

THE BLUE VEIL

Or, NICK CARTER'S TORN TRAIL

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CHAPTER I. REMARKABLE TRICKERY.

Nick Carter listened without interrupting.

The man addressing the famous detective was not one to be wisely interrupted. His strong face, his broad, thin-lipped mouth and square jaw, the glint of his steel-blue eyes, his portly and imposing figure—all denoted that he was the type of man that insists upon having his way, his inning at the bat, as it were, but who then would graciously accord the same privilege to another.

“The danger, Mr. Carter, cannot be overestimated,” he was forcibly saying. “It really is very terrible. We are living in constant peril. That man is a perpetual menace. Unless he can be wiped out of existence, or put behind prison bars, there is no telling what he might accomplish, no possible way to anticipate it and guard against it. I cannot for the life of me understand how he got by a detective as marvelously keen and discerning as you. I cannot, Carter, on my word.”

Nick smiled and knocked the ashes from his cigar.

“It is not very difficult to understand,” he replied, with patience unruffled. “There were two reasons for it, Mr. Langham.”

“Two reasons?”

“Yes. One, because the likeness between Chester Clayton and David Margate, or Doctor David Guelpa, in which character this exceedingly clever rascal then was posing, is a most extraordinary

one. I doubt that two other persons could be found, not excluding the most perfect of twins, who look so precisely alike.”

“But you already knew of that extraordinary resemblance, Mr. Carter, when Margate eluded you and made his escape.”

“Very true,” Nick admitted. “But there were other facts which I did not know, and which I had had no way of learning. That is why there was a second reason for Margate’s escape. Any detective, even one as ‘keen and discerning’ as myself, if I may quote you, would be deceived by a seeming impossibility.”

“Impossibility?”

“Seeming impossibility,” corrected Nick.

“What do you mean?”

“Bear in mind, Mr. Langham, that Margate rushed from the house in which we secured his confederates and ran to his suite in the Hotel Westgate, of which Clayton still is manager.”

“I know about that.”

“I then did not know that a secret electric communication existed between the very room in which we made the arrest and the apartments to which Margate had gone, nor that a signal informing him of the arrest and warning him to flee could be communicated to him by stepping on a concealed button under the carpet. I since have learned all about that. That was done by Scoville, one of the arrested crooks, unknown to me and my assistants.”

“But, Mr. Carter——”

“One moment, please,” Nick now interrupted. “I want you to see how impossible Margate’s exploit must have appeared.”

“Go on, then.”

“Only ten minutes elapsed from the time Margate left his confederates, until I entered the Westgate in pursuit of him. The first person I saw in the hotel office was, I supposed, Manager Clayton.”

“Well?”

“How could I believe anything else?” Nick went on more earnestly. “He was in the office inclosure and wearing an entirely different suit from what Margate was wearing ten minutes before. Ten minutes is an incredibly short time in which to have covered the distance between the two houses, to have gone to his suite and changed his outside garments and got down to the hotel office.”

“I admit that, Carter, of course.”

“I called to the supposed Clayton, therefore, and we went up to Margate’s suite, in company with my junior assistant, Patsy Garvan,” continued Nick. “We found the supposed Margate unconscious on his bed, clad in the same suit in which I had seen him, as I have said, only ten minutes before. Who on earth would have suspected, despite the extraordinary resemblance and all that previously had occurred, that such a lightninglike change of character could be accomplished; that the man on the bed was Clayton, and the man at my elbow was the crook himself? It would have seemed incredible, utterly impossible. That is why I did not give it a thought.”

“How was it accomplished, Mr. Carter?”

“I since have learned, of course,” said Nick. “Margate received the warning signal the moment he entered his suite. He instantly telephoned down to the hotel office and requested Clayton to come up there immediately on important business.”

“He did so?”

“Certainly. Clayton had no occasion to suspect Margate, whom he knew only as Doctor Guelpa. He complied, of course, and Margate invited him to his suite. Then, passing back of him, he threw one arm around his head and over his mouth, at the same time injecting into his neck a quantity of the same swiftly acting drug with which he had overcome Patsy Garvan earlier in the evening.”

“Clayton has told me about that.”

“It was done in a couple of minutes,” Nick went on. “Margate then stripped Clayton of his outside garments, exchanging them for his own, and placed his senseless form on the bed.”

