

HOW MANY CARDS?

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SYNOPSIS

A would-be thief enters the palace residence of Eugene Christopher Creveling. He runs out again indignantly and into the hands of a detective. He protests he has nothing to do with what's there.

On the floor of a room lies a man in evening clothes, the front of his shirt crimson with blood and by his side a large revolver. The table is laid for tea, with champagne on it still unopened. The house is empty of human beings. Creveling had led a wild life. He associated with the wealthy, and at one time was spoken of as "the million-a-month man." Mrs. Creveling is resolved to have her husband brought to justice. Alexander, partner in business with Creveling and uncle to Mrs. Creveling, objects to her activity and desires to succeed to the estate. The dead man is reported to have quarreled with Douglas Waverly, who had left the house a ragged, shabby, robbing man of some jewels, and then Mrs. Creveling's maid, was arrested, let out on bail and disappeared. Then what became of the jewelry? Mrs. Creveling demands.

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"DON'T know, sir, strike me pink!"

Bollin's tone was unmistakably sincere. "None of us can finger out what happened to it, but we was all glad when the go' bal, though where it come from Gawd knows." It isn't often that a person in service "as friends that can dig up \$10,000."

CHAPTER XI
Birds of Different Feather

LEAVING the Creveling house, McCarty for the second time that day boarded a south-going bus, having ascertained from Rollins that Mr. Nicholas Cutter lived on lower Fifth avenue near Washington square, and as he rode downtown he wondered somewhat grimly if further mystery were to greet him at his destination. Never had he known a case with so many conflicting elements, so many threads which led apparently nowhere, such an intricate tangle of tantalizing suggestions and false clues. Somewhere among them, he knew, lay the solution to the enigma, but it still eluded him. Waverly turned out to be as much of a puzzle as the rest of them had been.

The number given him proved to be that of an old-fashioned, square man-of-brick-and-brownstone situated upon a corner and running back to an unusual depth upon the side street, with a high wall bordering the strip of yard which separated the extension from the house at the rear. McCarty strolled past and examined the extension with curious eyes. It resembled a conservatory, but the walls and dome were formed of thick, opaque, ribbed glass, behind which he fancied he could distinguish a network of strong, projecting wires; surely, if there were plants in there they were of extraordinary value to require such guard, and must be of some species which needed no sunlight.

The shades had been raised at all the windows of the house, but they were masked by heavy lace curtains, behind which some darker material hung in close folds, and no sign of life appeared about the establishment.

McCarty mounted the broad steps which led to the massive front door and sounded with a vigorous hand the bronze knocker, which faced him between the wide panels. Its echo crashed rapidly in his ears like the clang of a jail gate, and promptly the door swung open, revealing an elderly figure in conventional black waistcoat and top hat, who in the rays of the setting sun as though unaccustomed to its light.

"Mr. Nicholas Cutter. Does he live here?" McCarty asked.

"Yes, sir." The doorway was wide but the shrunken, stoop-shouldered figure seemed consciously to fill it as McCarty made a move to step inside.

"I'd like to see him."

"I will see, sir, if he is disengaged."

The servant's tone was gentle but obsequious, but he still blocked the doorway. "What name, sir?"

"Timothy McCarty. Just tell him I'm here on a most important private matter."

"Come in, sir." The man threw the door wider and turning led the way with tottering but surprisingly quick footsteps to a second door at the side of the dim hallway. "I do not know that he will be able to see you, but I will take your message."

"The name," McCarty said dryly. He was accustomed to encountering effrontery, insolence and servility from the domestic staff in the homes of the rich, but the formal dignity of this ancient retainers was new to him.

When the latter had disappeared the ex-groundman glanced wonderingly about him. The entrance hall had been dark that evening in from the glare of the street but had been able to make out only vaguely the outlines of enormous, oddly shaped chairs and settles and chests, the great fireplace and eucalyptus staircase with heavily carved balustrade, but somber as it was he had gained an impression of space and grouping of unostentatious elegance made by luxuriousness of material.

As a boy in the old country he had once been invited together with other village children to a memorable "tea" at the castle which dominated the country and had strayed unbidden into the great hall, the one through which he had just passed would have been equally a corner of it, and yet something in its atmosphere recalled that glimpse of the splendor of long-past feudal days as nothing as in America had ever done and a sensation of awed admiration stole over him.

