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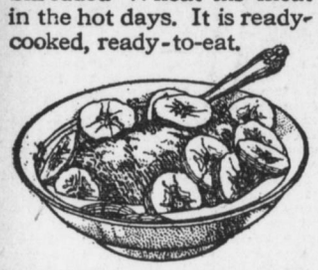

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SILVER SANDALS

A Detective Story of Mystery, Love and Adventure.

By Clinton H. Stagg.

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CHAPTER IV.

The Trail

Sydney Thames had drained his drink gulpingly to hide the nervousness the blind man's words caused as Thornley Colton had followed Manager Carl from the restaurant. There had been but three terse sentences in the minute the problemist had leaned across the table to whisper while the nervous manager waited at the door; yet they put a responsibility on the shoulders of the apple-cheeked secretary that had never been there before.

"That bearded man you noticed is dead," Thornley Colton had said. "It looks like murder. Watch the girl at the next table whose fingers snapped the stem of her wineglass, and see where she goes."

That was all. There had been no time for question nor explanation. The blind man had requested, and there had been no thought in his mind that the secretary would do anything but obey. Nor was there any other idea in the mind of Sydney Thames, whom Colton had picked up twenty-five years before as a bundle of baby clothes on the banks of the English river that had given him the only name he had ever known.

Sydney's nervousness was tinged with a bit of pride. This was the first case in which he had ever been intrusted a responsible part. Always before he had acted merely as a guide, the eyes of the man who had walked in the darkness always. He realized that the problemist had recognized in the presence of the dead man at the table evidence of a crime more complex, more sinister, perhaps, than any he had ever come in contact with before.

Had it been like any of the other cases he had watched the blind man solve while others stood helplessly by, Thames knew that Colton would have traced the girl himself, trusting to his extraordinary powers of mental visualization and elimination to find unaided the end of the tangled thread that led to the center of the maze. Interesting crime puzzles were the blind man's one great pleasure in life, and a peculiar vanity of his nature made him handle every possible end of a case alone.

Sydney Thames, after that first nervous glance toward the bearded man, kept his eye on the girl and her every movement. Her back was toward him, so that he could watch unobserved. Under the broad velvet rim of her Gainsborough hat, more striking because it was the only one in the restaurant, and plainly worn because the girl cared more for becomingness than ephemeral style, Sydney Thames saw the white curve of neck and the shell-pink ear lobes that peeped from beneath the great coils of burnished gold hair. Her evening wrap had fallen from one white shoulder, showing her left arm. The right arm and hand were hidden under the folds of her wrap.

She had pushed back her chair a trifle when the glass had broken and the wine spilled on the cloth. Her waiter had disappeared, and the captain was busy at another table. The girl turned her head impatiently, and Sydney Thames saw her profile; Grecian, the face of a young goddess, as clear cut as a cameo. The blind man's secretary, who defied all women, drew in his breath sharply. She was beautiful, wonderfully beautiful!

What could a girl like that have to do with a murder? Why had Colton watched her? What significant message had the stem of the wineglass given the wonderful brain of the blind man? Sydney Thames did not know. He had no means of knowing. The same question flashed to his mind that had occurred to the waiting captain minutes before. What was she doing in a Broadway restaurant unescorted? Where was her escort? Was he the one Thornley Colton hoped to find by watching the girl? No. The problemist's instructions had been specific. He was interested only in the girl.

The waiting captain finally turned. He saw the broken glass, the stained cloth, and hurried to the table. Sydney saw him begin to remove the pieces of glass. He saw her imperious gesture demanding her check. The captain asked a question, plainly to ascertain the amount of her check, because the waiter who served her had gone. She told him, and paid with a bill from a silver-mesh purse. Without waiting for change or assistance with her wrap, she rose. A shrug of her shoulder and a sweep of a left arm put the wrap into place with no sign of the hidden right arm or hand.

Sydney Thames hurriedly pulled out a bill as he watched the girl start toward the door. Even across the room he could see that her wrap brushed the cloth of her table to keep as far away from the bearded man as the narrow table aisle permitted. He could see, because he was looking for it, a shudder shake her body as she passed. So she knew that the man was dead! How did she know that? Thames understood that Colton, if he had spoken at all, had pitched his voice so low that there was no possibility of any one hearing his words but the manager, who had summoned him to investigate. He could see that the other diners were casting uneasy, apprehensive glances toward the table, and he realized that they knew something was wrong. But there was none of the fear, the evident repulsion that the girl had shown in the brief instant she had passed the table. She knew that the man was dead, and that he had been murdered!

