

The Black Mansion Murder

By Leslie McFarlane



Chapter IV A FRIEND IN NEED

For a man who had shuffled into the novelty store as though he was too weary to lift one foot after the other, the ragged derelict's departure was made with surprising dexterity.

By the time Steeger and Chapin had managed to disentangle themselves from the astonished customer and blundered out into the street, Kelvey was a good fifty yards away. A narrow alley opened to his left and the plainclothesmen were just in time to see him disappear into its friendly shadows.

"After him!" yelled Steeger. His whistle trilled madly. The two men pounded in pursuit. At the entrance to the alley they caught a glimpse of Kelvey going over a board fence.

A patrolman at the end of the block heard the whistle, saw the plainclothesmen running into the alley, and with great presence of mind he ran down the intersecting block to cut off the fugitive in the back lane.

A shabby little fellow who had been lounging in a doorway immediately opposite the store, roused himself to action and sped across the road. The plump customer, fuming and cursing, was

shaken by the events of the last few moments, was standing behind the counter.

"What's up?" asked the shabby man, quickly.

The girl showed him the handkerchief, crumpled up in her hands.

"The man with the patch over his eye. He gave me this. He said it had been found — in the house."

"A dick?"

"No. I thought he was at first but the police came. They were sure he came from Howard. They thought he had brought me a message. They bullied him. They wanted to take him to the police station. He ran away. Sam, I'm sure he's all right — I don't know why he came here, but he knew I had been at the house."

"This" said Sam, "is the worst thing I ever heard of. He knew you had been there?"

"Yes. I don't know how he got my handkerchief. I must have dropped it."

"He can't be a cop. They don't even know where Moreno got bumped off. And if the dicks ever catch him they'll choke it out of him in a hurry." Sam wheeled toward the door. "I'll do what I can, kid. I want to have a talk with that guy before the dicks get a whack at him."

He left the store and made his way quickly down the street toward the entrance of the alley. Less than a minute had elapsed but already whistles were trilling and the natives of the neighborhood were hastening from all directions to the scene of the excitement.

Kelvey was hard pressed. The alley had been a poor refuge. It had led him to a yard completely surrounded by a board fence. It was too high to jump, too high to climb, and there was no gate. Over at the right-hand side of the yard he caught sight of a pile of boxes which rose to within a few feet of the top of the fence.

He reached the boxes at a bound, scrambled up, crawled over the fence and dropped into a yard on the other side. He could hear the shrill note of a police whistle down the lane, answering Steeger's frantic blasts. A boy opening some grocery cartons in the yard gave a shout of aston-

ishment and fled toward the lane. Escape in that direction was cut off. A man came running out of the back door of a shop, saw Kelvey, goggled at him and ran back into the store.

Kelvey ran across the yard, leaped across a small wire fence, went stumbling through a rubbish heap and looked back in time to see the head and shoulders of Steeger rising over the board fence. The boy in the lane was yelling: "Here he is!"

A flight of steps leading to a second-storey gallery back of one of the buildings appeared to offer the only refuge. He gained the steps at a bound and reached the gallery, which ran around to the side of the building. For a moment he was out of sight of his pursuers. There was a partly open window before him and he paused, peeped into a room, saw that it was empty. But his footprints in the snow on the gallery would betray him. He ran down to the door at the far end, then retraced his steps carefully.

Footsteps thudded on the stairs around the corner of the building. He thrust open the window and dove inside the room.

Kelvey sprawled on the floor, then picked himself up and managed to draw the window down just as the clattering boots of his pursuers sounded on the gallery. A dark figure blundered past the window. He drew back snatched the black patch from his eye, struggled out of his coat and fung it upon the bed. The room was small and poorly-furnished, evidently occupied by a male lodger who was now doubtless at work. A basin of water stood on a wash-stand near the door. Kelvey hurriedly washed the grime from his face and hands, smoothed back his hair and then, seizing a newspaper, sat down in a rickety rocking chair by the bed.

There was considerable excitement out in the corridor. He could hear Steeger and Chapin bellowing inquiries. A shrill-voiced woman was indignantly denying that anyone had entered the hall. People were running back and forth.

"He's here somewhere!" raged Steeger. "We traced him right to the door."

"Maybe he beat it downstairs," Chapin suggested.

"And maybe he's hidin' in one of these rooms."

The door of the room in which Kelvey had taken refuge was now kicked violently open and Steeger looked in. However, instead of a ragged, dirty-faced, one-eyed vagrant he confronted a youngish looking fellow sitting placidly in his shirt-sleeves, who looked over the top of his newspaper in a startled manner.

"Anyone come in through here just now?" demanded Steeger, fiercely.

Kelvey's eyes widened, his mouth opened in surprise, he gulped and shook his head. "No — nobody here but me. Somebody ran past the window. I heard him going downstairs."

"I thought so!" yelled Chapin. He ran toward the stairs. Steeger slammed the door and followed.

Kelvey sighed happily as he heard their receding footsteps — a waking a clamor in the building. They went clattering down the stairs and soon there was a great tumult and hubbub on the lower floor. Finally, this too, died away.

