

**A HUMAN
COUNTERFEIT
Or NICK CARTER AND
THE CROOK'S DOUBLE**

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CHAPTER I. WHY WAS IT DONE?

“Extraordinary—that doesn’t half express it. I know of no word that would. To some extent, Nick, at least, men’s motives are usually discernible in their conduct. But in this case—why, there was nothing to it. It is utterly inexplicable. It was like a horrid dream, a hideous nightmare, or the mental abnormalities of a dope fiend.”

Nick Carter laughed and spread his napkin, with a significant glance at his chief assistant, Chick Carter, who sat at one side of the table, that of a private dining room in a new and fashionable New York hotel.

“Well, Mr. Clayton, if the story you have to tell warrants so remarkable a preface, it will be interesting, at least,” said the famous detective.

“Yes, Nick, and then some,” Chick agreed, smiling. “He so has aroused my curiosity that I really am all ears.”

“I don’t think I shall disappoint you,” said their companion, more gravely.

He was a fashionably clad man of thirty-five, of medium build and with clean-cut, attractive cast of features, smoothly shaved. There was in other respects nothing specially distinctive about him. He was the type of well-bred, well-informed, and thorough business man with which New York City abounds.

“Aside from the pleasure of having you dine with me, I am very glad of the privilege of telling you about my extraordinary experience,” he added, gazing across the table at Nick. “I want your opinion about it. I was tempted to call on you for advice immediately after it occurred, but there were many reasons why I did not do so. I have been terribly busy, you know, since the opening of the new Westgate six months ago, when the directors gave me entire management of the house. Busy, Mr. Carter, is no name for it.”

“I can imagine so,” said Nick. “You certainly have a magnificent hotel here.”

“There is none better in the city, nor one more generously patronized by wealthy and fashionable people,” said Clayton, with a quiet display of pride. “We are getting the cream not only of local society, but also that of the traveling public. We are almost constantly crowded. It’s an honor, indeed, to be the sole manager of such a house.”

“I agree with you, Clayton, but you are the man for the position, I judge,” said Nick. “I guess the board of directors made no mistake.”

“It was partly due, perhaps, to my owning quite a block of the stock,” Clayton replied, with a smile. “Now, to return to the main matter, I will tell you of my extraordinary experience.”

“When did it occur, Clayton?” Nick inquired.

“Three months ago, Mr. Carter, during the first three days in September.”

“Three days, eh? It covered a considerable period.”

“A period of apprehension and anxiety beyond description.”

“Began at the beginning, Clayton, and tell me the whole business.”

“I can tell you only what occurred. It will be up to you to determine why it was done and what it signified.”

“I will endeavor to do so.”

“As is my custom once a week,” Clayton began, “I had been out to Washington Heights to dine with my mother, who dislikes hotel life and for whom I bought an attractive place out there three years ago. Miss Langham was with me, the young lady to whom I am engaged. She is the only daughter of Gustavus Langham, president of the Century Trust Company.’

“I am acquainted with him,” Nick observed.

“They have a suite here in the house,” Clayton added. “My only other companion was my chauffeur, Paul Hazen, who was driving my touring car. We started to return about ten o’clock. We had covered less than half a mile, and had arrived at a point in the road where there are no near dwellings, when we were held up by a touring car that stopped as we were approaching, and at such an angle across the road that we could not pass it.”

“The occupants evidently had been waiting for you,” Chick remarked.

“So I presently learned, though I did not think so at the time,” Clayton replied. “One of the men in the car, the top of which was up and the side curtains on, had alighted and was looking at one of the front wheels. Two other men were getting out, and I inferred

that they had met with a mishap. The moment we stopped, however, some twenty feet from them, all three approached my car, and one of them called me by name. I then supposed him a friend, whom I did not immediately recognize.”

“Was it a dark evening?” Nick inquired.

“Not at all. It was bright starlight.”

“What followed?”

“The spokesman of the party did not wait for an answer,” Clayton continued. “He drew a revolver and ordered me to get out of my car, saying that I must go with him. At the same time another drew a gun and held up my chauffeur.”

“What type of men were they?” Nick asked. “Did they appear to be ruffians?”

“Quite the contrary. They were well dressed and appeared like gentlemen, aside from their conduct. Each wore a full beard, however, and I at once suspected that they were in disguise.”

