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THE PHANTOM AUTO

Continued from page 10

long, slender fingers pressed tip to tip, listened to the end.

"Are you sure you saw an auto?" he demanded.

"Certainly I saw it!" blurted the reporter. "I not only saw it, I smelled it. Just to convince myself that it was real I tossed my cane in front of the thing, and it smashed it to toothpicks."

"Perhaps, then, if everything is as you say, the auto actually has wings," remarked the scientist.

"You mean," Hatch inquired eagerly, "that the phantom may be an auto-aeroplane affair, and that it actually does fly?"

"It's not at all impossible."
"I had an idea of something like that myself," Hatch explained, "and questioned every person within a mile or so; but I didn't get anything."

"The perfect stretch of road there might be the very place for some daring experimenter to get up sufficient speed to soar a short distance in a light machine," continued the scientist.

"Light machine!" Hatch repeated. "Did I tell you that this car had four people in it?"

"Four people!" exclaimed the scientist. "Dear me! Dear me! That makes it very different. Of course, four people would be too great a lift for—"

For ten minutes he sat silent, and tiny cobwebby lines appeared in his dome like brow. Then he queried, "I suppose what you really want to learn is if the car is a—material one, and to whom it belongs?"

"That's it," agreed the reporter.

"Do you happen to know a fast, long distance bicycle rider?" demanded the scientist abruptly. "If you can arrange with a fast rider who can go a distance of thirty, forty, or fifty miles, we may end this little affair without difficulty."

Under these circumstances Professor Van Dusen met the famous Jimmie Thalauer, the world's champion long distance bicyclist. He held every record from five miles up to and including six hours, had twice won the six day race, and was altogether a master in his field.

"You ride the bicycle?" inquired the scientist.

"Well, some," confessed the champion modestly.

"Can you keep up with an automobile for a distance of say thirty or forty miles?"

"I can keep up with anything that ain't got wings," was the response.

The Thinking Machine examined the champion as a curiosity. In the seclusion of his laboratory he had never had an opportunity of meeting just such a worldly young person.

"How fast can you ride, Mr. Thalauer?" he asked at last.

"I'm ashamed to tell you," confided the champion in a hushed voice. "I can ride so fast that I scare myself." He paused a moment. "But it seems to me," he said, "if there's thirty or forty miles to do, I ought to do it on a motor cycle."

"Now that's just the point," explained the Thinking Machine. "A motor cycle makes noise, and if anything of that sort could have been used we should have hired a fast automobile. This proposition briefly is: I want you to ride without lights behind an automobile which may also run without lights, and find out where it goes. No occupant of the car must suspect that it is followed."

"Without lights?" repeated the champion. "Gee! Rubber shoe, eh?"

The Thinking Machine looked his bewildered.

"Yes, that's it," Hatch answered for him. So arrangements were concluded, and then and there the Thinking Machine gave definite and conclusive instructions to the champion. While these apparently bore broadly on the problem in hand, they conveyed absolutely no inkling of his plan to the reporter. At the end the champion rose to go.

"You're a most extraordinary young man, Mr. Thalauer," commented the Thinking Machine, not without admiration for the sturdy, powerful figure.

Night! Utter blackness, relieved only by a white, ribbon like road which winds away mistily under a starless sky. Shadowy hedges line either side, and occasionally a tree thrusts itself upward out of the somberness. The murmur of human voices in the shadows, then the crackling chug of an engine, and an automobile moves slowly, without lights, into the road. There is the sudden clatter of an engine at high speed, and the car rushes away.

From the hedge comes the faint rustle of leaves as of wind stirring, then a figure moves impalpably. A moment and it becomes a separate entity; a quick movement, and the creak of a leather bicycle saddle. Silently the single figure, bent low over the handle bars, moves after the car with ever increasing momentum.

Then a long, desperate race. For mile after mile, mile after mile, the auto goes on. The silent cyclist has crept up almost to the rear axle, and hangs there doggedly as a racer to his pace. On and on they rush together through the darkness, the chauffeur moving with a perfect knowledge of his road, the single rider behind clinging on grimly with set teeth. The powerful, piston like legs move up and down to the beat of the engine.

