



# A Man's Problem

By  
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(COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE)

## CHAPTER I. A MOMENT OF INDECISION.

**S**INCE the State Bank of Hermosa, the largest in that fast-growing city of fifty thousand, had installed its safety-deposit boxes and its great vault ten or twelve years earlier, Abner Weston, the night watchman, had not had infrequent occasion to pick up bonds or stock certificates dropped or left behind them on desks by careless depositors. Even small boxes of jewels were left now and then in the men's and women's booths adjoining the vault wherein were stored the rows and rows of steel receptacles. Mostly the women were the remiss ones; why that was so, Weston never paused to consider. But the Hermosa State Bank merely ran true to the rule of many other banks throughout the country, though he knew it not.

And this particular evening it was again in the women's booth that he came upon the small fortune in stray bonds. Ten thousand dollars' worth of government securities, in thousand-dollar issues—and all that Weston needed was two of them.

The darkness had been creeping into his wife's eyes for a year or two now. A difficult and expensive operation might save her—two thousand dollars Weston had figured would pay the surgeon, the hospital bill, and the expense of the trip to the distant city to which they would have to go.

He fingered the stiff papers thoughtfully and counted them over several times. There was nothing with them in the thick red envelope to identify the owner. It might be weeks or months before the woman who had left them there that afternoon would make another visit to her lock box and discover her loss.

Then, if she insisted, as she most likely would, that she had put them back in her box and that the bank itself had robbed her, why, the bank would have to make good on the quiet to hush her up and keep the story from spreading. True, the bank would undertake to find out what really had become of the missing bonds. All the employees would be questioned as a matter of form; and Weston, too, would be questioned, he realized; but his years of honest service, his record of having turned in hundreds and thousands of dollars in mislaid money and bonds and other valuables, both in the cages and in the vault booths, all would lend their supporting weight to the denial he would give regarding the missing ten thousand dollars in Liberty Bonds.

Weston decided to tuck the bonds down in his own locker in the basement of the bank building. They would be safer there while he made his rounds of the bank and of the offices on the second and third floors of the building.

All through his rounds that night, Weston turned over in his mind the chances for getting away with

his vaguely formed scheme; he had not yet made any definite plans for smuggling the bonds home or for disposing of them afterward. He knew he would have to take them to another city, of course, to convert them into cash. He was too well known in this town to try it at any of the banks.

And that was the state of mental indecision under which Abner Weston was laboring when "Bull" Frazer conceived the idea of cracking the crib of the Hermosa State Bank.

## CHAPTER II. HIS STRANGE EYES.

"**I** TELL yuh, Bull, yuh can't do it," argued "Midget Joe," seated at a table in the rear room of Hardesty's saloon. Ostensibly, near-beer was the best—or the worst—that the casual customer could obtain at Hardesty's, but then Midget Joe was no casual customer. He never was at a loss to think of some way in which he could sneak in a bit of old-line liquor to a friend in need in the rear room of Hardesty's; wherefore, Midget Joe's fame had spread to the underworlds of other cities and made him a personage to be cultivated by newcomers to the town of Hermosa.

Bull Frazer was Joe's guest on this occasion. He had just rolled into town a few hours earlier on the nethermost surface of a side-door Pullman, and having heard of the activities of one Midget Joe, address Hardesty's soft-drink parlors, from his mates in his last stopping place of Easton, he lost no time in hunting up the wizened little crook.

"No, sir; that bank is too blasted safe, Bull," insisted Joe. "It's got a night watchman, fer one thing, an' it's the best fixed on vaults of any bank in town."

Bull stared at his companion with an air of indifference. "Aw, bo, they all look alike when yuh give 'em the right dose of 'soup.' I guess this hick burg—"

"But how yuh goin' to get around the night watchman that camps in the bank? Goin' to—goin' to croak him if he butts in?"

Midget Joe's eyes bored into those of Bull Frazer as if to read his most secret thoughts, but Bull was not to be betrayed into a confession of his plans.

"Say, what's eatin' yuh about this night-watchman stuff? I ain't worryin' over no watchman that ever lived. What makes yuh leery of him?

Know him?"

Midget Joe grinned. "Ye-ah; that's why I'm advisin' yuh to try another bank. This Weston is a big feller an' ain't afraid to use a gat. Fact is, he's more'n likely to use it instead o' puttin' up a scrap, bein' as he's only got one arm."