“But what motive had he?” questioned Langham. “Why did he not flee at once after receiving the warning?”

Nick laughed a bit derisively.

“You don’t know this rascal, Mr. Langham,” he replied. “I now know more about him than I then did. He turned that trick only because he was short of funds. He then went down to the hotel office, a human counterfeit of Clayton, with the intention of stealing the money from the hotel vault.”

“Ah, I see,” Mr. Langham nodded. “A rascal, Carter, indeed.”

“My timely arrival with Patsy at just that moment prevented his design,” said the detective. “He had no sane alternative, when I called to him, but to accompany us to the suite. My assistant then made a hurried examination of the man on the bed, and he at once inferred that Margate had committed suicide.”

“I suppose it appeared so,” Mr. Langham allowed.

“In the meantime,” Nick added; “the supposed Clayton cried that he must telephone the good news to his mother and to Mademoiselle Falloni, whose stolen jewels we had just recovered. He hurried from the room, as if to do so. We now know that he hurried from the house, and that is the last we saw of him. But the whole business from beginning to end occurred in less than fifteen minutes, Mr. Langham, and no detective on earth, unless gifted with clairvoyance, would have suspected the trick.”

“I admit, of course, that it would have seemed impossible,” bowed Langham.

“Now, sir, let me tell you what I since have learned about this crook,” said Nick. “I have looked up his record abroad. He twice had been convicted and sent to prison. He at one time was associated in Paris with the notorious Doctor Leon Deverge, who was executed two years ago for wholesale murder by means of drugs and poisons, of which he had made so profound a study that he knew much more of their subtle and deadly qualities than has been learned by any of his contemporaries.”

“I remember having read of the man.”

“This notorious physician and chemist imparted to David Margate much of his dangerous knowledge, and the career of the

latter has always been one of vice and crime. It has been accomplished with such exceeding craft and cunning, moreover, that he most of the time has completely baffled the police. I admit that Margate is a terrible menace to society and to——”

“To us, Mr. Carter, in particular,” said Mr. Langham, interrupting. “For he threatened Clayton by letter many months ago that he would wreak vengeance upon him for having put you on his track, and that your life would be the price for having foiled him and imprisoned his confederates. In view of all this, Carter, and particularly his extraordinary likeness to Clayton, his very existence is a constant menace.”

“Those are the only reasons, Mr. Langham, why I consented to drive up here into the Berkshire Hills with my assistants to attend these festivities,” Nick again interposed.

“That was very good of you, Mr. Carter, to be sure,” bowed the other.

“I was pleased, of course, to be present at the marriage of Clayton and your daughter, and both assured me that they would feel easier if I was here,” Nick added. “Clayton apprehended that Margate, despite that he has not been seen or heard from save once since his jewel robbery, might attempt knavery at this time. I attribute that, however, to Clayton’s somewhat nervous temperament. I don’t take very much stock in the threats of crooks, you know, for I long have been accustomed to them. Very few of them ever make good. I doubt that David Margate ever will.”

“Well, I hope not, I’m sure.”

“It is nearly time, I think, for Clayton and his bride to depart,” Nick now said, glancing at his watch. “You will wish to see them leave, I suppose.”

It then was ten o’clock in the evening, that of a bright day in June—a fit day, indeed, for the marriage of as beautiful a girl as charming Clara Langham, the only daughter of the multimillionaire president of the Century Trust Company, with whom Nick Carter had been talking.

More than six months had passed since the extraordinary case they had been discussing, that involving the theft and recovery of the world-famous jewels of Mademoiselle Falloni, the celebrated prima donna, a case resulting also in the arrest and conviction of all of the crooks save their ringleader, whose unparalleled elusion of Nick Carter at the last moment they had been reviewing.

Nick never had confided, not even to his trusty assistants, the terrible secret intrusted to his keeping by Clayton’s cultured and attractive mother; that his extraordinary personal resemblance to the notorious crook was due to his twin relationship; that he bore his mother’s maiden name, and David Margate that of the criminal father of both, who had deserted his wife in England while the children were infants, taking with him this son, who afterward fell naturally into the evil footsteps of his vicious father, who since had died under sentence in a German prison.