The little reception room into which he had been ushered seemed on the contrary to be almost bare, with its delicately carved chairs and tables, its picture frames and the enigmatic lacquered cabinet, upon the broad top of which a huge vase of woaded and unopened blue blood in solitary state, bearing a Roldan's comfortably married sister, Nadis, was the only woman whom McCarty admitted to his friendship and had cluttered "narrow" was to him the epitome of cheerful good taste; else he had a few dollars and she would have had that room looking like something that was meant to be lived in, yet it although he could not have told wherein lay the distinction. Had he known that each article contained was well priced, less that some of them like the shoddy-looking case—had proved the palace of emperors long dead, and that he had a history which would have rivaled that of Arabian Nights of the antiquarians he would have been duly impressed, but it would have made no difference in his personal opinion.

The old man nervously closed the door upon him with a certain deliberation of gesture which made him hesitate long to wait and listen, but he had no sooner returned almost immediately to the former room and this time he brought upon the visitor.

"Mr. Cutter has been expecting you. Come this way."

McCarty followed, dumb with astonishment, as the other led him across the hall and ceremoniously opened another door. How could the man, Cutter, have anticipated his coming? Was it sheer bravado or was Cutter informed by the papers of the investigation and the names of those interested, and prepared to give him some facts which would help in the solution of the mystery?

As he passed over the threshold he was aware at first only of a rich, ruby glow falling on rows upon rows of exquisitely tooled books which lined the walls, flapping with gold the magnificent bronze groups that stood here and there in the vast recesses of the room and gleaming softly on warm-hued silken tapestries and mellow, deep-piled rugs into which his own heavy-soled boots sank with what seemed to him an almost profane pressure.

He started when the butler touched his arm and murmured deprecatingly: "Your hat, sir, and relinquish it with the same feeling with which he would have handed over his favorite blackthorn at the entrance to some museum.

Then all at once he was conscious of a tall, distinguished figure advancing toward him with erect, soldierly bearing, and in a moment he was looking at a man with just a hint of amused tolerance running through it exclaimed: "I have been waiting for you, Mr. McCarty. Take this chair and have a cigar; I think you'll find these to your taste."

As though in a daze McCarty felt the grip of a firm but vigorous hand, and found himself in the depths of a great chair with the best cigar he had ever smoked between his teeth and keen, inscrutable gray eyes smiling down at him.

"You're Mr. Nicholas Cutter, sir?" he asked when he could find his voice, and then at the other's nod he added: "You've been waiting for me? I don't get you—"

"Your former colleague, or—competitor, Mr. Wade Terhune, has already paid me a call and he told me that I might expect you shortly." Mr. Cutter dropped abruptly into a chair and stretched out his long, slim legs luxuriously. "I'm quite ready to tell you anything I can about our late friend Eugene Creveling."

No Terhune had been before him and left that ironic warning, knowing that it would be repeated; McCarty stifled a profane observation and his own honest blue eyes traveled in swift appraisal over his companion. He saw a man in the late forties with a dark, lean, almost ascetic face and hair just graying at the temples, a man who bore himself with the cordial but unconsciously aloof air of an aristocrat and yet about whom there appeared to be an alert tenseness as of one habitually on guard. There seemed to McCarty to be something vaguely familiar about that expression; upon whose face had he encountered it before?

"You'll excuse me for intruding on you, sir, but we've hardly any clues to work on and it's only through Mr. Creveling's friends and associates that we can hope to get a line on him. McCarty has there they were trying to find out what notice he could have had for killing himself."

Mr. Cutter's eyebrows went up and he put the tip of his long, slender, tapering fingers together.

"So? The authorities have come to the conclusion that it was suicide? That was not the impression I gathered from Mr. Terhune."

"Mr. Terhune is a private detective, sir; a scientific criminologist, he calls himself, and a wonder he is in some respects with his little recording machine and what he's doing. I'm a special duty on the police force and one of the old school. Suicide the assistant medical examiner names it, and as a suicide I'm investigating the case. McCarty's tone was that of one harnessed to routine, but there was a speculative gleam in his gaze he bestowed upon his host.

"Mr. Cutter shook his head.

"Of course you know business, Mr. McCarty, and your medical expert's diagnosis ought to be conclusive, but isn't there room for doubt? I'm not actually insinuating that some one had shot Mr. Creveling, but have you looked at the case from all sides?"

"If there was room for doubt that it was suicide what else are you thinking of, but murder, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty demanded.

The other shrugged.

"I have formed no opinion personally. I can see no more motive of Mr. Creveling killing himself than I can of any one wishing to take his life, yet the shot of a pistol fired by his hand or that of another, if the authorities do not admit that it is a case of suicide that is one step on the way to its solution."

