

DRUMS OF DEATH

MILTON LOWE

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Chet Haywood, first-grade detective, was next in line to get his pay check. But he didn't reach for it. Instead, he looked around at the other cops in the squad room. They were trying not to grin. Chet knew what was coming, and his ears burned a cherry-red. He put out his big paw for the check. Immediately the squad-room chorus broke loose.

"Turra bank! Turra bank! Turra bank, bank, bank!"

Some of the cops banged on the table, drummed on the walls and hammered on the radiator in accompaniment.

Chet's ears got red, his neck swelled, and his blood boiled with embarrassment, but he took the vocal hot-foot good-naturedly. It wasn't a crime to be thrifty. He grinned sheepishly, then walked out of the station house and headed for the Mechanics Savings Bank down the block.

It was a pay-day ritual. Ever since he and Martha had married, Chet made it a habit to put away part of his salary. He hoped to have enough to build a home of their own. As he walked along he shrugged. Let 'em laugh.

Realizing suddenly that the bank closed at noon on Saturday, Chet hurried. He made it with minutes to spare. The teller didn't have to be told what to do. While Chet endorsed the check, the teller dealt out three quarters of the amount in bank notes and marked the rest to Chet's account. Chet beamed at the figures in the bank book, then stowed it into his pocket.

He'd get another salute back at the station house and the whole thing would be forgotten until the next pay day. Chet squirmed just a little as he started for the street. Old Bob Linwood, the guard, stopped him, said hello and asked how Martha was.

"She's fine," Chet said and was going to say something about having a home of their own. He didn't. No use jinxing it.

Old Bob didn't notice Chet's biting his lip. The guard was nodding toward the other side of the street. "Candy store and soda fountain opening up Monday," he said. "Good location for that kind of a store, eh, Chet?"

The big detective hadn't paid much attention to the alterations going on in the one-story brick building until now. He glanced across speculatively. A chain grocery store had failed there a few months back, and the place had been vacant since.

"Ought to brighten up the avenue some," Chet said, thinking he'd get his smokes there and save the walk of an extra block. He moved out of the bank. "S'long, Bob. Remember me at home."

He noticed that the plate-glass windows of the store had been whitewashed to hide the work going on inside. Two large banners across the upper part of the windows announced the Monday opening. Chet had turned to go straight back to the station house when he saw a small truck braking to a stop at the curb in front of the store.

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The legend on the truck read:

CITY CARBONATED WATER,INC.

As Chet watched, two men jumped out. One was young, swarthy and moved with quick, catlike motions. The other was a beefy guy, overweight and lumbering. Both of them went to the tailboard and lowered it.

The young fellow sprang onto the truck, hoisted a heavy drum and shoved it to his partner. The big guy eased the drum to the asphalt as though it didn't weigh more than a two-by-four wood joist. To show it wasn't a freak, he handled the second drum as easily.

Chet was impressed.

He looked on as the men spun the drums to the store. The little guy had quite a tussle. It wasn't even exercise for the big man. They disappeared inside the store, closing the door after them.

Chet was about to continue back to the station house when a thought hit him. He frowned. Maybe he was too suspicious, but there was no harm making sure. He crossed the street. As he reached the truck fender, the swarthy helper came out of the store and jogged to the driver's seat. He glanced at Chet, then ignored him. His eyes seemed furtive. He snatched up a kit of tools and in his haste yanked it open.

Chet was near enough to see tools gleaming in the sunlight. But something else glimmered. A pair of round, dark disks. Chet stepped up, saying: "Installing a carbonated system?"

The helper glowered, nodding his head. He snapped shut the tool kit and lugged it toward the store. Chet was at his heels, wondering where he had seen the face before. Faces were hard for him to remember. Names and figures were easier. At the door the helper whirled angrily.

"Say, what's the big idea?"

Chet smiled a disarming smile. "Keep going, fella," he said, motioning to the store. "You know, I've always wanted to see how those drums get connected to a carbonated system."

Footsteps sounded in the store. The door opened inward. The beefy guy stood there, his black, sunken eyes glinting. He looked at his helper.

"This guy," he was told, "wants to see us connect the drums."

