

THE MASK OF DEATH

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CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERIOUS ROBBERY.

“Nick Carter will solve the mystery. No crime is too deep for him. He’ll ferret out the truth and run down the rascals. He will recover your lost treasures, too, Mr. Strickland, one and all of them, take my word for it. If there is one man on earth who can accomplish it, Nick Carter is that one man. So pull yourself together, sir, and face this calamity man fashion. Carter already is on his way here, and he soon will fathom this outrageous and——”

Nick Carter did not wait to hear more. He pushed open the door through which he had heard the above remarks, observing that it was ajar, and he entered without ceremony the apartments of the man to whom they had been addressed.

They denoted that he was on the threshold of an extraordinary case, one shrouded in mystery and involving a great loss, and the scene within seemed to warrant all that he had overheard.

The entrance hall through which he had passed led into a beautifully furnished parlor overlooking Fifth Avenue. It was one of the front rooms of an apartment occupying the entire second floor of the spacious and magnificent old Vanhausen mansion, turned to other than strictly private residential uses since the encroachment of commercial interests upon that part of the fashionable New York thoroughfare.

A slender, strikingly pretty girl of eighteen sat weeping in one of the richly upholstered armchairs. Her fair face was of an artless, winsome type, evincing girlish innocence and that sweet and

sensitive nature which none can resist. A light complexion and glistening golden hair, crowning a shapely and perfectly poised head, told plainly that she was of German extraction.

One of her two companions was a man turned sixty. He was pacing to and fro in a state of abject distress and violent agitation. His short, corpulent figure was shaking as if his every nerve had become a writhing, red-hot wire in his palpitating flesh. His round, florid face was streaming with perspiration. His hair, a tawny mop on a large, intellectual head, was in indescribable disorder. He was wringing his hands and moaning as if his heart was broken.

The only other person present when Nick entered with his chief assistant, Chick Carter, was a tall, clean-cut man in the twenties, one Arthur Gordon, a successful broker and popular society man with whom Nick was well acquainted, and to whose urgent telephone request he then was responding.

“Ah, here is Mr. Carter now,” he exclaimed, when the two detectives entered. “Thank goodness, Nick, you could come immediately. We’re up against it good and hard, a terrible robbery.”

“H’m, is that so?”

“You know Mr. Rudolph Strickland by name and reputation, I’m sure. This is his niece, Wilhelmina Strickland, from Boston. Now, do, Mr. Strickland, compose yourself, that Mr. Carter may lose no time in sifting this matter to the bottom.”

There was, indeed, as Gordon had implied, little need of an introduction to Mr. Rudolph Strickland. His name was a familiar one in the best circles of New York society. He numbered among

his friends and acquaintances nearly all of the distinguished artists, musicians, and literary people of any note, who were frequent visitors to his spacious apartments to admire his superb collection of art treasures, or hear his master hand manipulate his famous Stradivarius violin.

He was in no sense a society man, nevertheless, being a somewhat reserved and eccentric German, with a passion for music, literature, and art, treasures of which he had collected from all parts of Europe, where he was a recognized connoisseur, critic, and man of letters.

Age had begun to undermine his health, however, and for nearly five years he had occupied his present quarters on the second floor of the old Vanhausen mansion, richly furnished and containing most of the fine collection upon which he had expended a considerable part of his fortune. He was a bachelor and lived entirely alone, save when encroached upon by the woman who cared for his apartments, or by his artistic and literary friends.

A glance around the parlor, while he responded to Arthur Gordon's introduction and afterward presented Chick, gave Nick a hint at the character of the robbery. Several empty picture frames, from each of which the canvas had been removed, were lying on the floor and leaning against the walls; while vacant places on the mantel and in or on the several costly glass cabinets told the tale of depredation.

"Gordon is right," said he, as to the young man's advice. "You must be calm, Mr. Strickland, or valuable time may be lost."

"Lost! What is loss of time compared with the loss I have suffered?" cried the old German, wringing his hands and

desperately running his fingers through his thick growth of hair. "I am heartbroken. I am in despair. My beloved Murillo. My Titian. My Meissonier and Corot. My priceless Correggio, and two originals by Helleu. My antique, engraved gems. My costly collection of jade. My——"

"Hush! You will make yourself ill, Uncle Rudolph!" cried Wilhelmina, rising and clasping his arm with her dainty hands. "Do please try——"

"Ah, I am ill already. It is a loss to make angels weep," Mr. Strickland went on, in pathetic agitation. "It is gone—that, too, is gone! My life, my soul, my best treasure on earth! My precious Stradivarius! Oh, Mr. Carter——"

Nick checked him by placing both hands on the old man's shoulders, holding him firmly while he confronted him and said, with intense and impressive earnestness:

"Stop, sir, and listen to me. You have met with a great loss, but grief and lamentation will not bring back your stolen treasures. That now is what you most wish. That can be accomplished only by calm consideration of the circumstances, followed by speedy and energetic efforts to trace the crooks and recover their plunder. I feel sure that I can do both, but I will undertake it only on one condition, that you sit down and compose yourself while I look into the matter. Courage, Mr. Strickland! Your treasures are not hopelessly lost. They have not been destroyed by fire. They still exist—and I shall find them and restore them to you."

