

THE SUICIDE

Or, NICK CARTER AND THE LOST HEAD

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CHAPTER I. HOW THE END CAME.

“Slow down, Danny, and look out for that wire,” said Nick Carter to his chauffeur. “It may be a live one.”

“I’m onto it, chief.”

“Onto it, eh? Don’t you run onto it while I’m in the car, not if it’s a live one. You may fancy absorbing the output of an electric-lighting plant, but not for mine, Danny, not for mine! I know what it would do to me. I’ve seen men electrocuted.”

Danny Maloney laughed, for it was obvious that the famous detective was jesting.

“Onto it with my lamps, chief, is what I meant,” he replied.

“Say what you mean, then,” said Nick, with a smile. “Precision is one of the valuable assets of a detective. Luckily, however, you are addressing one who can read between the lines—barring those of the ambiguous letter that brought us out here.”

“Can’t you fathom it? It must be mighty blind, chief, if it fools you.”

“On the contrary, Danny, it is perfectly plain—what there is of it,” said Nick dryly. “A woman, one Mrs. Myra Darling, states that she is in great trouble, that a very devoted friend of mine has advised her to appeal to me, and will I favor her with a call at my earliest convenience.”

“That all?” questioned Danny tersely.

“The whole business,” said Nick. “Of course, the appeal coming from a woman, I cannot turn it down. Noblesse oblige.”

“You don’t know her?”

“Not from a side of leather. I am acquainted with no Darling woman—suppress that smile, Danny. I know what you are thinking. But all women are not darlings—far from it.”

“This one might be,” said Danny, his smile spreading to a grin.

“That’s neither here nor there,” said Nick, with a laugh. “Not being in the market, Danny, all women look alike to me. Now, the said Mrs. Darling’s trouble may be—ah, but we are near an answer to the momentous question. Yonder is the place, unless I am much mistaken. Stop at the driveway gate. I’ll walk into the grounds. Keep your eye peeled, by the way, while I’m engaged with her ladyship.”

The place referred to was out beyond Washington Heights and overlooking the Hudson. It was an attractive estate, without being at all pretentious, as were others in the immediate locality.

The grounds flanked a broad street in which electric lighting was being introduced, and from which the house stood back some thirty yards, with a well-kept lawn and a few shade trees. In the rear were a stable and garage, beyond which the land sloped down sharply toward the river.

Nick did not wait for an answer from his chauffeur. He sprang from the car while speaking, then walked briskly up the driveway and approached the house, quite a large wooden dwelling of the

colonial type. Nick mounted the broad front veranda and rang the bell.

It was answered almost immediately by a tall, graceful woman, clad in black, and about thirty years of age. She was of medium complexion, with brown hair and eyes and a finely poised head. Her features were regular, but her face was a strong one, rather than handsome, evincing will power, intellectuality, and a lofty character. She bowed and smiled a bit gravely, saying immediately:

“You are Mr. Carter, I think.”

“Yes,” said Nick politely.

“I am Mrs. Darling. Walk in, please, and come into the library. I am very glad you could comply so soon with my request. It is very good of you.”

“I happened to be at liberty this afternoon,” Nick replied, following her into the hall. “I received your letter this morning.”

Mrs. Darling conducted him into a prettily furnished library and invited him to be seated. Taking an opposite chair, she then said gravely:

“I will take as little as possible of your valuable time. I will tell you with few and simple words, Mr. Carter, why I have sent for you.”

“Cover all of the ground, Mrs. Darling,” Nick suggested. “My time just now is at your disposal.”

“Thank you,” she replied, bowing. “I will in that case begin at the beginning. I was married eight years ago to Mr. Cyrus Darling, a New York tobacco dealer, a man whom I have always supposed

had considerable means, though he has never informed me definitely. He owned this place, however, and we have always lived well, and he has provided for me generously.”

“Mr. Darling is not living?”

“No. I will explain presently.”

“Continue.”

“I was nearly twenty years younger than he, Mr. Carter, but our married life was a uniformly happy one, though not as gay and festive as he perhaps would have preferred. I am inclined to be domestic, while he was of a volatile nature, having neither a strong or stable character. I frankly admit, Mr. Carter, that he was subservient to my will and wishes.”

