



The Absconder

by
Henry Leverage

THE cashier's cage in the Lumberman's National Bank at Handover was considered the last word in protection and efficiency. It had been designed by a firm that made a specialty of this class of work. The circular glass opening over the money-counter precluded the possibility of a bank-sneak operating with a cane and hook. The netting at the top of the cage was there for this same purpose. The great triple-dial vault at the back of the cage was the final answer to any who might seek to rob the Lumberman's National of hoarded treasure.

Notwithstanding these precautions, the bank was short just eighty-eight thousand dollars in bank-notes of large denominations. These notes were reposing in the suit-case of the assistant cashier, who was waiting for the hour to close the bank. He had dropped them from a tin box into the suit-case, then had replaced the box within the vault. The loss would not be discovered until the cashier opened the doors in the morning. By that

time the assistant cashier figured on being many hundreds of miles from Handover and the scenes of his boyhood.

Fred Walsen had planned each detail. He was tired of being paid twenty dollars a week for the privilege of handling other people's millions. He had returned from his month's vacation with one thought in mind. This thought was to abscond with as much money as possible, enjoy life, and forget the past. He believed that this could be done by the exercise of ordinary precautions.

The chance came a few days after old Peter, the cashier of the bank, had returned from a two weeks' vacation and fishing trip. Old Peter had been a fixture of the bank since the first day it had opened its doors. Fred Walsen had listened to old Peter's recital of the big fish he had caught near a town called West Forest, Maine. It was far from the railroad and had to be reached by a stage. It was not down on the maps in the bank.

It was to this very town that Fred had

decided to go with the suit-case full of money. It was the last place that the police would expect him to go. It was in an opposite direction from the beach where he had spent his vacation.

Fred washed his hands as four o'clock struck. Old Peter counted the day's cash and carried it into the vault. Samuels, the watchman, who had taken the place of Dugan, the bank's detective, who had left the day before for his vacation, stepped to the circular window and offered to bet two dollars that the home team would win the game that afternoon. Fred took the bet. He considered it worth losing, for he would not be in town to pay it.

Dugan's going on his vacation at the opportune time had lifted a load from Fred's shoulders. Dugan prided himself upon being somewhat of a sleuth. He was a taciturn man, with big feet, and shoulders like a prize-fighter's. His one fetish was to sneak away somewhere and fish. He could sit by a stream for hours without moving as much as an eyelash. Dugan's biggest catch—a black bass—hung in the bank president's office. Dugan had sworn he had waited seven hours to catch the beauty. His position at the bank, where he kept his eyes on the long line at the paying-teller's window, had always seemed like that of a patient angler waiting for a bite. He had been overheard to state that he was "an ordinary plug who was holding down a soft job."

Fred Walsen remembered this. It fitted in with his plans. By the time that Dugan was called in on the search, and the agency got busy. Fred figured on being in the heart of Canada, with the money buried in three graveyards, and his appearance so changed that even old Peter would not recognize him.

Fred finished with the towel, hung it up, and turned for his coat and hat. He was interrupted for a moment as Samuels

appeared at the opening and offered to double the bet. Old Peter clicked the door of the cage in his anxiety to get home to his wife. Fred went over to the opening, called Samuel's attention to a window that had not been completely closed at the side of the bank, then reached in the closet where he and old Peter kept their clothes. He turned then, with his coat half on and his hat in his hand.

"Just a second," he said. "I almost forgot my suit-case. I'm going to do some light marketing for the landlady—that's why I brought it down this morning."

Old Peter's fingers trembled upon the latch. Fred wanted him to get a good view of the case. It was the one he was going to take the money away in when he started for Maine. Dugan would have a good description of it when the blow fell. It was just as well that Dugan should occupy some of his time following youths with yellow-leather cases that were bound with straps and cornered with bright brass trimmings. Fred had two weeks to plan the matter in, and things were occurring as he had anticipated.

He left old Peter at the side door of the bank. His rooming house and the market lay the opposite direction from the cashier's home. His heart beat high as he turned for the last glance. Samuels was still working on the window. He waved to him, then went on.

He stopped at the market, went inside, inquired about some bananas, and mentioned, as a dozen were wrapped up for him, that he was fond of tropical fruit. This was an added touch to throw Dugan or whoever would take up the trail, in the wrong direction. Fred prided himself upon his forethought in thinking of the simple things. He had read somewhere that a thief always acted first and thought afterward. He was not going to make that mistake.

