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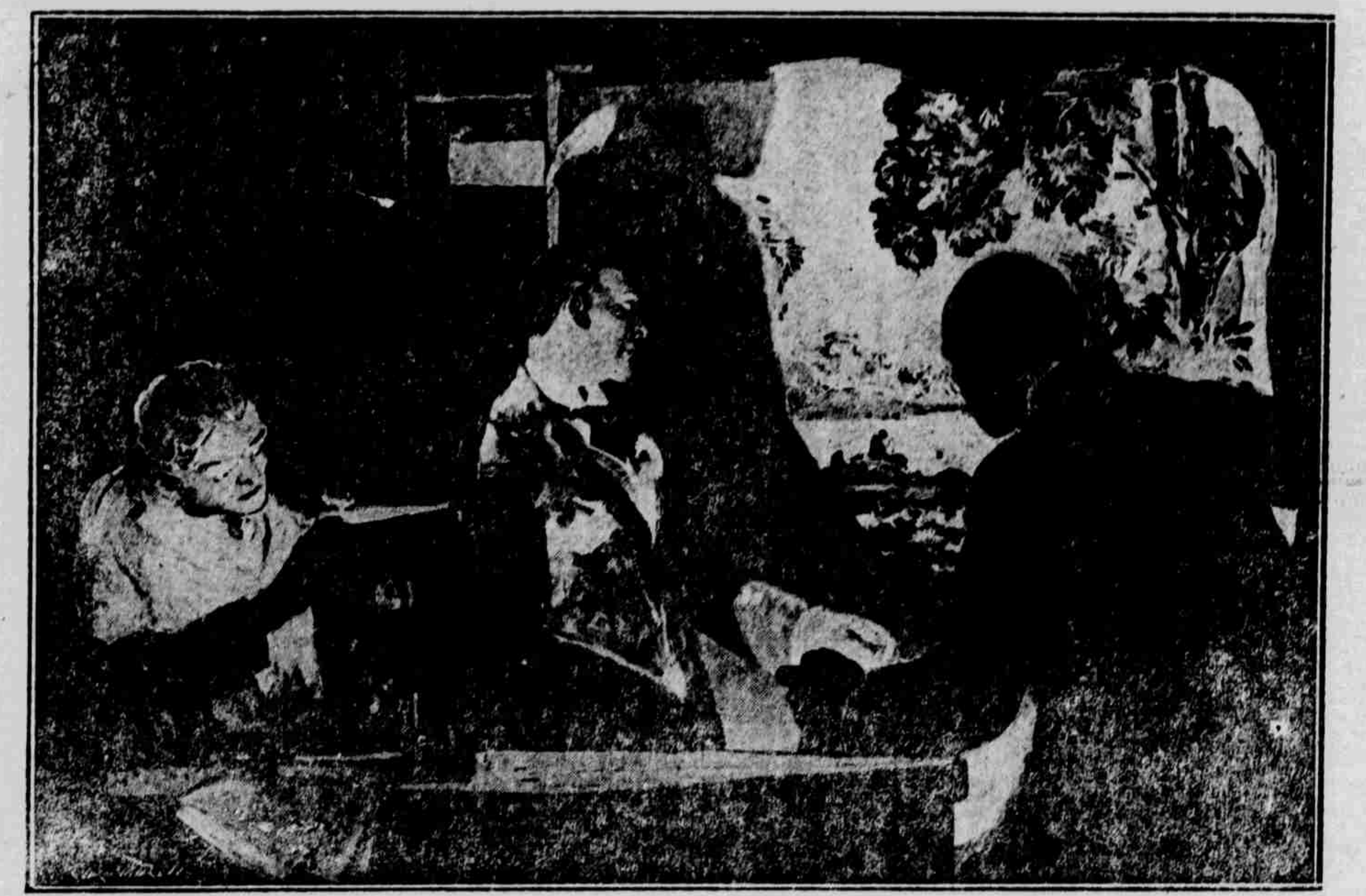
The Room on the Roof

By Will Payne



A brilliant funnel of light shot out from the magic lantern, striking the screen

Those who believe that all the mystery stories have been told, and that there are no new kinds, have the surprise of their lives coming when they read the first installment of the new Blue Ribbon serial, "The Room on the Roof," by Will Payne, which is published in this issue of our weekly magazine. It is not only a new kind of mystery story but also a remarkable story of Chicago life, with all its thrills, adventures, complications, and climaxes and the most remarkable setting ever chosen for a novel—the roof of an 18-story skyscaper in the loop.