“I understand you,” said Nick.

“I have no children, and I keep only two servants, aside from a chauffeur, whom I occasionally employ,” Mrs. Darling continued. “My husband’s habits were good, as the world goes, and I noticed nothing unusual in his conduct until about three months ago.”

“And then?”

“I then thought he appeared strangely reticent, at times very self-absorbed and less frank and affectionate than before. I asked him whether there was anything wrong, but he assured me to the contrary, though he seemed a bit irritated because I questioned him.”

“I follow you.”

“Later, Mr. Carter, he appeared quite despondent, and I feared that his business troubled him. He said that my fears were groundless, and that his business was never better. He went from bad to worse. He said very little at home, and remained in town evenings much more frequently than in years past, which I attributed to his seeming depression and his desire to find relief in the excitement and diversions of the city.”

“Did you occasionally accompany him?” Nick inquired.

“Very seldom. He did not seem inclined to have me do so.”

“Was he addicted to drink?”

“Only moderately. I never saw him intoxicated, nor anything like it.”

“Proceed.”

“About two weeks ago, Mr. Carter, he decided to sell his business, saying that he was sick of it and would try something else. I remonstrated with him, telling him that he was making a mistake, and that it is not easy for a man over fifty to make such changes profitably.”

“That is very true, Mrs. Darling.”

“It had no effect upon him, however, and he let the business go,” she replied, sadly shaking her head. “During the following week he was at home part of each day, but he spent most of the afternoons and evenings in town. On Tuesday, one week ago yesterday, he appeared unusually nervous and depressed. I missed him soon after lunch, and supposed he had gone into town. I had an appointment with my dentist and was absent from two o’clock

until nearly six. When I returned home—well, Mr. Carter, the end had come.”

“You mean?” questioned Nick gravely.

“My husband had committed suicide—or was the victim of foul play.”

“H’m, I see!” Nick drew up in his chair. “Were you in any uncertainty at that time, Mrs. Darling, as to the cause of his death?”

“No, not at that time, Mr. Carter,” she quickly informed him. “I know what you have in mind—that I should have called in the police immediately. I did not then, however, nor at any time until yesterday, have even a thought of anything but suicide. The circumstances suggested nothing else.”

“What were the circumstances, Mrs. Darling?” Nick inquired. “State them briefly.”

“There is very little to tell,” she rejoined. “My husband was last seen alive by one of my servants. She saw him going out of the back door of the house and around the stable, and she supposed he was going down to our boathouse, which was on the river bank and out of view from here, owing to the sharp slope of the land.”

“I see,” said Nick, glancing from the window.

“Soon after, Mr. Carter, the boathouse was seen to be on fire. It contained a motor boat and considerable gasoline, which caused it to burn very rapidly. It was completely destroyed. In the ruins were found the remains of my husband, little more than a charred skeleton, from which the flesh was almost entirely burned.”

Mrs. Darling paused to dry her eyes, maintaining with an effort her outward composure. Appreciating her feelings, Nick waited a few moments and then inquired:

“Are you sure, Mrs. Darling, that his death was not due to an accident?”

“Positively,” she replied. “To begin with, Mr. Carter, he left this letter on the chiffonier in my bedroom. You may read it.”

She took it from the library table while speaking and tendered it to the detective.

Nick read it, the following few lines written with pen and ink.

“MY DEAR MYRA: Forgive me for the step I am going to take. I am driven to it by feelings I cannot describe. I am sick and tired of the whole business—of life itself. I am going to end it. Forgive and forget me.

“CYRUS.”

Nick replaced the letter on the table, saying considerately:

“There seems, indeed, to be no reasonable doubt of Mr. Darling’s intentions. You recognize the writing, I infer.”

“Yes, surely,” she replied. “Furthermore, Mr. Carter, there were found in the ruins numerous articles that positively identify my husband’s remains. They included the buttons on his garments, which were entirely consumed; also his pocketknife, his false teeth, and a plain gold ring. His revolver also was found near by, and it is supposed that he shot himself after setting fire to the boathouse,

presumably to make sure that his terrible design could not miscarry.”