The landlady was in the hall when he entered. She, also, was allowed a glimpse of

the bananas and the suit-case. He mentioned the tropics and sunnier climes to her, with a wistful voice. This seed sown, he mounted the stair-way and entered his room. He dropped the suit-case, turned and locked the door, then sat down on the bed. All had gone well. He had eighty-eight thousand dollars in the case, twenty hours start, and the whole world to roam in.

He thought deeply before he rose. He went over the details in the bank. Samuels had suspected nothing. Old Peter had merely blinked at the case. The safe was locked with a time-lock and could not be opened till 8 A.M. There was no danger of discover till then.

He was willing to have the blow fall before noon. By then he would be through Boston by trolley. The trail he was going to leave behind was broad enough for a blind man to follow. He would take the accommodation to Boston, circle about in a taxi, then almost retrace his steps in a northerly direction. No one would surmise that a man headed for Boston from Handover would doable back to the north again. More likely they would think he had either taken ship at Boston, or one of the night boats for New York and the South. He had often mentioned the Southlands since returning from the vacation.

He took off his coat and hung it upon a chair. The hat he tossed into a closet. He was not going to wear it. A cap would be better until he could buy other clothes in the backwoods. Besides, a cap looked more like travel—less like his photographs scattered about the town.

He listened once or twice as he went about the room. The landlady was sitting upon the porch. He heard the sound of her rocker. He tiptoed to the small table at the head of his bed, and opened the drawer. Out of this he drew four tourist folders. One was

a steamship line that ran to Havana. The other three were lists of east and west coast hotels. They were filled with pictures of magnolias and palms, rolling-chairs and winter bathers. He placed these in the grate and struck a match. He listened, then touched the flame to their edges. He waited till they were half-consumed, then stamped upon them. They looked for all the world like evidence destroyed and forgotten. Dugan would be sure to uncover them and deduct that he had gone South.

To aid Dugan when he was called to the job, Fred sat down at the table, took out an envelope, and scrawled across its face the address of a hotel in Florida. Before the ink was dry upon this he blotted it upon a clean blotter. Then he tore the envelope into pieces and burned them at the edge of the grate. The ashes he sifted through his hands and dropped out the window. All Dugan or the agency needed was a mirror to read the writing. It would be a clue which a clever detective would pride himself on finding.

Fred Walsen was rather proud of his work as he finished dressing and turned at the doorway. He caught a reflection in the mirror that remained as he tiptoed down the stairway. It was of an ordinary looking tourist with an ordinary looking suitcase. There were thousands of young men dressed like himself in the world.

He wore a black suit, black shoes, black tie and a plaid cap. He wanted the landlady to see him that way, then, afterward, he could change to play the part he was going to assume. This part would be a hunter in the big Maine woods, who had come for game and who would be well supplied with money to hold the trail all the way to the Pacific coast by easy stages.

The landlady gave him a little friendly nod as he stopped by her side. She glanced at the case, then up at him inquiringly.

"I'm going to run down to Boston tonight," he said vaguely. "I'll be back by the seven-sixteen in the morning. In case I miss the train, and the bank calls up, tell them that I'll be in on the eleven-ten. I won't miss, though, unless I get run over or something like that. Good-by."

He went on down the steps, and turned at the gate. She had watched him with idle interest. Her chair was still rocking, which was a good sign. Had she suspected anything she would have been more alert—less at her ease.

He took the dark side of the well-known street until he reached the railroad platform. Here he waited for the train without showing himself to the agent. He could get on and state to the conductor that he had lost his ticket. This would call for a cash fare and a rebate at the Boston terminal. The inquiries he would make at the station as he cashed the coupon should be a well-dropped clue. Dugan could pick it up without great effort.

The train arrived on time. He crossed the platform, climbed the steps, and took a seat in the back of the smoker. There were no other passengers from Handover in this car. He leaned back and breathed a sigh of relief.

Everything had gone as he had planned. The first step on the long journey into nowhere had started. The drudgery of his work as assistant cashier was a thing of the past. He pressed his foot upon the suitcase with a reassuring feeling that no detective, or group of detectives, would be able to return the money to the bank.

He paid a cash fare and took the coupon from the conductor. He made inquiry as to how to cash this coupon, and incidentally remarked that he was somewhat puzzled about connections for New York and the South. The conductor took the trouble to furnish him with details enough for ten absconders. This given information might be

repeated, word for word, later to Dugan, who would most certainly be led astray.

