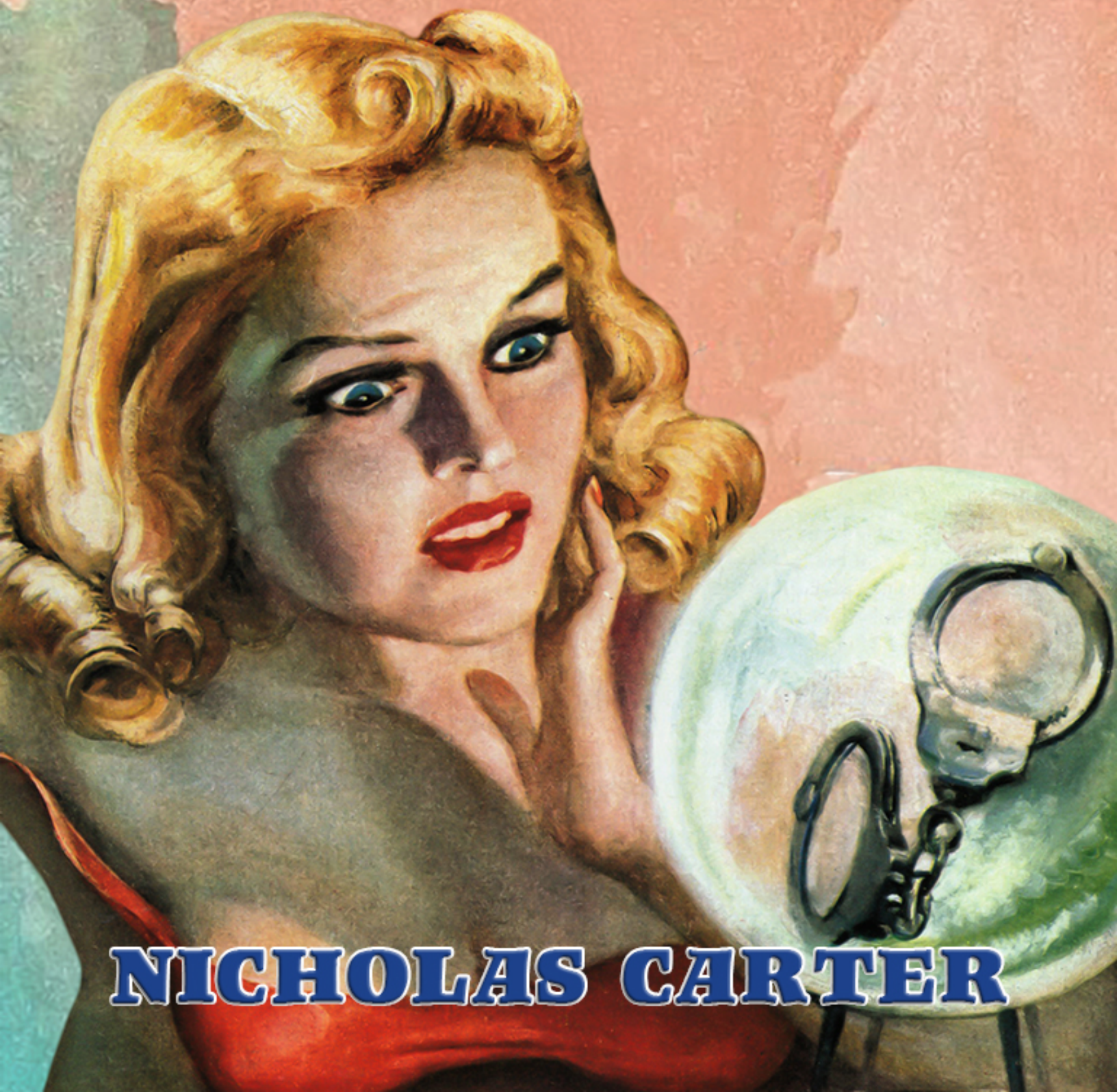


CLASSICS TO GO

HIDDEN FOES
OR, A FATAL MISCALCULATION



NICHOLAS CARTER

Hidden Foes

Or, A Fatal Miscalculation

Nicholas Carter

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CHAPTER I. A MYSTERIOUS FATALITY.

Nobody had heard the report of a pistol.

There had been no disturbance; in fact, no audible altercation, no startling cry for help, or even a groan of sudden, terrible distress.

