

# Deciphering Columbus Mysteries

## James Raymond's Suicide in Solitary Cell Helped Solve Prison Fire Details

**Convict Made Oral Confession, Then Asked To Be Put in 'Hole.'**

By WILLIAM H. MARKS.

THREE months after the Ohio Penitentiary fire, frantic telephone calls brought Joseph D. Clear, deputy state fire marshal, to the prison in jig time.

He found Warden Preston E. Thomas wearing out the green carpet in his office with nervous strides.

"I've been hunting you for hours," said the warden. "James Raymond has committed suicide."

While Clear tried to assimilate the catastrophe that threatened to destroy three months work, Warden Thomas outlined the details.

James Raymond, a Summit county robber, had been the chief hope of investigators striving to solve the prison fire, in which 322 prisoners lost their lives. Now he was dead.

"Raymond came to us yesterday afternoon," the warden related. "He wanted to be put in solitary because he was being threatened by other prisoners. Before we put him in the 'hole,' he talked. We didn't get it on paper. This morning, he was found dead in solitary. He hanged himself."

Clear looked his consternation. "What did he tell before he died?" he asked.

"He admitted giving Grate and Gibbons some candles," replied the warden.

### An Oral Confession

Clear considered this information thoughtfully. Raymond's confession clinched facts already in his possession. But Raymond's confession was merely oral. Clear doubted if it would hold in court.

"Raymond would have clinched the case," he said. "It was through him I had hoped to make the others talk. Well, we'll have to get busy."

"Anything you want around here," promised the warden, "you can have."

"We've got to make Grate and Gibbons talk," declared the deputy fire marshal. The warden nodded.

When Clear left the penitentiary,



an hour or so later, the details of his plan had been worked out. It was a subtle plan. Clear hoped it would work. It depended on the quality of somebody's intestinal fortitude.

Meanwhile, there were mysterious occurrences within the prison. The furnishings of the cell in which Raymond had died had been removed. These were now returned to the cell. Blankets, a mattress, a short length of rope. Last of all, Raymond's shoes.

Soon the suicide cell had a new occupant. The new arrival was Hugh Gibson, like Raymond, a robber serving a long sentence. Gibson was a suspect in the prison fire plot.

His first survey of the cell let him know what he was in for. There in the corner were the blankets Raymond had stood upon. From that grating hung the length of improvised rope. Underneath the rope were Raymond's empty shoes. And long hours of solitude stretched ahead.

That night, Deputy Fire Marshal Clear did not undress. He slept in a chair near the telephone in his

home. He already had awakened, when, early the next morning, the telephone buzzed.

Clear grabbed the receiver. He recognized Warden Thomas' voice.

"It worked like a charm," said the warden over the wire. "I'll get them in my office. Hop down right away."

There was a group of men in the warden's office when Clear arrived a

few minutes later. Warden Thomas and his personnel officer, Captain E. E. Stout, and two convicts. One of the convicts was Hugh Gibson. The other was Clinton Grate, familiarly known as "Cotton," a young and not unhandsome prisoner. He had bold features.

Gibson was nervous. His hands strayed continually to his neck, and when they came away the red, raw welt he nursed was visible.

"Gibson doesn't feel well," volunteered Warden Thomas, humorously, with the wisdom of a man who knows the value of humor. "A rope around a man's neck makes a poor breakfast. He hanged himself three times, Joe, and he was almost gone when Alec cut him down this morning."

Alec was the trusty who looked after the solitary cells.

Clear looked at the other convict,

**Grate and Gibson Also 'Talked' But Blamed Victim of Blaze.**

Grate. Grate, too, had been placed in solitary, in the cell above the suicide cell, so the two convicts could communicate with each other. There was no welt on Grate's neck.

### Talk to Gibson

"We'd better talk to Gibson first," said Clear.

Grate was led out of the room, and Gibson told his story, willingly enough about his suicide attempt, but haltingly and guardedly about the fire plot.

"I almost did it the third time," he said. "The first time I got cold feet, or the blankets slipped, or something. I thought Grate was going to, too. Just before the last time, I called up to him, and he didn't answer. I thought he was—you know."

"Who touched off this fire?" asked Clear, abruptly.

"I couldn't say."

"Have you learned since the fire?" persisted Clear.

"Yes. Skarko. 'Little Jeff' Skarko."

Clear and Warden Thomas exchanged glances. Skarko had died in the fire. Gibson was blaming the fire on a dead man.

Gibson told, among other things, that he had carried a bucket of oil up into the J and K block, where the fire started, on the afternoon of the fire.

When Grate was brought in, he corroborated this fact. He also blamed Skarko as being the "torch" man. He told other things.

"Well," said the warden, when the two convicts had been taken away, "they're both liars. They would blame a dead man."

"But they talked," rejoined Clear. "They practically admitted they had a part in the fire. And they confirmed the facts we already have. We'll work on that pair again."

And so, later, another trap was laid for Grate and Gibson, and they fell into it and made a complete confession.