

Carter Nicholas

A Woman at Bay: or, A Fiend in Skirts



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Nicholas Carter

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CHAPTER I. THE KING OF THE YEGGMEN

Four men were seated around a camp fire made of old railroad ties, over which a kettle was boiling merrily, where it hung from an improvised crane above the blaze.

Around, on the ground, were scattered a various assortment of tin cans, some of which had been hammered more or less straight to serve for plates, and it was evident from the general appearance of things around the camp that a meal had just been disposed of, and that the four men who had consumed it were now determined to make themselves as comfortable as possible. The kettle that boiled over the fire contained nothing but water – water with which one of the four men had jocularly said he intended to bathe.

These four men were about as rough-looking specimens of humanity as can be imagined. Not one of them had been shaved in so long a time that their faces were covered with a hairy growth which suggested full beards; indeed, their faces looked as if the only shaving they had ever received, or rather the nearest approach to a shave, had been done by a pair of scissors, cropping the hair as closely as possible.

The camp they had made was located just inside the edge of a wood through which a railway had been built, and it was down in a hollow beside a brook, so that the light of their fire was effectually screened from view, save that the glow of it shone fitfully upon the drooping leaves over their heads.

The four men were tramps – hoboes, or yeggmen, of the most pronounced types, if their appearance went for anything at all.

Their conversation was couched entirely in the slang of their order; a talk that is almost unintelligible to outsiders.

But, strangely enough, the four men were not hoboes at all; neither were they yeggmen; and the lingo they talked so glibly among themselves, although perfect in its enunciation, and in the words that were used, was entirely assumed.

For those four men were Nick Carter, the New York detective, and his three assistants, Chick, Patsy, and Ten-Ichi, a Japanese.

The president of the E. & S. W. R. R. Co. had sent for Nick Carter a week before this particular evening, and as soon as he and the detective were alone together in the president's private room, he had opened the conversation abruptly with this question:

"Carter, have you ever happened to hear of a character known as Hobo Harry, the Hobo King?"

"I have," replied the detective. "I have heard about him in a vague sort of way. I have no particular information about him, if that is what you mean."

"No; I merely wished to know if you were aware that there is such a character."

"Yes. I have heard of the fellow."

"Do you know what he is?"

"A yeggman, isn't he?"

"He is the king of all the yeggmen. He is the master mind, the controlling spirit of all the outlawry and lawlessness that goes on from one end of our big railroad system to the other. Hobo Harry costs us, in round numbers, anywhere from three to ten thousand dollars a month."

"Really?" asked the detective, smiling.

"Yes – really. This is no joke. There isn't a bit of thievery, however petty it may be, or a scheme of robbery, however grand and great, which they do not turn their hands to under the guidance of Hobo Harry – and we have about got to the end of our patience."

"I suppose," said Nick, "that all this means that you want me to find Hobo Harry for you. Is that the idea?"

"That is precisely the idea. Do you suppose you can do it?"

"I can, at least, make the effort."

"I should tell you one thing before you become too sanguine."

"Well, what is it?"

"Hobo Harry is largely a mystery. There are those – detectives, I mean – who insist that he does not exist at all, save in imagination."

Nick nodded.

"They say that he is only a figurehead; that he is only a name; that he is in reality an imperceptible, intangible idol, whom hoboos worship, and to whom they refer as their common leader, while, in reality, there is no real leader at all."

"It is possible that they are correct in that idea," said the detective slowly.

"It is possible, but it is not likely. There is too much system about their operations. I am at the head of a great system, and I know how such things are done. I am confident that the operations of these thieves – these yeggmen – could not have been carried on so successfully, and so systematically, without a head – a chief; and so I, for one, believe thoroughly in the existence of Hobo Harry."

"Well?" asked the detective. "What does all this lead to?"

"I am coming to that. I have had every railroad detective in my employ searching for Hobo Harry for months – I might say for almost a year, and without success. I have employed two of the largest and best – so called – detective agencies in the country to assist me. The result has in every case been the same."

"What were the results?"