The man lay there as motionless, nevertheless, as if felled by a thunderbolt. His life had been snuffed out like the flame of a candle by the fury of a whirlwind. Death had come upon him like a bolt from the blue. By slow degrees his face underwent a change—but it was not the change that ordinarily follows sudden death, that peaceful calm that marks the end of earthly toil and trouble.

Instead, the smoothly shaven skin seemed to shrink and wither slightly over the dead nerves and lifeless muscles, and a singular slaty hue that was hardly perceptible settled around his lips and nostrils, partly dispelling the first deathly pallor. It was as if the blast from a furnace, or the searing touch of a fiery hand, had withered and parched it.

He was a comparatively young man, not over thirty, and he was fashionably clad in a plaid business suit. He was lying flat on his back on the floor of the second-story corridor of a building known as the Waldmere Chambers, in the city of Madison.

Presently the door of one of the several adjoining rooms was opened and a stylish young woman emerged. She was clad for the street, and lingered to lock the door and put the key in her leather hand bag. Then she turned, and her gaze fell upon the prostrate man, several yards away and nearer the broad stairway leading down to the lower floor and the street door.

“Good heavens! Is he drunk?” she gasped, shrinking involuntarily.

She feared to approach him, though her hesitation was only momentary. For she heard the tread of some one on the stairs, obviously that of a man, and she ventured nearer just as the other appeared at the top of the stairs, a well-built, florid man of middle age.

“Oh, Doctor Perry, look here!” she cried excitedly. “What’s the matter with this man? Is he drunk or ill, or what is the —”

“Well, well, I don’t wonder you ask.” Doctor Perry approached and gazed down at him. “I don’t know, Miss Vernon. He appears to be——”

He stopped short; then crouched and raised the man’s arm, dropping it quickly. It fell back upon the floor as if made of clay.

“Heavens!” he exclaimed, rising hurriedly. “The man is dead.”

“Dead!” Miss Vernon echoed, turning pale.

“Stone dead. Do you know him?”

“No. I just came from my rooms to go to lunch and saw him lying here.”

“Did you hear him fall, or any disturbance, or——”

“I heard nothing, Doctor Perry, not a sound.”

“We must call a policeman. I will wait here while you do so. Go down to the street and find an officer.”

“Won’t it be better to telephone? I can do so in a moment.”

“Yes, yes, in that case,” Doctor Perry nodded. “Hasten.”

Miss Vernon ran back and entered her rooms, on the door of which a modest brass plate stated that her business was

that of a manicure and ladies' hairdresser. She ran to a telephone in one of the attractively furnished rooms, crying quickly to the exchange operator:

"Give me the police headquarters. Hurry, please! It's an emergency case."

Seated with Chief Gleason in the latter's private office when the telephone call was received in the outer office was the celebrated American detective, Nicholas Carter, who had arrived in Madison early that morning with two of his assistants, and who then was discussing with the chief the business which had occasioned his visit, the nature of which will presently appear. They were interrupted by a police sergeant, who knocked and entered, saying quickly:

"A man has dropped dead, chief, in a corridor of the Waldmere Chambers. Shall I send the ambulance?"

"What man? Is he known?" Gleason questioned, swinging around in his swivel chair.

"No, sir."

"Who informed you?"

"A woman telephoned that the body had just been found. Doctor Perry, the dentist, was watching it while she telephoned. His office is in the Waldmere Chambers. Neither of them knew the dead man."

"Yes, send the ambulance," Chief Gleason directed. "You had better go, also, and look into the case. If——"

"One moment," Nick Carter interrupted. "I think I'll go with him, chief, if you don't mind."

"What need of that? It is merely a case of——"

"We don't know what kind of a case it is, Gleason, at present," Carter cut in again. "A sudden death always warrants more or less suspicion. It is barely possible that

this has some connection with the series of mysterious crimes that we have been discussing, and which has finally led you to call on me for assistance. Be that as it may——”

“Hang it, Carter, I’ll go with you myself, then,” Gleason interrupted, rising and taking his cap. “You may be right, of course, and the chance is worth taking. You remain here, sergeant, but send along the ambulance. We’ll take a taxi.”

Chief Gleason started for the street while speaking, closely followed by the famous detective, and they were so fortunate as to find a taxicab just passing the headquarters building.

