Safes and Safe-Breakers—II

The Present Status of the War Between Safe Builder and Cracksman

By Edward H. Smith

THE TRIUMPH of nitro-glycerine over the safe-maker was not one whose scope was immediately apparent. Neither the burglar nor his opponent understood for some time how complete the disaster was, and manufacturers have never quite admitted the full truth. They did not, in the very nature of things, surrender. Instead they continued to experiment and invent, trying one type of safe after another, but without great success. As each kind of protective box was broken open by the yeggs another and improved variety was offered in its place, and each time the makers uttered great vaunts, perhaps quite honestly. It seems they never really understood the power of nitro or the skill of their criminal antagonists. Safes of ever heavier, stronger and more expensive types came into the market and bankers reluctantly bought and installed them, usually after an older type of safe had been blown in their vicinity. The safe-salesman, of course, followed in the wake of the cracksman. If a bank was robbed in Southern Indiana, let's say, there was a swarm of salesmen in the vicinity within the day, all offering safes that "could not be blown." But a few years passed and one of the "improved" boxes flew open before the puissance of the burglar's soup. So the comedy of the unbreakable safe was acted all over again.

What the technical experts who were trying to devise safes could not do the police attempted. Special precautions were taken against the night-prowling yegg, and bankers' associations organized criminal departments and employed the best private detectives to stamp out safe blowing. In these manners some check was kept upon the yegg, but he extended and enlarged his operations amazingly in the last ten years of the nineteenth century and the first ten of this.

When the yegg first used nitro he continued to direct his attention, as in the old powder days, to small safes in packing houses, ice plants, factories and post offices. These were about as big jobs as he cared to tackle and it was only as he gained experience and learned the full power of his new weapon that he turned his attention to the banks, with their larger and finer strong-boxes—and their greater rewards. There were, to be

sure, always a few bank robbers among the older men and in the day before nitro, but their operations were limited and occasional.

It is interesting to see the typical yegg gang of ten and twenty years ago at work. A gang or mob consisted usually of three or four members, including a cat kid or young scout. As soon as the use of nitro was well understood and yegging became more safe and profitable, these burglars abandoned their old methods of living. They no longer roved the country as tramps or dressed the part of vagabonds and indigents, as formerly, unless it was done occasionally to delude the police. Instead, the yegg became an extremely well dressed, business-like fellow, living in urban hangouts and often enjoying protection in certain communities that were run by corrupt political rings.

These hangouts were usually saloons with hotel accommodations on the upper floors. The man who ran them was always a minor politician, controlling the vote of a nether city ward. At the same time he was a fence and receiver of stolen goods. He took the stamps which his yeggs had stolen from post offices and converted them into cash, for a 20 per cent commission. If any of the bank notes happened to be torn or scorched as the result of the explosion, he likewise converted them into clean currency for a fee. Again, he was the official fixer for the yeggs who abode under his roof, making arrangements with the local police, passing a share of the proceeds of robberies to local powers and passing the word of alarm to his criminals in case public feeling was about to force police action. Finally, he acted as a professional bondsman, employer of attorneys, banker and lender to the robbing fraternity. He was, in fact, the central figure in the business of safe blowing—and he still exists.

In the hangouts kept by such men the burglar gangs got together, spent the proceeds of their raids, enjoyed the grosser pleasures, and planned their forthcoming robberies. Thence the scouts went out to look for new "marks" to be robbed.

How the Safe-Crackers Work

The leader of a safe-crackers' gang knew enough, after some sad reverses, to stay away from the cities

and the bigger banks and confine his operations to smaller communities, mainly towns so insignificant as to employ no night watchman or only a solitary officer, who might be held up, tied, gagged and rendered harmless. Rural regions, where banks in trifling villages were the depositories for a scattered farming population, were the favorite marks. When this captain of burglars wanted a new bank to rob he usually went to a public library and read through the newspapers of the surrounding territory for bank statements, in order to find which banks had plenty of cash on hand. Having made a list of half a dozen possible marks, he sent out his young bronk or scout to look over these various locations and see which offered the best chance of a neat job and sure getaway.

