

The Black Mansion Murder

By
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Chapter VIII The House by the River

(Continued from Last Week)

Kromberg ran a speakeasy consisting of two rooms above a cigar store on River Street. It was reached by a stairway opening onto the sideways and by loitering in the shadow of a building across the way Kelvey could watch all who came or went.

All his efforts to trace Goldy Marinoff, Joe Mintz, their companion and their captor had failed. There remained but this one slender chance. He was dismally convinced that by now Howard Gale was dead and now his energies were directed toward weaving a net about the men responsible.

The shadows deepened. Street lights gleamed through the mist from the river. The road was deep with slush. He was dismally the deep note of a clock in a distant tower boomed out over the city. Seven o'clock. Half-past seven. Eight o'clock. Half-past nine.

The evening was damp and cold. He turned his coat collar up about his ears, lit a fresh cigaret and plunged his hands into his pockets. He had little hope that his vigil would be rewarded but this was the only clue he had. There was nothing else he could do. Under the circumstances he could not afford to arouse suspicion in the neighborhood by even the most casual inquiries concerning the gangster.

A little after nine o'clock he saw a wheel chair laboriously moving down the street, on the other side of the road, and there was a flicker of interest in his eyes as he recognized the venerable figure of Old Ned. It might be only a coincidence, the presence of the cripple in this part of the city, but he wondered at it. He watched the wheel chair as it slowly disappeared into the gathering mist.

People went to and fro. An occasional man slipped into the doorway beside the cigar store. Once in a while a customer emerged and went down the street with gait more or less uneven. A drunk lurched out, clung to a telephone pole and sang for awhile in maudlin fashion, then staggered off.

Half-past nine. Kelvey wondered if he should not risk some more active method of discovering Goldy's whereabouts. And then he saw two familiar figures. Even without seeing their faces he recognized them as Goldy Marinoff and his flat-nosed companion, Joe Mintz. By their build, by their walk, he knew them to be the two men who had carried the packing case across the yard of Black Mansion that morning and who had abducted Howard Gale that afternoon.

They went into Kromberg's place. Kelvey debated whether to follow them or wait. He decided to wait. But there might be a rear exit to the speakeasy. He would have to chance it.

After about fifteen minutes they emerged again and retraced their steps back up the street. Kelvey emerged from the shadows and kept them in view. At the end of the block they turned down a side street and went toward the river. Kelvey crossed the road and followed a respectful distance.

At the foot of the street flowed the river, sullen and evil in the night, reflecting the gleam of light perched at the extreme end of a ramshackle wharf. Near the wharf was a frame house and as Kelvey watched he saw the two men make their way toward it. They vanished into the shadows;

at a moment later there was a patch of vivid light against which their figures were silhouetted as they enter a door at the side; the door closed and the light was blotted out.

He stole forward, left the street and went toward the house. The windows were evidently heavily curtained for no beam of illumination was visible. As he drew closer he made out the details of the building more clearly, picked his way across a yard littered with rubbish and went around to the back of the house. Here he found a window and he crouched beneath it, listening.

There was no sound but the lapping of waves against the piles of the wharf, a few yards off. After a while he moved around to the side of the house nearest the river and crouched beneath another window. Here he heard voices. And the first voice he heard was that of Goldy Marinoff.

"It's all set!" Marinoff was saying. "We'll leave here in about half an hour. Dan says everything is ready for the blow-off."

"Good! If our luck holds we should all be rich by morning."

Kelvey was puzzled. The voice was strangely familiar to him, yet somehow he could not readily identify it.

"The tunnel is through?" said a third voice. This was Joe Mintz.

"Everything is ready. It was ready last night," returned the strange voice. "Men, we're lucky. This Moreno business might have easily wrecked everything."

"I'll say we're lucky," growled Mintz. "I've been shaking in my boots all days. We can't say we haven't been getting the breaks."

"Now," said the third man, "we've got to decide what we're to do with Gale. I didn't draw an easy breath today as long as he was at large. If the police had ever nabbed him, if they once learned where Moreno had been killed—you see where he would have been! All that work gone for nothing. I'm glad we have him safely in our care."

"I've got to hand it to you," said Marinoff. "That was one bright idea giving that tip-off letter in at the store and then watching to see who'd deliver it. It worked like a charm. Sam and that other bird let us to hi mas if we'd asked 'em."

"It had to be done," returned the other, quietly. "Go and get him, Joe. We'll have a little talk with him before we leave."

Silence followed for a short time and then there was the sound of a door slamming shut, a flurry of footsteps, and Joe Mintz said; "In you go, baby! We've got a few things to say to you." Someone stumbled heavily across the room, as though he had been given a violent shove, and brought up against the wall. Then came the voice of Howard Gale, snarling and defiant.

