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The Sign at Six

BY STEWART EDWARD WHITE

Author of "The Blazed Trail," etc.

With Four Illustrations
By M. LEONE BRACKER

A. L. BURT COMPANY
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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CHAPTER I

THE OWNER OF NEW YORK

PERCY DARROW, a young man of scientific training, indolent manners, effeminate appearance, hidden energy, and absolute courage, lounged through the doors of the Atlas Building. Since his rescue from the volcanic island that had witnessed the piratical murder of his old employer, Doctor Schermerhorn, the spectacular dissolution of the murderers, and his own imprisonment in a cave beneath the very roar of an eruption, he had been nursing his shattered nerves back to their normal strength. Now he felt that at last he was able to go to work again. Therefore, he was about

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to approach a man of influence among practical scientists, from whom he hoped further occupation.

As the express elevator shot upward, he passed a long slender hand across his eyes. The rapid motion confused him still. The car stopped, and the metallic gates clanged open. Darrow obediently stepped forth. Only when the elevator had disappeared did his upward glance bring to him the knowledge that he had disembarked one floor too soon.

Darrow's eye fell on a lettered sign outside the nearest door. He smiled a slow red-lipped smile beneath his small silky mustache, drooped his black eyelashes in a flicker of reminiscence, hesitated a moment, then stepped languidly forward and opened the door. The sign indicated the headquarters of the very modest commissionership behind which McCarthy chose to work. McCarthy, quite simply, at that time owned New York.

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The Sign at Six

As Darrow entered, McCarthy hung up the telephone receiver with a smash, and sat glaring at the instrument. After a moment he turned his small bright eyes toward the newcomer.

"Hello, Perc," he growled. "Didn't see you. Say, I'm so mad my skin cracks. Just now some measly little shrimp called me up from a public booth. What ye suppose he wanted, now? Oh, nothin'! Just told me in so many words for me to pack up my little trunk and sail for Europe and never come back! That's all! He give me until Sunday, too." McCarthy barked out a short laugh, and reached for the cigar box, which he held out to Darrow.

Percy shook his head. "What's the occasion?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Just bughouse, I guess."

"So he wants you to go to Europe?"

"Wants me? Orders me! Says I got to." McCarthy laughed. "Lovely thought!"

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The Sign at Six

He puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"Says if I don't obey orders he'll send me a 'sign' to convince me!" went on the boss. "He's got a mean voice. He ought to have a tag hung on him and get carried to the morgue. He give me the shivers, like a dead man. I never hear such a unholy thing outside a graveyard at midnight!"

Percy Darrow was surveying him with leisurely amusement, a slight smile playing over his narrow dark face.

"Talking to get back your nerve," he surmised cheerfully to the usually taciturn boss. "I'd like to know what it was got you going so; it isn't much your style."

"Well, you got yours with you," growled McCarthy, shifting for the first time from his solid attitude of the bulldog at bay.

"His 'sign' he promised is apt to be a bomb," observed Darrow.

"He's nutty, all right," McCarthy agreed,

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CHAPTER II

THE SHADOW OF MYSTERY

DARROW walked up the one flight of steps to the story above. He found his acquaintance in, and at once broached the subject of his errand. Doctor Knox promised the matter his attention. The two men then embarked on a long discussion of Professor Schermerhorn's discovery of super-radium, and the strange series of events that had encompassed his death. Into the midst of the discussion burst McCarthy, his face red with suppressed anger.

"Can I use your phone?" he growled. "Oh, yes," said he, as he caught sight of the instrument. Without awaiting the requested per-

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mission, he jerked the receiver from its hook and placed it to his ear.

"Deader than a smelt!" he burst out. "This is a nice way to run a public business! Thanks," he nodded to Doctor Knox, and stormed out.

Darrow rose languidly.

"I'll see you again," he told Knox. "At present I'm going to follow the human cyclone. It takes more than mere telephones to wake McCarthy up like that."

He found the boss in the hall, his finger against the "down" button.

"That's three cars has passed me," he snarled, trying to peer through the ground glass that, in the Atlas Building, surrounded the shaft. "I'll tan somebody's hide. Down!" he bellowed at a shadow on the glass.

