

# THE GRAY MASK III.—THE PHANTOM ARMY By Wadsworth Camp

ONE fall morning Garth paused on the threshold of the inspector's office, and, surprised and curious, glanced quickly within. It was not so much that Nora sat by the window, clothed in her habitual dress, knowing his interest quickened by her fact that she knitted deftly on some heavy, gray garment. Rather his concern centered on the inspector who had left his desk and whose corpulent, lethargic figure moved about the room with an exceptional and eccentric animation. To ease the perceptible strain Garth spoke to Nora.

"Seems to me you knit no matter where you are."

"When one knits for the hospital," she answered, "any place will do. I had hoped my example might quiet and look at him. What a welcome! I'm afraid, Jim, he has something disagreeable for you."

The inspector paused and sat on the edge of his desk.

"Maybe so. Make no mistake," he rumbled. "I don't like working through the dark, so I don't like to ask anybody else to do it. I've got to, though. Cheer up. Go more than a random guest would."

He raised his paper cutter and jabbed at the desk with a massive penulane.

"Ever since I got down this morning," he went on, "I've been hounded by telegrams and long-distance calls. Well? Do you want a holiday? It's apt to be a hell of a holiday. Excuse me, Nora."

"I see," Garth said. "Something out of town."

"That's the rumpus," he answered, and Garth saw that his eyes were not quite steady. "Don't know anything about it myself unless they'd like Garth to chase a few spooks. Here's the layout. It's a man who's done me a good many favors. There's no secret—political ones. I'm in his debt, and he's asked me for a good detective, mind you, Garth. That's the queer side, the side I don't like. He insists on his man's showing up as a guest, knowing no more than a random guest would know. Sounds like tommy-rot, but he isn't sure himself there's anything out of the way. He wants you, if you take it up, to live quietly in the house, keeping your eyes peeled. He expects you to put him wise to the trouble or to stake your reputation that there isn't any trouble at all. Are you willing to jump into a chase blindly that way? He'd like the fellow that swung the Hennon job, but if you turned it down cold I couldn't help it, could I?"

"Nonsense, chief," Garth answered. "Never heard of such a thing, but it sounds interesting. I'll take a shot at it."

"Here's his name and address. Catch the ten o'clock from the Grand Central and you'll get up there tonight."

Garth took the slip. Before placing it in his pocket he glanced it over.

"Andrew Alden," he saw. "Leave Boston from North Station on four o'clock train and get off at Deacon's Bay."

"I've heard of Mr. —" Garth began. The inspector's quick, angry shake of the head in Nora's direction brought him to an abrupt pause. He walked to Nora and took her hand.

"Then I won't see you until after my holiday," he said with a smile. "I'll agree with father," he said. "It isn't safe to walk through the dark. Won't you tell me where you're going?"

"I'll leave that for the inspector," he answered. "I have to rush to pick up my things on the way to the train."

When Garth had left, Nora arose and faced her father.

"Why," she asked, "wouldn't you let Jim tell me the man's name and where he came down for this"

morning anyway? No sense in your getting upset. A detective bureau isn't a nursery."

"Politics," she cried. "And Jim's leaving from the Grand Central. If I know his name, he's going to Mr. Alden's at Deacon's Bay. I see why you wouldn't let him tell me."

"Place is all right," the inspector said stubbornly. "You've seen it. You were there with me two summers ago. That's the matter with the place."

"No use trying to pull the wool over my eyes," Nora answered. "It's the loneliest place I've ever seen, and you ought to know I'd remember Mr. Alden's big fur coat and his shoe-shop. I read the papers, father. He's staying up so late this year on account of the enormous war orders he's taken. You know as well as I do that that means real danger for Jim. What did Mr. Alden tell you?"

"I sometimes think, Nora, you'd make a better detective than any of us. Alden's sick and nervous. I guess that's all it amounts to. He's probably scared. Some German sympathizer may take a pot shot at him for filling these contracts. And he's worried about his wife. She won't leave him there alone, and it seems all their servants, except old John, have cleared out."

