

**AN UNCANNY
REVENGE**

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CHAPTER I.

A TRAGEDY OF THE STAGE.

The members of Nick Carter's household all happened to meet at the breakfast table that morning—a rather unusual circumstance.

The famous New York detective sat at the head of the table. Ranged about it were Chick Carter, his leading assistant; Patsy Garvan, and the latter's young wife, Adelina, and Ida Jones, Nick's beautiful woman assistant.

It was the latter who held the attention of her companions at that moment. She was a little late, and had just seated herself. Her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes gave no hint that she had reached the house—they all shared the detective's hospitable roof—a little after three o'clock that morning.

“You good people certainly missed a sensation last night,” she declared. “It was the strangest thing—and one of the most pitiable I ever beheld!”

Nick, who had been glancing at his favorite newspaper, looked up.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

It was Ida's turn to show surprise.

“Is it possible you don't know, any of you?” she demanded, looking around the table. “Haven't you read of Helga Lund's breakdown, or whatever it was?”

Helga Lund, the great Swedish actress, who was electrifying New York that season in a powerful play, “The Daughters of Men,” had consented, in response to many requests, to give a special midnight performance, in order that the many actors and actresses in the city might have an opportunity to see her in her most successful rôle at an hour which would not conflict with their own performances.

The date had been set for the night before, and, since it was not to be exclusively a performance for professionals, the manager of the theater, who was a friend of Nick Carter’s, had presented the detective with a box.

Much to Nick’s regret, however, and that of his male assistants, an emergency had prevented them from attending. To cap the climax, Adelina Garvan had not been feeling well, so decided not to go. Consequently, Ida Jones had occupied the box with several of her friends.

Nick shook his head in response to his pretty assistant’s question.

“I haven’t, anyway,” he said, glancing from her face back to his paper. “Ah, here’s something about it—a long article!” he added. “I hadn’t seen it before. It looks very serious. Tell us all about it.”

Ida needed no urging, for she was full of her subject.

“Oh, it was terrible!” she exclaimed, shuddering. “Helga Lund had been perfectly wonderful all through the first and second acts. I don’t know when I have been so thrilled. But soon after the third act began she stopped right in the middle of an impassioned speech

and stared fixedly into the audience, apparently at some one in one of the front rows of the orchestra.

“I’m afraid I can’t describe her look. It seemed to express merely recollection and loathing at first, as if she had recognized a face which had very disagreeable associations. Then her expression—as I read it, at any rate—swiftly changed to one of frightened appeal, and then it jumped to one of pure harrowing terror.

“My heart stopped, and the whole theater was as still as a death chamber—at least, the audience was. Afterward I realized that the actor who was on the stage with her at the time had been improvising something in an effort to cover up her lapse; but I don’t believe anybody paid any attention to him, any more than she did. Her chin dropped, her eyes were wild and seemed ready to burst from their sockets. She put both hands to her breast, and then raised one and passed it over her forehead in a dazed sort of way. She staggered, and I believe she would have fallen if her lover in the play hadn’t supported her.

“The curtain had started to descend, when she seemed to pull herself together. She pushed the poor actor aside with a strength that sent him spinning, and began to speak. Her voice had lost all of its wonderful music, however, and was rough and rasping. Her grace was gone, too—Heaven only knows how! She was positively awkward. And her words—they couldn’t have had anything to do with her part. They were incoherent ravings. The curtain had started to go up again. Evidently, the stage manager had thought the crisis was past when she began to speak. But when she only made matters worse, it came down with a rush. After a maddening delay, her manager came out, looking wild enough himself, and

announced, with many apologies, that Miss Lund had suffered a temporary nervous breakdown.

Nick Carter had listened intently, now and then scanning the article which described the affair.

“Too bad!” he commented soberly, when Ida had finished. “But haven’t you any explanation, either? The paper doesn’t seem to have any—at least, it doesn’t give any.”

A curious expression crossed Ida’s face.

“I had forgotten for the moment,” she replied. “I haven’t told you one of the strangest things about it. In common with everybody else, I was so engrossed in watching Helga Lund’s face that I didn’t have much time for anything else. That is why there wasn’t a more general attempt to see whom she was looking at. We wouldn’t ordinarily have been very curious, but she held our gaze so compellingly. I did manage to tear my eyes away once, though; but I wasn’t in a position to see—I was too far to one side. She appeared to be looking at some one almost on a line with our box, but over toward the other side of the theater. I turned my glasses in that direction for a few moments and thought I located the person, a man, but, of course, I couldn’t be sure. I could only see his profile, but his expression seemed to be very set, and he was leaning forward a little, in a tense sort of way.”