Nick spoke with more assurance than he really felt, but the circumstances seemed to warrant his confident prediction, and it

was not without effect, combined with his strong, personal influence.

Mr. Strickland pulled himself together, clasping both hands of the detective and saying fervently, but much more calmly:

“God bless you! God bless you for that encouragement. I will try to be composed. I really will try, Mr. Carter.”

“Capital!” Nick said approvingly, urging him to a chair. “I now think I shall accomplish something. Tell me, Arthur, what you know of this matter. Never mind at present what has been stolen. State merely the circumstances.”

“That may be quickly done, Nick,” Gordon replied. “Miss Strickland, who resides in Boston and to whom I am engaged, is visiting my parents for a few days. We called here at five o’clock this afternoon, and her uncle consented to go with us to dinner. We left here about six o’clock and returned just before nine. During that brief interval these rooms were entered and robbed of treasures enough to fill a wagon, and the value of which can hardly be estimated. How the job was done is a mystery. There is not the slightest evidence showing where the thieves entered, or how they removed the property. It could not have been carried out through—
—”

“One moment,” Nick interposed. “Does Mr. Strickland occupy this entire floor?”

“He does.”

“Are you sure the door was closed and locked when you went out?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Who occupies the floor below?”

“Madame Denise, a fashionable milliner. Her rooms were open when we returned. Several girls were busy in the workroom. Madame Denise was in her display room in the front of the house. The door has a large plate-glass panel and is within a few feet of the street door.”

“You have questioned her, I infer?” Nick put in.

“Yes, certainly. I went down and questioned her after telephoning to you. She had only a few customers this evening, but was in the front room all the while. She is positive that no persons have visited these rooms, or left them, by means of the stairs and the street door. Such a quantity of plunder could not possibly have been taken out that way without her observing it.”

“Is there a rear door from the house?” Nick inquired.

“Yes,” Gordon quickly nodded. “It leads to a small paved area between the back of this and the adjoining dwelling and the side wall of the Carroll Building. I have learned positively, however, that no persons have been in or out of the rear door.”

“From whom?”

“From the janitor. He is thoroughly trustworthy. He lives in a rear room on the ground floor. He has been there all of the evening, and the door of his room has not been closed. No person could have passed through the hall without his having seen or heard him. He is absolutely sure there have been no intruders.”

“By Jove, it does appear a bit mysterious,” Chick remarked.

“Plainly enough the plunder must have been taken out in some direction,” Nick replied. “Who occupies the upper floor of the house?”

“Victor Gilbert, the well-known photographer. He is the only tenant on that floor. His integrity is beyond question.”

“Very true,” Nick allowed. “I know him personally.”

“His rooms were closed at six o’clock and have not since been occupied, so far as I can learn,” Gordon went on. “I have telephoned to him, telling him of the robbery, and he now is on his way here, that we may visit his rooms. It does not seem possible, however, that the robbery can have been committed from above.”

“Nor from below, Arthur, if all you have stated is correct,” Nick said, a bit dryly. “Is it possible to reach the back windows of this apartment from those of the Carroll Building?”

“No, no; it is quite impossible,” Gordon protested. “The distance is more than twenty feet. Besides, Nick, there is no evidence that the windows of this flat have been opened. All of them were securely locked and——”

“I will inspect them presently,” Nick interrupted. “It is very evident, at least, that robbers have been here, and I know their knavery was not accomplished by any supernatural means. Who knew of Mr. Strickland’s intention to dine with you and be absent from his apartments this evening?”

“Nobody knew it, Mr. Carter,” Miss Strickland cried, with girlish earnestness. “We did not know it ourselves until after we came here. We then persuaded Uncle Rudolph to go with us.”

“Were any other persons present?”

“No, sir, only we three. No one could have overheard us.”

“Mina is right,” put in Gordon. “No person could have known that Mr. Strickland would be absent this evening. It was entirely unpremeditated. The crime could not have been planned from any knowledge of our intention.”

