

# **THE FORCED CRIME**

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## **CHAPTER I.**

### **A TALE OF BURGLARS.**

“You say this burglar has got into your bedroom three times?”

“Yes, Carter. Three times that I know of. He may have got in oftener for aught I know.”

“Hardly likely, Mr. Bentham. If you woke up three times and saw him, it indicates that there is something in his presence which affects you even in your sleep. It is a psychological influence, evidently.”

Professor Matthew Bentham, one of the most learned scientists in Brooklyn, shook his head. He knew too much about psychology to believe it was an agent in his case.

“That explanation won’t do, Carter,” he declared. “On each occasion I have been awakened by a distinct noise in the room.”

“But you never got up to interfere with the man,” Nick Carter reminded him. “That isn’t your way. No one ever has insinuated that you lack in physical courage. You are an athlete, too. I have had the gloves on with you, remember, and I know how you handle yourself. There must have been something to make you lie still in bed while a stranger was ransacking your bedchamber.”

The famous detective was sitting comfortably in Professor Bentham’s well-appointed library on the ground floor of the latter’s home near Prospect Park, and both were smoking.

Carter had dropped in casually to see his friend, and the subject of the mysterious burglar had come up without any previous knowledge of it by the detective. They had been talking about other things, particularly about some important records of a Chinese secret organization which were in Matthew Bentham's care, and which were soon to be sent to Washington.

Suddenly, Bentham had confided to Carter that he was worried over certain midnight visits that had been forced upon him, and instantly the great criminologist was deeply interested.

"Did your burglar—or burglars—get away with anything?" he asked.

"There is only one of him. At least, I think so. I never have had a clear view of his face. He is a slim, active sort of man, dressed in an ordinary dark business suit, with a soft hat pulled down over his eyes. The hat has always prevented my seeing as much of his features as I should like."

"There are many thousands of slim, active men, in dark business suits and soft hats, moving about Greater New York," remarked Nick, between puffs at his cigar.

"True," conceded Bentham. "But you know, as well as anybody, that every human being has certain peculiarities of movement, attitude, and poise, that are not exactly the same as those of anybody else. There is a sort of what I may call 'atmosphere' about each one of us—an aura—that distinguishes us from all our fellows. You know that, Carter?"

The detective nodded.

“Yes, professor. That is pretty well understood by most persons, I think. Well, we’ll say it is only one particular burglar who favors you with his company in this way. What I asked is whether he steals anything.”

“He never has yet. But I think that is because I never leave valuables lying about the room. I never carry much cash in my pockets—have no use for it unless I am going away somewhere—and my watch is always under my pillow.”

“And why have you never got up to argue matters with him?”

“Because I can’t. He seems to hypnotize me.”

“Then there *is* a psychological influence?” smiled Nick.

“To that extent, yes. But I do not believe it is that that awakens me.”

Nick Carter took his cigar from his mouth, and, with a careless gesture, knocked off the ash into a silver tray on the table.

“Well, that is of not much consequence, after all,” he said. “What is the fellow after? He must have some purpose in coming three separate times, only a night or two apart. You say you don’t know how he gets in?”

“Haven’t an idea. The doors and windows are all locked at night before we retire, and we find them the same way in the morning.”

“What servants have you?”

“Only two maids, besides the boy who does odd jobs, such as polishing brasswork, sweeping the front steps, and waiting on the

cook. He sleeps out of the house. My daughter lets him in early in the morning. There is an electric contrivance, operating from her bedroom, which opens the side gate, and also connects with the lock of the back door to the kitchen.”

Nick Carter stopped smoking and looked hard at the professor. He was interested in this mechanical device.

“I should like to see that electric connection,” he said. “Can you show it to me?”

“Certainly. Wait a moment.”

Bentham went out of the room. When he returned he smiled apologetically.

“My daughter is dressing to go out this afternoon. But I can tell you all about it. There is nothing remarkable about the apparatus. I had it put in by a regular electrician. It is a great deal like the electric door openers used in flat houses, by which tenants open the front door at the street without leaving their apartments.”

Nick Carter resumed his cigar and smoked for several minutes in silence. His host could see that he was thinking hard, and did not disturb him. Instead, he kept on gravely smoking himself.

“The last time this fellow came in was last night, eh?” asked Nick Carter, after a long pause.

“Yes.”

“And you have not told anybody about these visits?”

