

DRIVEN FROM COVER;
Or, NICK CARTER'S DOUBLE RUSE

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CHAPTER I.

CAUSE FOR SUSPICION

Nick Carter waited, listening intently, listening vainly, with his desk telephone in his hand and the receiver at his ear.

Chick Carter, the celebrated detective's chief assistant, sat watching him, noting each changing expression on his strong, clean-cut face, and wondering what occasioned it.

It was about nine o'clock one evening in October, and both detectives were seated in the library of Nick Carter's spacious residence in Madison Avenue.

"Hello!" Nick now called quite sharply. "Hello!"

No answer.

"What's the trouble?" Chick inquired. "Don't you get a reply?"

"No, Chick, and that's not the worst of it," Nick said quite gravely.

"Why so? What do you mean?"

"I heard my name called just as I removed the receiver from its hook," Nick explained. "The voice sounded like that of a woman, though I am not positive about it. Then came a single sharp crack, like the report of a revolver, or as if the telephone had dropped from the speaker's hand and crashed upon the floor. I suspect there is something wrong."

"Can you hear anything now?"

“Not a sound.”

“Call central,” Chick suggested. “You may learn who rang you up.”

“Presently. I still am hoping to hear something of more definite significance.”

One minute passed. It brought no sound over the wire.

The silence then was broken by a voice which Nick knew must be that of the exchange operator addressing the person who had rung him up.

“Did you get him?”

No answer.

Nick waited a moment longer, then cried abruptly:

“Hello, central!”

“Well?”

“This is Nick Carter talking. I can get no reply from the party who rang me up. What’s the trouble?”

“There should be none. The circuit is not broken.”

“Did you hear any unusual sound after making the connection, as if the telephone had been dropped, or as if something occurred?”

“I did not. I will try to get the party.”

“Do so.”

Nick waited and heard the operator cry repeatedly:

“Hello! Hello! Hello!”

No answer—still no answer.

No sound so much as suggesting what had occurred, what fateful deed had been done, or what horror might then be in progress, whence the mysterious telephone call had come.

The stillness over the wire was like that of death itself.

Had death, indeed, stilled the voice heard for a fleeting moment by the detective, the voice that had uttered his name, as if a cry of appeal had been cut short when it left the lips of the speaker?

The operator spoke again.

“Mr. Carter.”

“Well?”

“There is something wrong. The circuit still is complete, but I can get no reply. The person who called you up evidently has left the telephone, but has not hung up the receiver.”

“Were you asked to hold the wire?”

“No.”

“Can you find out who called, what number, or where the telephone is located?”

“I will try.”

“Do so, please, and notify me immediately.”

“I will, sir.”

Nick replaced his telephone on the library desk, then turned quickly to Chick.

“Have Danny here with the touring car as soon as possible,” he directed, referring to his chauffeur. “You had better get ready to accompany me.”

“You are going——”

“To the residence, office, or whatever the quarters may be, of the party who telephoned,” Nick interrupted. “The circumstances are decidedly ominous. We’ll find out why the milk is in the coconut.”

“I’m with you,” Chick declared, hastening to carry out the instructions given him.

Ten minutes brought the report Nick was awaiting. He then hurried through the hall, seizing his hat and overcoat, and rejoined Chick in the touring car, which had arrived at the curbing only a moment before.

“Great guns!” Chick exclaimed, upon hearing the terse directions Nick had given to Danny. “The Clayton residence, eh? Not that of Chester Clayton, our old friend and former client?”

“Yes, the same,” said Nick, now looking ominously grim and determined. “He no longer is running the Hotel Westgate, however, as when we twice served him so successfully. He now is in the banking and brokerage business with his wealthy father-in-law. The firm was established soon after his marriage with Clara Langham.”

“I know about that,” Chick replied. “But can Clayton again be up against trouble? What more have you learned?”

“Only that the phone call came from his residence,” Nick rejoined. “It is one of the most costly in Riverside Drive. Something is wrong there. The exchange operator stated again that the receiver still is off the telephone hook.”

“By Jove, that does appear decidedly ominous, Nick, in view of what you heard—a sound like the crack of a revolver.”

