

The Romance of Elaine

By

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1. The Serpent Sign

Rescued by Kennedy at last from the terrible incubus of Bennett's persecution in his double life of lawyer and master criminal, Elaine had, for the first time in many weeks, a feeling of security.

Now that the strain was off, however, she felt that she needed rest and a chance to recover herself and it occurred to her that a few quiet days with "Aunt" Tabitha, who had been her nurse when she was a little girl, would do her a world of good.

She sent for Aunt Tabby, yet the fascination of the experiences through which she had just gone still hung over her. She could not resist thinking and reading about them, as she sat, one morning, with the faithful Rusty in the conservatory of the Dodge house.

I had told the story at length in the Star, and the heading over it caught her eye.

It read:

THE CLUTCHING HAND DEAD

Double Life Exposed by Craig Kennedy

Perry Bennett, the Famous Young Lawyer, Takes
Poison--Kennedy Now on Trail of Master Criminal's
Hidden Millions.

As Elaine glanced down the column, Jennings announced that Aunt Tabby, as she loved to call her old friend, had arrived, and was now in the library with Aunt Josephine.

With an exclamation of delight, Elaine dropped the paper and, followed by Rusty, almost ran into the library.

Aunt Tabby was a stout, elderly, jolly-faced woman, precisely the sort whom Elaine needed to watch over her just now.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," half laughed Elaine as she literally flung herself into her nurse's arms. "I feel so unstrung--and I thought that if I could just run off for a few days with you and Joshua in the country where no one would know, it might make me feel better. You have always been so good to me. Marie! Are my things packed? Very well. Then, get my wraps."

Her maid left the room.

"Bless your soul," mothered Aunt Tabby stroking her soft golden hair, "I'm always glad to have you in that fine house you bought me. And, faith, Miss Elaine, the house is a splendid place to rest in but I don't know what's the matter with it lately. Joshua says its haunts--"

"Haunts?" repeated Elaine in amused surprise. "Why, what do you mean?"

Marie entered with the wraps before Aunt Tabby could reply and Jennings followed with the baggage.

"Nonsense," continued Elaine gaily, as she put on her coat, and turned to bid Aunt Josephine good-bye. "Good-bye, Tabitha," said her real aunt. "Keep good care of my little girl."

"That I will," returned the nurse. "We don't have all these troubles out in the country that you city folks have."

Elaine went out, followed by Rusty and Jennings with the luggage.

"Now for a long ride in the good fresh air," sighed Elaine as she leaned back on the cushions of the Dodge limousine and patted Rusty, while the butler stowed away the bags.

The air certainly did, if anything, heighten the beauty of Elaine and at last they arrived at Aunt Tabby's, tired and hungry.

The car stopped and Elaine, Aunt Tabby and the dog got out. There, waiting for them, was "Uncle" Joshua, as Elaine playfully called him, a former gardener of the Dodges, now a plain, honest countryman on whom the city was fast encroaching, a jolly old fellow, unharmed by the world.

Aunt Tabby's was an attractive small house, not many miles from New York, yet not in the general line of suburban travel.

.....

Kennedy and I had decided to bring Bennett's papers and documents over to the laboratory to examine them. We were now engaged in going over the great mass of material which he had collected, in the hope of finding some clue to the stolen millions which he must have amassed as a result of his villainy. The table was stacked high.

A knock at the door told us that the expressman had arrived and a moment later he entered, delivering a heavy box. Kennedy signed for it and started to unpack it.

I was hard at work, when I came across a large manila envelope carefully sealed, on which were written the figures "\$7,000,000." Too excited even to exclaim, I tore the envelope open and examined the contents.

Inside was another envelope. I opened that. It contained merely a blank piece of paper!

With characteristic skill at covering his tracks, Bennett had also covered his money. Puzzled, I turned the paper over and over, looking at it carefully. It was a large sheet of paper, but it showed nothing.

"Huh!" I snorted to myself, "confound him."

Yet I could not help smiling at my own folly, a minute later, in thinking that the Clutching Hand would leave any information in such an obvious place as an envelope. I threw the paper into a wire basket on the desk and went on sorting the other stuff.

Kennedy had by this time finished unpacking the box, and was examining a bottle which he had taken from it.

"Come here, Walter," he called at length. "Ever see anything like that?"

"I can't say," I confessed, getting up to go to him. "What is it?"

"Bring a piece of paper," he added.

