

# **The Exploits of Elaine**

By

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# 1. The Clutching Hand

"Jameson, here's a story I wish you'd follow up," remarked the managing editor of the Star to me one evening after I had turned in an assignment of the late afternoon.

He handed me a clipping from the evening edition of the Star and I quickly ran my eye over the headline:

"THE CLUTCHING HAND" WINS AGAIN

NEW YORK'S MYSTERIOUS MASTER CRIMINAL

PERFECTS ANOTHER COUP

CITY POLICE COMPLETELY BAFFLED

"Here's this murder of Fletcher, the retired banker and trustee of the University," he explained. "Not a clue--except a warning letter signed with this mysterious clutching fist. Last week it was the robbery of the Haxworth jewels and the killing of old Haxworth. Again that curious sign of the hand. Then there was the dastardly attempt on Sherburne, the steel magnate. Not a trace of the assailant except this same clutching fist. So it has gone, Jameson--the most alarming and most inexplicable series of murders that has ever happened in this country. And nothing but this uncanny hand to trace them by."

The editor paused a moment, then exclaimed, "Why, this fellow seems to take a diabolical--I might almost say pathological-- pleasure in crimes of violence, revenge, avarice and self- protection. Sometimes it seems as if he delights in the pure devilry of the thing. It is weird."

He leaned over and spoke in a low, tense tone. "Strangest of all, the tip has just come to us that Fletcher, Haxworth, Sherburne and all the rest of those wealthy men were insured in the Consolidated Mutual Life. Now, Jameson, I want you to find Taylor Dodge, the president, and interview him. Get what you can, at any cost."

I had naturally thought first of Kennedy, but there was no time now to call him up and, besides, I must see Dodge immediately.

Dodge, I discovered over the telephone, was not at home, nor at any of the clubs to which he belonged. Late though it was I concluded that he was at his office. No amount of

persuasion could get me past the door, and, though I found out later and shall tell soon what was going on there, I determined, about nine o'clock, that the best way to get at Dodge was to go to his house on Fifth Avenue, if I had to camp on his front doorstep until morning. The harder I found the story to get, the more I wanted it.

With some misgivings about being admitted, I rang the bell of the splendid, though not very modern, Dodge residence. An English butler, with a nose that must have been his fortune, opened the door and gravely informed me that Mr. Dodge was not at home, but was expected at any moment.

Once in, I was not going lightly to give up that advantage. I bethought myself of his daughter, Elaine, one of the most popular debutantes of the season, and sent in my card to her, on a chance of interesting her and seeing her father, writing on the bottom of the card: "Would like to interview Mr. Dodge regarding Clutching Hand."

Summoning up what assurance I had, which is sometimes considerable, I followed the butler down the hall as he bore my card. As he opened the door of the drawing room I caught a vision of a slip of a girl, in an evening gown.

Elaine Dodge was both the ingenue and the athlete--the thoroughly modern type of girl--equally at home with tennis and tango, table talk and tea. Vivacious eyes that hinted at a stunning amber brown sparkled beneath masses of the most wonderful auburn hair. Her pearly teeth, when she smiled, were marvellous. And she smiled often, for life to her seemed a continuous film of enjoyment.

Near her I recognized from his pictures, Perry Bennett, the rising young corporation lawyer, a mighty good looking fellow, with an affable, pleasing way about him, perhaps thirty-five years old or so, but already prominent and quite friendly with Dodge.

On a table I saw a book, as though Elaine had cast it down when the lawyer arrived to call on the daughter under pretense of waiting for her father. Crumpled on the table was the Star. They had read the story.

"Who is it, Jennings?" she asked.

"A reporter, Miss Dodge," answered the butler glancing superciliously back at me, "and you know how your father dislikes to see anyone here at the house," he added deferentially to her.

I took in the situation at a glance. Bennett was trying not to look discourteous, but this was a call on Elaine and it had been interrupted. I could expect no help from that quarter. Still, I fancied that Elaine was not averse to trying to pique her visitor and determined at least to try it.

"Miss Dodge," I pleaded, bowing as if I had known them all my life, "I've been trying to find your father all the evening. It's very important."

She looked up at me surprised and in doubt whether to laugh or stamp her pretty little foot in indignation at my stupendous nerve.

She laughed. "You are a very brave young man," she replied with a roguish look at Bennett's discomfiture over the interruption of the tete-a-tete.

There was a note of seriousness in it, too, that made me ask quickly, "Why?"

The smile flitted from her face and in its place came a frank earnest expression which I later learned to like and respect very much. "My father has declared he will eat the very next reporter who tries to interview him here," she answered.

I was about to prolong the waiting time by some jolly about such a stunning girl not having by any possibility such a cannibal of a parent, when the rattle of the changing gears of a car outside told of the approach of a limousine.

The big front door opened and Elaine flung herself in the arms of an elderly, stern-faced, gray-haired man. "Why, Dad," she cried, "where have you been? I missed you so much at dinner. I'll be so glad when this terrible business gets cleared up. Tell--me. What is on your mind? What is it that worries you now?"