Sydney Thames got his hat and coat and left the main entrance of the hotel a few feet behind the girl. On the sidewalk she stopped and glanced swiftly from right to left. One of the uniformed men Captain McMann had stationed at all entrances of the hotel moved near her as he shooed away a small group of loungers the sight of his blue uniform had attracted. The girl shrank back into a knot of men standing beside the main entrance. A low-toned, leering salutation drove away the momentary panic, and she started for the curb. The cab starter held open the door of a taxi, and she entered. It was her left hand she put out to touch the door.

Sydney Thames' eyes swept the line of waiting taxi's and automobiles, and located Colton's long, black car, with the alert Michael at the wheel. He hurried down along the curb line. The stolid chauffeur looked surprised when he saw Sydney alone; but understanding quickly replaced the surprise when Sydney gave his order:

"Follow that first taxi that is just pulling out."

Expertly Michael swung his car away from the curb. Sydney Thames lay back in the cushions. He had trailed cars many times for the blind man in every section of the city.

Straight down Broadway to Thirty-third the taxi went, then it turned toward Fifth Avenue. Evidently there was no thought of fear of pursuit in the girl's mind, for her car came to a stop before the Thirty-third Street entrance of the Waldorf. A plain trail, thought Sydney, and he was disappointed. Michael made no attempt to stop his machine until he had rounded the corner into the avenue, then he turned in his seat to speak.

"'Tis more than likely she came here to get away from any one follerin' her," observed the wise chauffeur.

"'Tis the best place in the city fer that. Like as not she will go through the lobby an' get another car that'll be waiting in the court at the other side. They have done that before on Mr. Colton and meself."

"All right, Michael." Sydney Thames was perfectly willing to take tips from the more experienced chauffeur.

The car turned the corner, went around Fifth Avenue, and stopped a short distance from Astor Court. Michael swung round in his seat, as though Sydney had given an order, but it was he who spoke: "Sit back in the cushions as though you cared fer nothin'. I will watch fer her in the mirror-scope, which I can do easylike, and widout turnin' me head." He swung the arm of his mirror at the proper angle, and Sydney Thames, appreciating the suggestion, obeyed literally.

It was fully fifteen minutes before the low hum of the gears sounded as the black car moved silently from the curb. Sydney saw that they were following a low-hung, single-seated car of the racing type. The big hat of the firl was unmistakable. The man beside her, driving, was hunched low over his wheel.

Down the avenue to Madison Square, with wise Michael keeping well in the rear, the two cars sped. Then the low-hung machine turned east, turned again, down Third Avenue, under the clank and clatter of the L trains; down past Chatham Square and Chinatown. Then the car they were trailing swung sharply into a diagonal street. Sydney caught a glimpse of a street sign as they passed, and read the name of Roosevelt. The big machine crawled along the narrow, dirty street, more than a block behind the smaller car. Another corner was turned. Another. The streets, narrow, dark, seemed to twist like snakes. It was an absolutely new district to Thames. Warehouses, tenements that defied every article in every building code that ever passed a board of aldermen or legislature, cluttered sidewalks, dirty gutters, lights few and far between, and in the distance the rattle and clang of the L trains and below the gongs of the bridge cars. At a street corner narrower than any of the others, Michael stopped the big car.

"'Tis in the Peck Slip district we are. You had better walk, now. There is nothin' but Roosians down here, and two cars in the street is like to bring them out. The other car will have to go slow, an' you will have no trouble follerin'."

"Thank you, Michael." Sydney stepped to the sidewalk. "Go back to the hotel and get Mr. Colton. I can find my way to the bridge, all right, and I'll take an L train uptown.

