

"THE FORGOTTEN FLEET MYSTERY"

by Van Wyck Mason

SYNOPSIS

At the request of Geneva Benet, daughter of Captain Benet, a charge of a fleet of obsolete vessels lying at anchor in the Chesapeake, Donald Colby, an ex-soldier, takes the job as watchman, despite the fact that three predecessors have mysteriously disappeared. As Colby, Geneva, and Dutton, another watchman, approach the "Monticello," on which the girl lives with her father, three shots and a scream rent the air. The captain is not aboard. Colby and Mears, watchman of the "Mount Vernon," find him in a cabin of that ship, dying from a bullet wound. Asked who shot him, the captain's eyes turn to the figure of a dead man sprawled on the staircase nearby. Suddenly, a sound issues from the passageway. Mears douses his flashlight. A figure appears and Colby tackles it. A jet of flame spews forth and in its light Colby is stunned to see the features of Geneva. Why was she on the "Mount Vernon" and why had she fired the automatic? The girl claims she thought he was "there." Colby snaps "Don't lie! You knew we were going to search the 'Mount Vernon'."

CHAPTER VII

Somewhat unsteadily, the girl pushed a strand of bobbed chestnut hair from across her eyes and got to her feet and stood looking at Donald Colby's grim figure. "What has happened?" Calmly enough, she switched on a flashlight of her own. Colby stepped aside, watching her closely. "I suppose since you have taken such pains you may as well see."

Once by him she halted and Colby saw her flashlight beam waver and drop until it encountered the gray white visage of Captain Benet—who, forgotten in the turmoil, still slumped, silently dying in the oak paneled passage.

"Oh, my God!" Geneva Benet gasped as people gasp when a bullet strikes them in a vital spot. "Connolly!" The two clad figures sped forward and knelt at the side of the stricken man. "Connolly! Have they hurt you very badly? Say that they haven't."

Connolly, indeed. Colby's features were leaner than ever when he stepped lightly back into the shadows and, poised somewhat like an old time gun singer, studied the shadow ruled grand staircase beyond. Mears, strangely unemotional, kept his light fixed on the oddly assorted couple.

"Talk, please talk!" The girl pleaded in fearful earnestness. "Don't die, for God's sake, don't die. Who shot you—was it Colby?"

At that moment Captain Benet, who apparently had another name as well, must have died, for all at once his body went limp and rolled sidewise, untidy bald head coming gently to rest on the floor beside the horrified girl's knees. It seemed impossible that anybody could turn so pale as Geneva Benet and yet keep their senses.

"You did this," she flung at Colby in jerky, metallic accents, as though to have known—you'd be one of them!

"You're crazy," Colby said, then added, with acid brutality, "He's dead, so quit acting and get up—there's a lot to be done."

The girl raised a face blank save for glittering staring eyes. Colby might have spoken in Chinese for all the effect.

"You—you murdered him!" She shivered as though suddenly stripped bare. "You made a neat job of getting me here," rasped the gaunt figure in the military tunic, "but now that I am here I'm going to run things. Get up!"

Geneva Benet stared emptily at him, then her eyes wandered vaguely to Mears just before she crumpled sidewise.

"She's fainted," Mears grunted. He also said, "Oh!" because he found he was looking down the barrel of Colby's .32. "Hey, what's the idea?"

"Drop that gun. Pronto!" "Who the devil are you, anyhow?" Mears, towering over the straight-backed ex-soldier, snarled and grasped himself.

"Drop that gun!" Staccato as

a machine gun's report came Colby's command.

The watchman's automatic clattered to the hardwood floor. "Okay, wise guy, okay," Mears snapped. "This ain't over yet."

"You gild the lily of obviousness," Colby remarked as he retrieved the other's weapon and then stood dominating the three prostrate figures. More Indian-like than ever, he jerked his head towards the man on the stair top.

"Go over and look at him." The watchman obeyed. "Know him?"

"No," came the sullen reply. "Never laid eyes on the guy." "Are you sure?"

Mears' lips revealed strong and prominent teeth in an unpleasant smile. "Prove that I have, Wise Guy."

"You did this," she flung at Colby in jerky metallic accents.

"How could he have got on board?"

"How would I know? Maybe you got a better idea yourself."

"You're sure you haven't seen him before?"

"No." But an indefinable instinct warned Colby to doubt the denial. "Pick up Miss Benet and take her to her quarters. When you return you'll get your gun back, so both of you better hunt up another. All I want is to stay alive. See?"

Mears relaxed a little. "Okay." "Incidentally, you can tell Dutton I'm holding him responsible for keeping her there," said this remarkable young man. "If he lets her out of his sight I'll beat the eternal trips out of him."

Mears silently gathered Geneva Benet's slight, long-legged figure into his arms and carried her out, with her bright loosened hair swaying over one jerseyed arm.