Nick nodded, as if Ida’s words had confirmed some theory which he had already formed.

“But what was so strange about him?” he prompted.

“Oh, it doesn’t mean anything, of course,” was the reply; “but he bore the most startling resemblance to Doctor Hiram Grantley.

If I hadn't known that Grantley was safe in Sing Sing for a long term of years, I'm afraid I would have sworn that it was he."

The detective gave Ida a keen, slightly startled look.

"Well, stranger things than that have happened in our experience," he commented thoughtfully. "I haven't any reason to believe, though, that Grantley is at large again. He would be quite capable of what you have described, but surely Kennedy would have notified me before this if——"

The telephone had just rung, and, before Nick could finish his sentence, Joseph, his butler, entered. His announcement caused a sensation. It was:

"Long distance, Mr. Carter. Warden Kennedy, of Sing Sing, wishes to speak with you."

The detective got up quickly, without comment, and stepped out into the hall, where the nearest instrument of the several in the house was located.

Patsy Garvan gave a low, expressive whisper.

"Suffering catfish!" he ejaculated. "It looks as if you were right, Ida!"

After that he relapsed into silence and listened, with the others. Nick had evidently interrupted the warden.

"Just a moment, Kennedy," they heard him saying. "I think I can guess what you have to tell me. It's Doctor Grantley who has escaped, isn't it?"

Naturally, the warden's reply was inaudible, but the detective's next words were sufficient confirmation.

"I thought so," Nick said, in a significant tone. "One of my assistants was just telling me of having seen, last night, a man who looked surprisingly like him. When did you find out that he was missing?... As early as that?... I see.... Yes, I'll come up, if necessary, as soon as I can; but first I must set the ball rolling here. I think we already have a clew. I'll call you up later.... Yes, certainly.... Yes, good-by!"

A moment later he returned to the dining room.

"Maybe your eyes didn't deceive you, after all, Ida," he announced gravely. "Grantley escaped last night—in time to have reached the theater for the third act of that special performance, if not earlier. And it looks as if he subjected one of the keepers of the prison to an ordeal somewhat similar to that which Helga Lund seems to have endured."

CHAPTER II.

ESCAPE BY SCHEDULE.

“What do you mean by that, chief?” demanded Chick.

“Kennedy says that one of the keepers was found, in a peculiar sort of stupor, as he calls it, in Grantley’s cell, after the surgeon had gone. He had evidently been overpowered in some way, and his keys had been taken from him. Kennedy assumes, rightly enough, I suppose, that Grantley lured him into the cell on some pretext, and then tried his tricks. The man is still unconscious, and the prison physician can do nothing to help him. Kennedy wants me to come up.”

“But I don’t see what that has to do with Helga Lund,” objected Chick. “Even if it was Grantley that Ida saw—which remains to be proved—I don’t see any similarity. He didn’t render her unconscious, and, anyway, he wasn’t near enough to——”

“Think it over, Chick,” the detective interrupted. “The significance will reach you, by slow freight, sooner or later, I’m sure. I, for one, haven’t any doubt that Ida saw the fugitive last night. If so, Grantley did a very daring thing to go there without any attempt at disguise—not as daring as might be supposed, however. He doubtless counted on just what happened. If any one who knew him by sight had noticed him in the theater, the supposition would naturally be that it was a misleading resemblance, for the chances were that any one who would be likely to know him would be aware of his conviction, and be firmly convinced that he was up the river.

“There doesn’t seem to be any doubt that he disguised himself carefully enough for his flight from Sing Sing, and covered his tracks with unusual care, for Kennedy has been unable to obtain any reliable information about his movements. If he was at the play, we may be sure that he restored his normal appearance deliberately, in defiance of the risks involved, in order that one person, at least, should recognize him without fail—that person being Helga Lund. And that implies that he was again actuated primarily by motives of private revenge, as in the case of Baldwin.