"You've known Mr. Creveling a long time?"

"Since he left the university, but he was having his fling in the bright lights and my tastes drew me in quite another direction; it was only after his marriage and through a mutual friend that I really came into contact with him and discovered that we had an interest in common which rendered us congenial."

"And that was that interest, Mr. Cutter?" McCarty asked quickly.

"A love of the beautiful in all things; textiles, books, paintings, porcelain, sculpture. It had lain dormant in him but with me it was active; the passion for a lifetime; he had the acquisitive zeal of a collector and I the appreciation of an hereditary possessor, but it was naturally interested in finding a man I had met and I had least thought to discover one. If you were a connoisseur, Mr. McCarty, you would understand what a pleasure it was to me to instruct and advise him in his choice. He made many mistakes but he was learning—he was learning. What a pity!"

"Yes, sir," McCarty agreed gravely. "Who was the mutual friend that brought you together?"

"Mr. Douglas Waverly."

"Him?" McCarty ejaculated. "And is he what you call a connoisseur too?"

Mr. Cutter smiled with evident amusement.

"You have already interviewed him, I see. No, Mr. Waverly is a good sportsman and a capital fellow, but he has no interest in the wasting your valuable time. As I said, I cannot conceive why Mr. Creveling should have killed himself unless—"

"Unless what?" McCarty leaned forward and his teeth clamped upon his cigar.

"I was going to say, unless he had suddenly taken leave of his senses. Mr. Cutter paused, staring intently in his chair. "I would not have suggested it as a possibility, but now that I have permitted myself this intrusion, I must tell you quite frankly that McCarty had seemed to be rather—er—peculiar. Not exactly irrational, but he has let go, lost control of himself over the matter and worked himself up into a state of ungovernable fury because of some small annoyance or difference of opinion at which he would have laughed a year ago."

"Difference of opinion?" McCarty ejaculated. "With whom, Mr. Cutter?"

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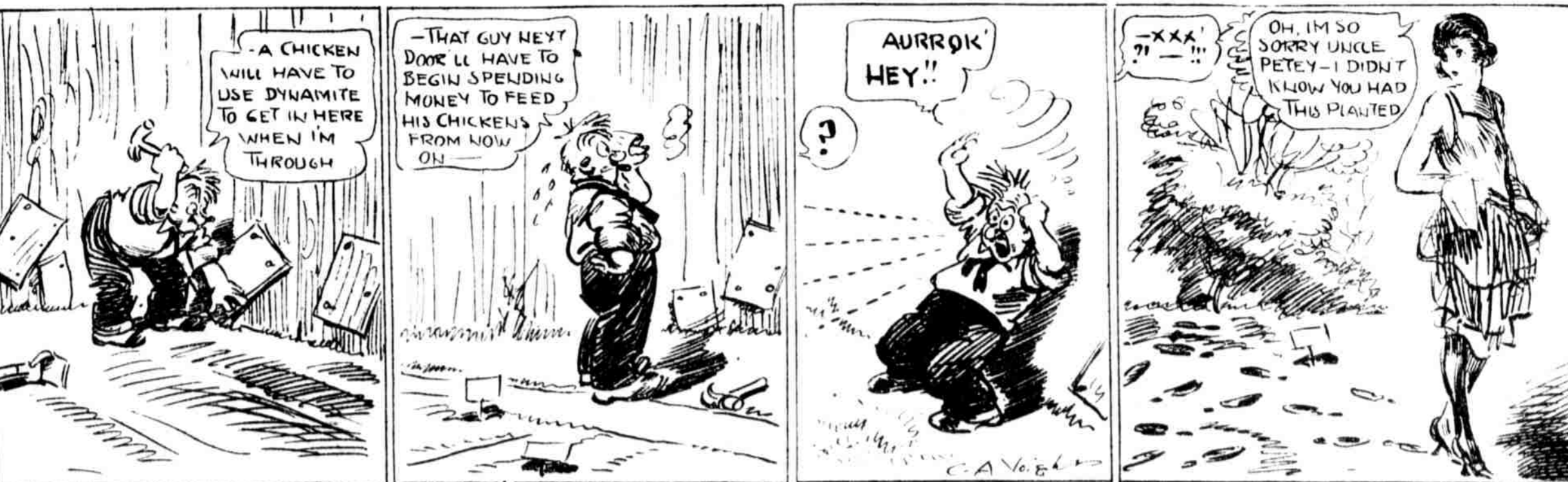
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