

Ways of Darkness

by
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THE ghostly reflection of a flash-light upstairs threw downward its faint illumination toward paneled oak and candelabra in the vast dining-room where Petey Ingalls jiggled nervously on his toes and strained his attention for hostile sounds. Petey was ill at ease. He had been so since he arrived. He had turned a few tricks—mere cottage affairs—but this intrusion into a millionaire's stately home had a tendency to overawe him.

Alongside him were two full suit-cases. Under his feet was a luxurious rug that made him feel as if treading on sponges. Ahead of him was a broad, polished stairway swinging upward with majestic banisters to a great hallway whence came the faint light. Just behind him was a heavy, carved table, and all about him, unseen but felt, were costly brocades, pictures, silverware, naperies, and laces. The place reeked of luxury and comfort, wondrously arranged and exquisitely novel to Petey. He lived in a back room over a garage.

A board creaked somewhere up above. Petey felt his spine tingle. The light became brighter and swung downward, illuminating the stairway. It glinted into Petey's eyes, then rested

on the oaken wall behind him and went out. His pal, McClung, was coming down, noiselessly, but with sure tread.

"Got the stuff?" quavered Petey.

"Sure," came McClung's husky, trembling voice. "Come along!"

With hands occupied by suit-cases they slipped over rugs and hardwood to the front door. The more experienced McClung fingered the lock for a moment, then led the way to the porch, ignoring the open window by which they had gained entrance. They trod past lawn, trees, and hedges toward the road, then walked along the highway to a lane hidden by small trees, where a black automobile awaited them in the darkness. They found it largely by the sense of feel.

Losing no time, Petey took the wheel and started the machine. That was his part of the job, by agreement. McClung did the heavy work while Petey supplied the transportation and acted as lookout and guardian of the loot. They had functioned perfectly. The robbery was so easy that Petey wondered if some trace of evidence had not been overlooked. It was too good to be true. Petey's doubting mind started backward, searching for flaws, while he traced

every move—the quiet arrival at one in the morning, the hiding of the auto, the entrance through the side window, the gathering of the harvest, and the exit. By all evidence these had been flawless.

Only one element had been left to chance.

Some one might have stumbled over the waiting auto and started to investigate. But that had not happened, therefore there was nothing to worry about. The younger man's spirits began to rise, and he turned his slim, weak-chinned face toward the older man while the car gathered greater momentum.

"Everything smooth as silk!" he remarked. "It couldn't be better. Get all you wanted?"

"Yeh," grunted the older man. "Watches, bracelets, rings, coin, silver—everything. The place is cleaned!"

Encouraged, Petey quickened speed. The only task now was to get to San Francisco, and that seemed so easy that mishaps were practically impossible. Nobody should become inquisitive about Petey and McClung. Their machine was of a fairly reputable make. Petey and McClung seemed like ordinary, well-dressed, well-spoken young men hastening to home and bed, perhaps after a late dance.

They had no prison records. They had not acquired the thieves' jargon or the language of the hobo. They were merely young clerks who had decided to enter on a side-line. McClung was more proficient at this business because he had been at it longer. He was rather slow-witted, perhaps, but he was careful—infinately careful. He had planned this visit for weeks, learning of the comings and goings of those in the house until he had picked exactly the right night. Even then he would not start, unless assured of utter darkness. This had been perfect. Even the stars could not see them. The coastal fog enveloped them as in a shroud.

"There's probably five or six thousand in them suit-cases," announced McClung, not without triumph. "Maybe ten thousand—twenty

thousand."

"That means at least three thousand each," said Petey. "M-m!" He thought of certain cafes and unconsciously speeded faster toward them.

"Hey!" rasped McClung suddenly. "Cut that out!"

Petey turned questioningly.

"Slow down!" snarled McClung, "Want to be pinched for speedin' just now?"

Petey's nervous hand reached for the controls. "You're right!" he grunted, pulling the car into a more sedate pace.

"Gosh! That would be fine—not!" He found himself nervous and gulping at the thought.

In silence they passed through Mountain View, Palo Alto, and Redwood City, while the machine purred along the great highway made smooth by the combined wealth of several rich counties. The car neared Belmont. Half the journey was done. Once or twice the travelers had passed automobiles, but these were few and far between. The hour was now two-thirty in the morning.

McClung glanced backward. Later he did it again. Then again. Gradually Petey noticed that the other was looking rearward steadily.

"What's the matter?" asked Petey irritably.

"Why don't that fellow pass us?" exclaimed McClung irritably. "He's been hanging on for two miles!"

Petey craned his neck. Behind them the vague black outline of a big and expensive car was rolling along less than a hundred feet away like a silent, mysterious shadow, without headlights or sign of human occupancy except for that steady, guided roll along the road. It kept its distance like a soldier on parade. In a short time it seemed to Petey's strained imagination like some grim Nemesis trailing along on their heels.

"Slow down!" mumbled McClung. "Give 'em a chance to pass. Maybe they're not after us anyhow."

Petey's impulse was for speed, but he

obeyed. The machine took the pace of a snail. It lingered and loitered and loafed. And yet, when Petey turned back impatiently at length, the dark follower was just a hundred feet behind them.

Petey stepped on the accelerator. The auto leaped forward. It sizzled along the road like a comet, ignoring the danger of possible speed patrolmen. The machine roared and swayed and rocked. House, fences, and poles seemed to melt past in one dark blur. A little town whizzed by. They came to the open country again. Then Petey looked back.