“Who examined the articles and investigated the case?” asked Nick.

“Doctor Lyons, my physician, who is also the coroner.”

“A capable man,” Nick nodded. “I am acquainted with him. What is his opinion?”

“He thinks it a case of suicide. He could find no evidence of anything else, and is very positive in his opinion.”

“Had your husband any money, jewelry, or——”

“He left those in the bedroom, his watch, diamonds, and pocketbook, also his ring of keys,” Mrs. Darling interposed. “Only one key was missing from the ring.”

“Which one?”

“The key to the boathouse.”

Nick did not reply for a few moments. He sat gazing thoughtfully at a figure in the heavy carpet. Superficially viewed, the circumstances stated seemed to admit of only one reasonable theory—that Mr. Cyrus Darling had, indeed, deliberately ended his own life.

“The funeral and burial were last Thursday,” Mrs. Darling added, during the brief silence on Nick’s part. “Doctor Lyons did not think the case called for any investigations beyond those he personally made, nor did I at that time. He——”

“One moment,” said Nick, looking up. “What have you since learned, Mrs. Darling, that occasions your misgivings? Why do you now suspect foul play? That, I think, is the term you used.”

“I have two reasons for apprehending something of the kind,” she replied. “One relates to my husband’s estate. I have learned from his lawyer, who has been assisting me, and in whom I have absolute confidence, that Mr. Darling left no will, that he has recently withdrawn considerable money from the bank, and that his safety-deposit drawer contains only a few securities, worth less than three thousand dollars. From dividends which I know that he has been in the habit of receiving, as well as from our living expenses for several years, I know that he was worth at least a hundred thousand dollars.”

“Is your lawyer investigating the matter?”

“I have requested him to do so.”

“What is his name?” Nick inquired, taking out his notebook.

“Henry Clayton. He has an office in town.”

“I am acquainted with him, also,” said Nick, noting the name. “You mentioned a second reason for your misgivings. What is that?”

“One of my servants.”

“You mean?”

“I referred in my letter, Mr. Carter, to a very devoted friend of yours, who advised me to appeal to you.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Nick, wondering. “A devoted friend of mine—one of your servants?”

“I refer to my table girl, who also serves me as a maid. You have, I am very sure, no more grateful and devoted an admirer. I will call her.”

Nick bowed and waited, still more deeply puzzled as to the girl’s identity.

Mrs. Darling touched a bell on the library table.

Nick glanced again from one of the windows—and discovered another perplexing fact.

His touring car was standing where he had left it, but his chauffeur was missing. Danny Maloney had disappeared.

The quick, light steps of the approaching maid sounded in the hall. Turning in that direction just as she appeared at the open door, Nick beheld——

Nancy Nordeck.

CHAPTER II. THE GIRL WHO WAS DOWN.

Suspicious were mingled with Nick Carter's surprise at seeing Nancy Nordeck. They were perfectly natural, too, under the circumstances, and in view of the disclosures to which he had just listened. The presence of a girl with a criminal record in the home of a man whose death was shrouded in mystery, much more of a mystery than Mrs. Darling even imagined, though already keenly appreciated by the detective, might indeed be significant.

Months had passed since Nick last saw Nancy Nordeck. She had so improved in looks that he hardly recognized her. She bore little likeness to the frail girl with pinched and haggard face, who was so deeply affected by the violent death of her crook father that she had resolved to reform, a moral awakening that Nick had by no means felt sure would be lasting.

His first thought, therefore, was that she might be up to her old tricks and in league with rascals to have killed Cyrus Darling to get possession of his fortune. It was not in Nick's nature to expose the girl, nevertheless, if her reformation was genuine, for he never put a block in the way of any one who was down and striving to rise.

He felt for a moment that his position might be a delicate one, but though no signs of them appeared in his face, his impressions evidently were suspected by the girl. For she approached him quickly, saying respectfully, yet with characteristic assurance:

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Carter, and no one could blame you. But there's nothing in it, sir. I've been as straight as a

string from the time you set me right and shook hands with me, wishing me all kinds of good luck, and you couldn't think if you tried how much I now care for you and your good opinion. I have hid nothing here, sir. Mrs. Darling knows all about me and what I was, and she's been as good to me as you, sir. I'd bite a finger off before I'd go crooked again in any way."