"There have been any number of hoboos and yeggmen arrested; many of them have been sent to prison; some of them have gone up for long terms; we have proved the cases of robberies against them often enough – but the point is, that the robberies have gone merrily on afterward, just the same."

"Go on," said the detective, nodding his head.

"Eight separate times we have had, as we supposed, Hobo Harry himself in our clutches. Each of those eight separate times the prisoner who was supposed to be Hobo Harry has confessed that he was that individual, and –"

"And so you have arrested eight Hobo Harrys, eh?"

"That is about the size of it. But the point is –"

"The point is that not one of the eight was really Hobo Harry."

"Exactly."

"Very good. Go ahead with your story."

"In each case, after the arrest, as we supposed, of Hobo Harry himself, the robberies and thefts along the line have received an impetus; they have increased in number, and in volume – and also in seriousness. These yeggmen do not confine themselves to breaking into freight cars and stations along the line of the road. They burglarize post offices, and even country banks. They pillage houses. They turn their hands and their talents to anything and everything where there is hope of reward for them. The thing has got beyond endurance."

"Well?"

"We want you, Carter, to find Hobo Harry himself – if you can."

"Well?"

"The matter was discussed thoroughly at a meeting of our board of directors yesterday, and it was determined at that meeting that if you could find Hobo Harry and arrest him, and, having arrested him, could convict him and send him to prison, and, having done that, could prove to our entire satisfaction that the man is Hobo Harry, your reward will be fifty thousand dollars, spot cash. Only, you must understand, we must be certain that your man is the real article."

"Hobo Harry, the King of the Beggars, eh?"

"Yes. Beggars, you know, is supposed to be the name of their organization."

The detective nodded.

"Will you take the case, Carter?"

"I suppose so – if there isn't a time limit set upon it."

"You may take your own time; that is, of course, if it is not too long."

"It will require some time to do the thing thoroughly."

"I suppose so. Well, have it your own way; only succeed. That is all the railroad people desire – success."

"I will get your man; only I won't promise to do it in a day, or a week, or a month. I won't set a time."

"All right. You shall be your own master in the case."

"I will have to be that – absolutely. After I leave this office, when my interview with you is finished, you will not see me again until I have got Hobo Harry in my clutches. You will not communicate with me, or attempt to do so, and I will not communicate with you."

"That is a little hard, isn't it, Carter? We would like to know, from time to time, how you are getting on, and what you are doing."

"That is precisely what you will not do."

"All right. Have it your own way. But what about the other men that are now on the case, Carter?"

"Leave them on it. Add more of them. Appear to increase your vigilance in other quarters. If there are fifty detectives on the case now, add fifty more if you wish. I would prefer that you should do so rather than not. The more the better."

"But suppose that one of them should nab the real Hobo Harry while you are seeking him. You would lose the reward."

"I will take my chances about that. The point is that I must work absolutely independent of all others who are on the case, and that nobody outside of yourself and the board of directors of your company must know that my services have been called into the matter. Will you agree to that?"

"Certainly."

"Increase your vigilance on every side, if you can. If you do so, you will assist me."

"I suppose," said the president slowly, "that it is your plan to become a yeggman yourself, in pursuing this case."

"It does not matter how I may accomplish it, does it?"

"No; I was merely going to say that that very thing has been tried four separate times; once with more or less success. But I ought to warn you that two of the four who attempted it lost their lives; a third is a cripple for life, minus a leg; and only the fourth, who ended by arresting the wrong man, after all, had any degree of success. And now he is frightened almost into imbecility, for his life has been sworn away by the yeggmen, and he expects to be murdered every time he goes out alone."

"All the same," said the detective, "that will not deter me."

"You will want money for your expenses, Carter. If you will tell me how much – "

"I will present my bill of expenses along with my demand for the fifty thousand dollars reward," the detective interrupted quietly.

By more closely questioning the president of the railroad, Nick learned that the depredations and robberies committed by Hobo Harry's gang had been remarkable in their extent and thoroughness; and that every effort to break up the gang had been in vain.