The great South Station at Boston teemed with life as he came through the gate, inquired, and found the way to the coupon office. It struck him, as he pocketed the refund, that he had overplayed the part. A man with eighty-eight thousand dollars in a suit-case would hardly stop to collect a rebate. He stood stock still. The trail ended with the thought. He was no longer Fred Walsen. He was the other man he was going to be. He sought for a name and decided upon Westland. It would match the initials upon his jewelry, and was more or less prophetic as to his ultimate destination.

He glanced round, lifted the case, and started across the terminal.

"Bellmore Hotel," he told the taxi driver who had come forward.

At the Bellmore he passed through the lobby, emerged and took another taxi. This he dropped at the intersection of an avenue and a trolley road. The trolley went northward toward a small railroad junction where he could catch a train for the Maine woods.

The thought came to him as he waited that the suit-case he carried might furnish a clue. It was the same as other cases he had seen about the station. He realized, however, that he had allowed himself to slip a trifle in the matter. It would not do to take any chances. The final trail had been broken with the taxi driver who had deposited him upon the trolley corner. He decided to remove the last chance from this direction by purchasing another and larger case and placing the yellow case within it. This would be the last touch to an already well-thought-out plan.

He walked down a side street until he came to a pawnshop. Here, after considerable searching round, he found what he wanted—a huge, black alligator bag that was big

enough to hold two of the yellow cases. He carried this away in an opposite direction from the trolley line, then doubled round a corner and dropped the yellow case into the bag. He breathed freely then. No one had seen the disappearance of the suit-case. It was as if the ground had swallowed it up. He smiled with superior freedom as he started for the trolley. The trail was most certainly broken.

The trolley was crowded. He managed to find a seat on the back platform. From this he watched the streets unroll until the car struck out across country. The lights of Boston faded in the night. He breathed the country air in great gulps of freedom. He had planned well. There seemed no possible chance of pursuit and capture. No man in all the world knew where he was going. No detective he had ever read about in fiction or fact could hold the trail he had broken so often. He was sure of this.

The danger might come later, when a country-wide search was made. He hardly thought it would extend to West Forest. Old Peter's description of the place suited him to a nicety: "Where no one goes, and the dogs bark at strangers."

The trolley-car reached the junction with the railroad at midnight. Fred dropped off, after passing the crossing, and walked back. He seated himself in the shadow of the platform and waited for the northbound train. The agent came out as a whistle sounded down the track. He walked to the end of the platform with some packages for the express car in his hand.

Fred jumped aboard and entered the smoker. A group of hunters with guns, a trio of drummers playing cards in a forward seat, comprised the passengers. He took a rear seat, coiled his legs about the alligator-bag, and waited for the conductor. To him he explained that he was going "up to camp,"

and named a station at a junction point which they would reach about daylight. The conductor took the bill, made change, but gave no coupon. Fred slid back in the seat, drew his cap down over his eyes, and went over each detail of his flight since leaving Handover. The getaway seemed masterly. He recalled no clue that would lead northward. Then he slept.

He awoke an hour before reaching the junction. The first, faint flush of dawn was in the sky to the east. The air felt cold. He drew his coat-collar about his neck, and peered out through the window. The land was broken, with here and there green glimpses of farm land and up-land meadows. The train roared through a tunnel and emerged in the heart of a valley whose slopes were covered with heavy timbers. Later he saw the sheen of a river and logging operations above a mill. It was a different world than any he had ever known. It seemed a big world and a broad world—a safe place to hide in for all time. It was as he would have chosen.

He dropped off the train at the junction, crossed the street, and entered a general store that had just opened its doors. Here he purchased a hunter's outfit and a shotgun. He went on down the road to the first woods, changed clothes, then retraced his steps to the railroad station. Surveying himself in the mirror of a slot-machine, he felt satisfied that the clerks in the bank at Handover would not have recognized him had he walked in upon them. He looked like the typical tenderfoot hunter who would be more dangerous to a guide than to game.

Satisfied, he took a train that would stop at the nearest station to West Forest. It occurred to him before he reached this station that it would be well that he walked into the town instead of taking the stage, which, he had learned from the conductor, took three hours to make the trip.