I noticed then that Dodge seemed wrought-up and a bit unnerved, for he sank rather heavily into a chair, brushed his face with his handkerchief and breathed heavily. Elaine hovered over him solicitously, repeating her question.

With a mighty effort he seemed to get himself together. He rose and turned to Bennett.

"Perry," he exclaimed, "I've got the Clutching Hand!"

The two men stared at each other.

"Yes," continued Dodge, "I've just found out how to trace it, and tomorrow I am going to set the alarms of the city at rest by exposing--"

Just then Dodge caught sight of me. For the moment I thought perhaps he was going to fulfill his threat.

"Who the devil--why didn't you tell me a reporter was here, Jennings?" he sputtered indignantly, pointing toward the door.

Argument, entreaty were of no avail. He stamped crustily into the library, taking Bennett with him and leaving me with Elaine. Inside I could hear them talking, and managed to catch enough to piece together the story. I wanted to stay, but Elaine, smiling at my enthusiasm, shook her head and held out her hand in one of her frank, straight-arm hand shakes. There was nothing to do but go.

At least, I reflected, I had the greater part of the story--all except the one big thing, however,--the name of the criminal. But Dodge would know him tomorrow!

I hurried back to the Star to write my story in time to catch the last morning edition.

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Meanwhile, if I may anticipate my story, I must tell of what we later learned had happened to Dodge so completely to upset him.

Ever since the Consolidated Mutual had been hit by the murders, he had had many lines out in the hope of enmeshing the perpetrator. That night, as I found out the next day, he had at last heard of a clue. One of the company's detectives had brought in a red-headed, lame, partly paralyzed crook who enjoyed the expressive monniker of "Limpy Red." "Limpy Red" was a gunman of some renown, evil faced and having nothing much to lose, desperate. Whoever the master criminal of the Clutching Hand might have been he had seen fit to employ Limpy but had not taken the precaution of getting rid of him soon enough when he was through.

Wherefore Limpy had a grievance and now descended under pressure to the low level of snitching to Dodge in his office.

"No, Governor," the trembling wretch had said as he handed over a grimy envelope, "I ain't never seen his face--but here is directions how to find his hang-out."

As Limpy ambled out, he turned to Dodge, quivering at the enormity of his unpardonable sin in gang-land, "For God's sake, Governor," he implored, "don't let on how you found out!"

And yet Limpy Red had scarcely left with his promise not to tell, when Dodge, happening to turn over some papers came upon an envelope left on his own desk, bearing that mysterious Clutching Hand!

He tore it open, and read in amazement:

"Destroy Limpy Red's instructions within the next hour."

Dodge gazed about in wonder. This thing was getting on his nerves. He determined to go home and rest.

Outside the house, as he left his car, pasted over the monogram on the door, he had found another note, with the same weird mark and the single word:

"Remember!"

Much of this I had already gathered from what I overheard Dodge telling Bennett as they entered the library. Some, also, I have pieced together from the story of a servant who overheard.

At any rate, in spite of the pleadings of young Bennett, Dodge refused to take warning. In the safe in his beautifully fitted library he deposited Limpy's document in an envelope containing all the correspondence that had lead up to the final step in the discovery.

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It was late in the evening when I returned to our apartment and, not finding Kennedy there, knew that I would discover him at the laboratory.

"Craig," I cried as I burst in on him, "I've got a case for you-- greater than any ever before!"

Kennedy looked up calmly from the rack of scientific instruments that surrounded him, test tubes, beakers, carefully labelled bottles.

He had been examining a piece of cloth and had laid it aside in disappointment near his magnifying glass. Just now he was watching a reaction in a series of test tubes standing on his table. He was looking dejectedly at the floor as I came in.

"Indeed?" he remarked coolly going back to the reaction.

"Yes," I cried. "It is a scientific criminal who seems to leave no clues."

Kennedy looked up gravely. "Every criminal leaves a trace," he said quietly. "If it hasn't been found, then it must be because no one has ever looked for it in the right way."

Still gazing at me keenly, he added, "Yes, I already knew there was such a man at large. I have been called in on that Fletcher case--he was a trustee of the University, you know."

"All right," I exclaimed, a little nettled that he should have anticipated me even so much in the case. "But you haven't heard the latest."

"What is it?" he asked with provoking calmness,

"Taylor Dodge," I blurted out, "has the clue. To-morrow he will track down the man!"

Kennedy fairly jumped as I repeated the news.

"How long has he known?" he demanded eagerly.

"Perhaps three or four hours," I hazarded.

Kennedy gazed at me fixedly.

"Then Taylor Dodge is dead!" he exclaimed, throwing off his acid-stained laboratory smock and hurrying into his street clothes.

"Impossible!" I ejaculated.

Kennedy paid no attention to the objection. "Come, Walter," he urged. "We must hurry, before the trail gets cold."

There was something positively uncanny about Kennedy's assurance. I doubted--yet I feared.

