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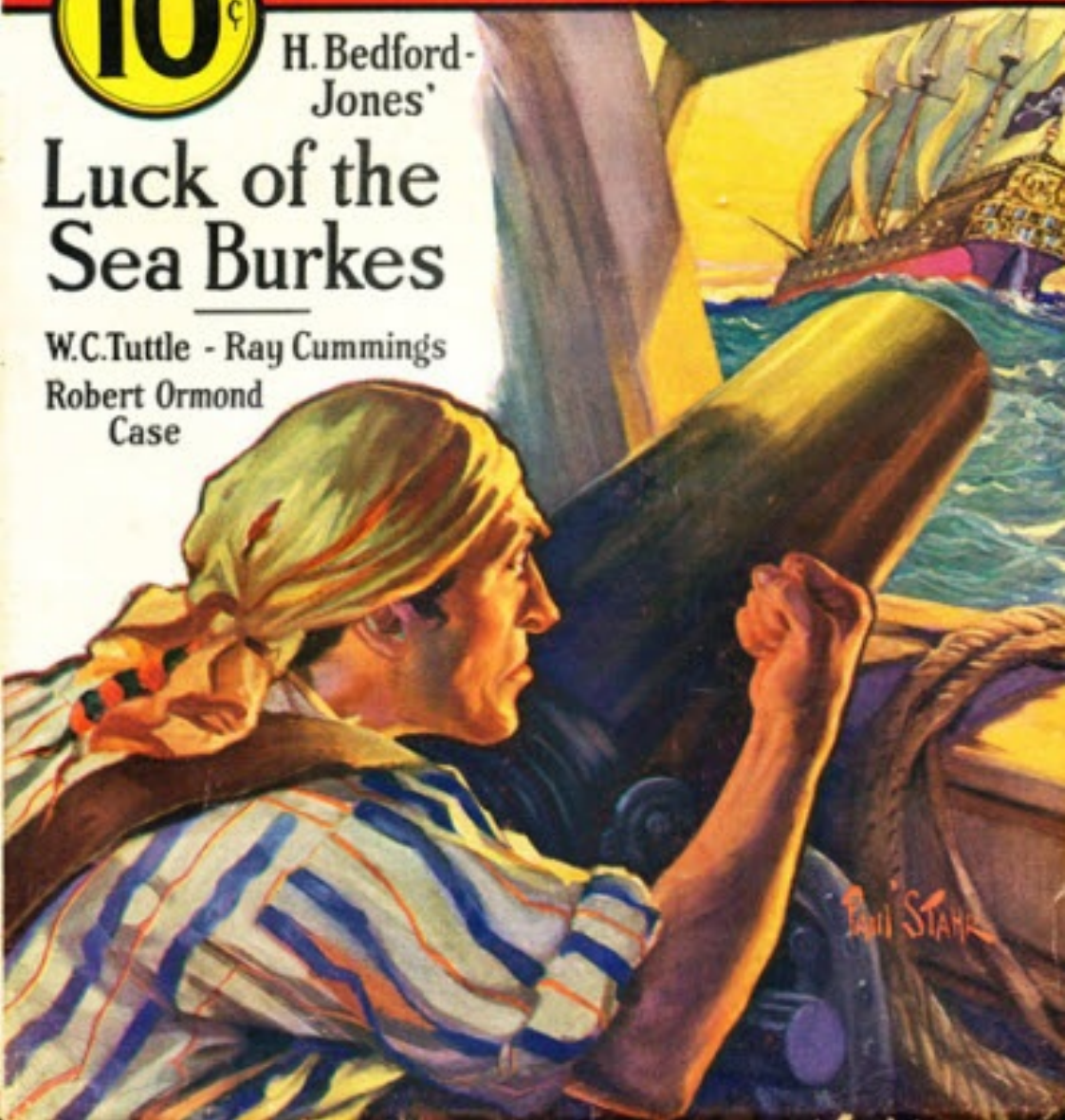
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10¢

H. Bedford-Jones'

Luck of the Sea Burkes

W.C. Tuttle - Ray Cummings
Robert Ormond
Case



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The Disappearance of William Roger

Ray Cummings

First published *Argosy Weekly*, January 9, 1932.

City Manager Roger of Great New York vanished on the eve of the 1981 audit—which put it up to detectives Baker and Dirk



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Look here," said Franklin Dirk, "you two had better be frank with me."

"We are," I insisted angrily. It was a new experience for me to be grilled by my own chief, as he and I had often grilled others. I looked at Beth Roger. She sat in the stiff upright chair of Dirk's office with her hands gripping its metal arms. Her dark eyes were fixed on Dirk as she echoed my words.

"It doesn't sound so," Dirk commented grimly. He was pacing the floor of the low metal room, with its dim tube-lights overhead, the audiphones on the desks and the door to the adjoining laboratory closed upon us. The Government Criminologist's office was insufferably hot this evening of June 5th, 1981. The single window was closed. Around us was the roaring city of Great New York. We were in the Mid-Manhattan section—near Street 42—but the clatter of the city reached us here as only a dim blended hum.

Dirk suddenly stopped before Beth. "When did you first know your father had disappeared?"

"Just this afternoon, when it was made public."

The thing was making a tremendous stir. William Roger, City Manager, Chief

Executive of Great New York, had inexplicably vanished upon the eve of the annual Federal Audit of his accounts. The whole city was ringing to-night with suspicion of political or private crookedness. There was as yet no police investigation, but Beth and I had at once appealed to Dirk. I was his assistant criminologist. But I was more directly involved in this case because I wanted to marry Beth Roger.

Dirk turned on me now. "Do you realize, Jac, that you can easily be suspected of complicity in this thing?"