"Have a cigarette," proffered Percy Darrow. "Calm down. To the scientific eye you're out of condition for such emotions. You thick-necks are subject to apoplexy."

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"Oh, shut up!" growled McCarthy. "There isn't a phone in order in this building two floors either way. I've tried 'em—and there hasn't been for twenty minutes. And I can't get a messenger to answer a call; and that ring-tailed, star-spangled ornament of a janitor won't answer his private bell. I'll get him bounced so high the blackbirds will build nests in his ear before he comes down again."

After trying vainly to stop a car on its way up or down, McCarthy stumped down a flight of stairs, followed more leisurely by the calmly unhurried Darrow. Here the same performance was repeated. A half dozen men by now had joined them. So they progressed from story to story until an elevator boy, attracted by their frantic shouts, stopped to see what was the matter. Immediately the door was slid back on its runners, McCarthy seized the astonished operator by the collar.

"Come out of that, you scum of the earth!"

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McCarthy stumped down a flight of stairs

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he roared. "Come out of that and tell me why you don't stop for your signals!"

"I ain't seen no signals!" gasped the elevator boy.

Some one punched the button, but the little, round, annunciator disk in the car failed to illuminate.

"I wonder if there's anything in order in this miserable hole!" snarled McCarthy.

"The lights is gone out," volunteered the boy; and indeed for the first time the men now crowding into the car noticed that the incandescents were dead.

While McCarthy stormed out to spread abroad impartial threats against two public utility concerns for interfering with his business, Percy Darrow, his curiosity aroused, interviewed the janitor. Under that functionary's guidance he examined the points of entrance for the different wires used for lighting and communication; looked over the private-

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bell installations, and ascended again to the corridor, abstractedly dusting his fingers. There he found a group of the building's tenants, among whom he distinguished Doctor Knox.

"Same complaint, I suppose—no phones, no lights, no bells," he remarked.

"Seems to be," replied Knox. "General condition. Acts as though the main arteries had been cut outside."

"Inside bells? House phones?" suggested Darrow.

The repair men came in double-quick time and great confidence. They went to work in an assured manner, which soon slackened to a slower bewilderment. Some one disappeared, to return with a box of new batteries. The head repair man connected a group of these with a small bell in the executive office. The instrument, however, failed to respond.

"Try your ammeter," suggested Darrow, who had followed.

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The Sign at Six

The delicate needle of the instrument did not quiver.

"Batteries dead!" said the repair man. "Jim, what the hotel-bill do you mean by getting dead batteries? Go back and bring a new lot, and *test* 'em."

In due time Jim returned.

"These test to fifteen," said he. "Go to it!"

"Test—nothing!" roared the repair man after a moment. "These are dead, too."

Percy Darrow left the ensuing argument to its own warmth. It was growing late. In the corridor a few hastily-brought lamps cast a dim light. Percy collided against Doctor Knox entering the building.

"Not fixed yet?" asked the latter in evident disappointment. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," said Darrow slowly; "it puzzles me. It's more than an ordinary break of connections or short-circuiting through apparatus. If one could imagine a big building

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like this polarized in some way—anyhow, the electricity is dead. Look here." He pulled an electric flash-light from his pocket. "Bought this fresh on my way here. Tested it, of course. Now, there's nothing wonderful about these toys going back on a man; *but*"—he pressed the button and peered down the lens—"this is a funny coincidence." He turned the lens toward his friend. The filament was dark.

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CHAPTER III

THE MOVING FINGER WRITES

THE condition of affairs in the Atlas Building lasted long enough to carry the matter up to the experts in the employ of the companies; that is to say, until about three o'clock the following morning. Then, without reason, and all at once, the whole building from top to bottom was a blaze of incandescent light.

One of the men, stepping to the nearest telephone, unhooked the receiver. To his ear came the low busy hum of a live wire. Somebody touched a bell button, and the head janitor, running joyfully, two steps at a time, from his lair, cried out that his bell had rung.

The little group of workmen and experts

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nodded in a competent and satisfied manner, and began leisurely to pack their tools as though at the successful completion of a long and difficult job.