“A very natural inference, Clayton, under the circumstances.”

“They meant business, all right, for my protest was immediately checked with a more threatening command to get out of the car. I was told, nevertheless, that I would not be harmed, robbed, nor subjected to any serious inconvenience, providing I made no resistance. I was also told that their only purpose was to detain me from this hotel for a short time.”

“I follow you,” Nick nodded.

“Their spokesman, who did all of the talking, so informed Miss Langham and Hazen,” Clayton proceeded. “He commanded them to return to the hotel, and to state that I had left town for a few days. He warned them against disclosing the truth and making a stir over my abduction. He threatened, in case they did, that my life would be the forfeit. On the other hand, he promised that I should be liberated and allowed to return safely, if his instructions were rigidly obeyed.”

“Did you say anything to him except to protest against the outrage?”

“No. He wouldn’t permit it, and the interview lasted only a few moments. I saw plainly that I had no alternative but to obey, however, and I resolved to take the rascal on his word. I directed Hazen and Clara to obey the scoundrel, therefore, and to take no steps for a few days, at least.”

“I infer that they did so, since the outrage was not published.”

“Exactly. That was the reason.”

“You then went with the gang?”

“Yes. I had no alternative. Hazen was ordered to drive on with Miss Langham, and the gang waited until my car had disappeared. I then was commanded to get into the other, which I did, taking a seat between two of the knaves in the tonneau.”

“Were there only three in the gang?”

“There was one other, the man who was driving the car.”

“Did he also wear a beard?”

“Yes.”

“All undoubtedly were in disguise,” said Nick.

“Sure thing,” Chick added. “Four bearded men in a bunch is very suggestive.”

“Continue. What followed, Mr. Clayton?”

“I then was blindfolded, but not bound nor gagged, though I was threatened with death if I made any disturbance. I decided to take my medicine quietly, and I so informed the rascals.”

“Otherwise you might have been roughly handled.”

“I inferred so. Ten minutes later, after a rapid ride in directions I could not possibly determine, I arrived at a house and I was guided to a room on the second floor. I have not the slightest idea where the house is located, for I was completely lost by the several turns the car had taken.”

“That was done in order to blind you.”

“No doubt.”

“What then occurred?”

“Then began the extraordinary part of the outrage,” said Clayton, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders. “The bandage was removed from my eyes. I found myself in quite a large room, the four walls of which were entirely hung with thick black cloth. Not a window or door, not a picture, not so much as a square inch of the wall paper, were visible.”

“By Jove, that was strange, indeed,” Chick remarked.

“Even the chandelier, pendant from a perfectly plain, plastered ceiling, also was covered with the same somber cloth. It was like opening one’s eyes in a chamber of horrors, or one draped in deepest mourning.”

Nick Carter smiled.

“The design of your abductors is obvious, Clayton,” said he.

“Do you think so?”

“I certainly do,” Nick nodded. “All that was done to prevent your seeing anything by which you subsequently could positively identify the room.”

“Well, well, that may be true, Nick, though I then was so affected by the mystery that that explanation did not occur to me,” said Clayton. “Nor, in fact, have I since thought of it.”

“What else did the room contain?” Nick inquired.

“Only two common wooden chairs and a narrow bed, the linen and blankets of which were perfectly plain.”

“Was the floor bare?”

“Yes. The appearance of it, however, indicated that a carpet had recently been removed.”

“Additional evidence that I am right,” said Nick, smiling again. “The rascals took care that you should see absolutely nothing by which you could identify the place. Was the room lighted with electricity, or gas?”

“Gas. One jet of the chandelier was burning.”

“What followed?”

“Only three of the scoundrels accompanied me to the room. I did not again see the fourth man until the evening of the third day of my captivity.”

“Well, what occurred?” Nick inquired.

“The three men then wore black masks,” Clayton continued. “I was ordered to remove all of my clothing except my undergarments. I did so under protest, of course, and all of my discarded garments were taken from the room by one of the rascals, who passed out between two overlapping draperies and through a concealed door. He presently returned with a woolen bath robe, which I was told to put on.”

“And then?”