"Yeah, that's right," chimed in Chet, lids narrowing. He showed his shield, his right hand straying to his hip. He carried a .38 Colt there. "Any reason why I can't?"

The big man grinned, showing tobacco-stained teeth. "No, sir, there ain't. Dice didn't know you was a dick. Come on in. We'll show you the works."

Chet didn't like the way it was said. It sounded like a threat. He waved them in ahead. They left the door wide for him to follow. Chet stepped across the threshold, eyes glued on the two of them. But what he could see of the store itself told him the place could never be ready for business on Monday,

He took another step inside, then heard the door slam behind him. He jerked his head sidewise. Something swished past his ear! He ducked, leaped to his left, going for his gun.

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But the claw end of a midget crowbar slashed down on his fingers. They went numb, paralyzed with pain. He turned fast, his left fist jabbing. It nailed the third man on the chin, drove him away. Chet followed him with a left hook to the mouth. A low cry mingled with the clang of the crowbar striking the floor. Chet wheeled, saw the helper plucking a gun out of the tool kit and threw himself at the hood.

But the heavyweight thug lunged, ramming a hamlike fist to the detective's chest! Chet didn't let it stop him. He smashed a hard left to the middle of the guy's paunch, barged right past him and kicked at the gun in the helper's hand. The blunt toe caught the man's wrist, sent the gun sailing. But doing that left Chet wide open to attack from the rear.

The beefy thug pounded a right to the base of the detective's head, clouted a left behind his ear! Chet thought a safe had landed on him. His knees went rubbery; he staggered, pitching to the floor. He tried to right himself by grabbing the shelving near him. But the bruiser tore in, swinging.

Chet squared his shoulders, balanced himself. He broke through the flailing arm with a stiff left. It bounced off the brute's nose, drawing blood.

It slowed up the man for a second. Chet brought up his guard, realizing the big guy had ring experience by the way he feinted and angled for a knockout smash. Chet crossed him up, jumping in with a left for the soft middle. The punch was blocked. A leer twisted the man's thick lips.

Chet was too busy to pay any attention to the swarthy helper. Not until he heard the swish of the crowbar did he glance around. The helper was swinging that crowbar like a bat. Chet tried to avoid it by dropping. It saved him from a fractured skull.

Though his hat flattened, cushioned some of the force of the blow, everything swirled before him. He stumbled, groping wildly, not seeing a thing. Then a black drape enveloped him.

His legs gave in, though he seemed to float in midair. Then he plunged down into an abyss as deep as it was dark. Blood gushed from his head wound and he lay as if dead.

The big guy bent over him, snorted. "He ain't dead yet." He stood up, looked at the man coming to near the door. "Snap out of it, Joe. You and Dice lug this bull to the cellar and tie him up."

"Let me finish him off, Spud," said Dice.

"No, I want him alive for a while." Spud's eyes glittered. "Maybe the cops got a line on us. This dick'll tell us. And if we get into a spot, we got a hostage. Get it?"

Dice rubbed his palms together, grinned viciously. He got it plenty. Spud yelled to Joe again.

"Stop feelin' your jaw. He don't hit so hard. Come on! We got lots to do yet!"

When consciousness returned to Chet he heard a thud-thud. First he thought it was the banging in his head. He wondered what had happened; where he was. He knew he was lying flat on his back. The noise puzzled him. Then he recognized the clang of a pickax striking stone. His brain raced.

Suddenly, he remembered everything. As he did, a shaft of agony shot through his head. The throbbing doubled. He tried to move, but couldn't. Dread poured down his spine.

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The next instant he blew out a sigh of relief. He wasn't paralyzed. He was tied hand and foot. The rope was cutting into his wrists and ankles. Sweat began to break out on his face.

He twisted his body, rolled on his side. He blinked, his eyes getting used to the semi- darkness. Light, he could see, was being reflected from somewhere. Half the cellar was piled with earth. Then he knew where he was. Under the store. More than that, it told him that the light was coming from a tunnel a tunnel dug under the street toward the bank!

His pulse climbed; his breath came in quick gasps. The set-up was clear to him. The store had been rented as a blind. The windows had been whitewashed not only to hide alterations in the store, but to cover up the gang's real purpose to rob the bank!