Nick would not have thought of betraying such a secret, of which Clayton was entirely ignorant, and the disclosure of which would serve only to mar his happiness and in a measure wreck his subsequent life.

The secret then was known, in fact, only by Nick and the sad-hearted mother, Mrs. Julia Clayton, who had confided it to him only in order that the detective might prove Clayton innocent of the great jewel robbery mentioned. It was a secret that could be safely trusted to a man of Nick Carter's sterling integrity.

The room in which he then was seated was the private library of Mr. Gustavus Langham, in the money magnate's great stone mansion, occupied only as a summer residence. It had been built several years before at an enormous expense, before the death of his gay and fashionable wife.

It was like an old feudal castle, with its massive walls and parapets, its broad halls and winding stairways, its stately rooms and attractive surroundings, covering a vast wooded estate in one of the most picturesque and secluded sections of the beautiful Berkshire Hills.

From the room in which Nick was seated could be heard, though the door was closed, the strains of the orchestral music, also the vivacious conversation and gay laughter of a multitude of guests, gathered at the wedding reception by a special train from New York, or with motor cars from select summer colonies from a radius of fifty miles.

The driveways and roads through the vast estate of nearly a square mile were alive with moving conveyances of one kind or another, some of the guests residing at a distance already having made their departure.

For the wedding ceremony had been performed two hours before, the reception was nearing its end, and the bride and groom

were making final preparations for a precipitous departure to avoid the customary good-luck shower on such occasions.

Mr. Langham also drew out his watch and glanced at it.

“Nearly ten,” he remarked, replying to the detective. “Why, yes, I certainly wish to see them leave. I also want a last word in private with Clara. I will go and see her before she leaves her room. I told her I would do so about this time. She is expecting me, no doubt, and——”

But Mr. Langham, who had arisen while speaking, got no further with his remarks.

He was interrupted by the unceremonious opening of the door and by the hurried entrance of Clayton’s best man, George Vandyke, a New York lawyer with whom Nick Carter was very well acquainted.

One glance at the young man’s white face and dilated eyes was enough to convince the detective that something both alarming and extraordinary had occurred.

“Out with it, Vandyke,” he exclaimed, starting up and dropping his cigar into the cuspidor. “What’s the matter with you? What has happened?”

CHAPTER II. THE STOLEN BRIDE.

Nick Carter evidently was the man George Vandyke was seeking. He appeared unable to speak for a moment, nevertheless, so great was his suppressed excitement.

"I've been looking for you," he finally gasped, when Nick seized him by the arm and shook him. "They told me you were here. I——"

"Out with it!" repeated Nick more sharply. "What's the trouble?"

"Clayton has disappeared," choked Vandyke. "He cannot be found. His bride also is missing. Neither of them are in their rooms, nor——"

"Good God! Has the blow fallen?"

Mr. Langham staggered as if he had, indeed, received a brutal blow.

Nick Carter immediately took the ribbons.

"Don't create a stir!" he commanded quickly. "Leave me to look into the matter. Since both are missing, they may have departed together, bent upon eluding their very zealous friends and a deluge of confetti."

“That cannot be, Nick,” Vandyke hurriedly protested. “Clayton’s suit case is still in his room. He would have taken it with him, of course, if he——”

“Leave it to me. Don’t alarm the guests needlessly.”

“But some of them already know——”

Nick did not wait for more. He brushed by the two men, and, outwardly perfectly calm, hastened through the crowded hall toward the main stairway.

Both Chick Carter and Patsy Garvan then were on the main floor of the vast house, the former near the open front door, where, both in the hall and on the granite steps and the broad veranda outside, scores of guests had gathered to speed the happy couple on their wedding journey.

Chick saw Nick approaching and caught the ominous gleam in his expressive eyes.

“What’s up?” he asked quietly, hastily meeting him.

Nick now said what he really thought.

“That devil has got in his work again.”

“Not Margate?”

“I fear so. Both bride and groom are missing.”

“The deuce you say!”

“Nothing could have been pulled off, however, under the eyes of this mob on the steps and veranda. Slip around to the side door and see what you can learn,” Nick hurriedly directed. “Keep your

eyes open and nail any one acting suspiciously. Get word to Patsy and send him to the rear door. The trick may not have been turned yet. They can have been missing only a few minutes.”

