

# The Yellow Letter



by William Johnston

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## SYNOPSIS.

Harding Kent calls on Louise Farrish 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, suitor for Katharine, who had been forbidden the house by General Farrish, had talked with Katharine over the telephone just before she shot herself. A torn piece of yellow paper is found, at sight of which General Farrish is stricken 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, Ardway, N. J. Kent goes to Ardway to investigate and becomes suspicious of a Henry Cook. A woman commits suicide at the Ardway Hotel. A yellow letter also figures in this case. Kent calls Louise on the long distance telephone and finds that she had just been called by Crandall from the same booth. "Cook" disappears. The Ardway postmaster is missing. Inspector Davis arrives at Ardway and takes up investigation. He discovers that the dead woman is Sarah Sacket of Bridgeport. Louise telephones Kent imploring him to drop the investigation. Kent returns to New York to get an explanation from Louise. He finds the body of a woman in Central Park and more yellow letters. He sees Crandall, whom he recognizes as "Cook," enter the Farrish home. Louise again implores Kent to drop the investigation and refuses to give any explanation. Later Kent sees Crandall and Louise in an automobile. Kent returns to Ardway. Davis announces that he has planned to arrest the missing postmaster and also the master criminal. While seeking the criminals, Kent comes across Louise and Crandall. Pursued by Davis the postmaster jumps off a precipice and is killed. Also Young, the master criminal, is found in a hut in a morphia stupor. Louise tells Kent that she and Crandall had come to get papers from Young which gave him a strange hold over General Farrish. It is shown that Crandall's only interest in the case was to help Katharine recover her father's papers. Young is shackled and bound, with morphia just out of his reach, in an attempt to make him confess and give up the papers. After 48 hours of torture from morphia hunger Young gives up and reveals the blackmail plot.

## CHAPTER XVI.—(Continued.)

As Davis finished reading the letter I took it from his hand and carefully re-read it. There could be no doubt that it was the same in form as the scrap Louise and I had found. As I scanned the lines, the words at the beginning of each, from the seventh on to the thirteenth, were the same as those over which we had racked our brains. The context now made them plain enough, but still I failed to see what deadly import the letter had or what sinister meaning it should drive its recipients to desperation and suicide. Surely on its face it appeared to present the harmless whim of an old man's slightly unbalanced brain. I turned to Davis for an explanation.

"An ingenious letter," Davis was saying. "And they fell for it!"

A look of pride came into the prisoner's face.

"Wasn't it great," he exclaimed. "Why, they ate it up like hot cakes!"

"Just plain blackmail," said the inspector.

"No, indeed—fancy blackmail," said Young indignantly. "They never had it dished up to them quite in this way before. I insist, if I've got to go to jail for it, on at least receiving credit for a new criminal invention."

"I fail to see," I interrupted, "just how the letter was a criminal one or why it should have bothered anyone."

"I'm afraid you will never make a good detective," said the inspector pityingly. "Don't you see how it worked? Young devised this letter. He needed the co-operation of some one in the post office to send it out without arousing suspicion. He tried yellow letters first on General Farrish to test the terrifying effects. Satisfied that his yellow letter plan would bring results, he recalled his acquaintance with Rouser, whom he knew to be weak and easily led. He returned to Ardway—his old home—and found it child's play to enlist Rouser's services. It was part of his general scheme for Rouser to send and receive all the mail through a lock box with a false name. His object in this was to enable him, in case the postal or police authorities got on his trail, to have all the documentary evidence point to Rouser alone. Before his connection with the letters could be established he could make his escape with the money the letters brought in."

"I still don't see," I protested, "how these letters could bring in money. They read exactly the opposite. They promise to give away money."

"That's the cleverest thing about it," the inspector said, and Young's malevolent eyes glistened at this tribute. "Can't you see how it worked? Young and Rouser, from tax lists, bank directories, from telephone books—from a variety of sources—compiled a list of persons employed in positions of trust and began sending out these yellow letters broadcast. If one of these should reach an honest bank employe or cashier, the conspirators figured that he would laugh at it and tear it up. But suppose one of them fell into the hands

of a man who was guilty of peculations of some sort. Suppose, for instance, old Andrew Elser, when his law business had failed him, had begun to speculate with the funds belonging to the boy for whom he was guardian. His speculations are unfortunate. He plunges and loses still more. He becomes desperate. He sees no way of replacing the money he has stolen. It seems certain that his crime will be discovered and that he will be disgraced. He can not sleep nights. His brain, constantly agitated by fear and worry, will not permit him to rest. His judgment, never acute, or he would not have become a thief, becomes more and more unbalanced. Then one day this yellow letter comes. It reads convincingly. It promises immediate aid. It pledges secrecy. At last he sees an honorable way out. He hastens to send a reply to Lock Box No. 17, Ardway, N. J., as directed. Can't you imagine what happens then? Young communicates with him at once. You used the telephone, didn't you?"