Chet's suspicions about the drums, the two dark disks, had been correct. All the while alterations were supposed to be going on, the gang had been burrowing through the cellar toward the bank vault.

The drums did not contain carbonated gas. They contained gases of another type. Oxygen and acetylene for blow torches. The gang was going to cut through the steel wall of the vault to the fortune in cash kept there.

And Chet Haywood was helpless to stop it. A groan of despair broke involuntarily through his clenched teeth. The cellar amplified it. The digging ceased at once. Boots shuffled toward him. He saw the wiry helper, Dice. The punk wore overalls; he held a shovel menacingly.

"So you've come to, eh?" he sneered. "Been out a long time." He inspected the rope binding Chet by a flashlight beam. He was satisfied. "You'll keep till Spud and me get ready for you." He went back into the tunnel, his voice echoing back: "He can't budge, Spud."

The pickax went to work again. Chet could count the blows. Once, twice, then the unmistakable ring of steel on steel. A bark of glee came from Spud. "That's it the wall of the safe."

Chet's heart missed a beat. With oxy-acetylene torches, it would be a matter of minutes before the steel wall was penetrated a hole cut out large enough for Dice to crawl through.

Spud! At first the name meant nothing to him. He thought of bank robbers wanted by the law. Then the answer came to him. It chilled his blood. Spud Taylor! Chet was positive now. He had seen the thug's picture on circulars at the station house. Taylor was an escaped lifer who killed at the slightest provocation. Chet's body grew taut.

He had stumbled upon two desperate killers, had caught them redhanded, But what was the use? He couldn't do a thing. He blamed himself for walking right into a trap, getting knocked out, then being hogtied while the gang went on with their work

He strained at the rope. Human strength alone couldn't break it. There had to be another way. He dug his nails into the knots, but with his hands behind his back, it was a torturous effort, a wasting ordeal.

If he got his hands around in front and could sink his teeth into the knots

He bent his legs as far back as they would go, rolled on his thigh, then forced himself upward. It took all his strength. His head wound smarted from sweat; his blood hammered in his veins. He gritted his teeth, kept at it. When it looked as if he would never make he did!

He was upright, on his knees, legs balancing him from behind. He waited, listening. The tunnel work was speeding up, he realized. He drank down a breath and tackled the next step.

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He arched his back, formed an O with his arms. Then he pushed his hands so the rope around his wrists slipped under his shoes to the ankles, inch by inch he pulled forward along his legs. His breath wheezed in his nostrils; his lungs felt afire.

Nearer and nearer to his kneecaps he forced his hands, scraping off skin until raw flesh was exposed. Carefully, then, he twisted his hands to a position for his final move. He toppled over on his side, yanked his hands up and forward, straightened out his legs.

His hands were in front, now!

But Spud had overheard the fall of Chet's body. The killer barged out, flashing his light. He spat a curse and rushed at the detective.

"Trying to break free, eh?" His eyes were black coals of hate. "It's as good as tellin' me you're the only copper wise to us."

He kicked Chet on the side of the head, The wound reopened and more blood spilled out. The kick all but knocked him senseless again. A million needles seemed to be sticking into him, then numbness branched out. Above him, Spud Taylor looked like an unsteady apparition. It swooped down suddenly.

Vaguely, Chet was aware of being dragged to the tunnel by the rope around his wrists. He was dumped close to the scene of operations.

"I'll tend to you later," Spud growled, then looked down with a snarl of disgust. "The lug can't take it. He's out cold again,"

Spud was wrong. Chet had deliberately closed his eyes. He lay like that for a short while. The numbness started to leave him, but the pain grew, went through him like molten lead.

Through slitted lids he peeped about. Within arm length were both drums of gas. Hoses were connected from them to two torches. Dice, wearing goggles, was using one, while the thickset Joe worked the other. They were cutting parallel lines in the exposed wall of the vault.

"How's it look?" asked Spud.

"Good," said Dice. "I shoved a rod through, and it didn't touch anything."

Spud turned impatiently to Joe. "Here gimme the torch. You beat it for the truck. Take a gander around, too; see if we're in the clear. Make sure, get me!"

Spud put on the goggles, took the torch. The bluish-white tip of fire was less than three inches long. But it could eat through the toughest steel.