“That is why I apprehend trouble. We soon shall know definitely. Ten minutes will take us to the house.”

It was a palatial residence, indeed, at which they arrived within the time mentioned, and at precisely half past nine o’clock.

The night was agreeably warm for October, with a starry sky and a half-filled moon running low in the west, lending a silvery luster to the placid Hudson.

“Wait here with the car, Danny,” Nick directed, alighting at the driveway entrance to the somewhat spacious grounds, which occupied a corner and also abutted on a less pretentious rear street.

“Come on, Chick, and we’ll very soon solve the mystery.”

“Do you know of whom the family consists, Nick, besides Chester Clayton and his wife?” inquired Chick, as they walked up the driveway.

“His mother, Mrs. Julia Clayton, and his wife’s father, Mr. Gustavus Langham,” said the detective. “They also have one child about four months old. There may be others for all I know, for I have seen but little of the Claytons, mother or son, since his

marriage and that extraordinary case at Langham Manor more than a year ago.”

“When Clayton’s double, Dave Margate, was wiped out of existence,” Chick observed. “He was an accomplished and vicious rat, Nick, if ever there was one.”

Nick Carter did not reply. He recalled for a moment the twin relationship of the two men mentioned. He was thinking, too, of the terrible secret known only to him and the mother of these two sons, whose extraordinary resemblance to one another had made possible the two strange cases in which they had figured; one a man of wealth, character, and social distinction, the other a notorious criminal, and both ignorant of their kinship and the circumstances under which they had been separated in infancy.

Nick’s mind had turned for a moment upon this distressing bit of family history confided to him by Mrs. Julia Clayton.

It still was the skeleton in her closet. Despite the death of that vicious son, who had followed the footsteps of his criminal father, or his supposed death under circumstances warranting hardly the shadow of a doubt, there had been no further disclosure of her terrible secret.

“Let it die with him, Mr. Carter, if David Margate is really dead,” she had said confidentially to Nick, after the sensational case at Langham Manor. “God grant that it is so. Not that I am an unnatural mother, however, who can deliberately wish for the death of her own son, but because his career has been one of persistent vice and crime, and his kinship with the loyal son who bears my maiden name has been the one black shadow that I have seen threatening the happiness and welfare of Chester Clayton. He

does not know; must never know. It will be better far for all concerned. Let the dead bury the dead.”

Nick agreed with her to this extent, and he was again thinking of her when, after more than a year, he strode up the driveway toward the Clayton residence—institively feeling himself on the threshold of another mystery.

“There is a light in the front hall,” he remarked to Chick, when they came nearer the house. “There must be some one at home.”

“Surely.”

“Come this way. I think the library also is lighted. Instead of ringing, Chick, we’ll try to obtain a look from outside.”

Nick had observed a brighter beam of light from one of the side windows. He saw it through the gloom under the portecochère. It streamed out over the side driveway beyond, giving a faint glow to the hazy mist that hung just above the cold earth, and lending a waxy luster to the dew-damp greensward of the near lawn.

Nick led the way in that direction, passing under the portecochère and by the closed door of a dimly lighted side hall. He then could see more plainly the window from which the light was shed.

It was a broad French window, obviously that of the house library, and opening upon a spacious side veranda. The interior blinds were partly raised, and one section of the window was open several inches.

“For ventilation, perhaps,” Chick whispered, with a significant glance at his companion.

Nick did not reply. He crept noiselessly up the veranda steps, and stole toward the partly open window. Through it, at first, he caught sight of only one corner of the large, beautifully furnished room.

A telephone stand was overturned and lying on the floor. The instrument was lying near by, with the receiver fallen from its hook.

Nick stepped nearer, and obtained a view of the entire room.

The corpse of an elderly man was lying on the floor between the telephone stand and the library table. His face was upturned in the light from the electric chandelier. His linen and garments were saturated with blood.

He had been shot through the heart.

Seated in an armchair near the opposite wall was a solitary woman. Her fine figure was clad in a handsome evening gown of black lace, the somber hue of which accentuated her ghastly paleness and the dreadful expression then on her white face—a face attractive even then with its refined, matronly features, its lofty brow, and abundance of wavy, gray hair.

