

A NETWORK OF CRIME

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CHAPTER I. A DOUBLE MURDER.

“Hello! hello! This is Frank Mantell talking. I want Mr. Carter—Nick Carter. Is he there?”

Patsy Garvan, the detective’s junior assistant, then alone in the library of Nick’s Madison Avenue residence, was the recipient of the above telephone communication. It came over the wire in tones reflecting the haste and excitement of the speaker.

Patsy remembered him, a son of the senior partner of the firm of Mantell & Goulard, whose big department store in Sixth Avenue had recently been wrecked by a long series of mysterious robberies committed by the junior partner, Gaston Goulard, resulting in a round-up of the criminal and his confederates by Nick and his assistants, all of which had transpired several months before.

“No,” Patsy replied. “Nick Carter is not here. He is out on a case.”

“Is Chick Carter there?” Mantell then hurriedly asked, referring to the detective’s chief assistant.

“He is not, Mr. Mantell. This is Garvan talking.”

“Ah, yes, Patsy—I remember,” was the reply. “When will Nick return?”

“I don’t know. He went with Chick about an hour ago to investigate a big murder case in Manhattanville. He may not return until evening.”

“Dear me, I’m sorry to hear that. I am very anxious to see him.”

“On business?”

“Yes. Very important business. There is half a million dollars involved.”

“Great Scott! Can I be of any help to you?”

“Not unless you can enable me to see Nick himself. Time is very valuable.”

“I can do that, perhaps,” said Patsy. “I can learn from police headquarters just where he has gone. You can go there and see him, or—where are you phoning from, Mr. Mantell?”

“From the office of Gray’s wharf, East River. I cannot explain by telephone. If——”

“One moment,” Patsy interrupted. “Have you a taxi?”

“I have my touring car.”

“Good enough! Join me here as quickly as possible. I’ll find out in the meantime where Nick is engaged. We’ll go there and see him.”

“Thanks, Garvan, a thousand times. I’ll be with you in ten minutes.”

It then was about ten o'clock in the morning. One hour earlier, complying with an urgent telephone request from the police headquarters, Nick Carter and Chick arrived in the detective's touring car at a dwelling in one of the outskirts of Manhattanville, the scene of a shocking crime evidently committed the previous night.

It was an attractive wooden house somewhat back from the street and occupying a corner lot.

It was in a quiet and entirely reputable locality, though somewhat thinly settled, and it was about the last neighborhood in which such a crime would have been expected.

More than a score of people had collected on the opposite side of the street, and were viewing the house with feelings of morbid curiosity. They were prevented from coming nearer, however, or encroaching upon the surrounding grounds, by policemen who had been stationed on both the front and side gates.

A police sergeant who was standing with an elderly man on the front veranda recognized the two detectives when the touring car stopped at the house, and he beckoned for them to enter that way.

"We have been waiting for you, Mr. Carter," he said respectfully, when Nick came up the gravel walk with Chick. "This is Doctor Boyden, who lives in the third house from here. I sent for him a few minutes ago, thinking you might want his opinion as to the length of time the two men have been dead, as well as any other information he can give you."

"There certainly is a deep mystery here, aside from the shocking crime, Mr. Carter, judging from the appearance of things

in the house,” said the physician, after shaking hands with both detectives. “It looks like a veritable slaughter pen. There must have been an awful fight here.”

“Come in, Mr. Carter, and see for yourself,” added the sergeant.

“One moment, Kennedy,” said Nick, detaining him. “Who lives in the house? I see that the name plate has been removed from the door.”

“I can answer that question for you better than Sergeant Kennedy, perhaps,” put in Doctor Boyden.

“If you please, then.”

“The house is owned by Mr. George Roland, who occupied it with his wife until about a month ago. She died quite suddenly at that time, and Roland since has been living with a married sister in Harlem.”

“Leaving this house vacant?”

“Yes. He owns it and the furnishings, however, and it has been in the market to rent. I noticed yesterday that the broker’s placard had been removed from the front window, and I inferred that the house had been rented.”

“Are you acquainted with Roland?” Nick inquired.

“Yes, indeed, very well acquainted.”

“Is he a man of good character?”

“Excellent. I consider him incapable of crime.”

“Do you know anything about the new tenants, or whether this furnished house has really been rented?”

“I think it has, sir,” said Sergeant Kennedy. “I used the telephone in the next house, Mr. Carter, and talked with the broker, Mr. Gibson.”

“What did you learn?”