It was well past the middle of the night when we pulled up in a night-hawk taxicab before the Dodge house, mounted the steps and rang the bell.

Jennings answered sleepily, but not so much so that he did not recognize me. He was about to bang the door shut when Kennedy interposed his foot.

"Where is Mr. Dodge?" asked Kennedy. "Is he all right?"

"Of course he is--in bed," replied the butler.

Just then we heard a faint cry, like nothing exactly human. Or was it our heightened imaginations, under the spell of the darkness?

"Listen!" cautioned Kennedy.

We did, standing there now in the hall. Kennedy was the only one of us who was cool. Jennings' face blanched, then he turned tremblingly and went down to the library door whence the sounds had seemed to come.

He called but there was no answer. He turned the knob and opened the door. The Dodge library was a large room. In the center stood a big flat-topped desk of heavy mahogany. It was brilliantly lighted.

At one end of the desk was a telephone. Taylor Dodge was lying on the floor at that end of the desk--perfectly rigid--his face distorted--a ghastly figure. A pet dog ran over, sniffed frantically at his master's legs and suddenly began to howl dismally.

Dodge was dead!

"Help!" shouted Jennings.

Others of the servants came rushing in. There was for the moment the greatest excitement and confusion.



Suddenly a wild figure in flying garments flitted down the stairs and into the library, dropping beside the dead man, without seeming to notice us at all.

"Father!" shrieked a woman's voice, heart broken. "Father! Oh--my God--he--he is dead!"

It was Elaine Dodge.

With a mighty effort, the heroic girl seemed to pull herself together.

"Jennings," she cried, "Call Mr. Bennett--immediately!"

From the one-sided, excited conversation of the butler over the telephone, I gathered that Bennett had been in the process of disrobing in his own apartment uptown and would be right down.

Together, Kennedy, Elaine and myself lifted Dodge to a sofa and Elaine's aunt, Josephine, with whom she lived, appeared on the scene, trying to quiet the sobbing girl.

Kennedy and I withdrew a little way and he looked about curiously.

"What was it?" I whispered. "Was it natural, an accident, or--or murder?"

The word seemed to stick in my throat. If it was a murder, what was the motive? Could it have been to get the evidence which Dodge had that would incriminate the master criminal?

Kennedy moved over quietly and examined the body of Dodge. When he rose, his face had a peculiar look.

"Terrible!" he whispered to me. "Apparently he had been working at his accustomed place at the desk when the telephone rang. He rose and crossed over to it. See! That brought his feet on this register let into the floor. As he took the telephone receiver down a flash of light must have shot from it to his ear. It shows the characteristic electric burn."

"The motive?" I queried.

"Evidently his pockets had been gone through, though none of the valuables were missing. Things on his desk show that a hasty search has been made."

Just then the door opened and Bennett burst in.

As he stood over the body, gazing down at it, repressing the emotions of a strong man, he turned to Elaine and in a low voice, exclaimed, "The Clutching Hand did this! I shall consecrate my life to bring this man to justice!"

He spoke tensely and Elaine, looking up into his face, as if imploring his help in her hour of need, unable to speak, merely grasped his hand.

Kennedy, who in the meantime had stood apart from the rest of us, was examining the telephone carefully.

"A clever crook," I heard him mutter between his teeth. "He must have worn gloves. Not a finger print--at least here."

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Perhaps I can do no better than to reconstruct the crime as Kennedy later pieced these startling events together.

Long after I had left and even after Bennett left, Dodge continued working in his library, for he was known as a prodigious worker.

Had he taken the trouble, however, to pause and peer out into the moonlight that flooded the back of his house, he might have seen the figures of two stealthy crooks crouching in the half shadows of one of the cellar windows.

One crook was masked by a handkerchief drawn tightly about his lower face, leaving only his eyes visible beneath the cap with visor pulled down over his forehead. He had a peculiar stoop of the shoulders and wore his coat collar turned up. One hand, the right, seemed almost deformed. It was that which gave him his name in the underworld--the Clutching Hand.

The masked crook held carefully the ends of two wires attached to an electric feed, and sending his pal to keep watch outside, he entered the cellar of the Dodge house through a window whose pane they had carefully removed. As he came through the window he dragged the wires with him, and, alter a moment's reconnoitering attached them to the furnace pipe of the old-fashioned hot-air heater where the pipe ran up through the floor to the library above. The other wire was quickly attached to the telephone where its wires entered.

Upstairs, Dodge, evidently uneasy in his mind about the precious "Limpy Red" letter, took it from the safe along with most of the other correspondence and, pressing a hidden spring in the wall, opened a secret panel, placed most of the important documents in this hiding place. Then he put some blank sheets of paper in an envelope and returned it to the safe.

Downstairs the masked master criminal had already attached a voltmeter to the wires he had installed, waiting.

Just then could be heard the tinkle of Dodge's telephone and the old man rose to answer it. As he did so he placed his foot on the iron register, his hand taking the telephone and

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