Ignoring the stage-driver at the platform as he stepped from the train, he struck down the road with the shotgun in one hand and the alligator-bag in the other. He rested at times at the side of the road. During these periods he went over the details of his flight. They seemed to him to be perfect. He could see no slip or danger from pursuit. He had planned as well as a cool brain could plan. He had not taken a drink for fear it would cloud his mind. He laughed once as he thought of Dugan finding him. That individual was probably rushing to Handover on some train. The police of the Southern cities had undoubtedly been notified to look out for a slim youth wearing black clothes and carrying a yellow suit-case. He smiled with superiority at the thought of how clever he had actually been in breaking the trail, not once, but a score of times in a score of different ways. He did not believe that a flight had ever been so skillfully managed.

The road to West Forest was longer than he had figured on. It was late in the evening when he passed the last mile-post sign, underneath which was a collection of rural free-delivery boxes.

He glanced at his watch as he came to the first scattered evidences of back wood civilization. It was ten o'clock. A stage had passed him at eight. This had been the second stage from the junction point during the day. He had noticed that all of its passengers had been sleeping or were too far back in the seats to glance out at him.

He reached the one hotel of the place, saw that it was as he had anticipated, then he knocked loudly upon the door and waited. Steps sounded along a creaky hall. The knob was turned. A head was thrust out.

"I'd like to put up for the night," suggested Fred with a light laugh of relief.

"We're full," answered the clerk. "Every room's taken in th' house."

"But I've got to stop somewhere," blurted Fred. "I've come on a hunting trip. I want a place for maybe a week. Can't you fix me up?"

The clerk scratched his head in perplexity.

"I'll tell you what I can do," he decided as an afterthought. "I'll double you up with a man who's up here fishing. There's two beds in th' room. He won't mind if you don't."

"That'll suit me right down to the ground," said Fred, picking up the bag and the gun. "Any port in a storm, you know."

The clerk led the way to a register at the back of a deserted parlor and sitting-room.

"Sign here," he said, as he opened a fresh page and dug a pen from out of a box of shot.

Fred signed his name as "Frank Westland, Chicago." He followed the clerk then, along a hallway and up a narrow stairs that led to a second hallway. Down this they went on tiptoes till they reached the last door.

The clerk hesitated, stooped at the keyhole, and inserted a key. He fingered this till he had thrust the key on the inside out and upon the floor. Fred heard it jingle as it fell. The door swung open. The clerk stood to one side.

"I guess you won't be wakin' him," he said with a grin. "Just pile in th' far bed an' I'll try to fix you up in th' mornin'. Better lock th' door."

The room was dark save for the light that came in through a curtained window. Fred tiptoed across the creaking floor till his outstretched hands came in contact with a bed. He felt of it. It was soft and alluring. He went back and brought over the gun and bag. These he thrust under the bed, undressed, and rolled within the covers.

The man in the other bed had not moved. Fred listened and heard the low breathing of a sound sleeper. He wondered, as he

drowsed, if the bag would be safe. He reviewed the events since leaving Handover. They had been well thought out and well planned. He sank into slumber with one idea lulling his tired brain. He had planned and carried out the flight too well to lose or to fail from that hour on. He would bury some of the money in an out-of-the-way graveyard, and go to Canada at the first opportunity.

His awakening was almost a torture. His limbs ached as he rolled over and blinked at the white light that came through the window. He lifted himself upon one elbow, and glanced across the room at the other bed. The man was piling up there. His face was puzzled and uncertain. He was raising, inch by inch from the coverlet. Fred stiffened as his eyes met those of Dugan, the detective.

There was no mistaking that homely face. It was Dugan's, of Handover—of the Lumberman's National Hank. It was a surprised Dugan but the detective in flesh and blood.

Fred leaned his weight upon his elbow. His teeth gritted as Dugan thrust out his bare feet, sat up on the edge of the bed, and stared across the room with eyes that protruded from their sockets like loose buttons.

Then slowly Dugan's hand lowered to the pillow at the head of his bed. He fumbled under this, his eyes hardened, his hand came out and up with a quick jerk. An ugly, automatic revolver was pointed directly at Fred's head. Dugan squinted along the sights.

"Throw up your hands!" he snapped. "Get them up—you're under arrest! Damn you!"

"How—" began Fred.

"Get them up! I suppose all the money's in that bag under the bed, there. They telegraphed me last night that you had skipped out."

"But, Dugan, how did you happen to be here?" asked Fred weakly.

"Happen—why, old Peter at the bank said this was a good place for fishing."