I went back to the desk where I had been working and looked about hastily. My eye fell on the blank sheet of paper which I had taken from Bennett's envelope, and I picked it up from the basket.

"Here's one," I said, handing it to him. "What are you doing?"

Kennedy did not answer directly, but began to treat the paper with the liquid from the bottle. Then he lighted a Bunsen burner and thrust the paper into the flame. The paper did not burn!

"A new system of fire-proofing," laughed Craig, enjoying my astonishment.

He continued to hold the paper in the flame. Still it did not burn.

"See?" he went on, withdrawing it, and starting to explain the properties of the new fire-proofer.

He had scarcely begun, when he stopped in surprise. He had happened to glance at the paper again, bent over to examine it more intently, and was now looking at it in surprise.

I looked also. There, clearly discernible on the paper, was a small part of what looked like an architect's drawing of a fireplace.

Craig looked up at me, nonplussed. "Where did you say you got that?" he asked.

"It was a blank piece of paper among Bennett's effects," I returned, as mystified as he, pointing at the littered desk at which I had been working.

Kennedy said nothing, but thrust the paper back again into the flame. Slowly, the heat of the burner seemed to bring out the complete drawing of the fireplace.

We looked at it, even more mystified. "What is it, do you suppose?" I queried.

"I think," he replied slowly, "that it was drawn with sympathetic ink. The heat of the burner brought it out into sight."

What was it about?

.....

Elaine had gone to bed that night at Aunt Tabby's in the room which her old nurse had fixed up especially for her. It was a very attractive little room with dainty chintz curtains and covers and for the first time in many weeks Elaine slept soundly and fearlessly.

Down-stairs, in the living-room, Rusty also was asleep, his nose between his paws.

The living-room was in keeping with everything at Aunt Tabby's, plain, neat, homelike. On one side was a large fireplace that gave to it an air of quaint hospitality.

Suddenly Rusty woke up, his ears pointed at this fireplace. He stood a moment, listening, then, with a bark of alarm he sped swiftly from the living-room, up the stairs at a bound, until he came to Elaine's room.

Elaine felt his cold nose at her hand and stirred, then awoke.

"What is it, Rusty?" she asked, mindful of the former days when Rusty gave warning of the Clutching Hand and his emissaries.

Rusty wagged his tail. Something was wrong.

Elaine followed him down to the living-room. She went over and lighted the electric lamp on the table, then turned to Rusty.

"Well, Rusty?" she asked, almost as if he were human.

She had no need to repeat the question. Rusty was looking straight at the fireplace.

Elaine listened. Sure enough, she heard strange noises. Was that Aunt Tabby's "haunt"? Whatever it was, it sounded as if it came up from the very depths of the earth.

She could not make out just what it sounded like. It might have been some one striking a piece of iron, a bolt, with a sledge.

What was it?

She continued to listen in wonder, then ran to Aunt Tabby's bedroom door, on the first floor, and knocked.

Aunt Tabby woke up and shook Joshua.

"Aunt Tabby! Aunt Tabby!" called Elaine.

"Yes, my dear," answered the old nurse, now fully awake and straightening her nightcap. "Joshua!"

Together the old couple came out into the living-room, still in their nightclothes, Joshua yawning sleepily still.

"Listen!" whispered Elaine.

There was the noise again. This time it was more as though some one were beating a rat-tat-tat with something on a rock. It was weird, uncanny, as all stood there, none knowing where the strange noises came from.

"It's the haunts!" cried Aunt Tabby, trembling a bit. "For three nights now we've been hearing these noises."

Around and around the room they walked, still trying to locate the strange sounds. Were they under the floor? It was impossible to say. They gave it up and stood there, looking blankly at each other. Was it the work of human or superhuman hands?

Finally Joshua went to a table drawer and opened it. He took out a huge, murderous-looking revolver.

"Here, Miss Elaine," he urged, pressing it on her, "take this-- keep it near you!"

The noises ceased at length, as strangely as they had begun.

Half an hour later, they had all gone back to bed and were asleep. But Elaine's sleep now was fitful, a constant procession of faces flitted before her closed eyes.

Suddenly, she woke with a start and stared into the semi-darkness. Was that face real, or a dream face? Was it the hideous helmeted face that had dragged her down into the sewer once? That man was dead. Who was this?

She gazed at the bedroom window, holding the huge revolver tightly. There, vague in the night light, appeared a figure. Surely that was no dream face of the oxygen helmet. Besides, it was not the same helmet.

