

# THE GRAY MASK II--THE ELMFORD MURDER By Wadsworth Camp

On the afternoon before the Elmford murder Garth, leaving headquarters, made an unaccommodated purchase. Not long ago such affectation would have appealed to his sturdy, straight-forward mind of a detective as trivial, possibly unmasculine. He reddened as he handed his ten cents to the shapeless Italian woman whose fingers about his coat lapel were confusingly deft. He had no illusions as to the source of this foppish prompting. The inspector had called him in and told him that Nora would welcome him at the flat for dinner that evening. The event appeared a milestone on the amorous path he sought to explore hand in hand with the girl. He realized his desired destination was not yet in view, but such progress required a deviation from the familiar—some peculiar concession to its significance. So he turned away from the cheap sidewalk stand, wearing, for the first time in his life, a flower in his button-hole—a rose of doubtful future and unaristocratic lineage.

That night on the edge of winter it was thoroughly dark when Dr. John Randall left New York for his Long Island home. Treving had unexpectedly detained him at the club. His review had evidently projected more than the unforeseen, for Randall's habitual calm was suddenly destroyed by the color and the lines of a passionate indecision. He crossed the Queensborough bridge and threaded the Long Island city streets with a reckless disregard of traffic which probably went undisciplined only because of the green cross on the radiator of his automobile.

His house, although just within the city limits, had an air, particularly under this starlight, remote and depressing. Heavy trees, which clustered near, appeared to shroud it. The doctor, scarcely slackening speed, swung up the drive. At the turn the house rose before him, square, frowning, black. It was only after a moment that a nebulous radiance from a certain window upstairs defined it as light.

Randall sprang out and nearly running, stumbling a little, climbed the steps, crossed the veranda, and pushed the electric button. No sound of hurrying feet followed it. Randall, after waiting for a moment, took out his latchkey and entered. Immediately the relieving answer came: "Here—in my dressing-room, John. Why are you so late?" He leaned weakly against the wall. "I was detained," she answered. "You talked it over a week or so ago, and I thought you had agreed. Ellen's wedding. Naturally they all wanted to go. I had an early dinner and packed them off. But I counted on you. I was growing afraid, all alone in the house. What kept you?" "Old Mrs. Hanson—at first. She's very ill. I should really have stayed the night. I went to the club for a bite."

She yielded and sat down, but now she bent forward, her hands clasped at her knees to prevent their trembling. "I overheard," she said, "it was Della and Ross. I went to Ross. I felt I knew him well enough. My dear! It's common scandal—much worse, I'll do you the credit of saying, then the facts. You've been seen with Treving in cafes of doubtful reputation, and out here on Long Island, at some of these unspeakable road houses—"

He turned away. "The lines about his mouth tightened. 'Treving,' he said with an affectation of simplicity, 'came into the club while I was talking with Ross. He had been drinking—a great deal. I didn't realize it at first—it's quite necessary you should hear this—so I took him out in the hall and tried to talk to him reasonably. I told him it must stop—any friendship between him and you. As I told you, he had been drinking, but that didn't explain his astounding assurance. I don't want to do you an injustice, but I couldn't help fearing his confidence was based on an understanding with you. I told him, if I heard of his coming near you again or communicating with you in any way, I would thrash him within a league of his life. Bella, he laughed at me."

His eyes left hers. A look of utter discouragement entered them. He spoke slowly, with unnatural distinctness. "Treving offered to lay me any stakes he'd spend this evening with you. He remained averted. Perhaps he didn't dare risk the vital testimony he might have yielded."

"But I don't think he'll succeed. And I warned him as best I could. You may as well make up your mind, Bella, that that incident is finished. Unless, Bella—that's why, when I saw the house dark, I was afraid you were gone. Did you and he know about old Mrs. Hanson? Have you any arrangement with him for tonight?"

"Why, isn't it answered? Oh, yes. You might have kept Thompson at least. Let it ring. I shan't go down." "A doctor?" she said scornfully. "She arose with an effort. The lace of the matie dressing-gown exaggerated the difficulty of her breathing. His glance, which took all this in, was not wholly without contrition. "I shan't fly from the house as best I can. You may as well make up your mind, Bella, that that incident is finished. Unless, Bella—that's why, when I saw the house dark, I was afraid you were gone. Did you and he know about old Mrs. Hanson? Have you any arrangement with him for tonight?"



Garth stepped forth aggressively. "I want you for the murder of Frederick Treving—there in the next room."

powerful automobile headlights blinded him. "You're Mrs. Hanson's chauffeur?" he called. An indistinct voice came back affirmatively. Randall caught the word "hurry." Therefore he ran down the steps and, his eyes still blinded by the glare, stepped into a large runabout and settled himself by the driver.