“A strong cord then was tied around my ankles, with about a foot of slack between them, which allowed me to hobble slowly, but effectually prevented me from flight, or attempting to do anything desperate. I then was invited to make myself at home, and told to be patient until I was liberated.”

“By Jove, that was a strange experience,” said Chick. “What do you make of it, Nick?”

“Wait till I have heard the entire story,” Nick replied. “Were you left alone in the room, Mr. Clayton?”

“Not for a moment, Nick, during all the time I was there,” said Clayton. “Two of the masked men withdrew. The third took one of the chairs and remained to guard and watch me. He was relieved by another about six o’clock the following morning, and the third

relieved him about noon. This was repeated for three days and nights. Not once did I see either of them unmasked.”

“Did they talk with you?”

“Part of the time, but only on ordinary topics. They would not discuss the outrage in any respect, nor permit me to question them. On the morning following my abduction, however, I was given a pen and paper and ordered to write to Clara Langham, stating that I was well and comfortable, and that she and Hazen must not deviate from the instructions given them. I was told to add that my absence would not exceed three days. I afterward learned that the letter was mailed one hour later in New York.”

“It was dropped in town, Clayton, so that your whereabouts should not be indicated by the postmark,” said Nick.

“I inferred so, of course.”

“Were you well fed and properly treated, aside from your confinement?”

“Yes. I could not reasonably find fault. I was presented with the morning and evening newspapers, also with several magazines, and was permitted to read at will.”

“I see.”

“Not once, however, did I pass beyond those dismal black curtains, or get so much as a glimpse at anything outside of that somber room,” Clayton added, with some feeling. “Not once was I without the gloomy companionship of a masked man in one of the chairs. I saw only three of them, as I have said, but I was under

frequent scrutiny of another, I am sure, whose evil eyes were watching me through some part of the somber draperies.”

“Did you hear him, that you feel so sure of it?” Nick questioned.

“No.” Clayton quickly shook his head. “I did not hear him, Nick, or see him, not once, but I frequently felt that some one was stealthily watching me.”

“And that continued for three days?”

“Yes. In the evening of the third day, Nick, my clothing was returned to me and I was told to dress. I then was blindfolded and guided from the house. Then followed another ride in the touring car, under the same conditions as before, and I was taken to a lonely road in an outskirt of Fordham.”

“And then?”

“I then was directed to follow the road for a quarter mile, when I would reach a trolley line into town,” Clayton said, in conclusion. “The four men then rode rapidly away, and one hour later I arrived at the Westgate, much to the relief of Miss Langham and my chauffeur, who were on the verge of reporting my abduction to the police. That’s the whole story, Nick. Now, as Chick asked, what do you make of it?”

Nick laid aside his napkin. The dinner had been progressing during Clayton’s recital, and coffee and cigars were in order.

“Well, I hardly know what to say,” Nick replied. “Have you notified the police, or taken any steps to identify your abductors?”

“I have not,” said Clayton. “They told me that any efforts along that line would be futile. I noticed the number on their touring car, but upon looking it up I found no such number. They had a doctored number plate.”

“Obviously, Clayton, they took every precaution, not only to hide their identity, but also to prevent you from identifying the house in which you were confined, in event of subsequent suspicions,” said Nick. “That they apprehended subsequent suspicion, moreover, shows plainly that they were paving the way for the execution of some later design.”

“That does seem reasonable. I have not thought of that.”

“Has anything since occurred that might have a bearing on the matter?”

“I know of nothing, Nick.”

“Everything in the hotel is all right, so far as you know?”

“Yes, indeed. Things could not be better.”

“I asked only because your abductors wanted to detain you from the hotel for a short time, or so one of them said.”

“Very true. But there is nothing wrong here. I am sure of that.”

“You have told me, then, all that you know about the affair, and you are without any suspicion concerning it?”

“Exactly. I have told you all, Nick, and am completely in the dark,” Clayton earnestly declared.

Nick knocked the ashes from his cigar and prepared to rise from the table.

“I have only this to say,” he replied, more impressively: “Be on your guard. Men never go to so much trouble, nor take such chances, Clayton, unless they have some definite and probably felonious design in view.”

“That’s true, Nick,” Chick put in.