La Salle street, one of the world's great money markets; Wells street, the day and night life of the loop, the homes and haunts of society folk—all these figure in Mr. Payne's story of a crime committed on the roof of the skyscraper. Casting aside the timeworn trappings of the mystery novel, he has made an extraordinary motion picture invention the treasure trove of his tale, for possession of which all characters strive, and there is a wholesome charming love motif to lighten up the grim background. "Will Payne's best story," is the verdict of critics.

Mr. Payne knows his Chicago, as for many years he was a Chicago newspaper man. He has more than a dozen successful novels to his credit, together with scores of short stories, many of which deal accurately with Chicago life. He was born in Whiteside county, Illinois, is 57 years old, and at present makes his home in Paw Paw, Mich. Now you're ready to begin reading first installment.

FIRST INSTALLMENT.
The Double Cross.

ONE day in July, 1918, a big, trampish man trudged north across the Wells street bridge. It was Chicago weather at its worst, parboiled air making existence anywhere in the sun a sticky misery. The big man was not suitably dressed for it—a cloth hat instead of straw; coat and trousers too heavy. A short, ill-trimmed beard, the color of moldy straw, covered his face.

Three blocks north of the bridge he turned off Wells street and soon stood before a doorway of sooty brick beyond which a flight of dirty stairs now arose. His destination was the fifth floor and there was evidently no elevator. He cursed a little, and toiled up the stairs.

The door up there was labeled "Curlin Camera Company." Panting, sweat trickling into his beard, he moved the battered hat to the back of his head and entered a showroom, 20 feet square, where cameras, lenses, and the like were displayed in glass cases. Not a penny had been wasted to make the room attractive, and there was nobody in it. A door in the opposite partition, with the sign, "President" above it, stood ajar. The caller stepped over there, pushed the door open, and announced, "I'm looking for the boss."

A gangling, red faced man in shirt sleeves looked up from the desk within and snapped, like a slap in the face, "What you want?"

"You advertised for lens grinders," said the caller and smiled as he added, "I'm the best lens grinder you ever had in your shop."

His appearance savored not only of the tramp, but of impudence. There was a cast in his left eye, giving it a dead look. Somewhere behind the beard a grin seemed to lurk.

Simon Curlin, president of the camera company, was careless in dress himself; but he hated dirty people, he hated impudent people, he hated tramps. Irascibility was stamped all over him—in his long, red, leathery face, and smouldery eyes that seemed to peer angrily out at the world under eyebrows so faintly marked that the eyes looked bald. Sparse reddish gray hair stood up over his head. He took no pains to conceal the disfavor with which he viewed this applicant.

But he did desperately want lens grinders. War had combed the country of men, and set up an insatiable demand for lenses. This fellow might fill one of the gaps in his workshop temporarily. Grudgingly and grumpily, he asked him a few questions, and agreed to give him a trial. The man said his name was Adolph Krom, and beyond that Curlin did not care to inquire—lest he discover that it was his duty to turn the fellow over to a recruiting officer, instead of setting him to work in the shop.

He presently found, to his surprise, that Adolph Krom was an exceptionally skilled workman, capable of making the very finest lenses. Moreover, he did not belong to a union. Curlin hated unions. Krom staid on—soon appearing in decent clothes, beard and hair presentably trimmed. Curlin began to favor him with a good opinion. The man was not only skilled at his trade, but intelligent, with many valuable little suggestions.

The camera factory occupied the top floor, which—behind the showroom and offices in front—was a dingy and barnlike loft divided by a number of plain board partitions that reached only two-thirds of the way to the ceiling. From these partitioned spaces one might catch a smell of new wood, or of leather, or of paint and varnish. Krom was in the biggest of them, occupying an L of the building, with four windows overlooking the alley. But greenish liquid [illegible] in long glass tubs furnished most of the light—a light [illegible] and ghastly. Here [illegible] swiftly revolving discs from which arose the purr of diamond dust biting, with gentle insistence, into glass.

A den, 15 feet square, was partitioned off from one corner of this room, the newness of the boards showing that this partition had been recently erected. The door to it was often open for ventilation. From his workbench Krom could look into the den, which provoked a very lively curiosity in his mind.