"You said something to Jim about spooks," Nora prompted.

"Silly talk, Alden says, about the woods back of the house. You remember. There was some kind of a fight there during the Revolution—a lot of men ambushed and massacred. Servants got talking—said they saw things there. Foggy nights."

The inspector lowered his voice to a more serious key.

"The angle I don't like is that Alden's wife was found dead in those woods yesterday morning. Not a mark on him. Coroner, I believe, says apoplexy, but Alden's nervous, and the rest of the help cleared out. Alden and his wife are alone with John. Confound it, Nora, I had to send him somebody."

"But without a word of this?"

"Jim," he said, "can take care of himself if anybody can. Seems to me you're more anxious sure you haven't anything to tell me about you and him?"

"I've nothing to tell you, father," she answered. "Nothing new. I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. I only know I've been through one such experience, and if anything happened to Jim that I could help, I'd never forgive myself."

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The night had gathered swiftly behind a curtain of rain. The last streak of gray had long faded when Garth's car drew up at Deacon's Bay station—a small building with a shed like an exaggerated collar about its throat. At this hour there was no operator on duty. Garth saw a horse and carriage at the rear. He walked to it.

"Could you drive me to Mr. Andrew Alden's place?" he asked.

"Probably you're the party I'm looking for," the driver answered. "You're Mr. Garth from New York, step in."

Without warning, through an open space, Garth saw a flame spring upward, tearing the mist and splashing about the car. He started, and a sharp "What's that?" he asked sharply.

"Mr. Alden's furnaces," he answered. Garth stirred.

"See, you. Steel. And now it works right and day?"

"On war orders," the native answered. "Now you wouldn't think we'd ever have got in the war, would you? That's what the town—scared about it. To take care of the men—more'n fifteen hundred of them."

"None of my business," the man went on, "but it's funny Mr. Alden's having come from Boston. He's a scoundrel."

"Maybe you'll tell me why," he encouraged.

"Because," the driver answered, "although Mr. Alden stands to make a pile of money by paying for it in some ways. You didn't hear about his yacht?"

Garth shook his head.

"Maybe some of these rough workmen he's got from the city, and maybe somebody wanted to pay him out. Took it out of his boathouse a few nights ago, started on a joy-ride, I suppose, and ran it on the rocks."

"Much loss?" Garth asked.

"Total, except for the furnishings?"

"Are you one of Mr. Alden's servants?"

The driver's laugh was uncomfortable.

"That's what I meant about his having company. There aren't any servants except the old butler. A woman from the village goes to get breakfast and lunch for them, but she won't stay after dark."

"Why did the servants quit?"

"Mr. Alden's right on the ocean—only house for two miles. You see he owns a big piece of this coast—woods right down to the water. They've all ways told about a lot of soldiers being killed in those woods during the Revolution. All my life I've heard talk about seeing things there. Servants got talking a few days ago—said they saw shadows in grave clothes going through the woods. I laughed at that, too. But I didn't laugh when they told Mr. Alden's wife yesterday morning, dead as a door nail."

Garth whistled.

"Violence?"

"Not a sign. Coroner says apoplexy, but that doesn't convince anybody that doesn't want to be."

"They turned through a gateway, and across a broad lawn, he caught a glimpse of lights, dim, unreal, as one might picture will-o-the-wisps. But the night and the mist could not hide from Garth the size of the house, significant of wealth and a habit of comfort.

In response to his ring he heard a step drag across the floor, but the door was not opened at once. Instead a quavering voice demanded his identity.

With some impatience Garth grasped the knob, and as he heard the carriage retreat towards the town, called out:

"My name is Garth. I'm expected."

"Thank heavens you've come, sir," the old man said.

"How do you know," Garth answered.

"Who is that? If it is Mr. Garth bring him to me at once."