“He stated that he showed the house day before yesterday to a couple who claimed to be Mr. and Mrs. Charles Greenleaf, of Brooklyn. They did not then decide to rent the house, but they called at his office again yesterday afternoon and requested the privilege of taking the key until this morning, stating that they wanted to show the dwelling to a relative who lives with them, and whose business would prevent him from visiting the house except in the evening. Gibson was favorably impressed with the couple. He let the man have the key, with an understanding that it would be returned to-day, and——”

“And the rascals got in their work,” Nick interrupted, with some dryness. “This looks very much as if the furnished house was craftily obtained only in order to pull off a knavish job of some kind.”

“Surely,” said Chick, with a nod. “That’s just about the size of it.”

“The job was pulled off, all right,” replied the sergeant. “Come in, Mr. Carter, and see for yourself.”

“Presently.” Nick still detained him. “I first want to learn what is known about the crime. Who discovered it?”

“A milkman who called at the house in the rear of this one about an hour ago,” said Kennedy. “He saw an old slouch hat in the back yard, near the fence that divides the two lots. He went and picked it up and found fresh spots of blood on it.”

“And then?”

“Looking over the rear fence, he then saw that the back door of this house was wide open,” Kennedy continued. “He could see no one, however, and knew that the house had not been occupied for a month. He then suspected there was something wrong, and he decided to look into the matter.”

“What did he do?” questioned Nick.

“He vaulted the fence and entered the back door. That is as far as he went. It’s as far as most men would have gone. When he saw the corpse on the kitchen floor—well, he dropped the hat and bolted.”

“Bolted where?”

“Luckily, Mr. Carter, he ran nearly into the arms of Policeman Brady, who is on this beat in the morning,” said Kennedy. “He told him what he had seen, and Brady returned with him to the house. He saw at a glance that a double murder had been committed, and he then notified the precinct station.”

“That was about an hour ago.”

“Yes. I was sent here with other officers, but was told to let things alone until you arrived, as headquarters had requested you to take on the case. That’s all there is to it.”

“You mean, Kennedy, that that’s the beginning of it,” said Nick. “To learn what there really is to it may tax the discernment of the best of us.”

“That’s true, Mr. Carter, after all,” Kennedy readily allowed.

“Have you inquired at the neighboring houses?”

“Yes, sir. Only a woman living opposite can supply any information.”

“What is that?”

“She saw two men and a woman, presumably Gibson and the couple mentioned, entering the house day before yesterday,” Kennedy proceeded to report. “Something like an hour after dark yesterday, or about seven o’clock in the evening, the same woman was seated at her front window waiting for her husband to come home to supper. She saw two men entering this house, and a moment later she saw the reflection of a light in the dining room.”

“In any other rooms?”

“No, sir. Nor could she tell me anything more, for her husband came in just then and she went to supper with him.”

Nick glanced toward the street.

“There is an arc light on the corner,” he observed. “I suppose, since it was evening, that the electric light enabled her to see the two men.”

“Yes, sir. I asked her about that.”

“Did you ask her for a description of them?”

“I did, sir,” Kennedy nodded. “She said that one appeared to be a man of middle age and was very well dressed. She also noticed that he wore a full beard.”

“Possibly a disguise.”

“The other looked a bit rough, she said, and wore a gray slouch hat, the same that the milkman found in the next yard this morning,” said Kennedy. “I sent an officer over to show it to her, and she readily identified it.”

“Anything more?” queried Nick.

“She told me he carried a suit case, also, and she judged that he had come from a distance. She noticed that the suit case appeared to be old and battered and that one of the straps was dangling, corresponding with the general appearance of the man himself. That was all she could tell me.”

“Was any disturbance heard last evening by people in the neighboring houses?” Nick asked.

“No, sir,” said Kennedy. “I have inquired at every house.”

“Did the woman living opposite see from which direction the two men came?”

“She did. They came around the corner and entered the front door of this house.”

“I see that you have unlocked it,” Nick remarked, observing that the door then was ajar. “Have you identified either of the two victims?”

“No, sir. I have not tried, Mr. Carter, as a matter of fact, knowing that you were on your way here. By their looks——”

“I will size up their looks for myself, Kennedy,” Nick interposed. “Are things about as you found them?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did Brady disturb anything?”

“No, sir. He has been on the force long enough to know where he is at.”

“Very good.” Nick turned and opened the door. “I’ll have a look at the scene. Come with me, Chick.”

Chick Carter accompanied him into the house, followed a moment later by Sergeant Kennedy and the physician.

CHAPTER II. A PERPLEXING PROBLEM.

Nick Carter had only to enter the hall of the house to see the first signs of the sanguinary conflict of the previous night.

On the wall opposite the dining-room door were spots and streaks of blood, great, irregular streaks and smooches, as if drops and splotches that had spurted upon the wall paper had been rubbed and spread by the garments of persons engaged in a terrific struggle. A rug near by had been kicked into a shapeless heap near the baseboard.