The youthful robber went to the various towns on the regular passenger trains, dressed like a salesman and usually carrying what appeared to be a sample case and sometimes was a kit of tools. The first thing the scout observed was the position of the bank building with reference to the other buildings of the town. He liked a bank that stood off by itself and shied at one located next to the rustic hotel or any other building inhabited at night. When the young marauder found a bank to his liking, he strolled in, asked for change of a large bill, engaged the teller in conversation, went over to the writing desk and jotted down some empty memoranda and meantime let his eye rove all over the place. He noted what kind of safe was in the bank, whether there was a burglar alarm and whether there was a night watchman or rooms overhead in which anyone might be sleeping in the night.

Having satisfied himself in these respects, the scout went out and looked over the town in more detail. He stayed at least a day and a night if conditions were favorable, to find out what the habits of the night policeman might be, how early the citizens were thoroughly asleep, at what hours in the early morning the freight and passenger trains pulled out, what cover the surrounding country offered for an overland getaway and many other details useful to the raiders. Then he sent for the rest of the gang or went back and got them.

The chief of such a gang was usually the man who

Left: The scene of a partially successful bank robbery at Mount Wolf, Pa., December 21, 1921. The outer shells of the safe were blown open, but the burglars could not get inside the inner strong-box in the time at their disposal. Center: A store job in Wisconsin a year earlier, in which the oxy-acetylene torch was used. Right: What the cracksmen left behind them in Henry County, Ind., when they found themselves unable to carry away their loot and their equipment. One tank contains acetylene gas, the other oxygen; and a noteworthy feature is the fire-extinguisher which the crooks carried against the possibility of an accident in the use of the flame.

Three typical instances of safe-cracking, showing what the premises looked like after the yeggs had gone

knew how to use the soup. About midnight on some night in the spring, fall or winter (bank yeggs did not operate in the summer because the nights were too brief) this leader dropped off a freight train with another member of his crew or alone. He always left the train at the next town or outside the yards and walked into the town to be robbed, where he met the scout or other members of the gang, who were already on the ground or had come by an earlier train. At an hour determined in advance by the scout, the gang slipped into the town, all armed and one man carrying the few tools and the deadly soup. Everyone was dressed to look as little like a robber as possible.

The first work was to lie in wait for the night officer, spring out on him with levelled revolvers and take him captive. After he had been trussed up under guard of one of the crew, the others went to a blacksmith shop and borrowed a sledge and crowbar, with which they opened a convenient window in the bank building.

The man guarding the captive officer was now stationed outside the bank as a lookout, while the others worked inside. The cup was rapidly prepared and the first shot of nitro poured in. As soon as it had seeped into the crevice, the cap was set off and there was an explosion which usually tore off or bent back the outer steel sheet of the safe door. This explosion made no very loud report if the yegg who did the blasting was an expert. He knew just how much soup to use and how to confine it so that the detonation was no greater than that of a revolver. Outside any kind of substantial building it could hardly be heard and it was seldom enough to waken a sleeping town, especially in the day when the automobile backfire was coming to be a sound more common than the crowing of cocks.

As soon as the smoke lifted, the soup expert went back to work and fired the next shot on the second casing. Then he fired again and again until he had torn the stout door apart and opened the way to the inner kiester. Usually he had to fire two or three more shots against this stout little receptacle before his job was complete. Then, if luck was with him, the robber chieftain led his men back out of town, pumped a few miles on a handcar, caught a freight train toward the city where his hangout was situated and often was safely home in his hotel before the robbed town awoke and discovered that its policeman had been shackled and its bank burglarized.

The general reader suffers under the same misapprehensions as to the noise of nitro-glycerine explosions that afflict him in respect to safe drilling. He is still back in the old days of the drill and the black powder. As a matter of fact, expert bank yeggs are likely to wake the communities in which they operate about once in five times, and then usually through some miscalculation, a bit of bad scouting or the wakefulness of some sick person or night-walking parent. I have known of numerous cases in which bank burglars of this type fired fifteen to twenty shots of nitro against the doors of the vault, safe and inner strongbox without waking a single sleeper. Nor is this accomplished by wrapping the safe in blankets and carpets, as often assumed. Burglars use such stuffing or muffling when it is handy, but not in the case of bank safes. The art of comparative silence rests upon the skillful handling of the soup and upon nothing else except picking out a substantial bank building that will more or less confine any sound.