"Sure," he said, "the telephone every time. It leaves no records behind it and the Bertillon system can't identify a voice."

"Now," the inspector went on, "what does Young say over the telephone to Elser? Something like this—'You're an old thief. I've got the proof. You are stealing somebody's money. Steal some more and give it to me or I'll tell.' Unfortunately, in old Elser's case there was no more money left to steal, so he killed himself. Am I right, Young?"

Again the prisoner nodded, and again he demanded another dose of morphia. His muscles were again getting beyond his control. As Davis fixed the hypodermic, I asked: "But where does the old maid from Connecticut come in? Surely she wasn't a defaulter?"

"I suspect it was the brother with whom she made her home," said the inspector.

"Damn her," said Young bitterly. "It was she who queered the whole game. We tackled her brother for five hundred and it came so easily we decided to make another try. The weak-kneed old thief, in his terror of us, told his sister all about it. She insisted on coming down here. She saw Rouser and tried to find the sign of the letter. Rouser denied knowing him. She was a wise old creature and pointed out that as postmaster he must know who got the mail. Her suspicion of Rouser scared him stiff. He wanted to give her the money back, but at first I wouldn't hear of it. She was threatening to commit suicide if we didn't. He was so scared that I finally consented to let him square her. I wanted to use him still further and wasn't ready to have him get cold feet. I gave him the money, and he went to the hotel late in the afternoon to see the old girl. He slipped up to her room and found her hanging there. It gave him such a shock that he dashed back to the post office, grabbed his bicycle and hustled out here as fast as he could come, where I was waiting to meet Katharine Farrish."

With difficulty I suppressed an exclamation of astonishment. I could not doubt that he was telling the truth, for his story dovetailed so well with what Louise had told me. Yet it seemed impossible to believe, it surely was preposterous to imagine that General Farrish, wealthy and honorable as he was, could have been a thief. I refused to believe it. I decided to demand an explanation from Young of why he had sought a meeting with Katharine.

"It's too bad Rouser was so easily frightened," Davis was saying sarcastically. "He was so scared that he left behind in the cash drawer five thousand he had just received from Henry Eberle."

"The accursed fool!" screamed Young in a frenzy of rage that he had failed to get his hands on this bit of plunder. "The sneak didn't tell me that. All he said was that Dora Hastings, who was a restaurant cashier, had insisted that it was utterly impossible for her to pay up. The dirty, damned sneak!"

In a fit of madness he cursed and cursed again his dead associate, foul oaths rolling in streams from his parched lips. Anxiously I waited for his fury to subside to ask him about Katharine and Hugh Crandall. It seemed a desecration of her womanhood to mention Katharine's name in the presence of such a man, so as he subsided I merely asked: "But what about Hugh Crandall?"

"Damn him," he cried. "That was another of my mistakes! I knew Crandall in college. When I got the goods on old Farrish I thought I could rely on Crandall to help me to turn the trick. I didn't know he was in love with the daughter. When I told him about it he refused to have anything to do with it and rushed off and squealed to the general. Much thanks he got for it! The haughty old gen-

eral ordered him out of the house and wouldn't let the daughter have anything more to do with him. I tried then to get him in on the scheme, but it was no go. For weeks he kept trying to worm my secret from me. I fired yellow letter after yellow letter at the general, but he kept defying me, and all the while Crandall kept after me to make me give up the papers. I was afraid I'd weaken. There are times the dope gets me and I hardly know what I'm doing, so I vanished. It struck me that if the general wouldn't come across maybe the daughter would. I put it up to Crandall and we arranged a meeting. I was to put the papers in her hands and she was to pay over the money. I slipped up on the first appointment and I guess you must have spoiled the second."

I still was puzzled. What could be the terrible mystery in proud old General Farrish's life that gave this miscreant such a hold on him? It was beyond my imagination to conjecture, so I put the question bluntly to the prisoner.

"Why ask me?" he snarled. "You've got the whole thing—every paper bearing on it in your pocket there."