“Do you keep any servants, Mr. Strickland?” Nick inquired, turning to him.

He had overcome his agitation, his terrible distress immediately following his discovery of the crime, made hardly an hour before. He appeared to derive much hope and encouragement from what Nick had said to him, and from the fact that an investigation by the famous detective already was in progress.

Arthur Gordon had, in fact, telephoned immediately to Nick for assistance after making the superficial investigation mentioned, and finding the robbery so shrouded in mystery as, he felt sure, to completely baffle the ordinary police. It was about ten o'clock when the two detectives arrived upon the scene.

“No, I keep no servants,” said Mr. Strickland, replying to Nick's question. “As you may infer, Mr. Carter, I have always been very careful to protect my treasures. My lost Stradivarius alone is worth forty thousand dollars. I would not have parted with it for ten times that sum. The door of my apartments is a very strong one, and it is provided with two heavy locks, which act automatically. My windows have patent fastenings, and they are always closed and securely locked when I am absent. This evening was no exception.”

“But who takes care of your rooms?” Nick inquired. “Do you look after them yourself?”

“Oh, no, not the care and cleaning of them,” said Mr. Strickland. “I employ a woman from the adjoining house, that occupied by Mr. Gerald Vaughn and his sister, both of whom are friends of mine. I pay their housekeeper, Mrs. Amelia West, to come in each day to make my bed and put my sleeping room in order, and to come once a week to sweep and dust all of my rooms.”

“I see,” Nick remarked, with a nod.

“She has been doing so for nearly three months,” Mr. Strickland added. “Alas! I now must find another. I am more than sorry to lose her.”

“What is the trouble?” Nick questioned. “Has she been discharged by Mr. Vaughn?”

“Oh, no!” Mr. Strickland shook his head sadly. “Mrs. West died quite suddenly yesterday morning.”

CHAPTER II. A VAIN SEARCH.

Nick Carter ended his interrogations quite abruptly.

“I will look around for myself in search of evidence,” he remarked, turning to Arthur Gordon. “You had better remain here with Mr. Strickland and his niece. If I require anything, or wish to add to my inquiries, I will call you. I shall return in a few minutes.”

“Go ahead,” Gordon nodded. “The case is in your hands.”

Nick Carter glanced at Chick and led the way into an adjoining front room.

It was a handsomely furnished music room. An expensive piano occupied one corner. Racks of music, a viola, with many articles of like significance, evinced the refinement and musical genius of the owner. Mr. Rudolph Strickland had, in fact, an international reputation as a violinist.

“Well, chief, the rascals have left the piano, at least,” Chick dryly observed, noting also in this room convincing evidence of the visit of the thieves.

“Yes, so I see,” Nick replied, more seriously.

“What do you make of it?”

“A remarkable job has been done here, if all that Gordon stated is correct. I think, Chick, you had better set about confirming it, while I look farther.”

“You mean?”

“Go down and talk with Madame Denise and the janitor. You can measure them better than Gordon. Have a look at the area back of the house and see what possibilities it presents for getting away with such a quantity of plunder. Find out whether a wagon, or a conveyance of any kind, has been standing in the avenue, the side street on which the Carroll Building fronts, or in any locality available for such a job.”

“I understand,” Chick nodded.

“Step to the door of the next house, also, and question Mr. Vaughn and his sister. It’s barely possible that one of them may have seen or heard the thieves, without having suspected what was going on in here. Find out, at all events, then rejoin me.”

Chick hastened to follow these instructions. A brief talk with Madame Denise and the janitor, one James Donald, convinced him that both were honest and could add nothing to what they already had stated.

An inspection of the area mentioned was equally convincing. It was only a narrow, paved space back of the Vanhausen dwelling and that adjoining it, which occupied a corner lot on the side street on which the Carroll Building faced.

There was no exit to the street, and Chick saw plainly that crooks not only could not have removed their booty from the rear door of the building, but also that they would have found it

impossible to ascend to the back windows of Mr. Strickland's apartments, which were more than twenty feet from the ground. A long ladder would have been necessary, and their movements in the quietude of the inclosed area would surely have been heard by the janitor.

"Nothing was done out here," thought Chick, turning to retrace his steps to the front of the house. "That's dead open and shut. The stuff must have been taken out of the front door, despite the assertion of Madame Denise to the contrary."

Investigation outside, nevertheless, seemed to confirm the statement of the milliner. Chick could not learn that any suspicious conveyance had been seen in the neighborhood. Both the avenue and side street were brightly lighted. Pedestrians were constantly passing. It seemed impossible that crooks could have committed such a crime without being detected. There would not have been greater risk in attempting it in broad daylight.