She sat gazing vacantly at the corpse, obviously that of a murdered man, but not a sound came from her ashy-gray lips. One would have thought her dead, also, but for the feverish gleam and glitter of her eyes and the piteous wringing of her shapely, jewel-bedecked hands.

It was as if, in a dazed and abnormal mental condition, she strove to cleanse them of the terrible stain, of the blood-red smears that covered them from her finger tips to her wrists.

“Good heavens!” Chick gasped, at Nick’s elbow. “Here’s murder, Nick, hands down. That woman——”

“Is Mrs. Julia Clayton,” said Nick, more calmly. “Be quiet.”

He stepped into the room and approached her, followed by Chick, but though she gazed at them with her glittering eyes turned quickly upon them, she did not stir from her chair, nor appear disturbed by their unceremonious entrance.

Nick paused in front of her, saying impressively:

“You recognize me, Mrs. Clayton, of course. Speak to me. What’s the meaning of this?”

She appeared to struggle inwardly, as if to make an effort to reply and to answer his question, but only two words, twice repeated in husky, horrified whispers, came from her drawn, gray lips:

“The scar! The scar—the scar!”

CHAPTER II. NICK TAKES A CONFIDANT.

Nick Carter now saw plainly that Mrs. Julia Clayton had suffered no bodily injury. That she was mentally affected, however, either crazed with horror, or in an abnormal condition resulting from other causes, and that any immediate attempt to evoke from her an intelligible explanation of the circumstances would prove utterly futile—these points were equally obvious to the detective.

Nick tried again, nevertheless, gently grasping her shoulder and saying even more impressively:

“The scar! What do you mean, Mrs. Clayton? Try to collect yourself. You surely recognize me—Nick Carter, the detective. Try to tell me what has occurred here. What do you mean? What scar?”

The face of the woman underwent no change. She stared vacantly at Nick, with no sign of recognition, though she again tried to make a vain effort to answer his questions. But only the same two words, repeated as before, was the result:

“The scar! The scar—the scar!”

Both detectives had seen at a glance that the man on the floor was dead, that nothing could be done for him, and the attention of both naturally had turned upon the woman, whose mental distraction and bloodstained hands indicated that she had in some way figured in the shocking crime, if such it really was.

Chick drew back a little and gazed at Nick, whose grave face now reflected not only his perplexity as to the cause for such a fatality, but also his profound regard for this woman who months before had made him the confidant of her dreadful secret. He was asking himself whether in that could be found the motive for this murder—and he glanced instinctively at the upturned face of the lifeless man on the floor.

But it was a fleshy, smooth-shaved face, that of a man well into the sixties—a face that bore not even a remote resemblance to that of David Margate, this woman’s crime-cursed son.

Besides, was it not known beyond any reasonable doubt that David Margate was dead?

Who could have doubted that either the bullet from Chick Carter’s revolver had proved effective, when a gush of blood covered the face of the reeling crook, or that death had ensued in that swift-flowing stream in the Berkshire Hills, into which Margate had fallen and disappeared, nor so much as arisen for a moment to the surface?

These recollections, Nick’s hurried inspection of the tragic scene, together with his vain inquiries addressed to Mrs. Julia Clayton—all had occupied only a very few moments, which Chick turned and asked perplexedly:

“What do you make of it? What’s the trouble with her?”

“Temporarily insane,” Nick murmured. “She cannot explain. She does not even recognize me.”

“You don’t think she is feigning?” Chick whispered.

“No, no, not for a moment. She looked precisely the same, appeared to be in precisely the same condition, when we saw her before we entered. She has undergone no change since seeing us. She is mentally deranged. She is stricken with aphasia, amnesia, or some similar condition.”

“See her hands. She may have killed this man, or——”

“One moment,” Nick interrupted. “She will remain here. We’ll have a hurried look at the evidence.”

“But what can she mean by those two words, Nick, the scar, which appears to be all she can utter? They must have some vital significance. They may supply the key to the mystery.”