Thus it happened that Nicholas Carter arrived upon the scene of the sudden fatality scarcely ten minutes after it was discovered. He was not without an intuitive feeling, moreover, that he was to be confronted with a mystery of more than ordinary depth and obscurity, a case that would tax not only his rare detective genius, but also his skill, craft, and cunning in every department of his professional work.

“I think, Gleason, that you had better not mention my name while we are looking into this matter,” he remarked, as they were alighting from the taxicab.

“Very well,” Gleason readily assented. “But what do you expect to gain by suppressing it?”

“Just what is hard to say at this stage of the game,” Carter replied. “If all you have told me is true, however, and Madison is afflicted with a crook whose crafty work has completely baffled your entire police department, it may be of some advantage to me, at least, if he does not immediately learn that I have been employed to run him down. That would serve only to put him on his guard.”

“I see the point,” Gleason nodded. “I agree with you, too.”

“The fact has not been disclosed, I understand.”

“Only to a few members of the force, Carter; all of whom were ordered to say nothing about it. They may be trusted.”

“Very good! If there should be occasion to introduce me to others, then, present me as Mr. Blaisdell,” Carter directed. “That is the name under which I am registered at the Wilton House.”

“Blaisdell—I’ll bear it in mind.”

“Come on, then,” the detective added. “We are none too soon. A crowd is beginning to gather.”

Their remarks had been made while they were entering the building. A group of men had collected at the top of the stairs. They were restrained by a policeman who had been called in from the street, and a passageway was hurriedly made for Chief Gleason and his companion. That the latter was the famous New York detective, not even the policeman then suspected.

The scene in the second-floor corridor was about what Nick Carter anticipated. Half a score of men and women had come from the adjoining rooms and offices and were gazing with mingled awe and consternation at the lifeless man on the floor. He was lying where he had fallen. A physician had been hurriedly summoned and was bending over him, engaged in making a superficial examination.

Chief Gleason started slightly when he beheld the upturned face of the dead man.

“Good heavens!” he muttered. “It’s Gaston Todd.”

Carter heard his muttered exclamation. Restraining him, at the same time furtively watching the physician, he said quietly:

“One moment, chief. Who is Gaston Todd? What about him?”

“He was born and brought up here,” Gleason replied. “He had been in the stock brokerage business for ten years, cashier for Daly & Page. He was a clubman and a figure in society.”

“Married?”

“No. He had a suite in the Wilton House. By Jove, it’s barely possible that——”

“What is barely possible?”

“That you are right.”

“Right in what respect? Tell me.”

Carter had noticed the chief’s hesitation, his dark frown, as if he had started to say something which discretion quickly led him to withhold. He demurred only for a moment, however, then explained with lowered voice:

“Right, perhaps in thinking there is knavery back of this. There had been a feeling of bitter rivalry between Todd and a young local lawyer, Frank Paulding, who is an exceedingly impetuous and hot-headed chap. They had an ugly altercation in the Country Club last night, I have heard, and it is said that they nearly came to blows. That may have ended it, of course, though this sudden death of Todd, following it so quickly——”

“Is somewhat significant,” Nick Carter put in quietly. “I agree with you. In what have the two men been rivals?”

“For the hand of Edna Thurlow, by far the most beautiful and accomplished girl in Madison. She inherited half a million when her father died. Her mother, Mrs. Mortimer Thurlow, is also very wealthy and fashionable. She’s the acknowledged leader of the local smart set. The two men may have met here this morning. Possibly the fight of last night was resumed, resulting in——”

“Let it go at that,” the detective interrupted. “The physician has ended his examination.”

CHAPTER II.

NICK CARTER'S OPINION.

Chief Gleason immediately turned and approached the rising physician, asking a bit brusquely:

“Well, Doctor Doyle, what do you make of it? The man is dead?”

“Yes, indeed, there is no question about that, Mr. Gleason.”

“What was the cause?”

“It appears to be a case of heart disease.”

“Are you sure of it?”

“One cannot be absolutely sure, Mr. Gleason, without performing an autopsy,” Doctor Doyle said blandly, while he wiped his fingers with his handkerchief. “I feel reasonably sure. There is no wound that I can discover, nor does there appear to be any indication of foul play. Yes, I feel reasonably sure of it,” he repeated.

“You don’t think, then, that there is any occasion to notify the coroner?” Gleason said inquiringly.