With Soup and Torch

The time it takes to open a bank safe of good make is a point of interest. I believe it safe to say that the average number of explosions required to open the bank safes such as were used in smaller communities ten years ago is about twelve. By the time the yegg technician affixes his cup, lets the soup seep in, pulls and pries away one loose casing and prepares for the next shot, he will have expended fifteen minutes on each explosion. Perhaps, if luck is with him,

A typical screwdoor safe which, while presumably vulnerable to attack by explosion or by torch, would resist such treatment for more time than the cracksman has at his disposal, and hence is, for the present, immune from violence

he may work faster. Thus no burglar can expect to open such a safe in less than two to three hours. The yegg chiefs figured accordingly. When they had a first-class bank job to do they tried to get to work before midnight if possible, so that they could get out of town and away before 3 o'clock, leaving themselves a few hours of darkness for the first stages of their flight and a few hours more before the robbery was likely to be discovered and the alarm telegraphed and telephoned broadcast. In the summer, when there is a waxing light between 4 and 5 o'clock, the bank yeggs ceased their operations altogether, as I have said. Such blowing as was done in this season was usually confined to post office safes and small fry of that sort.

About fifteen years ago, when nitro-glycerine was already giving officers, bankers and safe-makers more than they wanted to deal with, reports began to come in of the burning open of safes by means of the oxy-acetylene torch. There had been a bruit of this thing for some time before and the safe-makers had been at work upon safes which might resist the fiery tongue of this new technical implement. Many and contradictory claims were made and the writer even conducted some experiments on safes, with the aid of yeggs whom he happened to know through crime reporting. The safe-makers, after issuing various manifestos, remained discreetly absent.

For a number of years the success of the acetylene torch against modern safes seemed to be in doubt, but

A strictly modern "box" of a different style

this was not due in any way to the successful measures of safe manufacturers but to the fact that an effective torch and its tanks of oxygen and acetylene gas form a heavy and unwieldy contrivance, not easily carried about without attracting attention. This fault limited the use of this new technical device of the robbers and still limits it to some extent, though the burglars have managed to reduce the size and weight of their outfits greatly. However, the torch has been applied to safes with disconcerting success in all parts of the country. The police blotters and reports of the bankers' associations will demonstrate this beyond dispute.

When events showed the manufacturers that the torch would bite through any of the safes in existence, they set themselves to the task of making a new box which would resist heat sufficiently to foil the robbers. The fundamental mis-

take in this line of experimentation must be apparent to the least technical mind. The steel which goes into the making of a safe must be fused, cast and forged, no matter what special ingredients it may contain to contribute to its high fusion point. It is certainly no feat of logic to reason that whatever may be fused once may be fused again and it is, of course, a fact that the welding torch develops temperatures quite high enough to melt any steel known. Nevertheless, a series of so-called manganese steel safes was issued and sold to many bankers under the claim that they could not be melted with the oxy-acetylene torch or that, owing to their special structure, they could not be melted without destroying the contents, in which case the burglars would leave them alone.

But these manganese steel safes, which were of heavy patterns and very expensive, elicited the unpleasant attentions of the gas yeggs as soon as they were installed, and the results were not encouraging. Without going into details, the reader's attention is called to the single typical instance of the reinforced manganese steel safe of the First National Bank of Orange Cove, California, which was burned open by gas yeggs on the night of December 7, 1921, after similar safes and vaults of other California banks had been robbed in the same way. This safe did not resist the acetylene flame, as I have photographs to show. Neither was the money destroyed. The robbers poured water on the parts of the safe not under the flame and, as soon as the smallest hole was cut, they flooded the interior, so that they had a water-cooled box on which to work. The whole operation consumed about forty-five minutes, if the estimates of the officers are reliable.