“There is more of a mystery here than she can explain, Chick, while in her present condition, or than we can solve without a thorough investigation,” Nick said. “We had better begin it at once, than waste time vainly interrogating her.”

Nick turned while speaking and replaced the telephone stand, also the instrument in their customary position, but he did not delay to communicate with the exchange operator.

“There must be something here that will give us a hint at the truth,” he added. “We’ll try to find it before others show up.”

“Barring these two, Nick, there seems to be no one in the house,” replied Chick, after listening briefly at the open door of the adjoining hall. “That also appears extraordinary. Where are the Claytons? Where is Mr. Langham? What has become of the servants? Why are all of them absent? If for legitimate reasons, and others have not been here since their departure, it must be that the

woman killed this man in a fit of madness, of which her present condition may be the result, or——”

Chick stopped short.

A key had been thrust into the lock of the front door. The sound had reached the ears of both detectives.

Nick moved quickly, with his forefinger laid on his lips.

“Be quiet,” he cautioned. “Wait!”

He stepped back of the open door, to a position enabling him to peer through the broad, brightly lighted hall.

Chick drew back against the wall.

Mrs. Julia Clayton had not stirred from her chair, had not spoken, nor ceased the piteous wringing of her bloodstained hands. She again was gazing with wide, vacant eyes at the gory form on the floor, still with no sign that she recognized the detectives, or had the slightest interest in, or understanding of, why they were there and what they were doing.

Less than three minutes had passed since they entered the house—and another now was entering.

Was that in any way significant?

Nick Carter was much too keen to overlook that possibility, though only a bare possibility it appeared to be. He saw the front door deliberately opened and the man who complacently entered.

He was of medium height and rather slender build, a man about forty years old, with thin features, a pallid complexion, and a

mustache and beard of peculiar bronze hue and oily luster. His hair was of the same remarkable color, observable when he removed his hat. It was most carefully combed and brushed, being fairly plastered down with artistic skill over his skull and brow and above his ears, lending to that part of his head which it covered the glistening smoothness of a polished bronze globe.

He had entered with a latchkey. He paused in the hall and placed his cane in a stand, then removed his hat, overcoat, and gloves, all the while quietly humming a popular song.

Gloves off, he gazed into the hatrack mirror, and, with his palms, augmented the radiant smoothness of his remarkable hair, much as if that was the one personal adornment of which he was really proud.

He hesitated at the base of the stairs, toward which he had deliberately turned, and then gazed toward the library and listened, finally wheeling abruptly and walking in that direction.

Nick drew from behind the door, and in another moment the stranger appeared on the threshold—only to recoil with a startled cry, hands in the air, and with his face gone white with alarm.

“Don’t be frightened,” said Nick, sharply regarding him. “A crime has been committed here, and we are detectives. Who are you? I suppose you reside here.”

“Detectives—crime!” The man steadied himself, yet spoke with a gasp of augmented dismay. “You don’t mean a murder? Merciful Heaven! What’s wrong with Mrs. Clayton?”

His gaze had fallen upon her, but she had not so much as glanced in his direction, nor appeared to know him, or have more interest in him than in the others.

“There is more wrong here than can be told with a breath,” Nick replied. “Step in and answer my question. To begin with, sir, who are you?”

“I am Mr. Chester Clayton’s private secretary, Rollo Garside,” said he, with a manifest effort to pull himself together.

“Do you reside here?”

“Yes, yes, certainly. Who are you? How came you here? Why——”

“Patience, Mr. Garside, and answer my questions, that I may see how best to proceed with this case,” Nick interrupted. “I’m a detective, as I have stated, and my name is Nick Carter.”

“Oh, oh, that’s very different,” Garside quickly exclaimed, countenance lighting. “I have heard Mr. Clayton speak of you. I feared at first that you were deceiving me, that you were responsible for all this, and that I might suffer the same fate.”

“There is nothing for you to fear,” Nick replied. “Do you know where Mr. Clayton has gone this evening, and the rest of the household?”

“Yes, yes, to be sure. He has gone with his wife to spend the evening with the Burtons, in Claremont Avenue. They may return at any moment, Mr. Carter, or you may reach them by telephone. The name is Calvin R. Burton.”

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