"Good Lord, no!" I gasped at him. "But how—"

"If you two don't see that, you're more stupid than I think. Miss Beth, you only knew this afternoon that your father had disappeared? But he's been gone three days!"

"She doesn't live at home," I retorted.

Beth explained, "Four years ago mother died. A year afterward, father married again. With a stepmother as mistress of the house—"

Dirk nodded. "And you didn't get along with your stepmother? Tell me about her. I've heard—but tell me yourself."

"She was Clara Grayley—a television actress. Her people for generations back were circus performers. She and her brother George did acrobatic tricks—tight-rope walking, I think they called it—for a television broadcaster. Then my father married her—"

"How in the devil could you expect Beth to get along with a woman like that?" I interjected. "She's not much older than Beth—"

Dirk halted my impetuous outburst. "Miss Beth, you quarreled with your father and stepmother, and then left home to get a job?"

"I didn't quarrel with father—only with her. But he agreed with me I'd better leave. I visit him and Clara sometimes. Oh, I tried to like her—"

"Her damned brother George lives with them," I broke in. "He won't work—I don't suppose he could do anything anyway but walk tight ropes. He lives with them, sopping along on William Roger's generosity. How do you think Beth feels about that?"

A faint smile came to Dirk's thin lips. It was a strange experience having him turn his keen gray eyes upon me, when so often I had seen him flash them at others.

"I understand you don't know any of these people, Jac? Except Roger himself?"

"No, and I don't want to."

"Then stop interrupting. Miss Beth, when did you see your father last?"

"About a week ago. I heard, this afternoon, the public reports that he was

missing. I audiphoned Clara, and she confessed he's been missing three days. She and her brother—and Peter Clark, too, I think—have been looking for him. She seemed horribly upset—I couldn't get any details. I was so frightened myself, I didn't know what to ask. Then I got hold of Jac, and—”

“And you came to me,” Dirk finished. “Quite so. You mentioned Peter Clark. Isn't he a news-gatherer of the American Press Broadcasting Company?”

“Yes,” said Beth. “He's a friend of my stepmother's, and so—”

“You want the facts,” I exclaimed. “All right—she talks too slow! This Peter Clark was Clara Roger's former lover!”

“Jac!” Beth protested. “You don't know that for a fact.”

“I know what you've always told me! Peter Clark wanted to marry this Grayley woman, but William Roger won her.”

“Is that true?” Dirk demanded. He lifted his local audiphone sender. “Get me the history of Peter Clark—news-gatherer of American Press Broadcasting,” he commanded of our outside office manager. “Particularly his relations, if any, with Clara Roger—when she was Clara Grayley.”

He slammed up the instrument and came back at Beth.

“You think this Peter Clark is still in love with your stepmother, don't you?”

“I told you I don't know what to think,” she retorted. “Clara always seems devoted to father—”

“I can answer that, chief,” I interjected again. “Beth's father is comparatively rich, and Peter Clark is poor. So Clara Roger is not apt to be anything but a devoted wife!”

Dirk thought a moment. “Roger may just be hiding out, as the city thinks,” he said finally. “But if he's been abducted—in the hands of criminals—any move I make to find him might bring him into additional danger. The average crook only commits murder when pushed, and I don't want to be the one to do the pushing. You, Miss Beth—did you tell your stepmother you were coming to me?”

“No! No, I didn't!” Her eyes had filled with sudden tears of alarm. She stood up, tall and slim in her gray flowing skirt and gray jacket. Her dark hair was straggling out of the little gray hat and over her forehead. She pushed it back.

I drew her down beside me. “Easy, Beth—take it easy; he'll be all right. We'll find him.”

She sat clinging to me.

“Now for you, Jac,” Dirk resumed abruptly. “What were your relations with William Roger?”

“I didn't know him very well. Beth introduced me to him. I've seen him two or

three times.”

“But never at his home?”

“No.”

“And then you asked Roger’s consent to marry his daughter?”

“I did, and he refused it. Said he preferred her to be of legal age before she decided whom to marry. That meant waiting a year.”

“Did you quarrel with him, Jac?”

“No, I did not!”

“If he let Miss Beth marry now,” Dirk went on, “her legal dowry from him would be some ten thousand dollars? Is that so?”

“And the same a year from now,” I put in. “But Beth and I told him we are willing to waive the dowry.”

“And still he refuses the consent! Sounds as if he didn’t like you for a son-in-law.”

Dirk’s tall, thin figure towered over us. “As it happens, you two have a very good reason for wanting William Roger out of the way. Suppose in forty days he is still missing? If you broadcast now a demand for his consent to your marriage—and he doesn’t answer that demand in Personal Relations Court—in forty days you’ll get his consent by default, and ten thousand as dowry. I don’t suppose you and Miss Beth ever thought of that, did you?”

He flung the question at us sarcastically.

“But, chief,” I protested, “we never thought of it! I haven’t made any broadcast demand! I haven’t ordered any!”

“I don’t say you have. I’m showing you what an adverse lawyer could fasten on you.”

“But if we never even realized—”

As though to give the lie to my words, the audiphone on Dirk’s desk buzzed.

“A recent broadcast announcement you ought to hear,” said the microphonic voice of our outside office attendant.

It came in a moment, repeated from the Echo Service.

“Demand for William Roger’s parental consent to the marriage of his daughter is hereby made this June 5th, 1981, 7.32 P.M., to be broadcast by this service at this time daily for three days.”

I sat there frozen with breathless horror, and Beth swayed toward me, clinging to me.

“Jac, did you do this?” she gasped.

“No! Of course I didn’t!”