“There seems to be none. I have no doubt that the man died from natural causes. There is no superficial evidence to the contrary, or any——”

Doctor Doyle broke off abruptly, his gaze having fallen upon the detective, who had passed back of the couple and approached the body.

Carter then was bending over it, and with his finger had raised one of Todd’s eyelids. He studied the ball and pupil for several seconds, then took a powerful lens from his pocket and inspected the dead man’s face and lips. He looked up after a moment and said:

"I don't agree with you, doctor. This man appears to have been a very strong and rugged fellow."

"That is true, sir, as far as it goes," Doctor Doyle admitted, frowning slightly when his professional opinion was thus questioned by a stranger.

"It seems hardly probable that such a man died of heart disease," the detective said pointedly. "Nor do his eyes denote that apoplexy was the cause."

"You will have to go deeper, sir, nevertheless, to find positive evidence of the cause," Doctor Doyle said, rather coldly. "Superficial evidence is not absolutely convincing."

"Have you noticed this slight discoloration of the skin near the mouth and nostrils?"

"Yes, of course."

"How do you account for that?"

"Such slight changes immediately after death are not uncommon," said the physician. "There may be a slight settlement of blood in the tissues in that locality."

"You would not attribute it to a blow?"

"Surely not. There could be no mistaking the evidence of a violent blow."

"But the skin appears to be slightly withered," said Carter. "Minute wrinkles are discernible with my lens, particularly in the thin skin of the lips."

"That may be easily explained."

"How so?"

"Death may have been preceded by a sudden terrible pain, causing a contraction of the lips, and what may be termed a pinched condition of the nerves and muscles in that locality. They may not have relaxed yet, which causes the drawn

appearance of the skin which, you say, is discernible with your lens. No, I do not wish to examine it more closely. I don't think it signifies anything."

"I do," said the detective, rising abruptly. "I think——"

"One moment, gentlemen." The interruption came from Doctor Perry, the dentist, who still was among the people then gathered in the corridor. "Here is Professor Graff, the chemist. His opinion ought to be valuable in a case of this kind."

Nicholas Carter turned to gaze at the man who then was approaching.

Professor Graff had come from a room at the rear end of the corridor, and he appeared surprised that something unusual had occurred, evidently having heard none of the disturbance. He was a man of medium build, somewhat bowed, and appeared to be about sixty years old. His hair and beard were gray, his complexion sallow, his expression serious and reserved. He wore gold-bowed spectacles and looked as if he might be of German or Swedish extraction. He was clad for the street, wearing a soft felt hat and a coat with a cape, a style augmenting his foreign appearance.

"Dear me, what has happened?" he said gravely, while others made way for him to approach. "A gentleman injured—not dead, is he?"

"Yes." Doctor Perry drew him nearer. "He was found lying here a few minutes ago."

"I heard nothing. I have just come up from my laboratory. Why, why, this is Mr. Gaston Todd," Professor Graff added amazedly, manifestly shocked by the discovery. "I cannot be mistaken. I have seen him frequently in the Wilton House."

"There is no question as to his identity," replied the dentist, who appeared to be the only person acquainted with the

chemist. "There is a difference of opinion between Doctor Doyle and this gentleman, however, as to the possible cause of his death. They——"

"Let me explain," the detective interposed, addressing the chemist. "It will take me only a few minutes."

"Why, yes, certainly," Professor Graff bowed, regarding the detective a bit curiously.

Carter turned again to the body, briefly pointing out the conditions he already had mentioned, and then added earnestly:

"Use my lens. You can see more distinctly."

Professor Graff smiled faintly and shook his head.

"Really, sir, there is no occasion," he replied. "My opinion in such a matter is worthless. I know nothing about such things. I am a chemist, not a physician. I can subject the physical organs to analysis and detect poisons, or other foreign substances, perhaps; but I would not wish to pass upon the conditions you have mentioned. It seems only reasonable to me, however, that Doctor Doyle's opinion ought to be entirely reliable."

"I think he will find it so," said the latter, as Professor Graff moved away and descended the stairs.

Nick Carter did not longer argue the point. Instead, turning to Chief Gleason, he whispered quietly:

"You had better be governed by my opinion, nevertheless, and take the necessary steps to insure an autopsy."

"You really think, then, that——"

"Never mind what I really think. I'll see you later and inform you. You will make no mistake, however, in doing what I direct. Take it from me, Gleason, this man was—murdered."