The big, silent machine was just a hundred feet behind them.

"They're after us!" groaned McClung. "They're trailin' us into the city! Tryin' to sneak along behind us in the dark! Thought we couldn't see 'em!"

"Maybe they got to the house just as we left!" chattered Petey. "Gee! What shall we do now?"

McClung's left hand was clutching Petey's arm. A thrill of apprehension seemed to circulate through both of them. McClung's right hand moved and his body changed position. The faint glint of a pistol-barrel showed in his right hand.

"No—nix!" quavered Petey. "Nix—nix!"

"We can't get away any other way!" grunted McClung savagely. "I ain't goin' to get stuck behind bars!"

"Nix—lay off!" protested Petey vehemently. "That won't do no good. Let's take a side-road. Maybe we can shake 'em!"

"Shake 'em?" snarled McClung. "In this old bus? Why, that big gazump 'll climb all over us on a rough road! Lemme alone! I'll shoot—see? Maybe it 'll hold 'em back some. Then we'll get ahead and sneak down the side-road. See?"

Petey had nothing more to say. His brain was frozen. Thoughts of prison made him shudder, yet the thought of taking this way to avoid prison made him shudder still more. The enterprise had gone beyond his capabilities. He

felt himself in the hands of fate, and resigned himself, wishing he were back in that safe and comfortable room over the garage.

There was a blinding flash and a roar to Petey's right. The pistol spat flame rearward. Petey gulped and put on more speed and looked back. The big machine behind them applied brakes so desperately that the skirl of them could be heard above the roar of Petey's motor and the wind. The follower seemed to evaporate into the fog with one banshee shriek of brakes.

"Hey!" yelled a sudden sharp voice to Petey's left. "What's the idea?"

A motor-cycle was roaring alongside, and on it was a semiuniformed man wearing an official star! That shot had caused his appearance!

McClung turned. Petey could not see his face, but knew it was livid with anger and desperation. McClung's right arm swung to the left. The scared Petey grasped his wrist madly and clutched it tight. McClung's savage left fist tried to strike at him. Petey let go the wheel and grappled. The car swayed and swerved. Both men were cold with terror and utterly rattled. McClung's right hand twitched. The pistol roared again, and blew a piece off the top of their car.

A heavy and masterful hand slipped between them. The servant of the law was on the running-board, wrenching the pistol from McClung's hand. Alongside the machine another motor-cycle was coming up. McClung swore sinfully. The uniformed person produced a pistol and jammed the muzzle behind McClung's ear. Petey slowed down, halted, sighed, and put up his hands.

"What's the idea of this Buffalo Bill stunt on the road?" demanded the patrolman. "Who are you, anyhow?"

McClung just gurgled. Petey, quicker with his wits, jerked a thumb backward. "A fellow kept followin' us," he complained. "Had no lights or nothin'. We thought he was a robber or

somehin'."

"Yeh!" snapped the patrolman. "He's halted right behind you. I suppose that's why this feller took a shot at me. Hey?"

Petey had nothing more to say. Neither had McClung. The other patrolman came up, and the lights of his machine played on two persons he had routed out of the second auto—a stylish youth in Norfolk clothes and checked cap, and a tall girl whose features were concealed by a big hat and a great coat.

"I got these two out of the big machine behind." reported the second patrolman to the first.

"Never mind them!" snorted the latter. "Let's get these two birds out of this machine while we look through it. There's something fishy here. Hey, you fellers—climb out!"

Petey and McClung obeyed sullenly while the patrolman pocketed the latter's pistol and herded the suspects in front of the headlights. The other officer explored the tonneau of the car, his hands touching several suit-cases. He brought one up to the forward light and opened it. The illumination glinted on diamonds, sapphires, rubies, brooches, watches, and rings heaped together in a glittering pile.

"Wow!" exclaimed the patrolman, his eyes opening. "So that's the game, hey? Where'd you birds get these?"

Petey and McClung remained stubbornly silent. The patrolman gave them a grim nod. "I thought so!" he announced. "Robbery. We'll find pretty soon where the stuff came from, all right. When the folks in that house find themselves robbed—wherever it is—they'll let out a yell that will whoop through the bay cities.

But why did you shoot at the other machine?"

"I told you!" snarled Petey. "They kept follerin' us all the time."

"You!" demanded the patrolman, pointing at the quivering young man. "What's the idea of following these people? Where's your lights? Don't you know the law about headlights?"

"Ye-es; certainly," quavered the youngster. "Only, my lamps burned out, or something, coming up from San Jose, and I didn't have any others."

"I get you," nodded the experienced patrolman. "Elopers. Hey?"

The young man, still nervous from being fired at, nodded sulkily.

"All right—go on," grinned the patrolman. "After this, don't ever have bum lamps, on the road or anywhere else. Get me?"

The youngster gulped and started to comfort the girl, who was beginning to cry. McClung, standing wobegone in front of the headlights, watched them for a long time, and then he gave voice, very slowly. Something was trickling into his brain. The utter futility of life in general, including automobiles, burglary, lights, elopements, and policemen, was striking McClung in a way to plant the seeds for a lifetime of chronic pessimism.

"Was—was you only followin' us because you couldn't see the road?" he demanded of the young man in a strange voice.

"Certainly. I had no lights, so I let you pace me. That's all there was to it. Your lamps served for both machines."

"Damn!" sobbed McClung, as they led him away with Petey.