"I'm glad you've come. I—I was afraid you might not make it."

The man wore a dressing gown and slippers. His hair was untidy. From his cadaverous face eyes gleamed as if with a newly-born hope. He put his hands on the chair arms and started to rise, then, with a sigh, he sank back again.

"You'll excuse me," he said. "I've not been myself lately. It is an effort for me to get up, but I am glad to see you, Garth—very glad."

A stifled sound behind Garth caused him to turn swiftly. He was in time to see the distortion of the woman's features increase, to watch the restless tears sparkle in her eyes and fall, which, after she had covered her face, shook her in freeing themselves.

He advanced, at a loss, shocked by this unforeseen breakdown. He took Alden's hand, but the other appeared to have forgotten his presence.

"Don't, Cora," he mumbled. "You mustn't do that any more. We are no longer alone."

Garth glanced from one to the other, answering to the atmosphere of dismay, which moment by moment became more unavowable.

At last Mrs. Alden resumed her control. She faced Garth apologetically.

"It's because I can't get him away,"

she said wistfully. "And he's sick. Any body can see that."

"A week or two more," Alden said, "until the works are running right. Then we'll go back to New York. I've had trouble replacing unsatisfactory workmen, and I can't make the government wait."

"You've a doctor?" Garth asked.

"From the village," Alden answered. "I'm afraid he doesn't understand me."

"Then," Garth said firmly, "I should let the works go to blazes until I'd looked after myself."

"It's nothing—cold, maybe a touch of the gout. I sometimes suffer, and my nerves are a little under. Too much involved here, Mr. Garth. You couldn't afford to take chances with that."

"I'm not so sure about you."

Mrs. Alden approached him timidly.

"You'll forgive our welcome? You'll try to understand? You see we've no servants but old John. Shall I tell him to get you something—a whiskey and soda?"

Garth shook his head.

"I never drink when I'm at work."

He glanced at his watch. Mrs. Alden caught the gesture. She walked to a cabinet and measured her husband's medicine.

"It's time," she said as she gave it to him, "that we all were in bed. Shall I ring for John?"

"I'll ring," Garth answered, "a little later. I should be glad of a word with your husband."

"See here," Garth exploded at last.

"There's no point in your closing your confidence to me. It only makes matters a thousand times more difficult. You afraid. Of what?"

"Don't think," he managed to get out, "that I'm a coward. I'll stay. My contract will be carried through."

"No," Garth answered, "you're not that kind of a coward, but there's some thing else. Don't deny, Mr. Alden, you're more than sick. You're afraid. What is it?"

"A—coward."

The words stumbled out of his mouth.

"But I don't know what it is. You're to tell me, Mr. Garth, if it's anything."

"This rot about the woods and the spirits of dead soldiers?" Garth asked.

Alden stirred. He nodded in the direction of the rear casement windows.

"Just across the lawn," Garth asked sharply.

"You haven't seen?"

"But," Alden said, "the servants—"

"Nonsense, Mr. Alden. That's one of the commonest superstitions the world ever directed hypocritically towards the battlefields where they have died, and in time of war—"

"If there's nothing in it," Alden whispered, "why is it so common? Why did your servants swear they had seen? And the fog? We've had a much fog lately—every night for a week. My man died in the fog."

Garth whistled.

"Could they have mistaken him for you?"

"There were no marks on the body."

"We're talking too much. I—I want you to stay and judge for yourself."

"Why," he asked himself, "won't these people talk? What do they expect me to find in this house?"

So he pressed the electric bell and walked to the hall. He met John there.

"Please show me to my room," he said.

"Mr. Alden's asleep. Perhaps you'd better speak to his wife before you disturb him."

John bowed and let him upstairs.

"Goodnight," she said, opening the door. "My you sleep well. It's a little hard here lately."

Garth closed the door, shrugging his shoulders. Of what a deficiency the threat must be to require such scrupulous handling! "If there is anything," Alden had said. Garth brought his hands together.