"One arm—an' yuh think I'm goin' to steer off o' him!" Bull's laugh silenced the little man's rejoinder. "Say, when they told me over in Easton that yuh was the wise bird on the banks in this town, I'd never 'a' thought yuh'd be—"

"But say, Joe," he broke off, "how 'bout yuh comin' in on this deal with me? Yuh can jigger in front while I gets inside at the old crib—always safer to have a bird on the lookout to tip me off if a bull comes browsin' along. Give yuh a—a fourth cut on the drag."

Midget Joe shook his head slowly. "Runnin' the booze blockade takes up all me spare time, Bull, thanks. I'd be a fool to take a chanst like that in this dump where every flatfoot knows me a mile off by—by that!" He indicated with a gesture of bitterness the hump on his shoulders that made him a deformed midget.

Bull glanced at his companion's shoulders, then fell to studying the man. A queer bird, this Midget Joe—well under five feet in weight, with arms that seemed to swing almost to the ground when he shuffled along; a head abnormally large and set on his shoulders as if wedged between them, so that he had to turn the whole upper half of his body to glance to one side or the other. There was no hair on the top of Joe's head, and mighty little around the sides and back. His mouth was broad and sensuous at times; then, again, it bore a look of infinite sorrow and pathos.

It was Midget Joe's eyes, however, that had fascinated Bull Frazer from the first, just as they always affected new acquaintances and not a few old ones. The little man's eyes seemed capable of changing color at will; of course, they didn't, but that was the way they struck Bull. As he watched Joe's expression at his proposal of sharing in the bank loot, Bull thought the eyes staring at him from beneath the shaggy brows were green; but as he returned the midget's gaze the eyes were not green at all, but piercing black; and then, Bull would have sworn, they faded into a watery, innocuous blue.

Bull shook his head as if to escape from the spell of those kaleidoscopic orbs in the misshapen head of the little crook. He rose to go and flung

down a five-dollar bill to pay for the drinks and the flask of liquor that the midget had slipped him.

Joe plucked the bill from the table before it fairly landed, and tucked it away in a vest pocket with the surreptitious antics of a squirrel hoarding nuts in autumn. Then he dropped from his chair and shuffled alongside Bull, his head on a level with the safe cracker's elbow.

"Say, Bull, lemme know when yuh're goin' to pull that job. I might change me mind about helpin' yuh," he whispered as he accompanied Bull to the door leading into the alley behind Hardesty's place.

Bull smiled at the significant wink that punctuated Joe's remark. He nodded in tacit promise to consider the midget in his future plans. Then he was gone into the winter night, and Midget Joe was left to himself.

And as the shrunken little gnome of the underworld listened absent-mindedly to the chatter of the patrons in the front of Hardesty's parlors—scraps of gang gossip and unsavory jokes that filtered through the door into the room where Joe sat—his eyes closed for the barest part of a minute, and he shook his head as if in solemn denial to himself of some half-formulated question.

### CHAPTER III. GOOD FOR ANYTHING.

YES; the Hermosa State Bank was due for trouble; and this night was to see the climax. Abner Weston made his first round of the bank and office building soon after coming on duty at six o'clock. Everything was as it should be; everything, that is, except those ten Liberty Bonds that he still had stored in his locker downstairs. He knew that every day he kept them hidden away added to the danger of detection, for the woman might return at any time now and look into her lock box. Then it would be too late to dispose of the bonds, even the two of them that he so fearfully needed for his wife.

The light of the dying winter day lent an eerie glow to the little room behind the cashier's cage where Weston sat. He contemplated the situation for perhaps the fiftieth time since the idea of—well, of thievery, if you will, had entered his head a week before. It would be so easy to hop an interurban car and go down to the big city to cash the bonds in the morning.

The same plan he had mapped out time and

again; and always it seemed easier with every mental rehearsal. No one would suspect him in the great banks of the city, where one customer more or less excited no interest. Of course, he ran the danger of someone remembering him a bit more distinctly than the ordinary individual, for the loss of an arm stood out as an identifying mark, or so he imagined. He never had got over the self-consciousness, in all these eighteen years, that his crippled condition first had instilled in his heart.