“There certainly is something in the wind,” Nick added. “It is impossible to predict what it is, or when it will occur, but it is safe to say it relates to something with which you are identified. Otherwise, Clayton, you would never have met with such an experience. I can only warn you to be vigilant and constantly on your guard. A bomb may burst when it is least expected.”

“That’s right, too,” Chick declared, as they arose from the table. “No man, Nick, could say more.”

Mr. Chester Clayton thanked the detective for his advice and promised to be governed by it.

Precisely one week later, at eleven o’clock in the morning, Nick Carter’s prediction was fulfilled.

A message from Clayton, addressed to Nick, and received in his library, called the detective to the Hotel Westgate.

It contained only half a dozen words:

“Come quickly. The bomb has burst.”

CHAPTER II. AN AMAZING ROBBERY.

Nick Carter responded immediately to Clayton's urgent message. It was half past eleven when he entered the magnificent new Westgate, and almost the first person he saw in the spacious and elaborately designed rotunda and main office was one of the house detectives, Nat Webber, with whom he was well acquainted.

Webber saw him entering and hurried to meet him.

"I am looking for Mr. Clayton," said Nick. "Where will I find him?"

"He is with Mademoiselle Falloni, in her suite on the fourth floor," said Webber, with his face reflecting no end of conflicting sentiments. "She's up in the air a mile. So is Madame Escobar, who has the adjoining suite. Clayton has it all over both of them, however, for he's in the air out of sight. It's my opinion, Carter, that he has suddenly gone daffy, as mad as a March hare, or any old jack rabbit. There can be nothing else to it."

"What do you mean?" Nick demanded. "What has occurred here?"

"I'll tell you what I know," said Webber. "If you can tell me what it means, Nick, you'll be going some. About half past ten—stop a bit. Come here and let me show you. Do you see that door?"

He drew Nick toward the office inclosure while speaking and pointed to a door leading out of it to the right.

“Yes, certainly,” said Nick.

“That’s the door to Clayton’s private office,” said Webber. “There is an opposite door which opens into a corridor leading to one of the stairways, the ladies’ elevator, and the main dining room.”

“Well?”

“At half past ten,” Webber resumed; “Clayton was seen to leave the office inclosure and enter his private office. He closed the door, as he habitually does, denoting that he does not wish to be intruded upon. The clerks never interrupt him at such times except on very important business. Those are his instructions.”

“Well?” Nick repeated.

“About five minutes later Clayton came from the corridor and spoke to the head clerk, Robert Vernon, over the counter, directing the clerk to hand Mademoiselle Falloni’s jewel casket from the vault, remarking that she wanted them in her suite and that he would take the casket up to her.”

“Is that so?” Nick muttered, brows knitting.

There was no need for Webber to tell him of the tremendous value of Mademoiselle Falloni’s wonderful jewels. The world-famous prima donna, then singing *Cleopatra* with the International Grand Opera Company, had created a sensation and broken all records with her dazzling display of gems and jewels in her portrayal of Egypt’s ill-starred queen.

The precautions to preclude robbery, moreover, would have seemed amply adequate to protect her. Three special detectives

occupied her limousine during its run to and from the opera house. They guarded her dressing room between the acts. They watched her constantly when on the stage. From the moment her jewel casket was taken from the vault in the Westgate, in fact, until it was safely returned to it after each performance, these three trusty guardians never once lost sight of it.

Not less careful of her own costly jewels, which were deposited in the Westgate vault when not in use on the stage, was Madame Escobar, the celebrated Swedish contralto, to whom Detective Webber also had referred.

Half a million of money, in fact, was a conservative estimate of the value of both superb collections, though that of Mademoiselle Falloni greatly exceeded the other.

“Continue,” said Nick, gazing steadily at Webber. “Tell me the whole business.”

“That won’t take long,” returned the detective. “After five more minutes, Nick, Clayton again appeared at the office inclosure and asked for Madame Escobar’s jewel case. He remarked to Vernon that the two singers wanted to compare some of their diamonds, and that both caskets would presently be returned. Vernon did not for a moment suspect anything wrong. Who on earth, as a matter of fact, would have suspected Clayton of anything crooked? Vernon brought the jewel case from the vault and Clayton departed with it.”

“And then?”

“He came out of his private office a few minutes later, entering the clerks’ inclosure.”

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