Nick merely glanced at these, then paused at the open door of the dining room, in which the scene was doubly shocking.

The roller shades of both windows had been raised, admitting the morning sunlight.

One lamp of an electric chandelier still was burning. It looked wan and yellow in contrast with the bright light from outside.

“Great guns!” Chick Carter muttered, then at Nick’s elbow. “What a scene of disorder.”

“It’s the limit,” Nick tersely agreed.

“Slaughter pen is right,” added Chick, recalling the remark of the physician.

The scene was, indeed, a shocking one. The table was out of place. Broken glasses from the sideboard strewed the floor. Chairs

were overturned and broken. Spots and splashes of blood were everywhere. It stood in a great, partly dry and congealed pool on the floor between the table and the hall door—a pool in which the corpse of a murdered man was lying.

He had fallen upon his back and was lying with face upturned in the sunlight shed through one of the windows. There was a great bruise under one eye and a gash in his cheek.

He had been stabbed twice in the breast, and from the second wound still protruded the weapon used by his assailant, a knife driven home to the victim's heart with all the merciless energy of bitter vengeance, or utter desperation.

He was a man in middle life and of powerful build, a smooth-shaven man of dark complexion, close-cut hair, and a hard, somewhat sinister cast of features.

“Do you know him?” asked Nick, after viewing the scene for several moments.

“No,” said Chick. “Do you?”

Nick stepped into the room and bent above the corpse. With the tip of his finger he lifted the dead man's upper lip, revealing a quantity of gold bridgework on three of the teeth. He turned the left hand, also, and found that part of the third finger had been amputated.

“I thought I recognized him,” he remarked, rising and glancing again at the battered face. “We have his photograph in our album.”

“Who is he?” Chick questioned.

“Cornelius Taggart,” said Nick. “Better known to the police as Connie Taggart.”

“By Jove, you’re right,” Chick declared, gazing. “I recognize him, now. Connie Taggart, the yegg and cracksman.”

“He’s the man,” Nick nodded. “He has cracked his last crib and paid the price. He has been about as bad an egg, Chick, as one often finds in a basket. Have you examined this body, Doctor Boyden?”

Sergeant Kennedy and the physician had approached as far as the open door.

“Only superficially,” was the physician’s reply.

“How long would you say he has been dead?”

“Fully twelve hours, Mr. Carter; probably longer.”

“The crime must have been committed last evening, then.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“You raised these roller shades, Kennedy, I infer,” said Nick, glancing at the sergeant.

“I did, sir.”

“You found the electric lamp burning, of course.”

“Yes, sir. I thought I had better leave it until you arrived. Aside from the two curtains, Mr. Carter, the room is as Brady found it when he entered.”

“Very good.”

“There is the hat found in the next yard by the milkman,” Kennedy added, pointing.

Nick took it from a chair on which it had been tossed and began to examine it.

It was of gray felt, much worn and defaced with grease and dirt. A twisted cord encircled it, with two small silk tassels, or the frayed remnants of them. There were two round holes through the crown, on opposite sides of it.

Nick noted the size and examined the greasy interior. He found several short black hairs sticking to the sweat leather. The hat bore no trade-mark, however, nor any name or initial pointing to the identity of the owner.

Nevertheless, after a brief inspection, Nick said confidently:

“The owner of this hat is a Mexican. It is like those worn by some of the Mexican troopers. He has done military service, too, as appears in these two holes through the crown. They are bullet holes.”

“Could they have been made last night?” asked Chick.

“No. The edge of the felt around them is much soiled, which would be comparatively clean if they were so recently made.”

“I see.”

“A bullet passed through the man’s hat in a battle, or some sort of a skirmish,” Nick added. “He is a man of middle size, I judge, with dark complexion and black hair.”

“That answers the description the woman living opposite gave me,” put in Kennedy. “She saw him quite plainly when the two men came around the corner and entered the house.”

“She stated that his companion wore a beard, I think you said.”

“She did, Mr. Carter, and that he was well dressed.”

“It could not have been this man, then, unless he was in disguise,” said Nick, glancing at Taggart’s beardless face. “The disguise should be here, in that case, even though he removed it.”

“I have not seen it,” said Kennedy.

“Nor the suit case brought in by his companion?”

“No, sir. That is not to be found. I have looked through the house.”

“There must have been several men here, Nick, judging from the fight that came off,” Chick remarked.

“Yes, undoubtedly,” Nick agreed. “I am seeking evidence that might explain the fight.”

“It must have occurred quite soon after the two men entered.”

“True.”

“Others must have been here when they came in, then, or——”

“One moment,” Nick interposed. “I’ll see what more I can find.”

He crouched again above Taggart’s body and searched his pockets. Aside from a fully loaded revolver, he found only a few

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