Well, tomorrow he would get it done. Then—then, the operation on his wife; renewed sight; happiness, and—and what? There was a disturbing element creeping into Weston's thoughts of the future. What of his conscience? What of the eternal realization that he would be a thief? What of the continual fear that some day he would be caught?

He put those qualms quickly away, however, when he dwelt on the alternative—his wife going through her remaining years in utter darkness and helplessness. Yes; he would do it for her, and abide the consequences himself.

In a not-far-distant building, behind a locked door through which came sounds of ribald merriment and jest with the clinking of glasses and bottles, two men sat at a table and made their plans likewise against the safety of the Hermosa State Bank. The one was burly and gross and heavy-jawed, with cap that came down close over his eyes; the other was short and thickset, with shoulders that humped up around the back of his neck, and beneath his cap, pulled down close, too, his eyes glittered and snapped and seemed to change their color twice or thrice.

"What if the Hermosa Bank has got the biggest pile in town?" said the short one argumentatively. "Yuh could get away with the trick a hanged sight easier at one of the smaller banks that ain't got any night watchman snoopin' around."

"Never mind, Joe," said his companion. "I ain't pickin' no piker job. If it's worth riskin' a trip to the 'big round top'—or to the morgue—it's worth doin' big; that's me. With you doin' the lookout stall fer me, I ain't goin' to slip up, watchman or no watchman."

The little crook considered the proposition for the final time—just as Abner Weston, a few blocks away, was doing at almost the same moment. And, like Weston's, Midget Joe's decision was fraught with trouble for the Hermosa State Bank.

"All right, Bull," the midget said. "I'll go in

with yuh. What time?"

The big man grinned triumphantly. "I thought yuh'd come through O. K.," he said. "The gang over in Weston told me you was good for anything from bootleg to murder." He smiled again at the scowl that overshadowed the little fellow's face.

"Well, Joe," he went on, "we'll make it one o'clock. How's that? Meet me at the corner of Tremont Street and the alley behind the bank. Think that watchman's likely to doze off after midnight?"

The other shook his head. "He don't never doze on the job. Been there eighteen years and the bank ain't been robbed yet."

"Not yet, but soon," and the heavy-jowled man chuckled coarsely at his bromidic sally.

#### CHAPTER IV. AT THE VAULT DOOR.

IT was a few minutes after midnight that old Abner Weston heard the telephone ring in the cashier's cage. It was an altogether unusual occurrence. For a moment it had him guessing. What could it mean, this midnight call on the telephone? Did someone suspect his plan of robbing the bank—*his* bank! of the ten thousand dollars in Liberty Bonds? Or was it bad news from his wife—a hurried call from the Riordans, who lived upstairs and kept ear at nights for untoward sounds from his wife's rooms below?

The telephone jangled insistently again, and Weston started for the cashier's cage. It rang a third time before he could reach it and put the receiver to his ear.

"Who's this? Weston?" came a querulous voice over the wire.

"Ye-es. This is Weston. Who's talking?"

"Nev' mind who," replied the voice. "I got a tip that yer bank's goin' to be robbed tonight 'bout one o'clock, an' so—"

Weston glared into the mouthpiece, as if to question his own senses. "What's that? Going to be robbed?" he almost shouted. Panic reached for his heart; they had discovered his secret.

"Shut up! Not so loud!" The voice, for all its insistence, was modulated. "I got it straight now. Wise up an' nab this bird first, or he'll maybe plug yuh if he feels like it. Get busy an' lay fer him! Goo'-by!"

"Wait a min—" But Weston's plea died as he

heard the click at the other end of the line.

For a long time the old watchman stood at the cashier's counter, his one arm resting beside the telephone, his brain in a whirl of excited speculation. Then he glanced at his watch. It was twenty minutes after twelve; he had forty minutes or more to prepare for his unbidden visitor.

Weston reached his hand around to his right hip pocket where he kept his automatic. The smart-looking little weapon was in shape, a fresh clip in the magazine. He tucked it into his belt to have it readier for use when the emergency arrived; then he went back to his chair in the rear of the vault and sat down to think.