"There is something," he muttered, "something as dangerous as the death Alden is manufacturing back there."

He went to bed, but restlessness returned to him. He had lost account of time. He had been, perhaps, on the front of sleep for he sprang upright, he could not be all at once sure what had aroused him. A man's groan he thought. Suddenly, tearing through the dark, came the affirmation—a feminine scream, full of terror, abruptly ended.

He threw on his clothes, grasped his revolver, dashed down the stairs, and burst into the living-room.

"Tell me what's happened," Garth commanded.

The woman's voice was scarcely intelligible to let him sleep here. Just now he groaned. I ran in. Somebody—something had attacked him. I ran in. I—I saw it."

"Where?"

She pointed to the rear window.

"I saw it going out there. It was foggy. It went in the fog. I couldn't—"

Garth sprang to the window. It was, in fact, half open. Before he could get through Mrs. Alden had caught his arm.

"Don't follow. It isn't safe out there."

"I want that man," he said.

She pointed at her husband.

"Look at him. He saw it in the fog"

Mrs. Alden's outstretched hand, he noticed, did not waver.

"What does this mean?" he cried.

"It means," she answered in a tired voice, "that if you read what is on that paper you'll leave me no choice. I shall have to shoot."

Alden whimpered again. The paper fluttered to the floor and rested, white and uncommunicative, beneath the table. His face set. He pointed accusingly towards the rear window.

The gesture was clear to Garth. He knew what it meant before his eyes followed its direction. Before he had seen, he appreciated almost palpably the new presence in the room. At this moment it seemed inevitable to him that the tense group should be joined by a stronger force, the inspiration,

death," he answered. "What are one or two here?"

The voice carried a little expression as the face or the figure, but an accent, which Garth knew, hindered its flow, and defined the situation with a brutal clearness.

He turned at a slipping behind him, a heavy fall. Alden lay on the floor, his hand stretched towards the futility spot of white beneath the table. His wife stumbled across and knelt beside him, restlessly fingering his shoulders.

"Andrew," she cried. "You don't understand. Look at me. You have to understand. I love you. Nothing changes that."

The newcomer moved to her, and, without relaxing his vigilance, grasped her arm.

"There's too much to be done tonight for tears. Keep your watch."

He indicated Garth.

"I'll come back and attend to him later."

She continued to stare at her husband's closed eyes.

"He knows now, but you shan't kill him. I tell you you shan't kill him."

"When the occasion arises you will follow your duty," he said.

He turned to Garth, pointing to the oak door in the rear corner.

"You will go in there."

The flashing recollection of Nora decided Garth. Resistance now, he knew, as he studied the great figure, would mean the end, whereas, if he waited and obeyed, the knife, secreted in his belt, offered a possible escape.

"Wait!" the man snapped.

He thrust the revolver in Mrs. Alden's hand while he ran quickly over Garth's clothing. The thickness of the belt escaped him. He found only the pocket lamp.

"The telephone is disconnected," he said evidently to reassure the woman. "Your husband is too weak to leave the house, and no one will come near it until daylight. We won't cross that bridge before we reach it."

She shuddered.

The other opened the oak door and motioned Garth to enter. He went through, simulating a profound dejection, but actually reaching out again to confidence. For the man would come back to visit him with the silent, undemonstrative violence that had done for the two men in the woods, but Garth would be waiting for him, behind the door, with his knife. Therefore, when the door was locked, he commenced hopefully to examine his prison.

The arrangement, nevertheless, gave him one advantage. A single door to guard removed the threat of a surprise.

In the center of the floor he found a considerable heap of wood, probably the fittings of the place. He scarcely dared pause to examine it. He hurried back to his post at the doorway, removed the knife from his belt, joined it, and tested the point against his finger. He didn't know how long his respite would last. He couldn't hazard a guess as to the nature of the big man's occupation. He could only estimate its importance by the fact that it had prevented the other's dealing summarily with him.