Had she really fainted or had he successfully thwarted a clever ruse? Colby had no time to ponder the question, irreplaceable seconds were ticking by and a nagging premonition of danger would not leave him.

Out of caution, he darted into the barber shop which opened onto B deck and watched Mears carry his burden across the gangplank to the Monticello. Then, and only then, did Colby wheel and, silent as a leopard on the prowl, dart back to the landing where Geneva Benet's abandoned flashlight still attempted to dispense the gloom.

First he hurriedly ransacked Captain Benet's pockets and in them found a large dagger knife and a watch marked D. Connolly. Also on this interesting old man's person he discovered a blackjack and a handful of .45 caliber bullets. Odd, since his death, the murdered man had shriveled into a creature twice

as old as he had previously seemed. Next he gingerly opened the shirt front and narrowly inspected the two wounds, and as he did so his breath entered with a sharp hiss of surprise. One was ragged, much larger and different in shape from its precise little fellow.

Having completed a hurried inspection, Colby transferred his attention to the corpse of the unknown man. He was middle-aged, tall and thin with stiff iron gray hair and lay clutching a small Luger automatic pistol. A foot or so away a spent cartridge case winked like a tiny evil eye. The dead man wore a neat, gray serge suit which had recently gotten very dirty and marked with occasional streaks of rust. A bullet, planted squarely between the stranger's closed-set blue eyes did not by any means improve

his looks. A small, red-blue hole in the forehead seldom does.

"And now let's see what's on you, my lad," Colby muttered and, after sweeping the surroundings with his flashlight, rolled over the waning corpse.

"So Mears didn't know who this was," he mused, "or said he didn't."

Maintaining a sharp study of the landing and its surroundings, he rummaged hurriedly through the pockets, pocketed the contents and then grazed down into the dead man's sharp, strongly modelled features. It was neither a stupid nor an ugly face, but somehow vaguely sinister just the same. Two old scars, parallel to each other, and a nick off the top of the left ear afforded ideal items for identification.

"Um—must have been a university man," Colby reflected.

Boarding an interesting train of thought, he went quietly back into the dim and spacious smoking room to briefly cast his flashlight about. Hal! The gleam of metal caught his eye. Its origin proved to be a short crowbar—better known as a jimmy—and beside it lay a wood chisel. Had they been brought here to steal some lovely old panel or some handsomely carved mantel; or for what other purpose? It was that other purpose that bothered him.

Though he played his flashlight quickly on the mantelpiece and the paneling, he found nothing wrong, and a row of corpulent nymphs grinned down at him almost derisively. What the devil had been going on? What, for instance, had Mears been doing just prior to the shots?

(To Be Continued)

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Mr. Matthews Stricken

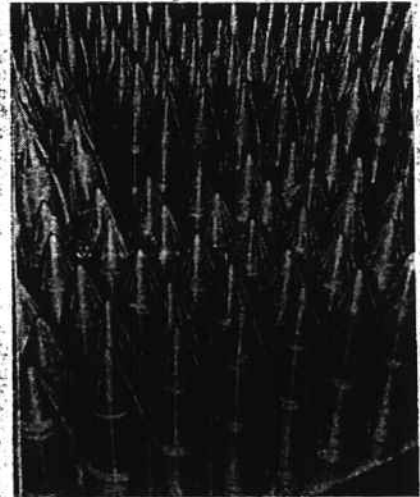
Robert Matthews, 80, died at his home at 706 Macon street here at 2:30 a. m. Saturday following illness of about six weeks. Funeral was held Monday at 4 p. m. at Hargett's chapel with Rev. G. W. Hargett in charge. Burial was in

Maplewood cemetery. Surviving are two sons and four daughters.

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Almeta Walker Is Given Sentence In Prison

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where Haley also lived. The jury was out 35 minutes.

M. B. Hall Released

M. B. Hall, 51, painter, who lived at 224 Mill street, High Point, home of the prosecuting witness, was found not guilty of a charge of attempted criminal assault of an 11-year-old girl.

In the case of W. C. Cooper, of High Point, who had previously

been convicted, of reckless driving, Judge Armstrong imposed a suspended sentence of six months, a fine of \$25 and costs, and ordered Cooper to pay \$8.00 damages to the owner of another car involved in a collision. The bond forfeiture, previously entered when the defendant was late in appearing, was discharged upon payment of the capias costs.

Prayer for judgment was continued to the September 14 term in two other cases, those of Roland Stimpels, High Point white man, and Bill Alford, High Point Negro.

Sathuela, charged with burglary,

pleaded guilty to forcible trespass, while Alford pleaded guilty of reckless driving.

Soldiers Report Stickups

Private Isidore Becker told police of Charlotte, that two Negro men held him up at 2 a. m. Saturday and robbed him of \$8. Private Bronchious Pietrzykwyak reported that about 2:30 a. m. he was held up in the same neighborhood by two Negroes, who robbed him.

Some jelly fish weigh as much as a horse.