I had not indeed; and I knew that Beth had not. But the public voice was now proclaiming it:

*“Jac Baker hereby demands of William Roger, parental consent—
and dowry of ten thousand gold dollars—”*

The damning broadcast was on the air! And I knew that within an hour the thoughts of the whole city would be turning toward me and Beth, wondering what we had to do with the disappearance of William Roger!

Look there,” said Dirk. “Every news-mirror in the city is loaded full of it to-night. There’s another.”

He and I were on our way to Roger’s home, by monorail car speeding us north to the Westchester residential section of the city. We had left Beth at the office. The poor girl was prostrated by the shock.

The big news-mirror on the mid-level of Park Circle 20 was in a moment out of sight; but at the Harlem Esplanade there was another, with a crowd of at least a thousand before it. I caught a glimpse of the words:

Government detective now in the Roger case. Jac Baker broadcasts demand upon Roger for consent to marry his daughter. Startling developments—

Our little single-seat car whirled us around a turn and the mirror was lost behind us.

“That’s bad,” said Dirk soberly. “We’re publicly branded as being in the case, right from the start, in spite of our desire to act secretly.”

“I’m prejudiced, I admit,” I said. “I can’t reason calmly on this affair. But you can. Do you think Roger is voluntarily hiding out?”

“No,” he returned soberly. “I don’t. He’s no embezzler—I’d trust him with anything.”

“Then he’s held under duress. By whom? And why? What motive has any one for wanting him out of the way? Won’t you discard Beth and me as—”

“Of course, Jac.”

“Then who else?”

“I can’t imagine,” said Dirk. “We may be able to make a guess when we talk to his wife.”

But almost at once it became obvious to me that we were going to learn very little from Clara Roger. I had never seen her before, and Dirk introduced me, not by name, but merely as his assistant.

Clara Roger was either a very good actress, or else she really was—as she appeared to be—in total ignorance of her husband’s whereabouts and thoroughly frightened for his safety. She received us in the somber-lighted luxurious living room on the upper floor of the residence which occupied a corner of the balconied block of houses, set with a garden of shrubs and flowers on top.

The three-leveled viaduct roared with traffic outside, but the window mufflers held out the noise. The dim room with its ornate padded metal furniture was cool and quiet—the height of modern city luxury. Clara Roger sat in an easy chair and told us, with trembling lips and frightened, tear-filled eyes, that she had not heard from her husband for three days. At about nine o’clock at night he had taken his small aëro-car to fly to his office—and he had never reached there.

She was a woman in her mid-twenties. Inclined now to be plump, with coiled and braided golden hair, mild blue eyes and a rosebud mouth. Without her present agitation undoubtedly she would be pretty. There was a theatrical look which still clung to her in spite of the three years she had been William Roger’s wife.

The brother, George Grayley, was with her now. He was an athletic-looking man of some thirty-five, with black hair and a neat black mustache. He hardly spoke for the first ten minutes of Dirk’s questioning of Mrs. Roger. Then he said abruptly, “Why the police get mixed in this, I’m damned if I see.”

“But we’re not the police, Mr. Grayley.”

He shrugged. “Ain’t it the same thing?”

At this mention of the police, Clara Roger was swept into sudden agitation. “Not the police!” she echoed. “Don’t let them interfere!”

I think I have never seen such terror as her eyes held.

Grayley had been staring at me. “Say, by the way, is your name Jac Baker?”

My heart leaped. I had seen Grayley once before, but I did not think he knew me. Roger was not accustomed to discussing Beth’s affairs with her stepmother.

“Yes,” said Dirk quickly. “This is Jac Baker.”

Clara Roger and her brother regarded me with new interest. The man laughed. “So this is the young detective Beth thinks she wants to marry? Well, let me tell you a few things. . . I heard that broadcast demand you and Beth made. It looks

pretty queer to me—”

“He did not file that demand,” Dirk put in. “We’re trying to find out who did, and why. It was clever—too clever.”

“So that’s why you’re in this,” said Grayley. “To clear your assistant of complicity?”

Dirk stood up. “Perhaps. But family affairs should be kept out of this. Mr. Roger may be in danger. If professional criminals have abducted him—”

Clara Roger gave a low cry, and on her face was again that look of terror. Dirk gazed keenly at the woman who was seated in her chair, with her gaze on the floor and nervous fingers plucking at her dress. And he suddenly changed his tack.

“What has Peter Clark to do with this?” he demanded abruptly.

Mrs. Roger looked up with terror-stricken gaze. “Nothing,” she stammered. “He—he offered to help—that’s all.”

Grayley strode over and fronted Dirk. He seemed about to add something to her statement. Then his gaze went to his sister, who was obviously upset. With veiled hostility he demanded, “Is this all you need of Mrs. Roger? This is all pretty hard on her.” He seemed urging us to leave.

“Yes,” said Dirk. “Good night, Mrs. Roger. I thank you.”

“Good night,” she said faintly; and as we left she was still huddled in her chair, staring at her feet.

Grayley followed us from the room. “Couldn’t talk before her. I’m glad enough to have you do anything you can to help us find Roger. You mentioned this bird Clark. I don’t want to make any charges, but it wouldn’t hurt you to check up on him. That broadcasting racket, for instance.” He turned to me. “You didn’t order that, Baker?”

“I did not.”

“Well—maybe Clark did. Ever think of that? He’s in the same line of business—” He seemed wholly sincere now. “It happens I don’t like Clark. My sister does—so let her. That’s her business.”

We paused just inside the front entrance of the house. Grayley lowered his voice. “For two days I’ve been tryin’ to find out if Clark had anything to do with Roger’s disappearance. I think I better not explain what motive he could have.”

“We know that motive,” said Dirk.