He stiffened at a stealthy movement of the key in the lock. Garth could not doubt that the German was about to enter, to annihilate in his subtle manner an enemy he believed unarmed.

With his left hand he braced himself against the door-frame for the strike, while with his right hand he lifted the knife. The necessity of striking without warning sickened him. He had no choice. There was too much eager help within ear-shot of an alarm.

The door hinges responded to a pressure. The lamp had evidently been extinguished again, for he saw in the uncertain radiance a thing, scarcely defined

as human, prone beyond the threshold.

Unexpectedly a brilliant light flashed in his eyes and went out. Half-blinded he sensed the presence of something on the sill, and he struck outward with all his force. He reached only empty space. The one on the sill had slipped through. From somewhere in the house, Garth heard the patter of hurrying feet.

He fought away the effects of the flash, striving to locate the man who had entered. There beside the map of rubbish knelt a form darker than the where darkness.

He moved noiselessly over. He reached down and grasped the man's shoulder, and, as the shoulder recoiled from his touch, so he recoiled from its presence a woman.

Through his amazement he heard the door close, but he felt sure of himself now. Mrs. Alden was his prisoner—his quarry, if he chose for his own sake, unless, indeed, she had finally reached and come to his aid.

"Get up," he said roughly.

The woman's sign conveyed relief. Something scraped beneath her hand. A tiny flame was born and entered into the base of the rubbish.

Then the woman turned slowly, and in the light of the flame, Garth noted the quality that revealed the presence in his presence of a woman.

Incredulous, he grasped her arm, lifted her to her feet, and stared. The growing flame struck a flash from his knife, drove into his brain a call of realization of the monstrous misadventure which had nearly involved them in an unspeakable disaster.

"Good God, Nora! I nearly—I tried to—"

Her smile grew.

"I didn't know what I should find here. I couldn't afford to take chances."

"But I left you in New York," he went on uncertainly. "How did you come? Why are you here?"

"No time for explanations now," she answered quickly. "We must get out of here."

"The door has been shut," he said. "I'm afraid—locked. Why did you light that fire?"

She ran across, grasped the knob, turned it, and pushed the door open. Her shoulders dropped.

"No use," she whispered. "She must have come in. She won't open now."

Garth hurried to her side.

"I don't understand," he said, "but it's evident we are caught here, and that fire has been fixed—a signal?"

"She nodded.

"Why did you light it?"

"Because," she answered dully, "it had to burn tonight."

The crisis they faced was clear to him.

"Nora! In a minute this room will be a furnace."

He imagined from the excitement still flashing in her eyes that she did not quite realize, but she spoke with out regret and her words carried the shocking fatality of the German's.

"I'm sorry, Jim, but if I had known we would be caught—"

The vapor out her voice. He reached blindly towards her through the smoke.

"Nora."

His heart leaped as she swayed a little. Then he heard the grating of the key in the lock.

Nora turned the knob. He pushed against the door. They stumbled into the next room, breathing deeply the fresh clean air.

Alden's prostrate form lay just within the hall door, the revolver held listlessly in her hand.

Garth caught the meaning of the tableau. He glanced with admiration at the sick man, appreciating the bitter

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Probably, of the mysteries that had posed it, and that worked ahead, he could not doubt, to a graver issue for Alden and himself.

The newcomer glided from the shadows by the window and moved to Mrs. Alden's side—huge, powerful. The cap drawn low over his eyes, and the thick growth about the mouth, robbed his face of expression and gave to his actions a mechanical precision not lightly to be disturbed. He took the revolver from the woman.

"I couldn't," she said. "He hasn't read. It won't be necessary."

"Necessary," the man answered in a voice with a German accent, "but you were right. Not in that way. It leaves too much evidence. As the others went."

"No more death," she cried. "There has been too much death."

"These days the world is full of

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