"I think you can safely depend upon that, Mr. Carter," said Mrs. Darling, smiling faintly. "Nancy has confided her entire past to me, and in overlooking it and lending her a helping hand, I now know positively that I made no mistake. She is a good girl and a capable one."

There was a suspicious moisture in Nancy's brown eyes, then fixed upon the strong, kindly face of her mistress. She colored deeply, too, when Nick extended his hand and said heartily:

"Come here, Nancy. Let's shake again. I'm more than glad to hear this and to know you are on the right track. Stick to it, my girl, as I now feel sure you will."

"You may be sure that I will, Mr. Carter," said Nancy, eagerly shaking his hand.

"Now let's proceed with this matter," Nick said, more seriously. "Mrs. Darling tells me that you advised her to appeal to me?"

"So I did, Mr. Carter," Nancy replied.

"She will answer any questions you care to ask her," Mrs. Darling put in.

“To begin with, then, what do you know about the case?” said Nick. “Was it you who last saw Mr. Darling alive?”

“Yes, sir. I saw him leaving the house and going down back of the stable.”

“Did you notice anything unusual? Did he appear excited, or—
—”

“No, sir; not in the least,” put in Nancy. “I didn’t reckon anything wrong was coming off. I didn’t get wise at all until the mistress told me that most of the master’s money is missing.”

“Wise to what, Nancy?”

“That he was killed and robbed, mebbe, instead of putting out his own light.”

“Why did you suspect that?”

“Only because of two guys he has been friendly with lately. They have been here to see him, one of them quite a number of times.”

“Two men?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you know them?” Nick inquired, turning to Mrs. Darling.

“Hardly more than by name,” she replied. “My husband introduced me to one of them, named Philip Floyd, who has called several times to see him. I have met the other only once.”

“What is his name?” asked Nick, proceeding to write them in his notebook.

“Ralph Sheldon. He called here a few days ago with Mr. Floyd, who introduced me to him. My husband was absent at the time and they remained only a few minutes. That is the only time I ever saw Mr. Sheldon, though my husband had frequently mentioned him.”

“Are they old friends of his?”

“Quite the contrary. I never heard of them until about a month ago.”

“Had they any business relations with your husband?”

“I cannot say.”

“Do you know anything about them?”

“No more than I have told you,” said Mrs. Darling. “My husband referred to them only as friends, and he appeared to think well of them.”

“Do you know where they live?”

“I do not.”

“Both were here, you say, a few days before he died.”

“The day before, Mr. Carter, and both attended his funeral.”

“Did they say why they wanted to see him on the day preceding his death?”

“They did not. I inferred from their remarks, however, that it was only a friendly call.”

“Are they men of his own age?”

“I would say that Mr. Sheldon is nearly as old. He appears to be in the forties. Mr. Floyd, however, is not over thirty.”

“Are they prepossessing men?”

“Yes, in a way, though I did not quite fancy them,” said Mrs. Darling. “As for Nancy—well, she may speak for herself. It was partly her impression of them that led me to take her advice and appeal to you.”

“On the dead, Mr. Carter, I would not trust either of them as far as I could throw a bull by the tail,” Nancy bluntly declared, in characteristic terms. “You know me, sir. I am not easily fooled. I can read a man dead right nine times out of ten, Mr. Carter, the minute I set my eyes on him.”

“You did not fancy them, then?”

“Not so you’d notice it,” said Nancy. “I wouldn’t say too much against the Sheldon man, Mr. Carter, for I’ve seen him only twice. I saw him at the funeral, and I let him in with Mr. Floyd a few days before. He’s all right, mebbe, though I’d hate to bank much on it.”

“What about Mr. Floyd? Why do you distrust him so seriously?”

“I have more than one reason for that hunch,” said Nancy inelegantly. “For a starter, Mr. Carter, I’ve seen that guy before.”

“Floyd?”

“Yes, sir.”

“When and where, Nancy?”

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