So they were going to try to rob the bank—*his* bank! Funny how calm he was now, after the sudden excitement at the telephone a little while before. But Weston was not thinking so much of himself, sitting here in the chair, as he was of his bank. Why, the nerve of any crook thinking he could rob the Hermosa State Bank, the largest in town, the one with the best safety vault in this end of the State, the bank with a watchman whose record had never been tarnished by so much as an attempted robbery!

The crook who should try to break into the Hermosa Bank's vaults—granting even that he could elude or overpower the veteran watchman—would have the toughest job of his career, Weston thought. The old bank was strong; it always had advertised its solidity, its hundred-percent safety, its guarantee to depositors of fireproof and burglarproof vaults. And here was some foolhardy marauder, some evil prowler of the midnight hours, believing he could get away with it!

Besides, there was Weston himself to be reckoned with. What had the bank kept him for, these eighteen years, if not to repel just such daring invasion as this unknown crook was planning? What, indeed, if not to guard its treasures with his very life!

Yes; the watchman was almost pitying this promised visitor, this fool that would try issues with the Hermosa State Bank and its guardian. It must be somebody unwise in the ways of the city's banks, or else he would have tried the Farmers' Trust Company or one of the lesser institutions. But then, maybe the crook figured very properly that the Hermosa would have the biggest loot—that is, if he could get away with it.

Weston wondered who his midnight informant

was. The voice over the telephone puzzled him. It had sounded vaguely familiar, though he doubted if he ever had heard it over the wire before. But he felt sure he had heard it in casual conversation somewhere; maybe not very often, maybe not very recently. It bothered him.

He glanced at the clock above the vault door now—a quarter to one. It was time to get busy. He speculated over which window the burglar would try to force; wondered whether it would be better to let the intruder get all the way to the vault door before he captured him or—well, or shot him. He drew back into the shadow of the vault, which projected into the room sufficiently to enable him to hide between it and the wall of the bank building. It was an ideal place from which to ambush the burglar.

The *tick-tick, tick-tick* of the clock was the only sound now. The waiting guardian of the bank fell to studying the objects within his range of vision, whiling away the moments until his enemy arrived. For Weston had begun to regard him in terms of enmity, this thief in the night whose mysteriously announced plans for robbing the bank had aroused all the accumulated loyalty to his job, to his trust, that had grown up in the heart of this watchman in his eighteen long years of service.

Presently Walton's eye caught a sign on the wall near the cashier's cage. A phrase stood out in the printing, lighted by the electric-light bulb in the front of the bank—a phrase of two words: "Liberty Bonds."

The sign was some announcement regarding the buying and selling of Liberty Bonds; but it brought Weston up with a start. What about those bonds downstairs in his locker? Suppose the burglar entered through a cellar window and found them and went off, content with that large haul, without risking a crack at the big vault upstairs?

The thought produced a whole fresh strain of speculation in Weston's mind. Suppose he let this burglar break into the vault and rifle the boxes or the money safe; why wouldn't it be natural for the bank to attribute the loss of the ten-thousand dollars in Liberty Bonds to the burglary of the vault? Why, too, should anyone ever suspect faithful old Abner Weston of stealing those papers when the vault had been so brazenly robbed?

Of course, he would have to "lay down" on his bank. He would have to concoct a plausible story to tell how the burglar opened the safe while a

companion disarmed Weston and held him helpless at the point of a gun. No one could blame him if—

A faint sound put all his senses on the alert. But it proved a false alarm; it was only a mouse, rustling against a bit of newspaper that Weston had thrown into a wastebasket after unwrapping his lunch an hour before. Again Weston lapsed into contemplation of the situation, and again the way seemed clearer than ever for getting away with the bonds if he let this crook accomplish his purpose.

Suddenly a shadow fell across Weston's gaze on the floor beyond the front of the vault. It was moving, too, and yet Weston had heard no sound, no warning of any intruder. The crook could not have come in through any of the windows of the bank, or Weston would have heard him. Then how— In a flash he remembered the door from the rear of the bank into the corridor of the offices that occupied the rest of the first floor of the building. The crook must have forced his way in by that door.

A sullen resentment filled Weston's mind at the realization that this burglar had outwitted him; had crept in unchallenged to the very heart of the bank that Weston had spent eighteen years of his life guarding, night after night; and his resentment was absorbed, in a moment, in a sort of angry determination to settle with this intruder for this blow at Weston's pride. He would show him what the bank had been paying their watchman for, all these best years of his life; he would show the bank, too, that its trust in him had been well placed; that even if he did have only one arm he knew how to use it.