It had been a narrow squeak. Kelvey grinned as he reflected on the situation. He, Roger Kelvey criminologist, being chased down streets and alley like a common pickpocket. It was fortunate, for the sake of his own dignity

and peace of mind, that he had not been caught. He knew well that Malloy would relish the opportunity to hold him up to ridicule. "Detectives Easily Penetrate Kelvey's Disguise." And he knew that Malloy would have had many questions concerning his reason for following the truck with Moreno's body, and concerning his reason for being in the novelty store.

Had Malloy been anyone else but the small-minded, petty, envious official he was, Kelvey would have been glad to share the information he already possessed in the Moreno murder. But, as he told Jimmy Thomas, he had a few scores to settle with the detective inspector and he wanted nothing more just now than the satisfaction of clearing up the mystery single-handed while Malloy blundered in aimless circles.

After a while he got up from his chair, put on his coat and cap, and went over to the bureau. He took the patch from his pocket and again adjusted it over his eye. He viewed the effect in the dingy mirror and wondered if it would be wise to venture out again in this disguise. It was a disguise for Roger Kelvey, but not for the derelict whom the plainclothesmen had questioned in the novelty store. And the police sought both.

He was debating the advisability of removing the patch when, in the mirror, he saw something that plucked at every nerve in his body.

The door of the room was very slowly opening.

Kelvey stood rigidly, gazing in to the mirror. He did not turn around. The door opened to its full extent, gradually revealing a fat, bare arm, a checked apron, a billowy skirt. A short, fat, old woman stood there, looking at him.

"Well?" she said in a throaty voice.

Kelvey turned around.

"I thought you were in here," said the woman.

Kelvey folded his arms and said nothing.

"The man who rents this room is always away all day," went on the woman, quietly. "When the police talked to someone in here I knew it couldn't be him."

"Are you going to tell them?"

The old woman pursed her lips and shook her head.

"A friend of mine asked me to look after you. He says you are regular."

Kelvey was puzzled. "A friend?"

"Just a minute. I'll bring him up."

She closed the door and went away. Kelvey stepped toward the window. Then he hesitated. Perhaps it was only a ruse on her part to hold him until she could warn Steeger and Chapin. But then, why had she not told them in the first place, when she knew the lodger was not in his room? He decided to stay. But who was this mysterious friend?

The old woman trudged up the stairs and appeared in the doorway a few minutes later. With her was a shabby little fellow whom Kelvey had never seen before.

"All right, Ma," he said to her. "This chap is all right. Thanks for lettin' him stay."

"If he's all right with you, Sam, he's all right with me. Though how he got away with it when those dicks came right into the room is more than I can guess."

Sam came into the room and closed the door behind him.

"You slipped one over on Steeger that time, brother," he said,

genially. "I've got to hand it to you."

Kelvey was watchful, but he decided to play up. "Just a dumb cop," he grunted.

"Yeah—just a dumb cop. But you sorta walked into him when you went to that store. Steeger has been watchin' the place for days."

"Why?"

Sam sat down on the bed. "Now you're askin' questions. Let's get together. If I hadn't figured you might be hidin' out around here and tipped Ma off to help as much as she could, you'd probably be on your way downtown wearing a pair of bracelets by now."

"Mighty good of you. Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"What about?"

"Where," asked Sam, suddenly, "did you get the handkerchief?"

"What handkerchief?"

"Lay off," growled Sam. "I know all about it. You saw the jane in the little store and gave her a handkerchief. Why?"

"For all I know," said Kelvey, sparring for time, "you may be a stoolie. I'll talk to the girl, but not to you."

Sam digested this in silence. His eyes were fixed steadily on Kelvey. At last he nodded.

"You're wise," he admitted. "In the same spot, I'd do the same thing myself. But after what I've done for you, don't you figure I'm regular?"

"Maybe. But it could be a plant."

"It could be," admitted Sam, "but it isn't. Miss Branner is a friend of mine. She asked me to look after you. What's it all about?"

Kelvey sat back. Suddenly he shot out:

"Who killed Moreno?"

Sam shrugged.

"Why ask me. I wasn't there."

"Miss Branner?"

"No!" Sam slapped his knee emphatically. "No! she didn't do it. She says she didn't, and I believe her. She couldn't. She's a good girl, Helen." He looked at Kelvey, narrowly. "Look here, baby, why are you so interested? You're not a cop, but you want to know things."

"I know some things already."

"And you want to know more. Why? What's the gag? You one of Moreno's gang? They'd like to know who did the job. Is that it?"

Kelvey shook his head.

"You're off the mark. If Miss Branner didn't do the killing, I'm with her. I gave her back her handkerchief, didn't I? So far as I'm concerned, no one but she and I knows where she was this morning or last night. That washes her up. She has the handkerchief, and believe me, boy, it could start plenty of trouble if the cops knew where it came from. I'll talk to her, but not to you. If she doesn't want to talk to me—" Kelvey achieved a cunning look, "maybe the cops would be nice to me if I told them about the handkerchief."

There was a long silence. At last Sam got up.

"I can't figure you, but you know plenty. Stick around here for a while. I'll fix it."

(To be continued)

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