Chet lay still until Joe was well out of the tunnel and both Spud and Dice were too busy to bother with him. The steel square was almost completely chiseled out when Chet looked up. Spud grunted, shut off his torch valves, letting Dice finish up.

"Ready with the pliers," snapped Dice.

Spud seized the pliers, dropped his torch, then clamped the plier jaws firmly onto the upper edge of the steel slab which had been cut out. Obviously, they didn't want the steel to fall inside the vault. It would make noise, and the

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less, the better.

Spud's muscles rippled. He lifted the steel piece free and set it on the dirt pile and against the two drums. The hole was big enough for Dice to get through without much trouble.

Pulling off his goggles, Dice twisted the valves of his torch to douse the flame. Then he dropped it to the ground. Excitement showed on his face as he poked his flashlight into the vault.

"Look at them bags, Spud! What a haul!"

He struck his head and shoulders into the opening. Spud helped him wiggle through, then held the flashlight so Dice would have both hands free.

This was Chet's chance. They were too intent on what they were doing. His mind galloped with an idea. It might work. It had to work! He wasn't kidding himself. They would kill him when they were through.

He reached out for the torch Dice had used. His fingers curled on its metal cylinder. Noiselessly, he drew the torch out of sight under the slab of steel. He scarcely breathed, lest he tip off the killers. Would it end in disaster for him, anyway?

Chet wiped such thoughts from his mind. He compressed his jaws until they ached. With each passing second his anguish, his doubts, mounted. He relied upon greed to keep the two men absorbed.

They were transferring bags of currency from the vault. Dice handed them one at a time to Spud, who dropped them at his feet on the tunnel side of the vault. Any sound Chet made was drowned out by the killers. They were gloating, talking with a note of glee in their voices.

Chet withdrew his hands, the rope burned off his wrists. He wasn't an instant too fast. Joe was coming back. Chet lay in his original position, hands out of view. Spud cocked his head as Joe entered the tunnel.

"Coast is clear, Spud," said Joe, his face going bright the second he saw the money sacks. "The truck's out in front. How's it?"

"Swell," Spud muttered. He looked toward Chet. "We'll leave the dick in the vault for the cops to find. Finish him, Joe. With a shiv!"

Chet froze. A knife. From the sound of Joe's approaching he guessed that the thickset thug was getting ready to carry out the order. Every nerve in Chet tightened.

He looked up. Joe was flipping out a knife blade. It glistened as he stepped up to the detective. His slinky eyes held no emotion. The knife hand went up; the blade started down on its murderous arc!

Joe never knew what happened. Chet's hands became batteringrams. His right cracked against Joe's chin, his left broke Joe's front teeth! The knife slipped from his hand, fell near Chet. He grabbed it. Joe lunged, Chet drawing back. The blade ripped the hood's jugular! He screamed, backed off, dazed, a hand clamping on the fatal wound.

Chet lost no time. With a single stroke of the razor-sharp knife he severed the rope around his ankles, kicked his feet free, then scrambled up.

Joe's scream caused Spud to turn. He saw what had happened. Roaring like a bull he launched himself at the detective. Chet seized the fear-stricken Joe, threw him at Spud. With one swipe of his arm, Spud flung Joe out of

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his way.

A gun, Chet's own, shone in Spud's big fist. It was leveled. Chet hurled the knife. Spud dropped to escape it. It was exactly what Chet counted on. He leaped in, caught hold of the Colt, twisting and wrenching with all his power.

Spud clung to the gun. Suddenly Chet let go, moving up. His left drilled out, his shoulder behind it, followed with a right to the killer's middle, Spud couldn't take punishment there. He backed off, his face contorted with pain. Chet crowded him, jutting piston-like punches to the same spot.

Spud doubled up, raised the gun. Caution seemed to have fled. But he didn't fire. Something in the way he looked told Chet greater peril lurked behind him. He glanced around. Dice Andrews was hefting the pickax, getting set to clout Chet.

Chet did the only thing left. He sprang at Spud. He guessed Dice wouldn't chance slugging Spud with the ax. But all this seemed as if Chet were only dragging out his agony, delaying the bolt of death.

