

The Yellow Letter



by William Johnston

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Illustrations by V. L. Barnes

SYNOPSIS.

Harding Kent calls on Louise Parrish to propose marriage and finds the house in great excitement over the attempted suicide of her sister Katharine. Kent starts an investigation and finds that Hugh Crandall, author for Katharine, who had been forbidden the house by General Parrish, had talked with Katharine over the telephone just before she shot herself. A torn piece of yellow paper is found, on which General Parrish is written with paralysis. Kent discovers that Crandall has left town hurriedly. Andrew Elser, an aged banker, commits suicide about the same time as Katharine attempted her life. A yellow envelope is found in Elser's room. Post Office Inspector Davis, Kent's friend, takes up the case. Kent is convinced that Crandall is at the bottom of the mystery. Katharine's strange outcry puzzles the detectives. Kent and Davis search Crandall's room and find an address. Lock Box 17, Arduway, N. J.

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

I had not looked at it in that light, yet I felt that he was right. There could not be a moment of happiness for the girl I loved until the black shadow that menaced her home and those she loved had been dispelled. Yes, Davis was right. I would go to Arduway that evening. I stopped only long enough to telephone Louise of my intention and to go to my rooms for a bag.

"If you have a revolver you'd better take it with you," said Davis.

"I never owned one in my life," I replied.

"He drew out his own and handed it to me. It was of the hammerless variety, flat and almost square.

"Be careful how you use it," he warned me. "It's a magazine gun and goes off with a very light touch."

"What do you expect me to find in Arduway?" I asked him as a taxicab hurried us to the Hudson tunnel.

"There are two things. First: find out if Hugh Crandall is there, when he arrived and what he has been doing. Probably if he is at the hotel he will be registered under an assumed name. Second: find out who has Lock Box 17. There is a list of box-owners kept in every office, with the names of the references. Find out all you can without arousing suspicion. I'll be out and join you there tomorrow evening. I'll come out on this same train. I'll leave it to you to find a plausible pretext for questioning the postmaster."

Tedious as the trip to Arduway would ordinarily have been, so absorbed was I in puzzling over the mystery I hardly noted the passage of time and was startled to hear the brakeman calling my station. I had learned from the conductor that it was a village of less than two thousand inhabitants and that there was only one hotel, about a block from the station. It proved to be a country hotel of the better sort, doing a thriving business in feeding motor-car folk who passed through and in taking care of traveling-men and farmers' supply agents who visited the neighborhood.

As I signed the register I scanned the names, hoping to see that of Crandall, but it did not appear. Yet registered the night before was a name "Henry Cook" that caught my eye. Something about the writing made it as distinctively that of a city man as his clothes would have distinguished him from the country boy behind the desk.

"Where will I find the post-office?" I asked the clerk. "I want to get a special delivery letter off to-night."

"It's a couple of blocks up Main street," he told me, "but you'd better go in and get supper. The dining-room closes at half-past seven and the post-office stays open until eight."

I took his advice and, after an excellent meal, lighted my cigar and walked in the direction he had indicated. The streets were lighted after a manner by oil lamps at the corners. There was no moon and the villagers for the most part seemed to live in the rear part of their homes. Few of the struggling stores had their windows lighted, so it was with difficulty I read the signs on the buildings I passed, yet I had little trouble finding the post-office. It was a one-story building that stood on a vacant lot in the middle of the block. It evidently had been built by some local politician for the purpose, as it was not quartered in the corner of a cigar or grocery store, as most country offices are. Peering into the darkness I read the sign "Post-Office," and noted with some surprise that the windows were without lights. I drew out my watch and striking a match looked at the time. It was half-past seven. For lack of something better to do I walked round the building. To my amazement when I reached the end away from the street I found the rear door standing wide open. Thinking perhaps that the postmaster might merely have gone to supper, relying on the honesty of his neighbors to leave things undisturbed, I loitered in the vicinity for a full half-hour. At last, growing impatient, I entered the rear door and striking another match looked about me. As far as the uncertain light permitted me to see, the place looked as if the postmaster had

been unexpectedly called away in the midst of his work.

I recalled that in my bag at the hotel was one of those storage battery lights, which happened to be there because I often found it useful in the cabin where I went to shoot ducks. I decided to get this and investigate further. It had begun to rain and there were few people on the street. I returned with my light in a very few minutes and began to explore. I did not greatly fear interruption, for the mail-boxes on the street side served as a screen to shut off the shaft of light by which I worked.