“No one. You see, my daughter Clarice and I are alone, except for the two maids. I would not worry Clarice, and there would be

no use in telling the maids. They probably would take fright and leave. You know what a bother is to get good servants in New York.”

“Those records of the Yellow Tong, sent to you by Andrew Anderton on the night that he died—you have them?”

“Yes.”

“Who brought them? As I remember Mr. Anderton’s last letter to you, he said they would be sent by safe hands. What did he mean by that?”

“They were sent by express to a club I belong to, but which I seldom visit. Then I got a cipher telegram from the club, informing me that there was a package in the safe there for me. I went to the club and got the package.”

“I see. It was a wise precaution on the part of Anderton. He knew that you were likely to be shadowed by some members of the tong, and that if you brought anything direct from his house, in Fifth Avenue, it would be doubtful whether you ever would get it home.”

Nick Carter spoke in low tones, as if he were deep in thought, and were letting his tongue run on almost without guidance. At the same time, it need hardly be said that this astute, long-experienced student of criminology was not the man to say anything without knowing exactly what he was saying.

“You have the package quite secure, I suppose?” he asked.

“Quite, I believe. Nobody knows where it is but myself—not even Clarice. It is not that I would not trust my daughter. But there

would be nothing gained by her knowing, and it might worry her to think that she held an important secret.”

“Women like secrets generally, don’t they?” smiled Nick Carter.

“That is the tradition,” acknowledged Bentham, also with a smile. “But Clarice is a level-headed girl. Then she has had to take care of me for three years, since her mother died, and that has given her a sense of responsibility, I think, which is beyond her years. She does not know anything about the package, and would not be interested in it, anyhow.”

“Don’t you see any connection between the visits of this mysterious stranger and the package?” asked Nick slowly. “May it not be that the Yellow Tong—and you know how powerful and far-reaching it is—has set its agents to get from you the records that it is so important to the organization to keep from the government at Washington?”

Bentham smoked a few seconds before replying. The same suspicion had been in his own mind, but he had brushed it away. Now, here was this cool-headed, straight-seeing master detective suggesting the same thing.

“It is possible you are right, Carter,” admitted the professor. “I’ll take those records to Washington to-morrow night. I can’t go before, because I am going to a reception this evening given by the famous Indian savant from the Punjab, Ched Ramar. You have heard of him?”

“Yes. He has been in the newspapers a great deal the last few weeks. Who and what is he?”



“One of the most eminent scholars from that country,” answered Bentham enthusiastically. “He has traveled a great deal, especially in Tibet. He has a collection of idols from that country which are well worth seeing, I am told. I am delighted with the prospect of looking them over to-night.”

“I should think you would be. Is there a special invitation needed to get into his house this evening?”

“Well, I don’t know. I got a card addressed to me. But there is a line on the card to the effect that any friend of mine will be welcome. It is written in pencil. The remainder of the card is lithographed. If you would like to go, I should be pleased to take you in. My daughter is going, with her aunt, Mrs. Morrison. She is Clarice’s mother’s sister.”

“I accept your invitation with pleasure,” said Nick Carter. “But—here is a request I have to make. You won’t think it very strange, knowing my profession. I should like to go in disguise, and under another name than my own.”

“Don’t want to be recognized, eh?” smiled Bentham. “Why? You don’t think there will be anybody there who would be afraid of you as Nicholas Carter, the detective, do you? Ched Ramar is a man who moves in the highest circles and is known all over India. His house, in Brooklyn Heights, is one that questionable characters would find it hard to enter. He has two tall men of his own race perpetually on guard at his door—besides many other servants engaged in this country.”

“It is merely a fancy of mine, perhaps,” returned Nick. “I will be Doctor Hodgson, if you don’t mind. Shall I come here to-night?”

“If you will. I’ll take you in our car. Mrs. Morrison and Clarice will be with us. Get here about half past eight. We don’t want to go too early. It will be ten o’clock or so before things get into full swing at Ched Ramar’s house.”

“All right! I’ll be here at eight-thirty,” replied Nick, as he got up to go. “I’ll have just about time to go home and dress, and get back again.”

“It takes you a long time to dress,” laughed Professor Bentham. “I can get ready in half an hour any time.”

“My dress will be rather more elaborate than yours, perhaps. I have to change my face, you know.”