At last, with dust dry throat and stinging, aching eyes, the cyclist feels the pace slacken, and faintly he drops back out of sight. It

is only by sound that he follows now. The car stops; the cyclist is lost in the shadows.

For two or three hours the auto stands deserted and silent. At last the voices are heard again, the car stirs, moves away, and the cyclist drops in behind. Another race which leads off in another direction. Finally, from a knoll, the lights of a city are seen. Ten minutes elapse, the auto stops, the head lights flare up, and more leisurely it proceeds on its way.

On the following evening The Thinking Machine and Hatch called upon Fielding Stanwood, president of the Fordyce National Bank. Stanwood looked at them with interrogative eyes.

"We called to inform you, Mr. Stanwood," explained The Thinking Machine, "that a box of securities, probably United States bonds, is missing from your bank."

"What!" exclaimed Stanwood, and his face paled. "Robbery?"

"I only know that the bonds were taken out of the vault to-night by Joseph Marsh, your assistant cashier," said the scientist, "and that he, together with three other men, left the bank with the box, and are now at—a place I can name."

Stanwood was staring at him in amazement. "You know where they are?" he demanded.

"I said I did," replied the scientist shortly. "Then we must inform the police at once, and—"

"I don't know that there has been an actual crime," interrupted the scientist. "I do know that every night for a week these bonds have been taken out through the connivance of your watchman, and in each instance have been returned intact before morning. They will be returned to-night. Therefore, I would advise, if you act, not to do so until the four men return with the bonds."

It was a singular party which met in the private office of President Stanwood at the bank just after midnight. Marsh and three companions, formally under arrest, were present, as were President Stanwood, The Thinking Machine, and Hatch, besides detectives. Marsh had the bonds under his arms when he was taken. He talked freely when questioned.

"I will admit," he said without hesitating, "that I have acted beyond my rights in removing the bonds from the vault here, but there is no ground for prosecution. I am a responsible officer of this bank, and have violated no trust. Nothing is missing, nothing is stolen. Every bond that went out of the bank is here."

"But why—why did you take the bonds?" demanded Stanwood.

Marsh shrugged his shoulders.

"It's what has been called a 'get rich quick' scheme," said The Thinking Machine. "Mr. Hatch and I made some investigations to-day. Mr. Marsh and these other three are interested in a business venture which is ethically dishonest, but which is within the law. They have sought backing for the scheme amounting to about a million dollars. Those four or five men of means with whom they have discussed the matter have called each night for a week at Marsh's country place. It was necessary to make them believe that there was already a million or so in the scheme, so these bonds were borrowed and represented to be owned by themselves. They were taken to and fro between the bank and his home in a kind of automobile."

And his statement of the affair proved to be correct. Marsh and the others admitted it. It was while The Thinking Machine was homeward bound that he explained the phantom auto affair to Hatch.

"The phantom auto, as you call it," he said, "is the vehicle in which the bonds were moved about. The phantom idea came merely by chance. On the night the vehicle was first noticed it was rushing along, we'll say, to reach Marsh's house in time for an appointment. A road map will show you that the most direct line from the bank to Marsh's was through The Trap. If an automobile should go half way through there, then cut across the Stocker estate to the other road, the distance would be lessened by a good five miles. This saving at first was of course valuable, so the car in which they rushed into The Trap was merely taken across the Stocker estate to the road in front. Of course they always returned to the bank by another route."

"But how?" demanded Hatch. "There is no road there."

"I learned by telephone from Mr. Stocker that there is a narrow walk from a very narrow foot gate in Stocker's wall on The Trap leading through the grounds to the other road. The phantom auto wasn't really an auto at all—it was merely two big motor cycles arranged with seats and a steering apparatus. The French army has been experimenting with them. The motor cycles are, of course, separate machines, and as such it was easy to trundle them through a narrow gate and across to the other road. The seats are light; they can be carried under the arm. I knew instantly what the auto must be when I knew there was no road through the wall—only a gateway."

"But what did Jimmie Thalauer do for you?"

"He waited in the road at the other end of the footpath, the opposite end from The Trap," the scientist explained. "When the auto was brought through and put together he followed it to Marsh's home, and from there to the bank. The rest of it you and I worked out to-day. It's merely logic, Mr. Hatch, logic."

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