My second inspection convinced me that the postmaster had left in considerable hurry. A pile of mail half-sorted, a stamp drawer left wide open and the books standing in an open safe seemed to bear out this theory. Even the cash-drawer stood open, revealing a few bills and some change.

"If the cash-drawer had been rifled," I said to myself, "I might suspect that the postmaster had been murdered and robbed."

I pushed the cash-drawer shut and heard the automatic lock click on it, and then began a search for the list of box-owners. At the back of each box a slip was pasted with the owner's name. To my great disappointment Box No. 17 was blank. I turned next to the safe and at last found the book in which the accounts of boxes were kept. In this were neatly entered the name of each box-holder and the two references given, for every box except No. 17.

As I stood poring over this book, perplexed by my failure to discover the owner, I became conscious that I was watched. A sixth sense convinced me that some one else was near. Quickly I pressed the button that extinguished my electric lantern. Noiselessly I turned toward the rear door by which I had entered. I caught just a fleeting glimpse of a man's face being hastily withdrawn. Undoubtedly it was the postmaster who had turned and caught me there. Of course he must take me for a burglar. It had been too dark for me to recognize the features of the man and I was certain he could not identify me. I stood motionless for a minute or two, listening intently, but I could not hear even a footstep—nothing but the patter of the rain.

Yet undoubtedly whoever had discovered me had gone to summon assistance. It would never do for me to be caught there. While I felt I was perfectly justified in my mission, it would be hard to make a satisfactory explanation. If I was captured there it certainly would mean an unpleasant night in a vermin-filled shack, perhaps in irons. It might take several days to establish my innocence. I decided to attempt an escape. The sense of having a revolver in my pocket comforted me, though I realized its possession would be most damaging if I should be caught. I moved swiftly to the door and peered out. There was no one in sight.

Thrusting my lantern in my pocket and turning up my collar I made a dash around the corner of the building and looked up and down the street. It was entirely deserted. The thought struck me that the man who had been watching me might still be in hiding on the other side of the building, but I did not stop to investigate. With the best air of unconcern I could assume, I walked, not over-hastily, back to the hotel. There was no one in the office but the clerk behind the desk and I stood there for a moment beside the big old-fashioned stove drying my clothes. The door opened and a tall smooth-shaven chap came in and approached the desk to get his key. As he saw me standing there he gave me a keen glance of scrutiny. I had noticed that he had come from the direction of the post-office and he must have seen that my clothing was rain-soaked. He halted as if about to speak to me, but changed his mind. I heard the clerk say:

"Good night, Mr. Cook," as he vanished up-stairs.

If this was the man who had seen me in the post-office, plainly he was not the postmaster. If not, who was he? What was he doing there?

It was long after midnight before my mystified brain would let me sleep. Every step I had taken seemed only to be leading me deeper and deeper into darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

The Third Suicide.

Something had happened. I awoke the next morning with a start and sat up in bed listening to the strange confusion in the hotel. Instinctively I recognized that the sensation of the unusual that so affected me was something more than the feeling every one experiences on suddenly awaking for the first time in a strange place.

I sprang from the bed and, opening my door, looked out into the hall. I could see nothing, for a turn of the

corridor shut me off from the main hall. From the floor below came the confused murmur of many voices and the sound of men moving about—many men. My first thought was of fire, but there were no cries and there was no smell of smoke. The memory of my experience in the post-office recurred to me. I vaguely wondered if I had been tracked and discovered.

I hastened to dress. If they suspected me of robbing the post-office, the sooner I found out the sooner I could plan some method of action. As I put on my collar I heard footsteps in the corridor, and, countless as I was, I flung open my door. A chambermaid was passing.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Haven't you heard about it?" she asked in wonder.

"Heard about what?"

"The suicide in the hotel—in the room right under yours. They discovered it hours ago. The coroner's just come and is getting ready to hold the inquest."

"Who was he?" I asked. I was thinking it might be Hugh Crandall, dead in some suicide pact with Katharine. A sense of disappointment began to take hold of me. I felt that if it were Crandall my efforts to clear the mystery would be still more futile, but the woman's answer quickly dispelled the thought.

"It wasn't a 'he.' It's a woman."

