plant the explosive.

"It was better for you to be killed. Otherwise you might find the box empty and accuse him. He stole the cards. He knew Connel had been there and that your secretary would be traced through the power of attorney in Oakley's possession. That would indicate Connel. But as I say, his plan backfired when Priest appeared instead of you."

Aldrich got the crutches under his arm and heaved his bony frame upright. "Well, gentlemen, I don't suppose you'll need me any longer."

"On the contrary," Hawke murmured. "We need you badly. There's that little matter of the shot somebody took at Priest in the street. You left your apartment this afternoon at about the time. Where did you go?"

Aldrich's nostrils pinched together. "To my doctor for diathermy treatment on my legs."

"But not Tashito. You sent him after Priest. The bullet was found imbedded in a wall near the shooting. Right now a couple of cops are searching for the gun in your apartment. If it checks with the bullet—"

The Jap whistled through his nose and his face distorted into an expression of fear. For the first time Hawke saw it without the smile. And as Tashito stepped back cowering against the wall, Hedrick pounced on him with a pair of handcuffs.

"Attempted murder," Nulty said. "I get it. When we visited you today you probably thought the Jap had only wounded Priest and that was why Priest had told his story. What story, Aldrich?"

Hawke supplied the answer. "Priest had proof of Aldrich's fraud and threatened to go to the D. A. unless he made good. So Aldrich promised him everything he owned, although he probably has another fortune elsewhere, and even offered to let Priest go to the safe deposit box himself. Sending the Jap to waylay him was an afterthought."

Nulty nodded shortly. "Well, that about ties up the loose ends."

"Not altogether. I imagine Connel swiped a few thousand dollars from the box when he opened it. We won't try to prove that if he turns state's evidence."

"I will," Connel's head bobbed eagerly. "I will."

Nulty stared at Pop Worden and shook his head. "You never can tell," he said.