“Murdered? Why do you——”

“Hush!” Nick quietly cautioned. “There will be nothing in immediately disclosing my suspicion. It will be better to conceal it temporarily. Has this man a family?”

“No; no family.”

“Or relatives who will be likely to interfere?”

“I think not. I am quite sure of it, in fact.”

“Very good. Notify the coroner, then, and have him take the necessary steps to perform an autopsy later,” the detective directed. “Understand?”

“Perfectly,” Chief Gleason nodded. “I will see to it.”

“And I will see you later, also the coroner, and explain my position,” Carter added. “Just now I have something else in view and must get a move on. Mum’s the word, mind you, until after the autopsy.”

He did not wait for an answer. He turned away and quickly departed, leaving his observers wondering who he was and what he had said, his instructions having been imparted in subdued and hurried whispers.

Returning to the street, Carter consulted a directory in a drug store, and five minutes later he entered the Gratton Building and approached the office of the lawyer whom the chief had mentioned. He listened at the door for a moment, hearing nothing, and then opened it and entered.

A tall, clean-cut man of thirty swung around in his swivel chair from a rolltop desk. He was of light complexion, with a smoothly shaved, attractive face, and frank blue eyes. He was alone and looked a bit curiously at his visitor, who, glancing sharply around the well-equipped office, appeared somewhat surprised, and said:

“Pardon me. Are you Mr. Paulding?”

“Yes, I am, sir.”

“I thought I saw Mr. Gaston Todd come in here a moment ago. Was I mistaken?”

“Humph!” Paulding straightened up with an expressive grunt. “Yes, sir, very much mistaken. Todd never comes here, nor would it be wise for him to do so. I would fire him out, head, neck, and heels, before he could open his mouth. You may repeat that to him, if you like and are a friend of his. I would say the same to Todd himself.”

Nick laughed, thrusting his hands into his pockets, and surveyed with quizzical eye the somewhat impulsive speaker.

“Oh, I’m no friend of Todd,” he replied. “I know him only by sight. There is a little matter, however, about which I would like to question him.”

“All right, in that case, and I’ll do all I can to help you,” Paulding said more agreeably. “I saw him in the Waldmere Chambers about fifteen minutes ago. He still is there, perhaps, if you care to seek him.”

“In the rooms of one of the tenants, or——”

“No. He was in the second-floor corridor,” Paulding interrupted. “He appeared to be waiting for some one. I passed him when I came out.”

“Did you speak to him?”

“Not by a long chalk. I speak to Todd only under protest and when it cannot be avoided. That’s all I can tell you. You may find him there, perhaps.”

Nick Carter had accomplished his object. He was a keen physiognomist and could read faces and characters much less frank and outspoken than those of this lawyer. He now was absolutely sure, in fact, that Paulding knew nothing

about Todd's death, nor had even heard of it. He smiled and replied:

"Much obliged. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble at all, sir."

"May I ask, Mr. Paulding, what took you to the Waldmere Chambers?"

"I went there to confer with a client who——" Paulding broke off abruptly, gazing more sharply at the detective, then frowningly added: "But why do you ask why I went there? What is it to you? It strikes me that you are deucedly inquisitive."

"I agree with you," said Nick, coolly placing a chair near that of the lawyer and sitting down. "There is serious occasion for it, Mr. Paulding, as I now will explain: I happen to know that Mr. Gaston Todd has not left that second-floor corridor in the Waldmere Chambers. He was found dead there immediately after you left the building."

"Dead—found dead!" Paulding stared amazedly. "What are you saying? Do you really mean it—that Gaston Todd is—dead!"

If Nick had had even a lingering shadow of suspicion, it would have been instantly dispelled by the expression of the lawyer's face. It was one that no man could have feigned, however accomplished an actor. He bowed and replied:

"Yes, Mr. Paulding, that is precisely what I mean. Gaston Todd is dead."

"Dear me, I can hardly believe it. It seems utterly incredible. Found dead, you say——"

"Exactly. Where you last saw him. He was——"

"Stop a moment! What do you imply by that?"

Paulding's face had changed like a flash. His brows fell and his eyes took on a threatening gleam and glitter. He lurched forward in his chair, adding quickly:

"Why did you say he was found immediately after I left the building, and where I last saw him? What are you insinuating? What are you trying to put over on me? Why, if you knew he was dead, did you come here to pretend you were seeking him? Who the devil are you, that you impose upon me in this way, implying that I——"

"Here is my card," the detective blandly interposed, tendering it. "You may, perhaps, know me by name."