“You do? Well, all the better. But she’s my sister—you keep her out of it! She’s a good wife to Roger, but this fellow Clark—”

He opened the door for us. “That’s all I’ll say. Guess I’ve said too much anyway.”

He closed the door after us and went back into the house.

We headed across the esplanade and down the escalator steps to the lower monorail entrance. Dirk was pondering our next move. To me, the interview had been unsatisfactory. There seemed no possible way of getting on a tangible trail. But practically every case is like that. Dirk and I had learned that exhaustive theory and deduction don't lead you very far. You find a starting point, which is generally by chance—or by trial and error—and once you get going, one lead nearly always suggests another. But this affair seemed to have no possible starting trail; then it opened and went with a rush.

We had no sooner reached the viaduct than from a shadowed recess of the platform a man accosted us.

“Mr. Dirk?”

“Yes. I am Dirk.”

The fellow was dressed in black, with a hat pulled down over his eyes. He edged us into the shadows away from the knot of passengers who were waiting for the car. He added:

“Are you—I suppose you are investigating this Roger affair?”

“I like to see with whom I'm talking,” Dirk said, then reached suddenly and jerked the hat from the man's head. “Peter Clark!” he exclaimed.

I had never met Peter Clark, though I had heard a great deal of him from Beth. He was a solidly built fellow of thirty-odd, with sandy hair and pale blue eyes. He was obviously under stress now, furtive and hurried.

“What do you want?” Dirk demanded. “You taking this car? You go ahead.”

“No! No, I'm staying here. Let it pass—take the next one.”

We let the car pass. Clark was plainly agitated. He cast swift glances about the now empty platform; and down the incline to the near-by front entrance of the Roger place.

“Mr. Dirk, are you—are you engaged to find Roger?”

“Why?” Dirk countered. “Would you like to print it as news? And cast it into the air?”

“No! I'm not here on business. I wanted you to know, if you mix up in this it may be very dangerous. You don't know what you're plunging into. That's why I wanted to warn you.”

Dirk seized him by the coat. “What do you know about this affair?”

“I? Nothing. But the police mustn't get into it. I tell, you there mustn't be any search. Not to-night—it's too dangerous . . . Stop holding onto me like that! I'm not

—”

“Not mixed in this, Clark? But I guess you are. Four years ago, the records show you as being engaged to Clara Grayley.”

Clark’s jaw dropped. By the vacuum tube light on the platform parapet near us I could see his face go white.

Dirk went on. “She broke that engagement to marry William Roger.”

“Well, I—what’s that to do with anything? I’m trying to tell you not to mix in this. It might bring—bring death.” He cast another swift glance toward Roger’s house. “Don’t you know there might be an electrical eavesdropper tuned on us even now?”

“There might, indeed,” Dirk agreed.

“Where are you going now? To your office?” Clark demanded.

“My business is to ask questions,” countered Dirk. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m wondering where I can audiphone you later this evening.”

“At our office,” Dirk returned promptly.

Clark looked relieved. “Here comes your car. If I have anything I’ll audiphone you.”

He darted into the shadows and was gone. The monorail car came along.

Dirk whispered, “Over by those passengers, Jac! Quick! As if we were going to board it—”

We hastened down the platform, merged into a group of passengers crowding to get on and off, then darted back into a parapet shadow, and reached a side exit.

“Now,” murmured Dirk. “Slip down along those shadows. Clark is around here, watching the Roger house, for some reason of his own. We’ll see—”

We gained the lower level of the esplanade, and gazing up to the pedestrian trail of the viaduct we were startled to see Clara Roger emerge from the front door of her home, a trim figure in black and white as she stood for a moment gazing about her.

“This way, Jac! We’ve got to get up there!”

She seemed about to call a public aëro-car. We would lose her before we got near enough to follow. Dirk made a start for the upward incline, but halted at once and drew me into a shadow under a network of cables. Clark had appeared up there and accosted Mrs. Roger. The two had drawn behind a little light-tower and were standing seemingly in earnest conversation.

“Jac, tune in on them! See what you can do. This accursed noise—”

The traffic was roaring around us. I held the little listening ear of the microphonic eavesdropper before me, cut in the current and tried with my hands to shield the grid

from the noise of the scurrying vehicles.

There was nothing at first. With the eargrids in position I was nearly deafened by the traffic noises. Dirk was bent anxiously over me.

I caught Clara Roger's voice, a fragment "—at the bank. But, Peter dear—"

Accursed traffic! And then Clark's voice: "Clara, don't you understand—all that money—"

Accursed traffic!

Dirk gripped me. "They're going! We've got to tail them!"

I bundled up the microphone apparatus and stuffed it in the pocket of my jacket as we darted for the incline. The two above us were momentarily lost to view.

"They signaled a car," Dirk flung back at me. "I'll follow them—you can stay around here and watch the house for Grayley—he may come out."

But when we gained the upper level Clark and the woman had parted. She was boarding a taxi, a small public aëro-car; and Clark was moving away among the passing pedestrians.

"Try and stay with him, Jac! When you get a chance, send a message to Beth at the office for me. And I'll do the same when I can."

He was gone. I slipped into the crowd and followed Clark. Behind me I saw Dirk pick up another air taxi and roll swiftly down the viaduct after the woman.

I was convinced that Clark and Mrs. Roger had not seen Dirk and me. All this vicinity was dim with eerie shifting lights and a confusion of movement. I very nearly lost sight of Clark, as he moved swiftly through the crowd on the pedestrian viaduct.

I followed. Clark did not seem to be aware of me. He walked rapidly, and when he was well away from the Roger home he suddenly stopped at the edge of the traffic and signaled an aëro-car. One drew quickly up to him. He boarded it and rolled away, down the viaduct.

Within ten seconds I was boarding another.