It was occupied by a dry wisp of a man, only five feet tall and weighing hardly 100 pounds. His meager face bore a thin growth of grizzled whiskers, which he clawed with bony little hands. But by a comical fisfit this weazen face was capped by a noble brow thatched with curly gray hair. Below the eyebrows the man was a mere monkey; above the eyebrows he was a philosopher. Sometimes for hours he bent over a desk, absently plucking his beard or ruffling his hair. Sometimes he restlessly paced his cage.

Krom's fellow workmen held different opinions about the man in the cage. Some said he was a nut; others said he was an inventor. Krom proposed to find out for himself. The little man's name was Steinman.

Various persons—fellow workmen and others—who formed Krom's acquaintance in his hours of leisure observed that he had one odd taste in literature. That is, all newspaper reports of swindles seemed to have a peculiar fascination for him. He would read them with the greatest care, dwelling upon the details with an appreciative relish.

After he had been nine months at Curlin's, and he felt himself well established in his employer's regard, he took a week off, without notice, and went on a spree. In that state he was loquacious, and freely expounded a cynical philosophy of life, as follows:

"Get 'em to thinking there's money in it, and they'll believe anything."

"They's all suckers because they're all crooks."

"Ask the first man you meet to lend you $100. Tell him you want to give it to a poor widow with seven starving children and he'll tell you to go to hell. But tell him you're going to paste another cipher on the bill and change it at the bank for $1,000, and he'll fall for it."

"Gold bricks and green goods ar the easiest things in the world to sell because the sucker thinks he's getting something for nothing."

At the end of the week, being sober again, he returned to the camera factory and gravely informed Curlin that he'd been ill with the flu.

"You've been drunk!" said Curlin, who had no small change of mere politeness. But Krom was a very valuable workman and retained his job—with a satirical little grin behind his beard.

About that time the great Comboy-Larsen Company, world's largest makers of cameras and lenses, sent Curlin a polite note calling his attention to the fact that a shutter which he was using on some of his cameras infringed a patent held by them. They must ask him to desist from using the shutter or pay a moderate royalty. Curlin replied, in effect, that the shutter was his own invention and the Comboy-Larsen Company might go to the devil.

There followed long, costly and bitterly-contested litigation, in which Curlin—to his unspeakable wrath—was finally worsted. In this litigation the Comboy-Larsen company was represented by the eminent law firm of Ellis, Martindale, Harwood & Smith, with offices in the top story of the Belknap building on La Salle street. Krom was a witness for Curlin and so became interestedly aware of Nathaniel Harwood, third member of the law firm.

One April evening in 1921, Nathaniel Harwood stood at the arched granite entrance of the Belknap building, evidently waiting for some one. The canyon-deep money street—below Madison—was but scantily populated at that hour, the city's evening attractions lying elsewhere. Yet there would be, now and then, a woman to look at Harwood standing by the entrance. There were always women to look at him.

Not only a very handsome man, but handsome in a distinguished way. The perfection of his clothes was distinguished also—no mere creased and varnished newness, as of a tailor's dummy. The lounging attitude of his slender figure, negligently supported by a silver handled walking stick, was graceful without posing. He was, in fact, 43, but the threads of gray at his temples, or here and there in his sleek, dark mane, gave a note of achievement. The contrast with them made his lightly tanned face seem only more youthful. Gray blue Irish eyes surveyed the street with a pleasant, assured look.

A cab drew up to the curb. From it emerged big Krom and little Steinman, the former carrying a bulky canvas bag of the sort popularly called a "telescope." Harwood led them back to the one elevator that was still running, and they went up to the 18th floor. There he let them into a big, dark room containing a dozen desks; then past smaller rooms, also dark—all part of the legal establishment of Ellis, Martindale, Harwood & Smith—to his own private office in the corner of the building where he turned on the electric lights.

This private office was, perhaps, too spacious and too lavishly furnished for mere professional uses. The hangings at the broad windows were of tawny, plaited silk. The long and shiny desk of expensive wood had silver trimmings. Upon it stood two massive silver candlesticks supporting clusters of electric bulbs. Above the low book shelves, of the same handsome wood as the desk, and delicately carved, the walls were covered with tapestry. All this might have seemed much more suitable to a luxurious woman's boudoir than to a lawyer's office.

But Harwood was a widower. His only child, a daugh-