She sat bolt upright and fired, pointblank, at the window, shivering the glass. A second later she had leaped from the bed, switched on the lights and was running to the sill.

Down-stairs, Aunt Tabby and Uncle Joshua had heard the shot. Joshua was now wide awake. He seized his old shotgun and ran out into the livingroom. Followed by Aunt Tabby, he hurried to Elaine.

"Wh-what was it?" he asked, puffing at the exertion of running up- stairs.

"I saw--a face--at the window--with some kind of thing over it!" gasped Elaine. "It was like one I saw once before."

Uncle Joshua did not wait to hear any more. With the gun pointed ahead of him, ready for instant action, he ran out of the room and into the garden, beneath Elaine's window.

He looked about for signs of an intruder. There was not a sound. No one was about, here.

"I don't see any one," he called up to Elaine and Aunt Tabby in the window.

He happened to look down at the ground. Before him was a small box. He picked it up.

"Here's something, though," he said.

Joshua went back into the house.

"What is it?" asked Elaine as he rejoined the women.

She took the curious little box and unfastened the cover. As she opened it, she drew back. There in the box was a little ivory figure of a man, all hunched up and shrunken, a hideous figure. She recoiled from it--it reminded her too much of the Chinese devil-god she had seen,--and she dropped the box.

For a moment all stood looking at it in horrified amazement.

.....

It was the afternoon following the day of our strange discovery of the fireplace done in sympathetic ink on the apparently blank sheet of paper in Bennett's effects, when the speaking-tube sounded and I answered it.

"Why--it's Elaine," I exclaimed.

Kennedy's face showed the keenest pleasure at the unexpected visit. "Tell her to come right up," he said quickly.

I opened the door for her.

"Why--Elaine--I'm awfully glad to see you," he greeted, "but I thought you were rustivating."

"I was, but, Craig, it seems to me that wherever I go, something happens," she returned. "You know, Aunt Tabby said there were haunts. I thought it was an old woman's fear--but last night I heard the strangest noises out there, and I thought I saw a face at the window--a face in a helmet. And when Joshua went out, this is what he found on the ground under my window."

She handed Kennedy a box, a peculiar affair which she touched gingerly and only with signs of the greatest aversion.

Kennedy opened it. There, in the bottom of the box, was a little ivory devil-god. He looked at it curiously a moment.

"Let me see," he ruminated, still regarding the sign. "The house you bought for Aunt Tabby, once belonged to Bennett, didn't it?"

Elaine nodded her head. "Yes, but I don't see what that can have to do with it," she agreed, adding with a shudder, "Bennett is dead."

Kennedy had taken a piece of paper from the desk where he had put it away carefully. "Have you ever seen anything that looks like this?" he asked, handing her the paper.

Elaine looked at the plan carefully, as Kennedy and I scanned her face. She glanced up, her expression showing plainly the wonder she felt.

"Why, yes," she answered. "That looks like Aunt Tabby's fireplace in the living-room."

Kennedy said nothing for a moment. Then he seized his hat and coat.

"If you don't mind," he said, "we'll go back there with you."

"Mind?" she repeated. "Just what I had hoped you would do."

.....

Wu Fang, the Chinese master mind, had arrived in New York.

Beside Wu, the inscrutable, Long Sin, astute though he was, was a mere pigmy--his slave, his advance agent, as it were, a tentacle sent out to discover the most promising outlet for the nefarious talents of his master.

New York did not know of the arrival of Wu Fang, the mysterious-- yet. But down in the secret recesses of Chinatown, in the ways that are devious and dark, the oriental crooks knew--and trembled.

Thus it happened that Long Sin was not permitted to enjoy even the foretaste of Bennett's spoils which he had forced from him after his weird transformation into his real self, the Clutching Hand, when the Chinaman had given him the poisoned draught that had put him into his long sleep.

He had obtained the paper showing where the treasure amassed by the Clutching Hand was hidden, but Wu Fang, his master, had come.

Wu had immediately established himself in the most sumptuous of apartments, hidden behind the squalid exterior of the ordinary tenement building in Chinatown.

The night following his arrival, Wu Fang was reclining on a divan, when his servant announced that Long Sin was at the door.

As Long Sin entered, it was evident that, cunning and shrewd though he was himself, Wu was indeed his master. He approached in fear and awe, cringing low.

"Have you brought the map with you?" asked Wu.

Long Sin bowed low again, and drew from under his coat the paper which he had obtained from Bennett. For a moment the two, master and slave in guile, bent over, closely studying it.

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