They swung away at a breakneck speed which before long swept Randall's cap from his head and forced him to cling with both hands to the side of the car. "Man!" he shouted. "This is dangerous. There's no point in such haste." The car swerved. Its speed was all of once reduced. With a disconcerting jerk it came to a standstill. As Randall, trying to recover his balance, started to speak angrily, something soft and blinding struck his face and enveloped his head. His hands raised purposelessly, were caught and pinioned. The cloth suddenly became moist and a familiar odor arose. The other laughed as he fastened a cord about the arms and body. Randall gasped. His bound limbs relaxed.

The driver turned the car, and with one arm around the senseless doctor, drove in leisurely fashion back toward Elmford. Hidden among the undergrowth at some distance from the house stood a small, partly ruined stone building, used once, form the water flowing nearby, as a spring house. The driver carried Randall to the interior of this building and placed him on the floor. Lighting a match, he glanced around. He saw a trifle, steadied himself with an effort, then, as the glow of the match expired, bent over and thrust his hand in Randall's pocket. He drew out a key ring. He struck another match and ran quickly over the ring until he had found the key he desired. This he slipped from the ring into his own pocket and returned the rest to Randall's coat. On the point of leaving, he hesitated, and with a resolute air stooped and removed the cloth from Randall's head and the cord from the body. After wards he took a small bottle from his pocket, forced the unconscious man's lips open and poured a quantity of the fluid down his throat. When he had gathered up the cloth, the rope, and the bottle, the man left the stone building, laughing with a satisfaction that was not wholly vicious. He secreted the compromising bundle

beneath a large stone in the bed of a stream. His lurch was more pronounced as he walked to the car, and his manner less confident as he drove on to the house.

He alighted, climbed the steps, and crossed the veranda. He felt in his pocket for the latchkey he had taken from Randall, inserted it in the lock, and noisily opened the door. He was very careful to see that the door did not latch behind him. He placed the key on the hall table. He folded his coat and laid it with his cap on a chair. Stealthily he advanced along the dark and silent hall to the stairway.

The sound of his automobile Bella had half arisen. A board creaked in the corridor outside her door. She swung around, her hand at her throat. "John!" Complete silence followed. Unless something out of all reckoning had occurred, her husband could not be back. None of the servants would have used an automobile. The knob moved. Inch by inch the door opened, and inch by inch, as if impelled by a perfectly controlled impulse from the door widening on the intruder, she retreated until the wall held her.

"Freddy?" she gasped. "What are you doing here? How did you get in? Before—this is out of the question." "It's all right, Bella. Weedn't be afraid. Randall's out of the way. He won't bother us tonight." "Then you know about Mrs. Hanson?" she asked. He nodded sagely. "I know a lot." "You can't stay here," she said. "Go." "You can't stay here," she said. "Go." That's the scheme been in the back of my head all along. We'll show a clean pair of heels. Time something definite happened. Bella—you know—how I love you! A slight impediment, unfamiliar to the startled woman, made itself noticeable in his voice. His control was eluded. Already his true condition disclosed itself. Fear, as powerful as that which had greeted his stealthy approach returned to her eyes. "You know I won't come with you, Freddy. Perhaps later things will be arranged. John and I had a talk tonight."

found out things you won't get from any papers. Randall and Treving met at their club last night. Seems Randall had overheard some of this conversation. I've had a few of the high-hat crowd down here today, and one of the hall boys who heard what went on between Randall and Treving. Randall warned Treving away with threats. Treving lost his head and offered to bet he'd spent last evening with Mrs. Randall.

"Good Lord!" Garth exclaimed. "Was he drunk?" "Can't tell," the inspector said. "Anyway, Randall came back with his own conviction. Swore he'd shoot Treving if such a thing came off. Well! Randall found Treving late last night in the lady's dressing-room."

"Pretty bad," Garth agreed, "and I suppose she refuses to open her mouth." "The inspector's small eyes narrowed.

"Wish I knew if she's acting. She's been practically off her head ever since that motor cop found her kneeling over the body, screaming fit to wake the dead. Nothing but hysterics all night and day. Jones reports she's had some nervous trouble—something about the heart. Her cousin, another doctor, is with her." Garth moved towards the door. "I know you'll bring Randall in," the inspector called. "I'll do my best," Garth answered. "It was late in the afternoon when he reached the station near Elmford. He inquired the way from the agent and set off along a road bordered by unlovely suburban dwellings. These soon gave way to fields and hedges which in turn straggled into a miniature forest. Just beyond that the road turned to the left. Garth walked through and up to the secluded house. He glanced at the two automobiles, near each other in the drive. A tired-looking man in plain clothes lounged in the veranda. Another with a languid air paced up and down at the side. They became animated and converged on Garth, anxious to know if

the inspector had got any word of Randall. While he was talking to them Garth first became aware of a mournful undertone, sometimes punctuated by a shrill, despairing note, now smothered in a heavy silence.