Whenever one of the yeggmen was arrested and sent to prison, two new ones, even more proficient in their thievery, seemed ready to spring up in his place; and so the thing had gone on and on until the people who had been robbed so often became desperate.

And then it was determined to call Nick Carter into the case.

Of Hobo Harry himself, nothing whatever was known beyond the fact that there was such a character, and that he was the head and front of the hobo gang – their chief, to whom absolute and implicit obedience was accorded. His power over them seemed absolute.

Whether it was because of fear of him, or for love of him, it was, nevertheless, true that not one of the fraternity of hoboes who had been arrested could be prevailed upon to betray the master. Neither threats nor offers of bribery had any effect upon them.

Hobo Harry remained as entirely in the dark as ever; and even in the cases of the eight men to whom the president of the railroad had referred as having confessed that each of them was Hobo Harry himself – they had each seemed to get a queer sort of enjoyment in posing, even for a time, as their dreaded chief.

As the president explained to Nick, there were many among the detectives who had been detailed upon the case who insisted that there was no such person as Hobo Harry. It was their belief that the name was merely a fictitious one, to which the hoboes, one and all, had agreed to give obedience.

But the president of the railroad did not believe this; neither did the detective. The completeness of the organization of the gang was a sufficient negative to such a statement. To have a perfect organization there must be a chief; a head; a ruling power.

By investigating the case a little further before actually starting out upon it, Nick discovered that the yeggmen had carried their depredations even into whole villages. In one town – Calamont – the place had been literally gutted in a single night.

The yeggmen had descended upon it in such numbers that the inhabitants were terrified, and could only protect themselves by barricading their doors, and remaining with their guns and other weapons in their hands, while they watched the looting of their bank and post office. And there had been other occasions as bad as that one.

Sometimes the yeggmen traveled in small groups; sometimes they worked in twos or threes, but often they went about in large bands which had been known to include as many as fifty or even more.

Had the outrages been confined to one community the inhabitants would have risen in their might and, by organizing vigilance committees, could have driven them out – possibly. But they were not confined to communities at all; they extended all along the line of the railroad, and the descent of the robbers seemed always to have been arranged far ahead – and perfectly planned by a master mind at that.

These descents always happened when it was known that there were large sums of money, either in the banks that were robbed, or when the post offices that were broken open were better provided than usual with cash.

At every place where there was a siding along the line of the railroad, freight cars had been broken open, and denuded of their contents; and this often happened when there was one or more night watchmen on hand for the purpose of preventing that very thing.

But in each case the watchman had been overpowered, and either beaten into insensibility or maimed – and in at least one instance – killed.

And hence it was that the railroad company was willing to pay well for the apprehension of the chief of these marauders.

All of this information Nick Carter gleaned before he formed any definite plans for his campaign.

Roughly speaking, there was a stretch of main line of the railroad over which, or rather along which, the yeggmen seemed to be most active. This principal thoroughfare for their nefarious trade was approximately five hundred miles long; and it was here where the greatest and the most persistent outrages were committed.

There were branches of the line, too, along which they worked; but off the main line the organization seemed to lose some of its power for concentration of force.

After Nick had pieced together all the information that could be gleaned without being actually at the scene of the trouble, he called his three assistants together in consultation with him. For he had determined to make use of all of them in this case. Indeed, that was the only method by which he believed that he could entirely succeed at it.

To them he related the circumstance of his connection with the case, after which he told them all he had been able to learn about it; and in conclusion he said:

"Now, lads, there is only one way by which we can hope to succeed in this undertaking, and that is, we must become hoboes ourselves."

The three nodded almost in unison.

"If we decide to do that," continued the detective, "we must do it thoroughly. We must do as General Grant did when he decided, against the wishes of his generals, to invest Vicksburg – be cut off from his base of supplies; and that is what we must do."

"I don't think I understand exactly what you mean," said Patsy, who was paying close attention; for Patsy liked the plan inconceivably.

"I mean," replied Nick, "that when we start out to become hoboes, we must become so in fact, and not in appearance merely. It is easy enough for any one of us to make ourself up as a tramp, or a hobo, or even a yeggman, and to play the part; but in this case we must do more than that: We must be the part."