## **CHAPTER II.**

### **A HOUSE OF MYSTERY.**

When a grave, bearded man, with gold-rimmed spectacles and hair brushed up straight from his forehead, presented himself in Matthew Bentham's library at half past eight, the professor could not see anything in him to suggest the clean-cut, up-to-date American whom he knew as Nicholas Carter.

The big, blond beard and mustache completely changed the contour of his countenance, while the pompadour hair and the lines in the forehead were not those of the detective, although they seemed to be perfectly natural in Doctor Hodgson. The rather shabby cape overcoat which covered his evening clothes was not such a garment as he would wear in his own proper person, either.

It was only when the door of the library was closed, and Nick knew they were alone, that he dropped the deliberate speech he had used, and spoke in his own natural, quick tones.

"The package still all right, professor?" he asked.

"Yes. I looked a few minutes ago, to make sure. Somehow, I hate to leave it in the house when I am away. It is something I never have done before. Still, I am not afraid it will be found—even if my burglar should come while I am away. He may do that, if he is keeping as close a watch on me as I think he must. I have too much faith in my hiding place."

Nothing more was said, for just then Clarice knocked at the library door, and, on her father telling her to come in, she stood before them.

Clarice was a beautiful girl, who looked enough like her father for any one to recognize the relationship. She had something of the intellectual gravity of the professor, and Nick set her down at once as a very bright young woman. He put her age at not more than twenty. Later her father told him she lacked two months of that age.

With Mrs. Morrison—a middle-aged, dignified matron, richly attired and bejeweled—on one side of him, and Clarice on the other, in the tonneau, Nick Carter kept up his character of a learned doctor by talking authoritatively on tuberculosis, typhus, and similar cheerful subjects brought up by Mrs. Morrison, but always with one eye on Clarice. He wanted to hear the girl talk, so that he could judge whether she would be careful in guarding her father's house against strangers.

But Mrs. Morrison—who was a good woman in her way, and devoted much time to the poor and sick of New York—would not let him off. They got to the house of Ched Ramar without Clarice getting an opportunity to throw in more than a few words here and there, and he did not see her again until they were in the handsomely furnished reception rooms of the Indian scholar, and were looking at the curiosities on all sides.

Nick Carter got an opportunity soon to stand back and look steadily at Ched Ramar. He saw a tall man, with the dark skin and black eyes of the East Indian, and wearing the white turban of his race, who talked good English and was the essence of suave courtesy.

“I don’t know how it is,” thought Nick Carter. “His face seems familiar and yet I know I never saw Ched Ramar before.”

As the detective moved about with the others, looking at the many curious idols of various metals that were disposed about the great rooms, and answering readily to his assumed name of Doctor Hodgson, he seemed not to have any interest outside of what he was inspecting with the other guests. But his gaze never left the swarthy face of Ched Ramar for more than a few seconds at a time.

“Where have I seen him before?”

This was the question that would not keep out of Nick Carter’s mind. It might have worried him, too, only that he had quite determined that he would answer it before he was many days older.

“Perhaps not to-night,” he told himself. “But when I get alone, in my own room. I’ll go through my portrait gallery of people I have met, and I’ll place him, or know the reason why.”

There were other rooms besides these two great double drawing-rooms to which the guests were invited. In all the apartments of the house were some strange things worth seeing, and Ched Ramar took pleasure in offering them to the inspection of those who had honored him by coming.

He said this himself, and he seemed sincere when he did so. He seemed inclined to pay particular attention to Matthew Bentham, Clarice, and Mrs. Morrison. He talked to them more than to any of the other guests, Nick Carter thought.

The two tall Indian guards, in glittering military uniforms, with curved swords at their sides, and gaudy turbans setting off their dark, solemn faces, were always at the wide door of the reception

rooms, and the detective noted that they watched every move of the throng as it surged about the apartments.

Ched Ramar had the air of a man who trusted everybody, but his guards' vigilance suggested that he had given them orders to be suspicious unceasingly.

"Hello! Where's he taking that girl?" suddenly exclaimed the detective.

Ched Ramar had directed the general attention to a large glass case filled with magnificently jeweled weapons at one end of the drawing-room. Then he called one of the guards.

"Show and explain these, Keshub," he ordered shortly.

Keshub, the guard, made a deep salaam and marched to the end of the case. He spoke as good English as his chief, and his sonorous tones rolled through the rooms as he told the history of each dagger, sword, and gun to his open-mouthed listeners.