She hurried on down the corridor and I hastened to finish my dressing, recalling as I did so Davis' belief that there would be other suicides. It seemed absurd that there could be any connection between the suicide of a woman in a country hotel in an obscure New Jersey village and the two suicides the day before in New York, and yet there was at least one link between them. It was Crandall who had telephoned Katharine. Some one had telephoned Elser, too. It was in Crandall's rooms that we had found the address of this place where the third suicide in the series had taken place.

With the triumphant feeling that my friend the inspector finally would have to accept my theory of Crandall's guilt, I hurried down-stairs and forced my way into the room where the coroner had already begun his inquest.

On the bed, covered with a sheet, except for the face, lay the lifeless body of a woman perhaps fifty, the face still distorted from the death agony. A bit of rope attached to the end among the rafters of the room showed that she had hung herself. The woman's outer clothing lay neatly piled on a chair near the bed. This much I had time to notice before the coroner finished selecting his jury. Near the coroner, too, I observed the

she asked for a room for the night—a cheap room. She seemed so feeble I gave her this room on the ground floor, No. 4, and only charged her seventy-five cents for it, though it's a dollar room, or a dollar and a half for bridal couples. She paid for it for one night and right after supper she went into it and stayed there. Yesterday morning after breakfast she went out somewhere and was gone maybe an hour or an hour and a half. I didn't see her when she came in but I heard—

"Mahon Williams," said the coroner severely, "you ought to know enough about the law to understand that what you heard ain't evidence. Tell only them things you know of your own knowledge."

"All I know," said Williams, perceptibly miffed, "is that she come out along about three in the afternoon and paid another seventy-five cents, saying she wanted the room another night. That's all I seen of her."

"Can I ask a question?" said one of the jurors, all of whom were townsmen of the class usually to be found around the hotel bar-room.

"If it is a proper question," said the coroner judiciously.

"Where did she go when she went out?"

"The question is a proper one, if the witness can answer it of his own knowledge," the coroner ruled.

"If I knowed I'd told already," said the hotel keeper.

One or two of the other jurors asked questions, prompted plainly more by curiosity than by intelligent effort to ascertain the facts; but it was plain that Mr. Williams had revealed all that he knew, and he was dismissed.

Doctor Allen, who had been sent for as soon as the suicide was discovered, gave it as his opinion that the woman had hung herself early the evening before, as nearly as he could judge about five o'clock.

"Who was it found the body?" the coroner asked.

"Mary Evans, the chambermaid," the constable volunteered. "Here she is, right here."

The coroner proceeded to examine her.

Much embarrassed by the prominence into which she found herself thrust, but manifestly enjoying the unusual situation, the girl told how, early in the morning, as soon as she began her work, she had gone to the room.

"I didn't know there was anyone in No. 4," she explained. "I knew the woman had taken it for just one night and I hadn't bothered making it up the day before. None of the other roomers was up yet and I thought I might just as well get No. 4 off my mind. I knocked like I always do and getting

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I Stood Motionless for a Minute or Two, Listening Intently.

man whom the clerk had called Cook. I thought he gave a quick glance in my direction, but I could not be sure. The first witness was called, Mahlon Williams, the proprietor of the hotel.

"Mr. Williams," said the coroner, "do you know this woman?"

"I can't say as I do."

"What was her name?"

"She was registered here in the hotel. The name's on the book. You can see for yourself. I don't know if it 'was her real name or not."

"Mary Jane Teller, Bridgeport, Conn.," was the entry in the hotel register which was produced and submitted for the jurors' inspection.

"Tell us, Mr. Williams, what you know about the deceased."

"Mighty little; nothing at all, in fact. She come here right before last. Got in on the seven-two train from New York, I calculate, from the time of her arrival. She had no baggage, only that little black bag yonder, and

no answer I opened the door right wide all of a sudden. Such a shock as it gave me I never expect to have again in my dying day. There was the poor creature a-hanging there. I let a yell out of me that must have waked the dead, and then I ran and called Mr. Williams."

"Had you seen the deceased on the day previous?"

"Yes, but she wasn't deceased when I saw her."

"Did you have any conversation with her?"

"No more than to pass the time of day with her you might say."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Contrary Justice.

"There is one condition of retribution which goes by contraries."

"What is that?"

"The one in which crooked men find themselves in straightened circumstances."