"That red-barred car ahead of us, see it?" I flashed my Federal identification at the pilot. "Ten dollars in gold-leaf for you—if you don't lose that car. Are you fast?"

"Fast?" He meshed in his gears and we leaped into the traffic. "Fast? Say, chief, nothin' flies faster than this little blackbird you're in."

But we had no need of speed. The red and white car ahead of us proceeded in swift but orderly fashion along the viaduct. We were presently in the Fordham District, rolling along the lowest of three levels, with shops and lighted arcades to the sides and a network of pedestrian catwalks crossing overhead. It was a

neighborhood business center which at this hour of the evening was a riot of blaring noise.

Clark's car drew to the side, and he leaped out; but, a square behind him, I was out as swiftly as he. A level higher, and farther along, I saw the illumined metal entrance of the Fordham branch of the Bank of Great New York.

I recalled those fragments of conversation between Clark and Clara Roger which I had overheard with the eavesdropper. She had told him: "—at the bank. But, Peter dear—"

And he had said: "—all that money—"

Were they arranging to meet here at the bank? Had Clara Roger come here ahead of Clark? Perhaps she was in the bank now. Then Dirk should be around here.

The various levels and pedestrian walks were crowded with people. I did not see Dirk; I had all I could do not to lose Clark. He went up an escalator, and I paralleled him. On the second level he stood in an angle of the parapet wall. Obviously he was waiting, watching the front entrance to the bank. And fairly near him, with the pedestrian stream flowing between us, I found shelter and waited . . .

Within the bank at that moment Clara Roger sat waiting for a draft-check to be honored which she had just presented for payment.

The astounded manager could only gasp, and ask her deferentially, "Do you want this in cash, Mrs. Roger?"

"In gold-leaf certificates, yes."

"But the danger—you can't carry that much money. Let me deliver it—"

"Do what I ask, if you please. And will you hurry?"

She sat waiting; and by a side entrance of the bank Dirk had gained the manager's office. They stood now gazing at the little oblong slip of paper. It was drawn neatly in ink—a demand in favor of Clara Roger for ninety-two thousand gold dollars; and it was signed William Roger.

"It is within fifty dollars of all he has here on deposit," said the manager.

"A forgery?"

"But it isn't, Mr. Dirk. Our graphologist just passed it."

The check was dated four days ago—the day before William Roger vanished. It was now three minutes of the bank's evening closing time—illegal to delay payment longer. They might have chanced some excuse, but with the wife of the city's chief executive the bank did not dare.

"I've got to pay it, Mr. Dirk."

“All right,” said Dirk swiftly. “I’ll follow her. Send that canceled check to my office at once.”

From behind the wicket Dirk watched Clara Roger receive the thin oblong packet of gold-leaf notes. She was pale, but calm. She did not count the money. She placed the packet in a burnished metal hand-case of the sort women carry, smiled her thanks, and turning, left the bank by its front entrance—walking swiftly and plunging into the passing crowd of people.

For Dirk, I think that moment presented a more difficult task than for me. Yet both of us miscarried our attempts. Dirk saw the woman for just a moment outside the bank, and then he lost her in the mob. And a minute or two later, a block away from him, all the levels and the arcade entrances and the overhead catwalks were abruptly illumined in a flash of white light. Dirk, with hundreds of other pedestrians, rushed toward that crime-beacon . . .

I saw Clara Roger when she emerged from the bank, but I had no knowledge of what had transpired inside. Clark began moving swiftly forward. I could see his bobbing head in the crowd. I waited. The woman was coming toward me. I thought Clark would join her and both of them come my way. But she swerved quickly across to a parallel walk. I lost sight of her. I had miscalculated what would happen. Both of them darted into the crowd as though suddenly anxious to shake off pursuit. It took me so by surprise that I lost sight of them both.

But luck was with me. I saw Clara Roger again within a minute. She was loitering, and suddenly I thought I saw Clark approaching her. If it was he, he had thrown a dark flowing silk cape over his shoulders. He jostled against her, and I thought she handed him something. They were well away from me, but there was a glint as though she had given him a metal case. Then suddenly he was running, and there was the figure of another man close after him. The crowd tightened. There seemed a scuffle. Then a traffic director’s alarm siren screamed, and the actinic alarm-light of the street flooded everything with its glare.

But Clark and his pursuer, whom I had no more than vaguely glimpsed with a vague idea it might be Grayley, were gone. Dirk and I met as we were forcing our way into the glare. Clara Roger had seemed to try to escape; but she was recognized and deferentially stopped by the traffic man. He forced back the crowd and called an aëro-car for her. I saw, and so did Dirk, that she was no longer carrying the metal hand bag. The money, Dirk gasped, was gone! The halted traffic gave her car free space. It rolled forward, took the air, skimmed perilously between two lateral catwalks and sailed into the starlight . . .

More tangible a lead? I should say it is, Jac!”

“She and Clark! Ninety-two thousand of your father’s money, Beth! What have you got to say to that?”

We were back at the office, where Beth had been waiting anxiously for our return.

“But I don’t understand—” she gasped.

“You don’t? Well, it isn’t very complicated. Clark and your damned stepmother—”

“Don’t theorize,” Dirk broke in sharply. “This is no time for theory. If that check shows what I think it will show—”

Beth gripped him, white-faced, with blazing eyes. “You mean to say my father wrote a check three or four days ago for ninety-two thousand dollars and Clara cashed it and gave it to Clark?”

“That’s what the date is on the check. That’s what I want to find out—*when he wrote it*. If it’s when I think it was. . . Ah, here’s the check—”

The small cylinder came tumbling onto Dirk’s desk from the vacuum tube. Beth sat in a chair, forcing herself to calmness, watching while Dirk opened the cylinder and pounced upon the canceled check which the bank had mailed us.