“The scoundrel seems to have a supply of enemies in reserve, and is willing to go to any lengths in order to revenge himself upon them for real or fancied grievances. If he’s the man who broke up Lund’s performance last night, it is obvious that he knew of the special occasion and the unusual hour before he made his escape. In fact, it seems probable that he escaped when he did for the purpose of committing this latest outrage. Even if his chief object has been attained, however, I don’t imagine he will return to Sing Sing and give himself up. We shall have to get busy, and, perhaps, keep so for some time. Plainly, the first thing for me to do is to seek an interview with Helga Lund, if she is in a condition to receive me. She can tell, if she will, who or what it was that caused her breakdown. If there turns out to be no way of connecting it with Grantley, we shall have to begin our work at Sing Sing. If it was Grantley, we shall begin here. Did you see anything more of the man you noticed, Ida?”

“Nothing more worth mentioning. He slipped out quickly as soon as the curtain went down; but lots of others were doing the same, although many remained and exchanged excited conjectures. I left the box when I saw him going, but by the time I reached the

lobby he was nowhere in sight, and I couldn't find any one who had noticed him."

"Too bad! Then there's nothing to do but try to see Helga. The rest of you had better hang around the house until you hear from me. Whatever the outcome, I shall probably want you all on the jump before long."

Nick hastily finished his breakfast, while his assistants read him snatches from the accounts in the various morning newspapers. In that way he got the gist of all that had been printed in explanation of the actress' "attack" and in regard to her later condition.

All of the accounts agreed in saying that Helga Lund was in seclusion at her hotel, in a greatly overwrought state, and that two specialists and a nurse were in attendance.

The prospect of a personal interview with her seemed exceedingly remote; but Nick Carter meant to do his best, unless her condition absolutely forbade.

* * * * *

Doctor Hiram A. Grantley was very well, if not favorably, known to the detectives, in addition to thousands of others.

For a quarter of a century he had been famous as an exceptionally daring and skillful surgeon. In recent years, however, his great reputation had suffered from a blight, due to his general eccentricities, and, in particular, to his many heartless experiments upon live animals.

At length, he had gone so far as to perform uncalled-for operations on human beings in his ruthless search for knowledge.

Nick Carter had heard rumors of this, and had set a trap for Grantley. He had caught the surgeon and several younger satellites red-handed.

Their victim at that time was a young Jewish girl, whose heart had been cruelly lifted out of the chest cavity, without severing any of the arteries or veins, despite the fact that the girl had sought treatment only for consumption.

Grantley and his accomplices had been placed on trial, charged with manslaughter. The case was a complicated one, and the jury disagreed. The authorities subsequently released the prisoners in the belief that the chances for a conviction were not bright enough to warrant the great expense of a new trial.

Nevertheless, as a result of the agitation, a law was passed, which attached a severe penalty to all such unjustifiable experiments or operations on human beings.

After a few weeks of freedom, Grantley had committed a still more atrocious crime. His victim in this instance had been one of the most prominent financiers in New York, J. Hackley Baldwin, who had been totally blind for years.

For years Grantley had been nursing two grievances against the afflicted millionaire. Under pretense of operating on Baldwin's eyes—after securing the financier's complete confidence—he had removed parts of his patient's brain.

Owing to Grantley's great skill, the operation had not proved fatal; but Baldwin became a hopeless imbecile.

Nick Carter and his assistants again captured the fugitive, who had fled with his assistant, Doctor Siebold. This pair was locked up, together with a nurse and Grantley's German manservant, who were also involved.

To these four defendants, Nick presently added a fifth, in the person of Felix Simmons, another famous financier, who had been a bitter rival of Baldwin's for years, and who was found to have aided and abetted the rascally surgeon.

It was a startling disclosure, and all of the prisoners were convicted under the new law and sentenced to long terms of confinement.

That had been several months before; and now Doctor Grantley was at large again, and under suspicion of having been guilty of some strange and mysterious offense against the celebrated Swedish actress, who had never before visited this country.

* * * * *

Nick had learned from the papers that Helga Lund was staying at the Wentworth-Belding Hotel. Accordingly, he drove there in one of his motor cars and sent a card up to her suite. On it he scribbled a request for a word with one of the physicians or the nurse.

Doctor Lightfoot, a well-known New York physician, with a large practice among theatrical people, received him in one of the rooms of the actress' suite.

He seemed surprised at the detective's presence, but Nick quickly explained matters to his satisfaction. Miss Lund, it seemed,

was in a serious condition. She had gone to pieces mentally, passed a sleepless night, most of the time walking the floor, and appeared to be haunted by the conviction that her career was at an end.