"Well, you crooks! What is it now? Going to bump me off?" Kelvey experienced a surge of relief and surprise. Gale, then, was still unharmed. But why? What possible motive could these men have in merely keeping him prisoner? He crouched closer to the window as he heard the unknown man say, suavely; "Not yet my friend. That is, not unless it is necessary."

A short bitter laugh. "I know how much chance I have with you, you damned thugs!"

"You will have every possible chance. We have taken the law into our own hands but at least we will hear what you have to say. As you know, we are friends of the man who was shot dead in the Black Mansion early this morning. That man was

murdered. His murderer must die. If we leave him to the law, there are many loop-holes. He has too many chances of escaping punishment. So we are saving the police a great deal of trouble, saving the state a great deal of expense and making sure that justice will be done, by taking charge of the business ourselves.

"By murdering me!" snapped Gale.

"By executing you," corrected the suave voice. "If we should find you guilty."

"After a fair trial," the prisoner sneered.

"As fair as possible. Now, Gale, it is fairly obvious that you killed Moreno, our friend—"

"I didn't."

"You plead 'not guilty' eh? Well we shall hear your story. You do not deny being in the house."

"I'm saying nothing. What's the use? I'm licked before I start."

"Not at all. The thing is this—a friend of yours went to the Black Mansion early this morning as well. A woman. She too had reason to dislike Moreno. We have taken into account the possibility that she may have killed him. It was either one or the other of you. Now, Gale, who did it?"

"She didn't."

"Then," said the suave voice, remorselessly, "you did!"

"No!"

"One of you killed Moreno. Tell the truth, Gale. We'll take your word for it, but Moreno's murderer dies."

"I did not kill him."

"We accept your word. The girl killed him? Then she shall suffer."

"No! No! shouted Gale, desperately. "She didn't kill him, I know."

"She was in the house," went on the suave voice, grimly. "She wanted Moreno to clear you and you know the price Moreno demanded from her before he would prove your alibi. Why did she go to the house? You say you did not kill Moreno. Then she did." A pause. "That is all we want to know. Goldy, take this fellow back to the other room and see that he is kept tied up until after the getaway. If anything goes wrong tonight—finish him. And as for the girl, I'll settle with her myself."

There was a heavy silence. Then Gale spoke again, dully; "I killed him."

"Ah! Now we're getting at it. You were at the Black Mansion this morning. You shot him. Why?"

"I threatened to tell the police what was going on in the Black Mansion unless he proved my alibi. He tried to shoot me, and missed. I shot him."

"Put him back in the other room, Goldy. We can't take the chance of finishing him now. After this other business tonight—"

The silence was significant.

Kelvey, in his anxiety to hear every word had pressed close to the window pane. He had not noticed that one foot rested upon a fragment of ice that was slowly becoming dislodged beneath his weight. Suddenly it gave. He lost his footing, sprawled wildly. One elbow crashed through the window pane and there was a loud shattering of glass. A shout of consternation. The men in the room rushed toward the window. The blind shot up.

To hide was impossible. He knew that the men would be out of the house in a moment. He had a confused glimpse of their shadow figures against the sudden rectangle of light, beyond the shattered pane. He fled, blindly.

An automatic spat viciously. A door slammed. Head down, he

raced toward the wharf. The automatic was rapping a message of death behind him. He dodged from side to side and reached the dark shadows of the wharf, avoiding the radiance of the lone electric light. He looked back. Two figures were plunging out of the house in pursuit.

He ran along the end of the wharf, his eyes vainly seeking a hiding place. There were no boats. The river seemed to cut off all escape.

Before him loomed the gloomy shadow of a ship and he dodged around the end of it. The planks were icy and treacherous. He stumbled, lost his balance, staggered and sprawled down the incline of the slip. His fingers scabbled at the smooth, cold boards and then he toppled over the edge into the black water below.

When he came to the surface he struck out instinctively, then looked up in time to see a dark figure crouched at the top of the wharf. He heard a shout.

"There he is! Swimming! Get him!"

Flickers of crimson light as the automatic barked again and again. Suddenly Kelvey's arms flung up, he uttered a strangled shout and disappeared.

The men on the wharf stood watching.

"I got him!" muttered Goldy.

"Wait," urged his companion. "He may be bluffing."

But although they scanned the lapping waves for a long time they saw nothing more. At last Goldy said.

"Who the devil could that have been? Listening in. Likely heard every word!"

"A stoolie. And he may have heard every word but he'll never tell what he knew."

After a while they turned and went back to the house.

"It may have been one of Moreno's men," said Goldy's companion. "Things are getting hot. We've got to pull this job and be out of town by morning."

Goldy shivered.

"Mebbe it was only a bum. It ain't nice to think of bumpin' off a guy when mebbe there was nothing wrong."

"Pull yourself together," snapped the other, curtly. "We'd all be in jail in half an hour if that bird had got clear. It was either him or us."

"Yeah," agreed Goldy. "I guess it was either him or us."

(To be continued)

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