“Miss Beth, while I work on this check, you try and find out if Mrs. Roger is at home. I suppose she is. Don’t talk to her—just make sure she is there. Call the maid, and then disconnect. . . And you, Jac, call our chief in Washington. He won’t be at his office—at his residence, try him there. Say I want Federal permission to force questions on the City Manager’s wife under oath. Explain—and I’ll talk to him if he wants it. Hurry up, you two!”

Dirk rushed into his laboratory with the check. In ten minutes he was back, check in hand. I could see at once by the expression on his face that he had learned something definite—and startling.

“What did they say?” he demanded of us.

“Clara is at home,” said Beth. “Vance, the maid, said she was ill and preferred not to speak with me.”

“Good enough! And you, Jac?”

“I got the chief. But not the permission. He says he’ll have to look further into the matter. To put Mrs. Roger on oath—that’s too drastic.”

“Oh, is it? Well, he’ll give me the permission quickly enough! That check she just cashed was written by her husband—not four days ago, before he vanished, but today! I’ve measured the oxidation-rate of the ink. Roger wrote it this afternoon, or at the earliest this morning. Get me the chief in Washington. . . Don’t look like that,

Miss Beth! It doesn't necessarily mean that harm has come to your father. But it does mean that he's probably being held a prisoner somewhere. He wrote the check to-day—was forced to write it, I'm convinced."

That meant that Mrs. Roger was in communication with her husband, and he wrote the draft to pay her all his available cash. But did he do it voluntarily? The sinister aspect of the thing came like a light in darkness. I could imagine that Clark had hired professional criminals to abduct Roger. The Federal Audit was a good excuse for his disappearance. And some one—Clark probably—had instigated the broadcast demand for parental consent, in order to throw suspicion upon Beth and me. To save himself from death Roger had written the check. And now, would Roger be murdered—and Clara Roger and her lover be left free to enjoy the money?

Dirk finished with Washington. Then he sent out a general order over the New York district for the arrest of Clark. And following that he put through an imperative audiphone call for Mrs. Roger. He sat gripping the instrument, his thin face grim with the intensity of his emotion.

"Are you there? I want Mrs. Roger."

The maid's voice said, "She will give no connection."

"Oh, yes, she will. I have Federal authority. Contempt of court if she doesn't. Tell her that."

He got her in a moment.

"What is it you want?" she demanded.

"This is Franklin Dirk. I have orders to put you on oath. Give me visual connection, please. I must see you, Mrs. Roger."

Our mirror-grid lighted. Beth and I leaned over Dirk's shoulder. The image showed Clara Roger's pale, harassed face, with the grid on her dressing table showing Dirk and me.

"I accept the oath," she said quietly. "What is it you want to ask me?"

He struck her with it: "I want to know where Peter Clark went half an hour ago when you gave him that money."

We saw the blood drain from her face and lips and terror leap into her eyes. I thought she would faint, but she clung to her chair.

"Why, I—I did not, I don't know—"

"You're lying, Mrs. Roger. On oath, before witnesses. Where did Clark go?"

"I don't know," she said faintly.

"Nor where your husband is held?"

“No.”

If it were possible for a greater intensity of terror to surge into her eyes, it came there now.

“Your husband—you know he was abducted by professional criminals?”

“Yes,” she admitted frankly. And beside me I heard Beth gasp with horror. Dirk’s swift, menacing voice went relentlessly on.

“You know that your husband is a prisoner, somewhere near here—and he wrote that check to-day—was forced to write it?”

“Yes. Oh, if you can—”

“Not murdered yet, is he?”

It made Beth clutch at me. On the mirror-grid I saw that Clara Roger’s white lips were trying to stammer something, but the words would not come.

“Didn’t Clark let you know where your husband is?” Dirk insisted.

“You—you—”

We saw her fall, and saw the maid rush forward to her. Our mirror went dark as the connections broke. And at once the instrument buzzed with an incoming call. The mirror lighted again. We saw the inside of a little public booth—a man’s head and shoulders and his face gazing at us. It was Clark! I leaped instantly to trace the call, while Dirk kept him busy.

“Mr. Dirk? I tried to get you, but you were busy. I want you—I want you to come to me.”

“Why, hello, Clark.” Dirk forced himself to a sudden calmness, “What is it? I’ve been waiting for your call.”

“I want you to come. I think I’ve found—I don’t dare—”

His voice was breathless; his face held a mixture of eagerness and terror. “It’s got to be now. There’s no time—” He was almost incoherent. Then out of it emerged a meeting place for him and us. He named it—a lower ramp in the east side section of Manhattan near the water front.

“Will you come there?”

I saw on our image mirror that behind Clark in the booth a black-gloved arm and hand appeared. Beth murmured tensely into my ear: “What is that? What—”

But I had no time to answer. The black-gloved hand was behind Clark’s shoulder and he was not aware of it. Then the hand touched him. He gasped, and whirled.

“What is it?” Dirk demanded.

Clark came back to the instrument. His voice sounded strange. “Nothing . . . Some one must have thought the booth was empty. Bumped into me, but he’s gone

. . . Will you come at once?"

"We'll come."

Dirk flung off the connection and leaped to his feet. "No time now, Jac—you heard what he said. Get our flash-guns. Here, this one is yours. And your microphone—you've got it? The police will comb that section around the visiphone booth, but I doubt if they'll catch him. Come on—I suppose the monorail will be quickest—it will drop us near the river . . . Miss Beth, you'll have to wait here."

"Jac, dear—"

But I could not stop to talk to her; there was the equipment to get ready.

