

SEVEN BIG BILLS

By S. I. Kishor

Hank had no intention of taking those bills, but it looked as if he were being forced into it!

HANK was working overtime as usual. They used to have two boys; now one had to do. Old Bushke, the cashier, had gone home; so had the three stenographers and the assistant manager. The boss had gone into the shipping room. Hank had to stick around and finish sealing and stamping a stack of envelopes that looked as high as the Rockefeller Building.

The sponge-stick went dry and Hank stepped over to the water cooler in the outer office to fill it. His eye lingered on the boss' private office. That was the kind of office Hank wanted to have if he ever went into business, after the war. Oriental carpet, leather armchairs, desk big enough to sleep on. Big safe—Hank's uncertain grey eyes became fixed on the safe door. It was swinging very slightly open. What was the matter with old Bushke to leave it like that? Suppose a stranger came in?

He left the sponge-stick on the water-cooler and went into the boss' office, hesitantly. Yes, the safe door was open. His hand on the heavy steel flange to slap it shut, Hank peeped inside. Whee—thousand-dollar bills! Not one, but a pile! Five—six—was it more? He put in his hand and spread the bills a bit, to count them. . . Seven. . . He picked them up, holding magic in his hand. Today was payday and what had he got? One lousy twenty-dollar bill. A guy could go to South America with these. . . could lie in the sun and listen to Spanish rhumbas and

meet those *senoritas* like they had on the travel posters next door. . . buy that pink dress his sister Mary had looked at so long in the store on Fourteenth Street last Saturday. . . get Ma that sewing machine she was always yipping about. . . buy toy guns for the younger kids. . . just these bills and what couldn't a guy do.

He laughed wistfully, and was about to slide them back, when the outer office door opened and slammed. Hank was horribly startled. It was the boss' step. There was no time to put the money back. With one hand Hank shoved the bills into his pocket, with the other he pushed the safe door back so that it looked closed. He stepped into the outer office so quickly that he could grab the sponge-stick and stand by the water-cooler and start filling the stick, just as if he'd not been in Mr. Green's office at all.

"Listen, Hank," the boss was saying, as he shoved a large wrapped package into the boy's arms. "Never mind the mail; grab this package and get it over to this address on the double. He's got to get it before he closes at six. I'll leave the office door on the latch so you can get back in if I'm gone." Mr. Green almost pushed Hank out. "Step on it, son. I'll give you supper money."

Shaking all over, Hank stepped into the elevator and shot down. Seven thousand-dollar bills stuck in his trouser pocket. Suppose the boss looked in the safe before Hank got back. . .

Hank spent his own forty cents on a cab to the other office which wasn't far but would have taken a lot of pushing through crowds. He delivered the package to the girl at the information desk. She gave him a receipt for it, and smiled. She was dark and cute and he would have to come back next time and talk to her, but today those bills were burning a hole in his pocket. He would have no peace till he got them back in the safe.

He was running down the street when a thought stopped him. He couldn't go back as long as the boss was there. He couldn't go near the safe holding the money until the boss had left.

THE clock through the window of a little diner he was passing said six-fifteen. The boss would certainly leave by seven. Mrs. Green always called him up and raised Cain if he hadn't left by that time. Hank decided to have his supper before going back to finish the mailing.

He went in; the place was steamy and dirty looking. But some men were eating. They sat at tiny white tables in their overalls. At the counter two men were sitting and not eating. They were better dressed than the others; their lips shifted cigars in their mouths. They stopped talking when he came in and looked him over contemptuously.

Frankfurters, French fries, coffee. It was hard to get the food down, with that money on his mind. Jeez, if the boss looked in the safe. . . Hank was the last one in the office. He hadn't been in the place more than two months. He was only working till he was seventeen and could enlist in the Navy. Gee, if something got pinned on him and he couldn't enlist...! The thought made him frantic. His sister Mary was going to marry Bill Kelly, the cop's son, on his next furlough. What a monkey-wrench it would be if Hank got

into trouble. Kelly'd never let his son Bill marry into a family where there was jail trouble.