The safe which cannot be melted with the torch is as much a chimera as were those early safes with special packing that was to foil the old powder man's drill. The solution of the safe-maker's problem does not lie in high-fusion-point metal. What the acetylene flame will not do the electric welding-torch certainly will accomplish, and burglars may find ways of employing it sooner than is pleasant to contemplate.

While it is true that the acetylene torch will melt away any metal practicable for safes it is also a fact that the best and latest kinds of safe and vault doors are so heavy and so well constructed that the torch man cannot enter them in the time allowed him for a burglary, i. e., between Saturday night and Monday morning. Experiments made on behalf of the Federal Reserve Bank at Washington showed that a metal called infusite, a special cast iron alloyed with copper, resisted the torch seven times as long as ordinary steel, and vault doors made of this substance have been employed by the Government. The makers, however, do not claim that the torch will not melt infusite. They simply put their faith, as do the makers of the screwdoor safe, in big, heavy, expensive equipment, too ponderous for the cracksman or torchman to manage in the time nature gives him. The introduction of such doors for vaults is especially important to the renters of safe-deposit boxes, for reasons which appear elsewhere in this article.

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Safes and Safe-Breakers—II

(Continued from page 301)

Fact Versus Fiction

Here another disputed problem of safe-opening comes to mind. We are all familiar with the fictional heroes, a la Alias Jimmy Valentine, who rubbed their fingers to the quick on sandpaper and were then supposed to open safes by means of touch. It has been generally supposed that this was a purely romantic notion and that such feats could not be performed. All the yeggs I have ever consulted agreed that there was nothing to this claim and this writer has been one of the chief skeptics. Nevertheless, I have recently seen the feat performed in connection with the safes of Labor Leader Brindell in New York, who locked his strong-boxes and refused to open them. After many experts in the employ of the manufacturers had failed, an Italian safe mechanic and locksmith was summoned out of Grand Street to the District Attorney's office and he opened the safes within forty minutes, without the use of a single tool, merely by listening intently to the tumblers and employing both his sense of touch and a very complete knowledge of combinations and their number sequences. He afterwards demonstrated for me and explained how he worked. Without revealing this gentleman's business secrets, it may be said that only such combinations as have tumblers may be opened in this way and that the large bank safes are in no special danger from experts of this kind who might turn criminal.

Another invention which has figured extensively in the calculations of those whose business it is to prevent safe robberies is the automobile. When this means of rapid locomotion came into use it was expected that yeggs would adopt it and that there would be the devil to pay. But, except in isolated cases, nothing of the sort happened. The reasons are that there are too many automobiles and that pursuit and identification of a car employed by robbers in operations against country banks would be too easy. A car is too hard to hide and those escaping in it must stay on the roads, where the telegraph is certain to head them off. Overland flights afoot or recourse to the good old freight train are still the best methods known to the yegg. I believe, however, that the acetylene yeggs have employed cars to some extent, since they need a vehicle in which to transport their apparatus.

This was the situation ten or fifteen years ago: No safes had come into use among smaller banks that could not be broken with nitro, though a good many claims were made, which subsequent burglaries disproved. The acetylene torch was being rapidly introduced and safes specially built to resist its heat did nothing of the sort. (Nor have those devised in the meantime fared better.) The automobile had not been extensively used by bank robbers. Old-fashioned bank banditry or holdup was practically extinct.

The Screwdoor Safe and the Time Equation

At this point invention stepped in once more and there followed a new revolution in bank robbing from which resulted the conditions prevailing today. Safe manufacturers had seen that the only real hope of defeating the burglars lay in very large and heavy steel boxes, which because of their very ponderousness could not be opened with either nitro or the torch in the few hours allowed the robber for his work.

As a result of experimentation along this line there was gradually evolved what is commonly termed the screwdoor safe. There are various makes of this kind of strong-box and several special styles. I do not know that one is better than another and I speak of the screwdoor safe as a type, not as the product of any one maker. Such great costly safes began to find their way into the larger banks a good many years ago, but their high price kept them out of the rustic financial houses until most recent times, when the safe-makers began to construct somewhat more economical models and the bankers began to see that nothing else was worth while. Today the screwdoor safe has been introduced all over the country and banks not so equipped are rare.