Dirk stopped suddenly before her, and put his hands on her slim shoulders. "Miss Beth, I know that just waiting, doing nothing, is the hardest thing of all. But very often it's the woman's part. If you're going to be the wife of a detective—" He smiled gently. "Now is the time to get used to it."

And she bravely answered his smile. I think I never loved Beth so dearly as at that moment while she stood in the center of the office bravely smiling and gazing after us as we rushed out.

But if it's an ambush," I suggested, as we hurried from the office and headed for the lift-car which would drop us to the city's ground-level corridor. "If it's a lure to get us—Clark knows we're after him—"

"We'll chance it—with caution. Jac, whatever you think we know about this affair—I'm beginning to think other things."

And so was I. Clark's attitude—and Clara Roger's—did not ring true to our appraisal of them as kidnapers. The monorail whirled us into the city slums—a dark and gloomy metal shambles as unlike the Westchester residential area as the poles of the earth. It was now nearly midnight. We left the monorail and on the ground level followed the dark city street toward the East River water front.

Rivington Ramp 80 was a small balconied circle where half a dozen disreputable streets and alleys converged. The dwelling houses, most of them ancient ramshackle brick and stone, went up no more than a dozen stories, with rusted iron balconies, and a few of the more modern catwalks dangling overhead. There was hardly a vehicle here—all were high up on the near-by viaducts leading to the Brooklyn river bridges. It was like a glimpse into the shambles of the past—these water front streets. All the criminals of the city congregated here, and the rest of the city was glad enough to have it so. There should have been a patrol officer at his post on Ramp 80, but he had not bothered to stay on duty.

There were a few pedestrians, and noise enough from the public drink shops,

and a dance palace near-by. Dirk and I moved around the edge of the ramp. There was no sign of Clark. We came to the side street he had mentioned. It was no more than an alley—a dark gash in one of the buildings. We slid into it—a place of almost fetid blackness. Suddenly I stumbled upon something. A man, lying on the alley floor. Under Dirk's tiny flash light beam we saw that it was the body of Clark!

We bent over him, and he was not dead. But dying, there could be no doubt of that. His roving eyes recognized us. His twitching hand tried to reach for us.

"You came? I was afraid you wouldn't. I traced them—at last—"

Dirk raised his head. "But, Clark—"

"I'm finished. They've done me in. It's—poison, I guess. There in the booth when I called you—"

He clutched at his throat. On his neck I saw a little spot of red where it seemed that a needle had pricked.

His eyes were glazing. "You—I guess you've still got time. It's—they're under the old dock at the end of the street. Or near there. It wasn't more than ten minutes ago."

"Who?" Dirk demanded. "Roger? Have they got him there?"

"Yes. Roger—if they haven't—killed him yet. I was afraid—you or the police investigating—that would have meant death for him. Hurry—"

My mind flung back to that scene outside the bank. The man in the cloak who had been given the money by Mrs. Roger was not Clark. It was Clark who had chased the other man . . .

Dirk was saying gently, "We mistook you completely, Clark."

"Yes. I suppose—" His face and his tongue were choked with stagnant blood. "Yes. I—it doesn't matter. I don't want Roger to get murdered. She—loves him. She wouldn't—"

His hand tried to reach for Dirk. "She didn't dare tell me much. I did what I—could to help. I'm finished—"

His thickened tongue caught between his lips. He murmured, "She'll—know—I did my best—for her and—her husband—"

He twitched, shuddered, and the light went out of his staring eyes . . .

Get out your microphone," Dirk whispered. "What a place! Try listening—it may help—if there's any one lurking around down in here—"

It was like a broken rabbit warren. The ancient dock loomed above us. And far higher, and to one side, one of the great bridges glowed with its dotted rows of lights, and the light of its swiftly passing vehicles. The river—as though it were

subterranean with all the lattice of structures over it—flowed dark and sullen some thirty feet beneath us. It was of no use now. The city had overgrown it.

Broken wooden rooms and cubbies and platforms were here among the piers under the crumbling dock, relic of a bygone age. From the overhead dock there had been a catwalk to a neighboring structure a hundred feet away. But it was broken now, dangling so that there was only a single cable stretched across the intervening water.

The place was black where we crouched under the dock. I tuned in the sound magnifier. And at once caught the murmur of men's voices.

"Overhead," I whispered. "Some one up inside the dock. Can we get up there?"

It seemed so. We clambered cautiously along rotting planks to where an old stairway led upward. And presently we were in the broken dock.

Dirk clutched at me. "Over there!" I barely heard his whisper. "That light—when you fire, Jac—it's to kill—take no chances on that."

The black tumble-down interior seemed thronged with ghosts of the past. There was a broken interior boarded enclosure and from its window a little light was straggling. And over the distant murmur of traffic noises we could hear now the near-by voices of men . . .

I caught just a brief glimpse of the interior of that little wooden room as we crept up to its window. The portly, middle-aged William Roger was lying bound and gagged on the littered floor. Two men were kneeling, fastening weights of iron to his arms and legs—men black-garbed and hooded. A third man, wholly enveloped in black and with hood drawn close over his face, was across the room, near where another window looked out upon the river.

That third man discovered us. He leaped and Dirk's bolt missed him. The two men upon Roger jumped erect; but before they could draw their weapons my bolt caught one, and Dirk's hit the other. They crumpled and fell upon Roger, who struggled and twisted beneath their bodies.

The third man went through the window. My bolt struck the casement, shredded it and set it on fire. But I missed the man. His black-gloved fingers clung for an instant, and then he dropped.

"Inside!" Dirk shouted. "He didn't fall far!"

We gained the room, went across it. Beneath the outer window, ten feet down, was a line of planks. The hooded figure had dropped to them. And the end of that broken catwalk was there, its single remaining cable fastened there. The hooded figure was on the cable, running along it out over the dark river.

