SILVER SANDALS

A Detective Story of Mystery, Love and Adventure.

By Clinton H. Stagg.

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(Continued From Yesterday)

CHAPTER XX

Carl's Story

Two persons in the great, vaulted room that had been the study of the strange old man whose life it had cost to prove his theory that he had discovered the Great Mystery, were calm and cool. The others had not yet recovered from the shock caused by the denouement when the cars had come to see the blind man guarding the former manager of the Hotel Beaumonde. One of the two cool persons was Thornley Colton. The other was Manager Carl!

"You've got me right," he said, with only a bit of sullenness in his voice. "I did it. I'd have got by with it, too, if I hadn't been a damn' fool enough to try and play safe by getting you in."

"You are the only man who has ever deceived me by tone inflection," declared the blind man, and in his tone was the compliment the clever criminal always gets from his detectors.

"Thanks, but you see I had several months to practice in it. I figured that that short-tempered attitude because the police were spoiling my business was the only one to use."

"Tell us how you pulled it!" Police Captain McMann blurted the exclamation, and for the first time since he had seen the murderer the look of almost doglike admiration he had been giving the blind man changed.

"Miss Neilton ——" put in Colton sharply.

"I want to hear it all! All!" put in the girl, who sat, white-lipped, with tightly clenched hands, by the side of Silver Sandals. The old woman had her arm around the waist of her neice. One withered old hand held the plump white hand of Ruth. She murmured a low-toned, endearing encouragement, and no one seemed to notice the fact that she talked.

"That's what gave me the first idea." Carl jerked his thumb viciously toward the huddled-up figure of Norman, who was handcuffed to the wrist of the square-jawed detective. "I used to know him when he was a real hotel manager and not quite as crooked as Doyers Street. About six months ago he came and told me he wanted a position as assistant manager. I was going to kick him out, but he told me why he wanted it. He told me of the old man and his — idea. I thought he was kidding. I didn't think there were people like that. But I found that what he said was true. He knew that the old man had money, a million at least, somewhere here. He knew how it was going when he died, too. Been around here a lot, I guess."

He paused to glance inquiringly around. Colton nodded.

Carl continued: "Somehow Norman knew how in the hole I was. He knew that Wall Street had been getting me strong. Bracken was off on his yacht all the time, and I was the whole works around the hotel. In the last year or so I knew it couldn't go on. The boy was taming down, and I knew it wouldn't be very long before he took a hand in the Beaumonde. And I was a couple of hundred thousand into Bracken.

"This was an absolutely safe way to get it back with a lot more. I gave Norman the job, and never let any one suspect that we were working together. You never knew that?" he asked of Bracken.

"No." The negative came hoarsely. "I offered him five thousand dollars to do his part. He knew the father of my wife. He knew there was nothing but the whim of a strange old man to be respected. I thought he had secured the position on his merits."

"You haven't been around New York much," declared Carl dryly. "Well, Norman knew the whole stunt. We knew the day the old man had figured he was going to die. We knew the minute he wanted to be led into the diningroom. I don't suppose there ever was a murder that was figured out like that. Six months ago I fixed the door to have everything ready. I got the new cabaret act that would make people sit up and take notice and forget everything else that was going on at the minute the old man and the woman were to get into the diningroom. I let two of the captains go, through Norman, of course, so that the one would be too busy to keep near the table all the time. Of course Bracken thought Norman had fixed it for his part. But I did that, too. I was grinning almost when he came to plead for the private diningroom, but I solemnly let him have it.

"The old man came in the afternoon with Bracken. Norman slid them up to the suite without any one getting wise. Bracken left him right away, and Norman told the old man that he'd better wear gloves so that his hands wouldn't get dusty from the unused furniture. He put 'em on without a question. We didn't want any finger prints around. We'd had months to figure that end of it, too. I had it fixed so that I could watch him in the room. We knew that he had the paper with the hiding place of his money or jewels on, because Norman knew that the woman was to get it before she took him to the diningroom.