It was four minutes to seven. Hank got down from the high stool and called the office from the little phone on the wall. There was no answer.

His dinner cost forty cents. He put his hand into his pocket for the change. His fingers met only two nickels. He realized that he had spent most of his change for the taxi. The cashier was watching him with a suspicious expression.

"Whaddya do if a guy's lost his dough?" Hank began, as if in jest. The man looked at him coldly.

"We'd be tickled silly. Put him to work washing dishes. Can't get no guys to work for you, these days."

But that meant time. Hank hadn't time. He'd have to use his own twenty-dollar bill, which had just been paid him that day. But he couldn't take out a roll like that in a public restaurant.

"Guess I'll go in the washroom a minute."

"You'll have to hold it, bud. We ain't got none here."

Hank involuntarily glanced at the two better-dressed men on their stools. They exchanged an alert, sly look that somehow worried him. But there was nothing else he could do. Trying to detach the topmost bill, hoping it was the twenty, he pulled it out then quickly shoved it back in his pocket. It was one of the thousands. There was no help for it, he had to take out the roll.

The cashier's eyes went narrow and his face turned dull red as he watched. Hank pulled out the twenty, shoved the rest of the money into an inside pocket of his coat, collected his change and went out of the diner.

The street was deserted and dark and Hank felt he had better take a taxi back to

his office. But there was no cab in sight. He began to run.

Before he reached the corner he felt his arms violently yanked from behind; his elbows were being forced together, giving him a racking pain. He yelled, and a fist crashed in his face. He was pulled backward and flung down a short flight of stone steps.

After a dizzy while, when he didn't know if he had fainted or not, Hank raised himself to a sitting position on the lowest step. He didn't have to put his hand into his pocket to know the money was gone. But he felt for it, anyway. Not only was the money gone, the pocket itself was ripped out.

Hank was crying as he dragged his legs up to street level. He was done for, all right. This was the end of Hank Johnson. Might as well keep going west and jump into the Hudson. Maybe they'd give him ten years. Who was going to believe him, that he wasn't stealing the money? Who'd believe that the bills had been stolen from him. It'd be jail all right. Mary'd be shamed. Even if Bill wouldn't give her up, it'd be trouble between them for always. . . Maybe it would be better not to go home at all. He could enlist under a different name, claim he was seventeen.

Mary would cry her eyes out, especially when she heard about the money. Maybe she'd think he was a thief. And Ma. . . At least he'd go home and tell them. Mary'd believe him. Ma would believe him. Dad wouldn't. . .

He had to wait a while and hold onto the rail while he was sick.

AT THE corner of his home block, Mary was standing. Her face, like a cute little cat's, was all puckered up and anxious. There was a cop standing beside

her. Hank felt a shiver of terror. It was Patrolman Kelly, Bill's dad, big and easy-going. All the boys on the street liked him. But now. . .

"There he is!" Mary came running. "Good land, Hank, what happened to you? Oh, we've been so worried! Look, Mr. Kelly! See! They beat him up!"

"Yup, did a job on him, all right." Kelly frowned down at Hank in the semi-darkness. "Must have been some of that cashier's gang. Got to take you along to the station, Hank."

Hank drew away. "Mr. Kelly, if you'll just listen—"

"Ah, you've got nothing to worry about. Just a few questions the captain wants to ask ya about that old guy Bushke. You know about it, don't ya? Boss found the safe door open, no dough. Called the cops. They caught up with your cashier at Penn Station with the seven grand sewed into a lining of his coat."

"S—sewed—"

"Yup." Kelly twirled his nightstick. "He talked all right. Smart guy, that one. Stuck seven counterfeit thousand-dollar bills in the safe so the boss wouldn't get wise right off and was goin' to phone in he was sick—from Canada! He'll take a rap on fake money, too, if they ever find the bills he said he put there. Now you'd better be tellin' me, who was the hooligan that beat ye up?"

Heaven was right there and Mary was an angel and the cop was St. Peter. Hank laughed out loud, happy as a newborn babe.

"Beat me up? Heck, no, Mr. Kelly. A guy just bumped me and I fell down a flight o' steps!"

THE END