More deeply puzzled, now, as to how it could by any means have been accomplished, Chick went to question the occupants of the corner house. It was an attractive brownstone dwelling of three stories, its side wall adjoining that of the Vanhausen residence, with no passageway between them. A light in the front hall denoted that the Vaughns had not retired.

A large wreath tied with purple ribbon hung on the knob of the door, a token that the shadow of death had fallen upon the house. But this did not deter Chick from ringing the bell, in accord with Nick's instructions.

It was answered almost immediately by a slender, serious-looking man about thirty, clad in a black suit. He was of dark

complexion, with wavy black hair and a peculiarly clear and pallid skin, accentuated somewhat by a flowing black mustache. He gazed inquiringly at Chick, who bowed politely and said:

“I wish to see Mr. Vaughn. Is he at home?”

“I am Mr. Vaughn. What can I do for you?”

The reply was agreeably made, but with a gravity Chick was quick to observe and attributed to the death of one of the household.

“I am sorry to trouble you at such a time,” he rejoined. “My name is Carter. I am a detective. The apartments of your neighbor, Mr. Strickland, have been robbed this evening, and I——”

“Robbed!” Mr. Vaughn exclaimed, interrupting with a quick display of surprise and consternation. “Dear me, is it possible? Robbed of what, Mr. Carter?”

“Of several very valuable paintings, many of his art treasures, and his almost priceless Stradivarius, together with——”

“Oh, oh, that is dreadful!” Mr. Vaughn again interposed. “Strickland is such a fine old gentleman. I am sorry for him, more than sorry for him. Come in, Mr. Carter. Can I be of any assistance?”

Chick accepted the invitation and stepped into the hall. Through the open door of an adjoining parlor, dimly lighted by the rays from the hall lamp, he could see a closed casket on a bier, also numerous boxes of flowers, evidently prepared for removal the following day.

Observing his furtive glance in that direction, Mr. Vaughn said gravely, while he considerably closed the door of the room:

“My aunt, who long has been the housekeeper for my sister and myself, died suddenly of heart failure yesterday morning. She is to be taken to Springfield to-morrow for burial. Step into the library, Mr. Carter. Clarissa will be terribly shocked by Mr. Strickland’s misfortune. She is really fond of the old gentleman, and often runs in to see him and hear him play on his rare old Strad. Stolen—that is too bad! It will be a terrible loss to him.”

“I agree with you,” Chick replied. “He appears heartbroken.”

“No wonder. This is my sister, Miss Vaughn, Mr. Carter.”

Chick had entered an attractively furnished library, where a handsome, dark girl, in the twenties, sat reading a book. She laid it aside at once and arose to acknowledge the introduction, though with manifest wonderment as to the visitor’s mission.

Gerald Vaughn hastened to inform her, however, evoking repeated expressions of surprise and sympathy, and Chick then said:

“I came here only to ask whether you have heard any disturbance outside this evening. We wish to find out, if possible, how the thieves entered Mr. Strickland’s apartments and got away with such a quantity of plunder without being seen or heard. It really is very mysterious.”

“Decidedly so, Mr. Carter,” Vaughn agreed. “But we have heard nothing unusual, not a sound suggestive of anything wrong.”

“We have been here alone, too, since dinner,” put in Clarissa, gazing with demure, dark eyes at the face of the detective. “Both of us have been reading, and it has seemed unusually quiet. If there

had been any noise outside, Gerald, dear, we surely ought to have heard it.”

“It seems so, indeed, Clarissa.”

“I have not heard a sound that I can recall.”

“Nor have I, Mr. Carter, I assure you.”

“The circumstances are such, too, that I am unusually sensitive,” Miss Vaughn added. “The sudden death of my Aunt Amelia has made me very nervous. I think we should send a message of sympathy, Gerald, to Mr. Strickland. He was very kind to us yesterday, when he heard of our bereavement.”

“I think so, too,” Vaughn said quickly. “I had better step over there, perhaps, and see him personally.”

“That will be even better, Gerald.”

“Is there any objection, Mr. Carter, to my doing so?”

“Not the slightest,” said Chick. “You may go with me, if you wish, since there is no information you can give me.”

“None whatever, Mr. Carter, I regret to say,” Vaughn replied. “I hope you will command me, however, if I can be of any assistance. You don’t mind being alone here, Clarissa, for a few minutes?”

“No, indeed. I will sit here till you return.”

“I have closed the parlor door.”

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