"He took it out and started to study it. That was the signal for Norman to enter and ask him if he wouldn't like a drink. It was a grim sort of thing, that old man sitting calmly before the table waiting for death that he'd figured was coming at seven o'clock, just because a lot of figures he had gotten from some old stone said so. He'd been sitting there, for hours, without a move. When the time came nearer I suppose he wanted to see that everything was right.

"He took the water and thanked Norman, who was already beginning to show the yellow. There was a good stiff jolt of chloral in it, and if the old man had been at all wise he'd have seen that Norman was shaking like a leaf. I watched him. He took a sip of the water, then suddenly decided that he wanted to write another few words on the funny-looking sheet he had. He took a pen from his pocket, a sort of a fountain stylus, and started to write. Then the chloral got him.

"Norman wanted to steal the thing and get away. But I knew what that meant. It wouldn't be two hours before they got wise. The thing had to be carried out the way he had intended. That made it safe! They couldn't come back because they'd made every plan themselves! The next part wasn't very nice. Norman crawled like a whipped dog. But here was a bunch of money in it for me, and on the other side was the jail that waited when Bracken discovered how I'd run his hotel. Bracken wasn't the kind of a man that'd let up.

"Norman knew about the slashes. The woman was supposed to make them when she came up to take him downstairs. I made 'em, and the killing was done just the way you said!" He jerked his head toward the problemist. "We left him there at the tub, so that when the woman came she'd think he did it himself. I knew her well enough, from people that have been to her and also from the story Norman told me; I knew that she wouldn't think it a bit strange that the old man had taken things into his own hands. She didn't either. Her whole mind was on playing the game the way she had promised. And she did it. But a fool play of mine spoiled it. I thought you'd ball the thing up with your blindness, and that's what got me. Your blindness! I was laughing at you, up my sleeves, until last night when you came to the hotel.

"The thing that we thought was going to get the money for us was a puzzle for fair. We couldn't get the key because we didn't know what it was. I figured on it—I used to be a wonder with puzzles — but could make neither head nor tail of the thing. Then Norman, who was scouting around under cover, found out that a crow was the thing we needed.

"Norman had been taking the waiter that came off Bracken's yacht out every day and getting him full of whisky so that he'd talk. Silver Sandals had him pretty well, but we got a lot of things from him.

"Then you came up and found the words on that table. I began to realize what I was up against then. You found the hair. D'ye know the old man had folded that up in the cryptogram, and it must have fallen out when I took it from his pocket there by the tub? When you found that I didn't know what was going to happen, but I knew it was up to me to get that money quick. Then you found the crow's feather, and said the crow was at your house. I figured the best play in the world to get it. We'd gotten from the waiter where the girl and Silver Sandals were. I called up. The girl wanted to know if it was Phil. I told her yes and gave her the idea for stealing the crow. They were up in the air, too, about the cryptogram. I sent Norman to lay for her. Well" —he laughed grimly—"it was all a game to lead me on, wasn't it? And then I lost the cryptogram."

"I stole it from your pocket," the blind man put in seriously.

"You stole it?" Carl jumped in amazement, and McMann pulled him back.

"Yes. Another thing my blindness enabled me to do. As I said beore, your voice deceived me utterly. Your pulse was absolutely normal when you shook my hand. I can understand this because there was no excitement such a sudden crime would have caused. You had prepared for months, and you thought that nothing could go wrong. I didn't connect you with the case at all, first. My blindness told me the true facts of the thing; that it was the curious idea of a curious man. I didn't think it was murder. It was only with the disappearance and finding of Sydney that I realized something was behind it all besides the mere carrying out of a dead man's wish.

"I supposed Norman had been paid to do his part. Then various things pointed inevitably to the fact that even he must have had your cooperation. Yesterday afternoon I spent several hours in my library, figuring out the case. Some of the time was with the telephone to Wall Street friends. Then I found out how deeply you were in the hole. I realized that you were desperate. But I knew that there wasn't a thing to prove your guilt. You could laugh at me while the three persons who had done nothing but carry out the wishes of John Neilton went to prison or the chair. They had all plotted and planned to make possible your murder of Neilton.