It was at this instant that Nick Carter made his inaudible remark, for Ched Ramar led the girl behind some heavy red velvet hangings, which dropped back into place, hiding them.

For a few moments Nick stood still, uncertain what to do. He had no idea of allowing this young girl to be taken into a secret part of this big, strange house by a man like this Indian, whom no one knew except as a famous man in his own country.

"I've got to see what is back of those portières," muttered the detective. "I don't see Matthew about, or I'd tell him. By George! This is New York—even if it is Brooklyn—and we don't do things of this kind. He must think he is still in the Punjab."

He saw that Keshub was busy with the people who were admiring the really wonderful display of weapons in the glass cases, and that the other guard was staring at the people over there. No one was taking any notice of himself.

“All the better,” he thought.

He edged around the wall till he stood in front of the red velvet curtains. Then he gently pulled them apart and looked behind. What he saw was the gilt railings of a door that evidently belonged to an elevator. The elevator car was above, on another floor.

“One of those automatic affairs,” he thought. “Well, all the better. I’m going up. If one of the guests is entitled to ride in the elevator, it ought to be all right for another. Anyhow, I can easily explain that I supposed we were all to go up here, if there is any question.”

He pressed an electric button, and the car slid noiselessly down. The coming down of the car released a latch on the railed door, and Nick pulled it open. Taking his place in the car, he pressed a button inside, and was wafted upward.

The elevator was so delicately adjusted that it made not the slightest noise, and it stopped at the next floor above without a jar. There were thick curtains outside, like those below. Also a railed door.

Gently, Nick opened the door and stood inside the curtains, listening. He caught a low murmur of voices, which told him that the speakers were at some distance.

He opened the curtains a little way, and then stepped between them. He was in a dimly lighted room, with a red lantern giving the

only illumination. At one end were heavy portières draped back, so that he could look beyond, into another room.

In the farther room he saw that there were idols of all sizes and kinds. He remembered that Ched Ramar's collection of idols was said to be the finest possessed by any private person in New York. Moreover, each idol had a history.

Standing, with their backs to him, were Clarice Bentham and Ched Ramar himself. The latter was pointing to one immense image of Buddha which faced the opening in the curtains. He was talking in a low earnest tone, and it seemed to Nick as if the girl were completely entranced by the great, golden figure and the words that poured from the grave lips of the Indian.

"I can't hear what he is saying," muttered the detective. "I suppose the way to find out is to step forward and show myself. And yet——"

At this instant the low tones of Ched Ramar changed to loud, clear accents, delivered in a matter-of-fact way, as he waved his hand toward the Buddha.

"That Buddha and other things in this room will interest you for some time, Miss Bentham, I have no doubt," he said. "But I can hardly remain away from my guests. I will leave you alone. When you are ready to come down, you know how to work the elevator. Although it is possible that some of the other ladies below will be up to see the idols before you have finished looking at them."

"Oh, but I don't know whether I dare be left here alone with these dreadful things," she protested, with a shudder. "I'm rather afraid of them."



Ched Ramar laughed good-naturedly as he shook his head at her.

“I beg your pardon for laughing, Miss Bentham,” he said. “But, really, I had never thought of my poor idols in that light before. These things that so many thousands of people in Asia believe can save them from all ill, and bring succor to them in distress—surely ought not to frighten any one, even an American young lady. But, if you are timid, why, I’ll take you down at once.”

This offer seemed to bring Clarice to herself. She was ashamed of her apprehensions, and Nick saw her shoulders stiffen as she declared, in a resolute voice:

“No, I’ll stay till I’ve looked at all of them. I hope you won’t think I’m a coward. When I said I was afraid I meant that I felt a sort of awe. I should think most persons would experience some such feeling on beholding all these strange figures for the first time. No doubt, if I lived in Tibet, or wherever these images come from, I should regard them only with reverence, and believe in them as sacred guardians, like the others who have been familiar with them from childhood.”

Nick Carter slipped behind a tall vase on a stand close to where he had been standing. He saw that Ched Ramar was about to go downstairs, and he did not want to be seen.

“I’ll stay up here till she has finished her examination,” he thought. “Then, if she should get frightened—as she may when she is alone—I’ll step forward and try to give her courage. She knows me only as Doctor Hodgson, and I flatter myself I took the part of a grave and reverend medico pretty nearly to perfection.”

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