"I see, Mrs. Randall," Garth said. "I'd hoped she'd be able to stand a little talk by this time."

"One of the detectives handed him a key. 'Room's locked. This lets in from the corridor. Key to her bedroom door's in the lock.' Garth entered the hall. Randall's hat lay as the inspector had described it. Its gilt initials stared up at Garth with an odd air of appeal. He saw Treving's coat and hat—another tragic excitation for the doctor if he had chanced to notice them—on a chair by the table. A key, which Garth found fitted the front door, lay at the table's edge. Garth replaced it there and continued up the stairs.

Two books lay on the floor beneath. Half a dozen long-stemmed roses, faded as they were, still splashed color across the carpet of a neutral tint. As his eyes took them in Garth smiled, shamefacedly reminiscent. He started. The formless, agonized cry of a woman arose and seemed to set in violent motion the atmosphere of this tragic chamber.

The cry was repeated. Garth shivered. He had a quick uncomfortable fancy that the woman was making horrid and superhuman efforts to overcome some obstacles to expression. He returned to his scrutiny of the room. Its disordered condition suggested a struggle before Randall had fired the shots and dropped the revolver there at the end of the table.

A circle of no great radius would have enclosed the scattered and faded roses. No—not all. One bud lay farther off nearer the bedroom door. Garth tipped to it, stooped, and picked it up, examining it curiously while he tried to reconstruct from it an active picture of the tragedy. The stem had been broken away, indicating since Treving or Randall had probably worn it, the close and desperate nature of their struggle. For it was not like the roses from the vase. They were of a larger variety and light open, and this lay, he estimated, near the spot where Treving, conquered and killed, had fallen.

As he stooped there, reflecting, contentedly troubled by the impotent sounds from the next room, a ray of late sunlight penetrated the foliage, entered the open window, and gleamed upon a silvery thread apparently in the carpet. In his haste to reach this thread Garth stumbled noisily against a chair, and, as if in response, while he detached the thread from the carpet, a gentle knocking reached him from the bedroom door. A little ashamed of his racket, he thrust the thread in his pocket, arose, and opened the door. A tall man with iron-gray hair entered, closing the door gently behind him. His tone was repressed, but Garth did not miss its annoyance.

"Do you want to kill that woman?" "I see. The chair," Garth said. "When do you think we'll be able to question her?" "God knows! If this keeps up, she's in a bad way. Do you suppose I waste my time here otherwise? I tell you quiet is essential."

"By the way, doctor, since you're Mrs. Randall's cousin, you must have known the doctor pretty well." "Yes, yes, very well." "Did you ever notice—was he in the habit of wearing a flower in his button-hole?"

The other glanced at him suspiciously. "I never saw him with one. He was a very masculine type—no affectations."

Garth flushed. "And Mr. Treving?" he asked. "Did he?"

"What? Wear a flower? I'm sure I don't know. Never noticed. But I think it likely enough."

"Thank you, doctor. There'll be no more noise here tonight. I'm sorry about the chair. I'd rather you didn't say anything about those questions."

Garth went downstairs. He paused in the hall long enough to take the latchkey from the table and slip it in his pocket. Then he walked to the back of the house where the servant were collected in an uneasy group. There was a chauffeur, he found, a butler, a cook, and a maid. Another maid, they told him, was with Mrs. Randall. Garth questioned them about last night's wedding and the hour of their return, but they were an incoherent lot, all talking at once, and saying nothing useful. Therefore he returned to the veranda where he stood, trying to put himself in Randall's place, casting about for his likely course when he had sensibly decided not to use his automobile.

The sun had set. The dusk had already rendered objects at a distance indistinct. Garth started. He stared at a patch of shrubbery on the hillside to the right. Certainly something had moved there. It occurred to him that to a man in the shrubbery the three forms under the veranda roof would be in his light invisible.

Without speaking to the others he walked to the end of the veranda and dropped over the rail. Aiding the friendly dusk by keeping behind trees and bushes as far as possible, he approached the patch of shrubbery. At a moment there was no question. The foliage did not wholly conceal the figure of a man. The man appeared to listen. Garth's hand tightened on his revolver. The description fitted, that was scarcely necessary, for on this cold evening the man was hatless.

Garth sprang up and, his revolver ready, faced the man. "Dr. Randall! I've plenty of help near."

Randall stepped back. "And what about Treving?" he asked in a husky voice. Garth watched him warily. "I'm sorry," he answered, "but I've got to take you for his murder."



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