"The only thing to do was make you convict yourself. I knew the crow had some mighty important part. The finding of the feather that the girl had dropped in the house of Silver Sandals when she was excited over getting away proved that there had been a desperate attempt to catch the crow. When the time came I took it to let you know that I had the crow and to make you send some one after it. At the hotel I found the words on the table."

"That told you I had the cryptogram!" put in Carl.

"No." The blind man shook his head. "You told me that.

"I?"

"Yes. You have just said that you tried to figure the thing out. You did that on the desk of your office. It was littered with papers. You didn't bother to push them back, and my wonderfully sensitive finger tips felt the indentations your pencil had made through the paper on which you had written to the loose papers underneath it. My fingers were feeling them as I sat at your desk before we went to the suite upstairs. Of course you had destroyed the paper, but that made no difference to my blindness. It was simple, then, for fingers such as mine to search your pockets at the time I asked you to lead me. I let you know that I was very anxious to have the district attorney locate the missing waiter so that you would have the thing you needed to get me from the house. I pretended to listen in the suite to see if you would try to direct suspicion against Norman, who, I knew, must have been your pal. You did, very cleverly. Then I waited for the girl. Her story proved the correctness of my theory and told me the thing I could get in no other way —the hiding place of Silver Sandals.

"I understood then that both Silver Sandals and Bracken had come to know that Neilton had been murdered. They kept it from the girl. But Bracken had an idea Norman was guilty, and he was trying to find him. Both realized how their hands were tied, and they were powerless because no jury in the land would believe their story. I knew that Bracken must come to the hiding place early this morning because he would want to report and to see the girl. He couldn't have stayed away longer."

"Then I heard Silver Sandals confess!" Bracken exclaimed.

"Yes." The faintest suspicion of smile hovered over Colton's thin lips. "I intended that to bring you into the room. She thought that you had committed the murder!"

"She thought ——" Colton could hear the sudden movement that told him of Bracken's turning to stare at the silent woman whose arm was around the waist of the girl.

"You were supposed to have been with Neilton. Even your wife thought that. Silver Sandals loved Ruth as much as you do. She was willing to sacrifice herself to save you for Ruth."

"I wasn't in the suite except to take him up," said Bracken. "He wouldn't let me stay. But I couldn't go back to the old house. I was afraid to do anything that might get the police on the trail of Ruth. I never"—he hesitated a second, then plunged bravely on—"I never believed that death would come. I expected father would be back at the house when I got through my work. Then when Ruth came ——" He shuddered. The thing was uncanny, dreadful.

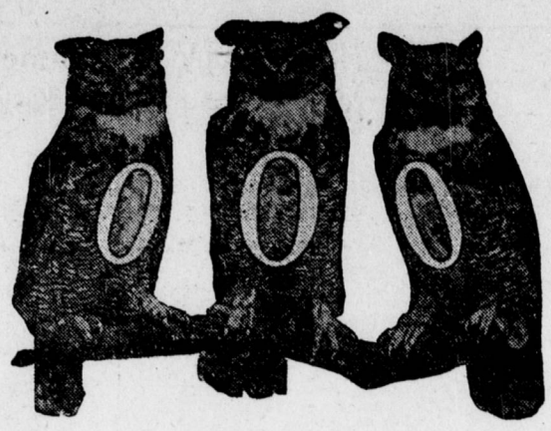
"Then you confessed," reminded the blind man gently.

"I ——"

"Your object was obvious," interrupted the blind man. "Your love or your wife controlled you, too. You wanted to give Silver Sandals time to solve the cryptogram that meant so much. You were willing to go to jail so that she might carry out the wishes of Ruth Neilton's father. I've said once before that only the girl and the woman were dominated by the dead man; you were dominated by love; love for the girl who believed as her father believed."

"And now"—Carl cooly crossed his legs to be more comfortable—"I hope you have the time of your young lives solving the damn' thing. The fool police left and made it easy for us. But the Egyptian disguises were the safe play, and I thought I was playing safe all through. You'll find the two servants in Cairo, by this time. They never stopped running when the cops came. We had to lay around for an hour or so before we could get in."

(To Be Continued.)



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Bringing Up Father

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