Spud tagged him with a jab to the jaw. Chet thought he had been slugged with a lead pipe. He staggered drunkenly, tottered away, toward the cellar end of the tunnel. It was his lone chance of survival. Spud's laughter mocked him.

But Chet knew what he was doing. He tripped over Joe's sprawled body, Down he went, flat on his stomach.

"You asked for it, copper, buttin' in on us," Spud rasped. "We'll leave you around so the other cops can give you an inspector's funeral."

Chet looked toward the drums, under the slab of steel. "You...you'll never get away with that money," he gasped. "You might kill me, but "

He stopped short, utterly exhausted. He needed time, just a few more seconds. He raised his head. Spud and Dice were looking at each other, wondering what Chet meant. Time seemed to be on a holiday. Then Dice spoke.

"Don't listen to him, Spud. Can't you see he's givin' us the needle. I'll crack him with the ax and then we'll lam."

Spud rubbed his lantern jaw, then nodded. Dice grimaced, spat on his palms and took a good grip on the handle of the pickax. He came toward Chet while Spud trained the Colt unerringly, They weren't chancing any more of Chet's tricks.

Chet felt his throat going dry, his body growing chill. He was no coward, but he saw death staring at him from the snout of the Colt; he saw it perched on Dice's shoulder.

Chet thought of Martha, the house they had planned together. It wasn't to be

His thought was punctured by a blast. The tunnel seemed to erupt! The ground churned; dirt pelted down upon him. There was a sustained flash. It showed the ax leaving Dice's grasp, being embedded in the tunnel wall. Then Dice was rammed against its sharp point.

Just before the flash died out and darkness closed in, Chet caught a glimpse of Spud Taylor. The killer was flat against the vault wall, his body draped over the money sacks. His clothes were shreds, his body charred.

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Only because Chet had lain flat with Joe's body as a shield had he escaped the full fury of the explosion. But his face was seared and scorched, and he lay half buried in dirt. He began to pull himself out, then managed to crawl to the cellar. It seemed to take ages.

As he climbed out of the tunnel a police lamp appeared at the head of the cellar stairs. The next instant light fell upon him. A cop yelled.

"Hey, get Captain Haines. It's Chet Haywood."

"Get an ambulance, too," Chet added, leaning wearily against the cellar wall. "There's a guy back there we want to save for the electric chair."

Twenty minutes later, while an ambulance interne gave him first-aid treatment, Chet was talking to the sober-faced, gray-haired Captain Haines.

Briefly he explained how Bob Linwood, the bank guard, had focused his attention on the store. "When the truck drove up with the drums of gas I noticed something I didn't understand. There was a pressure gauge on each drum. I knew enough about carbonated-water systems to realize one gauge is enough, and even that isn't necessary. So I decided to find out things."

Haines blinked. "Is that all you went on?"

Chet grinned. "No. Something else. When Dice Andrews yanked open the tool kit by mistake, I saw a pair of disks that didn't go with carbonated gas tanks."

"Disks? What kind?"

"Round dark ones. They were goggles. A special kind. The kind only oxy-acetylene workers wear."

"But the explosion how did that happen?" demanded Haines, getting impatient.

"I'm coming to that," said Chet, unhurried. "I got my hands on the torch Dice Andrews had been using. While he and Taylor were rifling the vault, I pulled the torch under the steel slab, knowing the tip of the torch was hot enough to ignite oxygen. I turned on the valve and rope off my wrist and some skin. Then I turned on the acetylene gas and pointed the white-hot flame at the acetylene drum itself."

Haines stared, blurted out. "You burned a hole through the drum! When the flame reached the acetylene, the gas exploded!"

Chet nodded, a bit modestly. "And not a second too soon, either." He told how Dice had been ready to pickax him. "Instead, he got a dose of his own medicine."

Haines added hastily: "Taylor's going to get all he deserves, too." He stopped, puzzled. Chet wore a frightened look, was frantically going through his pockets. Concerned, Haines demanded: "What's wrong, Chet?"

The detective blew out a sigh. He took an envelope, opened at one end, from his hip pocket.

"My bank book, captain," he said. "I thought I'd lost it."

He glanced around at the other cops. They were grinning broadly. Chet's grin was even broader. He knew he had heard the last "Turra bank" from them.

THE END