The immediate result of this invention and its widespread adoption has been the nation-wide defeat of the soup yegg. To state the case accurately, the screwdoor safe can be blown with nitro. It probably can also be opened with the torch. It is not in a technical sense invulnerable, but practically it is just that. The time that would be necessary for the success of either attack

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is not available between nightfall and the next morning. All bank burglars know this and they pass the screwdoor safes by.

On its face this condition means the end of the era of safe burglary by means of explosives, and there are a great many signs pointing to this development. But one who has watched the half century of conflict between the robber and the banks is not too easily convinced. It would be more conservative to say that the screwdoor safe means the end of bank burglary with such technical implements as are now in the hands of the criminals.

Some of the results of this defeat of the bank burglars are already largely and painfully apparent. The first of them was the shifting of burglars' attacks from the bank safe itself to the safe-deposit vaults, which means, of course, that the persons concerned in the losses are no longer the bankers but the clients. The deposit vaults, carefully as they may be protected in most cases, are not inclosed in screwdoor safes and the robber finds it easy enough to crack them open and attack the boxes inside with nothing more formidable than a sledge or a can-opener, an implement fashioned out of a short crowbar or jimmy and designed to cut the sheet iron or steel of safes and strongboxes as a kitchen can-opener cuts a salmon tin.

The widespread ownership of easily negotiable Liberty Bonds figured in this change of attack. The burglars have been able to count, in the last five years, on finding these bonds in almost every box they might break open, and the losses in some of these burglaries have consequently been extremely heavy. Naturally, another shift in the burglar's point of attack is involved in this change. The banks which have safe-deposit vaults are the larger institutions in major towns and cities. Consequently the old yegg has come in from the "sticks" and is once more an urban criminal.

The Bank Bandit, 1921 Model

But still more interesting, as a result of the invention and introduction of the screw-door safe, is the revival of bank banditry, which was originated by such robbers as the Jameses, just after the Civil War, and was driven out by the telegraph and the railroad twenty years later. And a phase of this restoration that will interest inventors is the belated adoption of the automobile by criminals of this class.

Many old yeggs, unable to combat the screwdoor safes, have tossed away their rubber bottles of nitro and picked up the bandit's revolver. But, unlike their notorious forebears, they do not go after country banks and ride to cover in the wilderness of the hills and forests on horseback. Instead they raid the banks of cities, even those of New York itself (as in the Hamby case in Brooklyn, three years ago), and dash to the cover of urban jungles in motor cars.

Two representative cases will show the significant aspects of this mutation. In Detroit not long ago a gang of ex-yeggs painted up a motor car in faithful imitation of the official police cars, which are allowed the right of way over all traffic. They mounted an official police signal whistle on their counterfeit car, dressed one of their number in a policeman's uniform and drove to a bank in the heart of the business section. Here three men got out, walked into the bank, levelled revolvers at the officials, swept a big haul of cash and bonds into a bag and ran out into the street. They sprang into the car and rushed through the streets with the police whistle tooting on their dashboard and the traffic officers all along the line of their retreat holding back the other vehicles to let the "police car" flash past to the slum district of the city and immediate cover. This is but an elaboration of the plan used by Hamby in attacking the Brooklyn bank, when he hired a taxicab and kept it waiting with the engine running.

The other case in point deals with a bank at Sandy Springs, Maryland, which has been attacked five times by yeggs because of its exposed position. After the first attack the bankers took such precautions that the nocturnal burglars were driven off in four succeeding raids. But more recently, after the yeggs had turned to banditry, a gang of them invaded the town in broad daylight, held up and robbed the bank, killed an official who offered resistance and escaped with their loot. Later some of the bandits were caught and sent to prison for life.

Apparently, for the time being, the burglar has been stopped by inventions too strong for any tools now at his command. He has gone back to the primitive tactics of his ancestors until further inventions let him take the field again with a new technique.

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