The shadow drew nearer, and still Weston could hear nothing. The fellow must have pads on his shoes. Then the distorted shadow of a man's head and shoulders presented themselves into Weston's vision on the floor; from that sign, he knew the thief must be directly in front of the vault door. Now it was time for action.

Weston looked down at the automatic, held tensely in his right hand—his lone hand, it was, too, that he would have to play, in more senses than one. Then he stepped forth from his hiding place and covered the crouching burglar at the vault door.

The trapped man snarled and swore and drew his gun all in one breath of time. But Weston had the advantage, the fearful advantage, of having had his weapon out first. His pistol sputtered three shots at the crook before the man had time to fire more

than once. The four blasts from the guns reverberated through the bank and flooded back upon the ears of Weston for all the world like the echoes of infantry fire.

The crook crumpled up, his pistol flung against the door of the great vault. He plucked desperately at the wounds in his side and shoulder; and then he lay limp, almost at Weston's feet, moaning and swearing and moaning without end.

The old watchman surveyed him curiously at first. It was a new sensation, this seeing a victim of his own gunfire writhing in what might well be the death agony. And Weston didn't exactly like the sensation, either, as the seconds lengthened into a minute and he still stood staring at the whining, moaning burglar. So presently Weston lowered his pistol that all the time had been covering the man on the floor; he looked at the weapon again, then stuck it into his hip pocket with a nervous feeling in his heart.

"For God's sake, get a doctor! Do somethin', yuh old fool!" And Bull Frazer took to moaning and picking at his wounds again.

The sharp cry stirred Weston to action. He gathered up the pistol from the floor, and walked into the cashier's cage to telephone for the police and an ambulance.

#### CHAPTER V. UNEXPECTED NEWS.

THE next day when he went off duty Abner Weston did not get much rest. The night had been too full of excitement, for one thing; and then there was the matter of police investigation and all that to be attended to, with Weston as chief witness.

At last, toward noon, Weston reached home—his clingy pair of rooms, second-floor back, where his wife had been wondering and worrying, in her almost childlike helplessness, what was keeping her husband. Always Weston had returned by seven, at the latest.

The old watchman walked in and flung his hat on the table, with little more than a mumbled greeting to his wife. He was deep in perplexity now; disconsolate first because he had lost the chance to make off with at least two of the Liberty Bonds for the sake of this pitiable little woman whose eyes were growing dimmer week by week; and then the resentment flared up again in him at

thought of any crook's having had the temerity to think that he could break into the bank—his bank, if you will!—while Weston was on guard. It served the burglar right if the bullets laid him up for six months!

In unheroic sentences Weston told his wife of the night's events. He found her quick to justify him for shooting at the intruder; found her proud at his having risked his life for the safety of the bank; and then he startled her almost to tears when he asked her if she could see well enough to sew up the rent in his empty sleeve that the burglar's bullet had made.

Only one detail did Weston neglect to tell his wife—the little matter of the Liberty Bonds that he had concealed down in his locker. They were there no longer, for Weston had gone down, after his return from the police station with the wounded man, and sneaked them from their hiding place, tucking them into his inside coat pocket. He would go down this afternoon before the bank closed, hand them to the cashier, and explain that he had found them in the vault booth.

Somehow, his heart grew bitter within him when he thought that now his wife could not have that operation. If only he had ignored his duty! He could have sold two of the bonds so easily. But now—well, he had acted, had done it, had stood by his bank, and all out of the innate sense of loyalty bred of the eighteen years he had served in that lonely vigil night after night! There was no chance now for his wife.

"The bank ought to raise your pay for doing such a brave thing," his wife said when he had finished. "But I wonder who it was that telephoned you."

Weston frowned. "I'm wondering, too, but I—I have a sort of idea. It might be—least, it sounded over the phone like it might be—"

A sharp knock on the door interrupted him. Weston arose and admitted a boy from the drugstore on the corner. "Yer bank's phonin' fer yuh to come right down," the youth said, somewhat breathlessly. "Say, the papers got a great story 'bout the way yuh shot that burguler!" And he grinned in admiration.