But every man jack of them knew perfectly well that the electrical apparatus of the building was now in exactly the same condition as it had been the evening before. No repair work had followed a futile investigation.

As the group moved toward the outer air, the head repair man quietly dropped behind. Surreptitiously he applied the slender cords of his pocket ammeter to the zinc and carbon of the dead batteries concerning whose freshness he and his assistant had argued. The delicate needle leaped forward, quivered like a snake's tongue, and hovered over a number.

"Fifteen," read the repair man; and then, after a moment: "Hell!"

The daily business, therefore, opened normally. The elevators shot from floor to floor;

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the telephones rang; the call-bells buzzed, and all was well. At six o'clock came the scrub-woman; at half past seven the office boys; at eight the clerks; a little later some of the heads; and precisely at nine Malachi McCarthy, as was his invariable habit.

As the bulky form of the political boss pushed around the leaves of the revolving door, the elevator starter glanced at his watch. This was not to determine if McCarthy was on time, but to see if the watch was right.

McCarthy had recovered his good humor. He threw a joke at the negro polishing the brass, and paused genially to exchange a word with the elevator starter.

"Worked until about three o'clock," the latter answered a question. "Got it fixed all right. No, they didn't say what was the matter. Something to do with the wires, I suppose."

"Most like," agreed McCarthy.

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The Sign at Six

At this moment an elevator dropped from above and came to rest, like a swift bird alighting. The doors parted to let out a young man wearing the cap of the United Wireless.

"Good morning, Mr. McCarthy," this young man remarked in passing. "Aren't going into the sign-painting business, are you?" He laughed.

"What ye givin' us, Mike?" demanded McCarthy.

The young man wheeled to include the elevator starter in the joke.

"Air was full of dope most of last night from some merry little jester working a toy, home-made. He just kept repeating the same thing—something about 'McCarthy, at six o'clock you shall have a sign given unto you. It works,' over and over all night. Some new advertising dodge, I reckon. Didn't know but you were the McCarthy and were getting a present from some admiring constituent."

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He threw back his head and laughed, but McCarthy's ready anger rose.

"Where did the stuff come from?"

"Out of the fresh air," replied the operator. "From most anywhere inside the zone of communication."

"Couldn't you tell who sent it?"

"No way. It wasn't signed. Come from quite a distance, though."

"How can you tell that?"

"You can tell by the way it sounds. Say, they ought to be a law about these amatoors cluttering up the air this way. Sometimes I got to pick my own dope out of a dozen or fifteen messages all ticking away in my headpiece at once."

"I know the crazy slob what sent 'em, all right, all right," growled McCarthy. "He's nutty for fair."

"Well, if he's nutty, I wish you'd hurry his little trip to Matteawan," complained the operator, turning away.

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The boss went to his office, where he established himself behind his table-top desk. There all day he conducted a leisurely business of mysterious import, sitting where the cool autumn breeze from the river brought its refreshment. His desk top held no papers; the writing materials lay undisturbed. Sometimes the office contained half a dozen people. Sometimes it was quite empty, and McCarthy sat drumming his blunt fingers on the window-sill, chewing a cigar, and gazing out over the city he owned.

There were two other, inner, offices to McCarthy's establishment, in which sat a private secretary and an office boy. Occasionally McCarthy, with some especial visitor, retired to one of these for a more confidential conversation. The secretary seemed always very busy; the office boy was often in the street. At noon McCarthy took lunch at a small round table in the café below. When he reappeared at the

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elevator shaft, the elevator starter again verified his watch. Malachi McCarthy had but the one virtue of accuracy, and that had to do with matters of time. At five minutes of six he reached for his hat; at three minutes of six he boarded the elevator.

"Runs all right to-day, Sam," he remarked genially to the boy whom he had half throttled the evening before.

He stood for a moment in the entrance of the building, enjoying the sight of the crowds hurrying to their cars, the elevated, the subway, and the ferries. The clang and roar of the city pleased his senses, as a vessel vibrates to its master tone. McCarthy was feeling largely paternal as he stepped toward the corner, for to a great extent the destinies of these people were in his hands.

"Easy marks!" was his philanthropic expression of this sentiment.

At the corner he stopped for a car. He

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