“I’m wise,” Chick nodded, starting for the side hall and the broad exit under the massive porte-cochère.

Nick hastened to the second floor and toward the two rear rooms used by the bride and groom that evening, those in front having been needed to accommodate the throng of guests.

Nick discovered a solitary bridesmaid near the door of Clara’s room, and somewhat apart from the group of women then near the stairs. She happened to be one with whom he was acquainted, and he hurriedly approached her.

“What’s this I hear, Miss Arden?” he said quietly. “What do you know about it?”

“Little enough, Mr. Carter,” she replied, pale and mystified. “I only know that Clara sent us all from her room after she was dressed for her journey. She explained that her father wanted to see her privately before she left, and that she was momentarily expecting him. We left her alone, therefore, and went downstairs.”

“You mean yourself and the other bridesmaids?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Not more than ten minutes; hardly as long, I think.”

“Who discovered her absence?”

“I did. I returned to get my handkerchief, which I had left in the room. I found the room deserted. Clara had gone, but her suit case and hand bag still are there. I came out, of course, and I at once saw Mr. Vandyke coming up the side stairs. I told him about it, Mr. Carter, and he said that Clara probably was with Mr. Clayton in his room. He knocked, but received no answer. He then went in and found that Mr. Clayton also was missing.”

“Did you make any inquiries among the guests here in the hall?”

“Yes, immediately. We could find no one who had seen either of them go out. Strange though it seems, both of them have mysteriously disappeared, leaving their luggage in their rooms.”

“You say that Miss Langham, or, rather, Mrs. Clayton, was clad in her outside garments?”

“Yes, sir. She had on her hat, veil, and jacket, and was ready to leave at any moment.”

“What is her traveling costume?”

“A navy-blue suit with hat and veil to match.”

“Who, now, is in her room?”

“No one, Mr. Carter. She——”

“Wait!” Nick interrupted. “I will look in there.”

He stepped into the room while speaking. It was in considerable disorder after the change of attire from a wedding gown to a traveling costume. There was no sign of the missing girl, no written line explaining her sudden departure, no evidence of

when, why, or how she had gone. Both windows were open, but in each there was a wire screen secured on the inside. Nick saw plainly that neither of them had been tampered with.

“By Jove, this looks bad enough. It looks, indeed, as if Dave Margate has again got in his work,” he said to himself while retracing his steps. “Has the rascal designs upon this girl, disregarding the valuable gifts now in the house? Those were safely guarded from every side, but who would have thought it necessary to guard her in such a throng as this?”

“What do you think about it, Mr. Carter?” questioned Miss Arden, awed by the more serious expression on the detective’s face when he came from the room.

“I cannot say at present,” Nick replied. “Don’t be alarmed, nor spread the news too quickly. There still is a possibility that they will return.”

He did not wait for an answer, but hastened into an opposite room, that occupied by Chester Clayton.

There Nick found, at first, the same negative conditions. A single window overlooked the rear grounds. It was closed and locked. Clayton’s suit case stood near the door. His overcoat and hat were missing, however, though a pair of new kid gloves lay on the dressing stand.

Nick had only time to note these features of the scene when Vandyke hurriedly entered, looking even more pale and disturbed.

“Why did you apprehend so quickly that something was wrong?” Nick asked a bit abruptly, turning to him.

“Only because Clayton appeared to fear some mishap,” Vandyke replied. “He admitted he had no definite reason for it, but he seemed very nervous.”

“Where were you when he left? You were his best man.”

“True. I came here to tell you about that.”

“About what?”

“One of the caterer’s assistants came in here a short time ago, not more than twenty minutes, and stated that Mr. Lenaire wanted to see me in the dining room.”

“Lenaire is the caterer?”

“Yes. It was upon my recommendation that he was given this job. I asked Clayton if he had any immediate use for me, and he told me to go ahead and see what Lenaire wanted. I did so and found him in the dining room.”

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to thank me again for having recommended him, and also to ask me to express his gratitude to Clayton for having seconded my suggestion, which he feared he would not have an opportunity to do personally before Clayton departed. He explained at some length, Nick, and when I returned I found that Clayton was missing. Then, when unable to find Clara, I feared something was wrong.”

“I see,” Nick nodded. “Did the waiter who came up return to the dining room with you?”

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