"Every one's in bed by this time," laughed Sydney; and, with a wave of his hand, he started down the dark street in the direction the other car had taken. At the corner, he drew back into the shadow of a ramshackle building with scrawly Russian characters on the window and dirty, fly-blown piles of canned goods behind the dusty panes. Michael had stopped just in time. The other machine had halted, and the girl was stepping down to the sidewalk. He saw the driver put his hand on her shoulder, as though he was encouraging her to do something she feared. Suddenly she lifted her head in a pretty, significant gesture, and her left arm went around the driver's neck. Always her left arm, thought Sydney. What was the trouble with the right one? The driver patted her on the shoulder once more, a low-voiced word or two, and the girl started down the street alone. Sydney drew farther back in the shadow as the car backed along the curb to the corner. It turned, and crawled slowly past his hiding place out of the street. He tried to see the driver's face, but it was covered with big, masklike automobile goggles.

Keeping in the shadow of the buildings noiselessly, Sydney slid along in the wake of the girl. In the stillness of the deserted street every sound seemed magnified, intensified. He could hear the pounding of his own heart, and his footsteps sounded, to his highly strung nerves, like the clank of horses' hoofs on cobbles. He could imagine the feelings of the delicate girl as she made her way alone through the street, where every house was a hive of bewhiskered, ill-smelling foreigners, who would come swarming out at the least sign of anything unusual. But she went resolutely ahead, never once turning to look back.

Half-way down the block she walked nearer the houses, and Sydney saw that she was looking for some number or sign. She stopped before one with brownstone steps, a relic of the days when aristocracy had reigned, and powdered, bewigged women and men had walked the rutted dirt road of old New York. But now the building was wedged between a tottery wooden warehouse and a tumble-down structure, outside of which a great, rusty anchor and huge pile of chain proclaimed the owner's business. The girl hesitated a moment, squared her shoulders, and hurried up the steps as though she was afraid her courage would desert her before she reached the top. She put her hand on the door handle and turned it. The door opened creakingly, and she entered.

For several minutes Sydney Thames crouched in the shadows, staring at the house. The unexpectedness of the girl's action had stunned him. He had thought of every possibility but her ready entrance. He had seen fear in her manner as she paused at the bottom of the steps. Yet she had gone into the dark house as though she belonged there. Why should a girl like that be in such a section of the city as such an hour?

Taking advantage of the shadows, he crept nearer the grim-looking house sandwiched between its grimmer-looking mates. There was not a light. He could see the end windows, thick with years' accumulation of dust and dirt. One heavy green shutter hung by a single hinge. An empty house, certainly. Yet the front door had been open and the girl had entered. Fifteen minutes passed, a half hour, three-quarters. The noise of the bridge cars sounded in Sydney's ears. On a street far over, a milk wagon clattered over the uneven street pavings. But the girl did not reappear. Sydney Thames' brain conjured up all sorts of terrible possibilities as he crouched in the darkness of the shadows. Where was the driver of the car who had left her? Why had she shown such fear at the bottom of the steps, then entered the house so boldly and without knocking? What kind of a place was it?

Sydney Thames went forward carefully. Colton had told him to find out where the girl went. He would! The big pile of rusty chain threw a mantle of blackness over the stone steps. He ascended them carefully; but there was no sound, nor a chink of light. He saw a heavy brass knocker on the green-painted, unpaneled door. A battered brass sign, slightly askew, showed outlines dimly in the lesser shadows of the house front. He bent forward to make out the letters in the man would have read, so Sydney darkness, but could not. He put his fingers up to feel the first letter, deeply bitten into the metal. As the blind Thames spelled it out slowly, and when the last letter on the dull brass sign told him the words, his sharp indrawn breath sounded hissingly in the silence. His fingers had read:

SILVER SANDALS,
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The shooting of a heavy bolt behind the wooden door grated on his ears. He heard the first creak of the hinges before he had a chance to move. The door swung open, and, standing before him, terrible, more sinister than ever against the heavy black of the wall hangings, was the woman of the restaurant; the woman whose face was seared with years uncountable. The lighted candle she held over her head accentuated her age with its garish, flickering light. She peered out into the darkness, and the lined face contorted with passion. A queer, parrot-like cry issued from the withered lips, repeated shrilly as he stared dully. She opened the door wider. He wanted to get away, to dash down the steps and run, run, but something seemed to hold him there before her. Again came that curious sound from her lips, eerie, inhuman; but in it was command.

Then Sydney Thames understood. The woman who stood before him with one silver sandal showing under the him of her black satin dress was deaf and dumb — a mute!

(To Be Continued.)

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