Quickly I snatched the envelope from my pocket and was about to rip it open. At last I was to know the secret that had brought such unhappiness into the life of Louise. At last the mystery was to be cleared up. But just as my thumb went rudely under the flap, Davis laid a restraining hand on my arm.

"Wait," he said gently. "Would it not be just as well to deliver that envelope to Katharine just as it is? The fewer people know its contents the less unhappiness there will need to be."

Davis was right. I was beginning to think he was always right.

## CHAPTER XVII.

The End of the Mystery.

With one of the conspirators lying in the undertaking shop of Miller-vale and the other safe behind the prison bars in Ardway, the documentary evidence against him in our possession reinforced by his full confession signed and witnessed, Inspector Davis and I that same afternoon hastened back to New York, where, it can be imagined, I lost no time in reaching the Farrish home.

As we waited for the train I had telephoned Louise and she was expecting me. She met me in the lower hall. One glance at my radiant face told her that our mission had been successful and she flung herself into my arms while I rained happy kisses on her lips, her cheeks, her glorious hair. But thoughtful ever of others, even in such a moment of ecstasy, she gently unclasped my arms and whispered: "The papers—did you get them?"

A little cry of joy came from her lips as I handed her the envelope.

"They are all here," she exclaimed with a sigh of relief as she passed them to Crandall.

"Yes," echoed Crandall happily, "they are all here."

"Burn them, Hugh; burn them at once," she demanded.

Crandall, gathering them up with the envelope in which they had been encased, crossed to the grate where a cheerful fire was burning and one by one fed the documents to the flames.

That was three months ago. Louise and I are married now and Katharine and Hugh are on their honeymoon, too, taking a six months' European trip. Though we never mention the mystery of the yellow letters in the presence of our wives, for it recalls too many sad memories unnecessarily, my new brother-in-law and I had a good laugh the night before I married Louise. As I at first suspected him of being one of the conspirators, so it seems he had suspected me. It was he who peered into the post office that night as I was examining the books by the light of my electric lantern. He knew that Young had an associate and was trying to find him.

The mystery of the disappearance of the yellow fragments that had given us the first clue is a mystery no longer. It merely had slipped behind the drawer in which Louise had put it. Aleck Young is serving a well-deserved sentence of fourteen years, as nonchalantly, I presume, as he underwent his trial. So long as prison-keepers can be bribed to keep him supplied with his beloved drug, I doubt if he bothers over his lack of freedom. Sometimes I think his punishment falls far short when I recall all the misery and suffering he caused, yet my new-found happiness has softened my view of life.

As for General Farrish, he died three weeks after Young's arrest. Before the end he regained his faculties sufficiently to understand that the papers that had menaced his peace and reputation had been destroyed. In his last hour he put Katharine's hand into Hugh Crandall's.

What was in the documents that Katharine and Hugh Crandall burned? What was the secret with which Young threatened him for months and months?

I do not know. Louise does not know.

We never discuss it even among ourselves. It is better so. Only Katharine and Hugh Crandall and a poor drug sot in a distant cell know what those papers were. I might conjecture if I cared, and what would be the use? After General Farrish's death it came out that his vast estate had shrunk to almost nothing. Unfortunate investments in his old age had swept away his fortune. He was the custodian of various trust funds. It may be that in a spiteful effort to recoup his losses he had misused some one else's money; and Young



"Burn Them, Hugh; Burn Them at Once!"

"Come," she cried jubilantly, "let's take it to Katharine at once! The sight of it will do more to cure her than all the doctors in the world."

Together we hastened to Katharine's room, where we found her sitting up in bed, much stronger than when I had last seen her, though a nurse was still in attendance. Hugh Crandall was seated in a chair beside the bed. The joy I read in the faces of Katharine and Crandall as Louise handed her sister the envelope was reward enough for all I had gone through since I had set out to solve the mystery.

Frantically Katharine tore open the envelope and inspected three documents it contained.

with his devilish ingenuity, had found it out. Certain it is that while the papers commented widely on the small estate he left, in none of them was there the slightest hint of scandal. Equally certain am I that neither his daughters nor his sons-in-law be-moan the lack of an inheritance. Louise and I, I know, have learned that happiness lies not in wealth and luxury, but in loving service each to the other.

And one thing more.

Both Davis and myself have quietly withdrawn our accounts from the Million bank.

The cashier's name there is Henry Eberle.

[THE END]



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