A few minutes later Weston stood in the office of the bank's president. He had first handed in to the cashier the Liberty Bonds, with a halting explanation of how he had found them in the writing booth; the cashier had thanked Weston and

locked them in the money safe to await their owner's claim.

Weston felt nervous in the president's office, now that the time had come to face his boss. In his perplexity over the returning of the bonds, he forgot that perhaps the president would be more interested in the affair of the burglar at the safe than in hearing of any mislaid bonds that had been recovered.

"Weston," said the president, "the chief of police has just phoned me that this fellow Frazer you shot last night is a notorious crook. Says there's a reward of a thousand dollars for him from the Denver police."

Weston's eyes blinked. His throat filled with a sudden desire to laugh right in front of his chief.

The president noted the watchman's agitation and smiled indulgently. "And to prove that the bank isn't going to let your good work go unnoticed, I'm going to recommend to the board of directors that we give you another thousand. No more than right; you risked your life to save our money—our depositors' money."

During the next few dazed minutes Weston was dimly conscious of shaking hands with the president and the cashier and all the lesser employees in the outer offices—even the newsboy on the corner that saw him coming out of the door.

#### CHAPTER VI. A CHANCE TO PAY.

**W**ALKING down the street a week later on his way to the bank, Weston heard a voice in the crowd behind him. It was a querulous tone, but it struck the sensitive ears of the bank watchman out of all the hum and noise of the street. He turned quickly to verify his suspicion. Yes; it was just as he had thought—the voice came from a misshapen figure of a man who was shuffling along beside a robust individual whom Weston recognized as Hardesty, once the most notorious saloonkeeper in town.

Weston fell back in the passing throng and let the little man and Hardesty go ahead. He would follow and try to seek out this Midget Joe alone; he had heard that the fellow made his underworld rendezvous in Hardesty's saloon; Midget Joe was something of a character in the eyes of all Hermosa.

A jam of traffic at the next corner cut Weston

off from his quarry. The midget and his companion were lost in the winter's dusk that was settling over the supper crowds scattering forth from stores and office buildings. But Weston decided to follow on down to Hardesty's place.

Midget Joe was playing solitaire at the table in the rear of Hardesty's when Weston knocked and was bidden to enter. Evidently the night's business in bootleg was not yet underway.

"Joe," said Weston, sliding into a chair across from the little man, "it was you that phoned me about that robbery a week ago, wasn't it?"

It really was more an assertion than a question. But Joe chose to regard it in the latter light. He raised his heavy eyebrows, and his pupils dilated and seemed to change from their usual brown into an innocent-looking hazy blue.

"Huh? What makes yuh think so?" He grinned faintly.

"I know it now—now that I hear your voice again," Weston maintained. "It struck me I'd heard it somewhere before, when you tipped me on, and then I overheard you talking with Hardesty tonight on the street, so I—" He paused.

Joe's eyes narrowed now and the smile faded. "Well, what now, Weston?" he demanded. "Wonderin' how in blazes I knew 'bout Bull Frazer framin' to crack yer bank? Well, that's my business—see?"

Abner Weston shook his head, studying the strange gnome of the underworld who faced him with a crafty stare. "No-o-o; that ain't it, Joe." His voice was unsteady now. He didn't know exactly how to talk to crooks in their own bailiwick. "No; it's this way. I got—got two thousand dollars' reward from the police and the bank, and—and I thought, if you'd tipped me off, you ought to get—well, you ought to get half, maybe."

Midget Joe dropped his uncanny eyes from the watchman's face and took to shuffling the cards, a quizzical, thoughtful expression on his features. And Bull Frazer had only offered him a fourth of his drag! Joe was amused inwardly at the difference in the two men—Frazer, with his stingy fourth, and Weston, timidly offering him a half! He hadn't done such a fool thing, after all, to telephone to the bank watchman.

At length a flicker of a smile creased the ends of the midget's sensitive mouth, and once more he looked squarely at Weston, only this time his eyes once more seemed their natural brown—clear and

steady and guileless.

“Weston, yuh don’t owe me a cent,” he declared. “Yuh sort o’ forgot—why, hang it, man, ain’t I been waitin’ seventeen, eighteen years fer a

chanst to pay yuh back fer the arm yuh lost savin’ my life down in the railroad yards back in 1904? I’ll say you got a bully memory, you have!”