She declared that she would not mind so much if it had happened before any ordinary audience, but as it was, she had made a spectacle of herself before hundreds of the members of her own profession. That thought almost crazed her, and she insisted wildly that she would never regain enough confidence to appear in public again.

If that was the case, it was nothing short of a tragedy, in view of her great gifts.

Doctor Lightfoot hoped, however, that she would ultimately recover from the shock of her experience, although he stated that it would be months, at least, before she was herself again. Meanwhile, all of her engagements would have to be canceled, of course.

In response to Nick's questions, the physician assured him that Helga Lund had given no adequate explanation of her startling behavior of the night before. She had simply said that she had recognized some one in the audience, that the recognition had brought up painful memories, and that she had completely forgotten her lines and talked at random. She did not know what she had said or done.

Her physicians realized that she was keeping something back, and had pleaded with her to confide fully in them as a means of relieving her mind from the weight that was so evidently pressing upon it. But she had refused to do so, having declared that it would

serve no good purpose, and that the most they could do was to restore her shattered nerves.

The detective was not surprised at this attitude, which, as a matter of fact, paved the way to an interview with the actress.

“In that case I think you will have reason to be glad I came,” he told Doctor Lightfoot. “I believe I know, in general, what happened last night, and if you will give me your permission to see Miss Lund alone for half an hour, I have hope of being able to induce her to confide in me. My errand does not reflect upon her in any way, nor does it imply the slightest danger or embarrassment to her, so far as I am aware. My real interest lies elsewhere, but you will readily understand how it might help her and reënforce your efforts if I could induce her to unbosom herself.”

“There isn’t any doubt about that, Carter,” was the doctor’s reply; “but it’s a risky business. She is in a highly excitable state, and uninvited calls from men of your profession are not apt to be soothing, no matter what their object may be. How do you know that some ghost of remorse is not haunting her. If so, you would do much more harm than good.”

“If she saw the person I think she saw in the audience last night,” Nick replied, “it’s ten to one that the remorse is on the other side—or ought to be. If I am mistaken, a very few sentences will prove it, and I give you my word that I shall do my best to quiet any fears my presence may have aroused, and withdraw at once. On the other hand, if I am right, I can convince her that I am her friend, and that I know enough to make it worth her while to shift as much of her burden as possible to me. If she consents, the tension will be removed at once, and she will be on the road to

recovery. And, incidentally, I shall have gained some very important information.”

The detective was prepared, if necessary, to be more explicit with Doctor Lightfoot; but the latter, after looking Nick over thoughtfully for a few moments, gave his consent.

“I’ve always understood that you always know what you are about, Carter,” he said. “There is nothing of the blunderer or the brute about you, as there is about almost all detectives. On the contrary, I am sure you are capable of using a great deal of tact, aside from your warm sympathies. My colleague isn’t here now, and I am taking a great responsibility on my shoulders in giving you permission to see Miss Lund alone at such a time. She is a great actress, remember, and, if it is possible, we must give her back to the world with all of her splendid powers unimpaired. She is like a musical instrument of incredible delicacy, so, for Heaven’s sake, don’t handle her as if she were a hurdy-gurdy!”

“Trust me,” the famous detective said quietly.

“Then wait,” was the reply, and the physician hurried from the room.

Two or three minutes later he returned.

“Come,” he said. “I have prepared her—told her you are a specialist in psychology, which is true, of course, in one sense. You can tell her the truth later, if all goes well.”

CHAPTER III.

THE ACTRESS CONFIDES.

Nick was led through a couple of sumptuously furnished rooms into the great Swedish actress' presence.

Helga Lund was a magnificently proportioned woman, well above medium height, and about thirty years of age.

She wore a loose, filmy negligee of silk and lace, and its pale blue was singularly becoming to her fair skin and golden hair. Two thick, heavy ropes of the latter hung down far below her waist.

She was not merely pretty, but something infinitely better—she had the rugged statuesque beauty of a goddess in face and form.

She was pacing the floor like a caged lioness when Nick entered. Her head was thrown back and her hands were clasped across her forehead, allowing the full sleeves to fall away from her perfectly formed, milk-white arms.

“Miss Lund, this is Mr. Carter, of whom I spoke,” Doctor Lightfoot said gently. “He believes he can help you. “I shall leave you with him, but I will be within call.”

He withdrew softly and closed the door. They were alone.

The actress turned for the first time, and a pang shot through the tender-hearted detective as he saw the tortured expression of her face.

She nodded absent-mindedly, but did not speak.

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