I fired, but miscalculated the shadowy swaying form. The man's arms were

outstretched to balance himself, and he ran like a monkey. I fired again, but he was out of range. He kept on going.

He reached the other dock, ran back along it, jumped to a little connecting bridge-walk; and in a moment we saw the tiny blob of him at the foot of an escalator leading up to the main bridge artery over the river to Brooklyn. We saw him reach the pedestrian throng up there and vanish.

Roger was unharmed, though in a few minutes more they would have dropped him into the sullen river. The two men we had killed were professional criminals, with a persistent police and prison record—the sort of men any one with the price may hire to do murder.

And we found the price of this affair on them—ten thousand dollars each, of William Roger's money. The rest of it was gone—with that third man, doubtless.

Roger did not know who the fellow was. He had always been masked; and he had never spoken, save in a whisper. But it was obvious that he was the man who had hired the other two; who had taken Roger's check, and returned just a few minutes ago with the cash.

And seeing what we had seen of his escape across that single cable strand over the water, we could not fail to guess who he must be. A man with the skill to perform such an unusual feat; the man who for a television broadcaster had done acrobatic tricks walking tight ropes for the delight of a television audience . . .

I bent down over Roger where he was sitting on the floor chafing his arms and legs, which were numb.

"You're not hurt?" I asked. "It was a close nip—"

"You, Jac? I hadn't thought I would be thanking you—after that last little argument we had—"

He reached and gripped my hand. He was white and shaken from his experience. He leaned back weakly on one elbow.

"Have Clara and Beth been frightened over me? Where are they? Can't you audiphone them now? Relieve their anxiety—"

It was the thought in my mind, too.

There was nothing wrong with William Roger's accounts, when the Federal Audits were held that next morning. In the afternoon Roger and Beth came secretly to our office. Dirk had invited Grayley to come for a little private conversation, and he acquiesced readily. When he entered, Beth and her father were hidden as witnesses, and hidden instruments gave sight and sound connection with Headquarters.

Only Dirk and myself were in evidence as Grayley jauntily entered. He was smilingly self-confident.

“Well,” he greeted us, “I suppose you’ve got a battery of instruments to record everything I say. Go ahead—I haven’t a thing to conceal.”

“You got away from us last night with very great dexterity,” Dirk began crisply. “I never realized before what possible use such skill could be to its possessor.”

Grayley raised his black brows and laughed. “I heard about that fellow running over a cable. Say, if you think I can walk that cable, you put a net under it and I’ll prove how easy I can fall off.”

“Quite so,” smiled Dirk. “Falling off ought to be equally easy. Sit down. I want to talk with you. We were all at Roger’s home by eleven o’clock last night. Where were you?”

“Me? I was playing cards with some friends. I’ve got a couple of them to prove it, if you want—”

“It won’t be necessary. Sit down, Grayley. Hand me your hat. I want a serious talk with you.”

My heart was pounding as I came forward with a glass microscope slide, and I saw Grayley’s hand go out with his hat as Dirk reached for it. I stumbled on the floor rug. I think I did it naturally—Dirk and I had practiced this for an hour past. And as I staggered, my hand with the microscope slide came down sharply and struck Grayley’s wrist.

“Oh—I’m sorry—” I stammered.

Simultaneously Dirk leaped to his feet.

“Jac, you fool! Clumsy fool! Are you hurt, Grayley?”

“No. Not much.”

Then Dirk saw the glass slide in my hand and the blood welling out on Grayley’s wrist.

“Jac! Good God, is that what you cut him with? Don’t you know that’s a culture of Clark’s blood—and I’m trying to find out what poison killed—”

There was just an instant when Grayley stood staring stupidly at the jagged cut near the base of his thumb. Then terror swept him. A wild panic of terror.

“That? Clark’s blood! That—” His voice rose into a scream. “Get me a physician. You damn’ fools, don’t stand there staring like that! Clark’s blood—in me! Why, that’s death! That’s curare that killed Clark! It’s death to me now! Get me a physician.”

That was the end of it. During those minutes while Grayley was waiting for the physician (with the deadly poison, so he thought, circulating in his blood) he yielded to Dirk's pounding and made a full confession. He told us where he had hidden the money, and there we subsequently found it. He had hired the two professional criminals to abduct Roger, and told his sister that her husband was being held for ransom. He told her that the abductors had communicated with him and demanded the money of him. And he had promised it, and persuaded his sister that a word or look which brought the police into the search would cause her husband's death. Then Clark had dabbled in it, and Grayley killed him.

Grayley had slipped out of the house just after Clark finished talking to us on the monorail platform. He had met his sister outside the bank, and gotten the money from her as they had arranged. And he had bribed an under-official of the broadcast service to fake that demand from Jac Baker.

Had the scheme been successful, Mrs. Roger would always have believed that the ransom was paid by her brother, and that in spite of it her husband had been murdered.

His confession was hysterically poured out, mingled with wild demands for a physician. When it was over Dirk put him in police custody and sent him from the office with scant ceremony, leaving the officials to tell him he needed a lawyer, not a physician.

In our private office the smiling William Roger faced Beth and me. He took us each by a hand.

"Poor Clark! I never liked him—if I had known what was really in his heart for Clara and me! And you, Beth dear—don't you think you and Clara will be better friends now?"

"Oh, I do! I do, father."

"And you—you persistent young cub—" There was a gleam of quizzical humor in his gray eyes as he turned to me. "I was prejudiced against having a detective for a son-in-law, but I discovered last night that a detective is sometimes a very handy person to have around."

THE END.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Disappearance of William Roger* by Ray Cummings]