CHAPTER III.

A FRIEND WORTH HAVING.

Nick Carter smiled amusedly when Frank Paulding, having fairly snatched the card and read it, straightened up in his chair and stared at him with almost ludicrous astonishment.

“Nicholas Carter!” he exclaimed; “the New York detective! Good gracious!”

“Is it so very amazing?” the detective asked dryly.

“Yes, by Jove, it is,” said Paulding, pulling himself together. “I do, indeed, know you by name, and who does not? Let the circumstances be what they may, too, I am very glad to become acquainted with you. I am not blind, nevertheless, to the fact that your visit is rather significant; decidedly so, in reality, in view of your duplicity and covert insinuations that——”

“That you know something about Todd’s sudden death,” Nick put in, checking him. “Don’t let that annoy you. I did so, Mr. Paulding, only to assure myself to the contrary. I have succeeded, too, completely.”

“But what was the occasion?” Paulding questioned. “I don’t see, Mr. Carter, why you thought I knew anything about it.”

“I did not really think so,” Nick said dryly. “I foresaw, however, what others possibly will think, sooner or later, and I wanted to look at you and take your measure before circumstances might make it difficult for me to do so with absolute certainty. He is a wise man and keen, you know, who anticipates coming events.”

“By Jove, I fail to get you, Mr. Carter,” Paulding said more seriously. “Take my measure, eh? What others will possibly

think? Say, you don't—you don't mean that—that Gaston Todd was killed, do you? Not that he was—murdered?"

Nick glanced at the door, to be sure that he had closed it. He then replied more impressively:

"I am a stranger to you, Mr. Paulding, but you will make no mistake in meeting me halfway and taking my advice. I frequently am a good friend to have in time of trouble."

"I know of none I would rather have," Paulding said quickly.

"That goes, does it?"

"You bet it goes."

"What now passes between us, then, must be strictly confidential," said the detective. "You must, moreover, be governed by my instructions. You will presently see, I think, that that will be the only wise course for you to shape. If you are not inclined to meet me in this way——"

"But I am," Paulding cut in earnestly. "I'm not blind. I now see there is something wrong, Mr. Carter, and that you are here in my behalf. I would be more than a fool, sir, if I did not take advantage of your offer. I promise in advance to do what you direct."

"Very good," Nick said approvingly. "You will not regret it."

"But how am I in wrong?" Paulding asked anxiously. "Has a crime been committed? Was Todd murdered?"

"I think so," said the detective.

"Good heavens! Is it possible that I am suspected of——"

"One moment, Paulding, and I will tell you about it."

He then stated the circumstances briefly, in so far as he had figured in the case, and then added pointedly:

"You now can see why I wanted to talk with you, Paulding, and get your measure."

“Yes, yes, I see,” Paulding nodded. “But how did you know that I passed Todd in the corridor just before he died, or was killed? I saw no one else. I am sure, too, that no one saw me. How did you know I had just left there?”

“For two reasons,” Nick replied. “One, because you told me so.”

“I told you so?” Paulding stared perplexedly.

“In effect,” smiled the detective. “You said you had passed Todd about fifteen minutes ago, and I knew that was just about when his body was discovered.”

“Ah, I see. You are a keen reasoner, Mr. Carter. You said there were two reasons, however.”

“The other can be briefly stated: Todd did not look to me like a man who had dropped dead of any organic trouble. He looked like a strong and healthful fellow. I very soon suspected murder; and, after having been told of your fight with Todd in the Country Club last night, I reasoned that you had just met him, perhaps, and been seen by some person who, for some reason and knowing all of the circumstances, had taken advantage of them to craftily kill Todd and fix the crime upon you, assuming that you had not done it. That’s why I lost no time in sizing you up from personal observation. I wanted to do so before you heard of Todd’s death, in case you were innocent, of which I was quickly convinced. Have I made it plain to you?”

“Perfectly plain, Mr. Carter,” Paulding said earnestly. “I am more than grateful. I don’t know how I can repay you for your interest in me, a stranger——”

“Don’t speak of that,” the detective interrupted. “I am interested in serving justice, mind you, and am taking what seems to be the best way. I am not absolutely sure that Todd was murdered. An autopsy will determine that. If he was, at such a time and in such a public place, without any