"But that 'base of supplies' business – what do you mean by that?" insisted Patsy.

"I mean that when we start out on this case, there will be no returning here until we have lodged Hobo Harry behind the bars. We are going to live as hoboes, and do as hoboes do, carrying out a real robbery or so, on our own hooks, taking care, of course, that one or more of the real article shall know about it."

"And taking care also," interjected Chick, "that we keep track of what we steal, so that it, or its value, may be returned to the owners later on."

"Of course, Chick; that goes without saying. Now, there is another thing."

"What is that?"

"At the present time there are no less than fifty detectives, some from Pinkerton's, and some from other places, engaged upon this case. If we play our parts as we should play them, we are bound to run into some of those chaps sooner or later. If we do that –"

"Well?" asked Patsy.

"We must continue to play our cards to the end, no matter what happens – even to the extent of being arrested, and possibly tried for the offenses that have been committed. If one of us should get caught, he must play his part even then, for the protection of the others who are still on their jobs; for if that one should confess himself a detective, the usefulness of the others would be past."

"That is clear enough," said Ten-Ichi.

"It sure is," said Patsy. "It isn't very pleasant, either. Although it will be some fun to work on the opposite side of the fence for once."

"How do you mean?" asked Ten-Ichi.

"Why, we are always chasing down criminals, aren't we? Now we will have some fun in letting others chase us while we play the criminal. Say, chief?"

"Well?"

"We will have a chance to learn a little about that other side of the fence. We will discover how it feels to be chased, instead of doing the chasing."

"Yes," said the detective; and Patsy turned then to Ten-Ichi.

"I'll make you a bet," he said. "I'll bet you anything you like, on the basis of two to one, that I don't get nabbed while we are on this lay."

"That's a go," smiled Ten-Ichi, "for I think you will be the very first one to go under."

"How much do you want to bet?"

"Never mind the betting part of it, lads," Nick interrupted them. "The point is, that each of you is to do his utmost to carry out his part to the end, no matter what happens. Now, if you please, all step this way. I have a map here that I wish to show you."

He spread the map upon the table, and upon it he showed them the five hundred miles of railway along which they were to work; and presently he put his finger upon the name of a town along the line, and he said:

"Here is a place called Calamont. It is, roughly speaking, two hundred and fifty miles from New York. Some time ago Calamont suffered greatly by the descent of the hoboes upon it. It has not quite recovered from the effects of that time yet, although several months have elapsed since the occurrence. Do you see it, all of you?"

They admitted that they did.

"Right here," he continued, drawing his pencil with which he was pointing a little to the eastward, "is a patch of woods through which the railway runs. There are about twenty acres of woodland there, and the road passes through the centre of it."

They nodded, and he went on:

"To the south of the railroad, through the woods, is a swamp. It is almost an impassable swamp, I am told. I will have more to say about that part of it presently. Understand, do you?"

They did understand.

"To the north of the tracks, through the woodland and beyond it, the country is hilly and almost mountainous. There is a limestone formation there. There are deep ravines and gulches, high cliffs and precipices, and, although I stated in the first place that there is only about twenty acres in the woodland, I meant to say in that particular patch of woods to which I first drew your attention."

"Yes," said Chick.

"As a matter of fact, the country all around this region is wild and unsettled. It is much too rough to settle, and there are woods and forests everywhere. Just beyond these woods, to the northward, the forest is almost unbroken for several miles, save that there is a narrow clearing to separate this particular bit of woods from those beyond it."

"Well?" asked Chick, who was paying close attention.

"To the south of the tracks it is almost the same, save that the country is flat and low. As a matter of fact, the railroad passes across the spur which lies between the rough country to the north and the flat, swampy country to the south.

"I have not been able to gain any very exact information about those swamps, but from the best opinions I can get, I should assume that it is a sort of another Dismal Swamp down there. Men and cattle, horses and sheep have been known to wander in there, and never return. Presumably they were lost in the swamps or –"

"Or else eaten up by the yeggmen," suggested Patsy.

"Precisely. But it is a wild country. Now" – he rested one finger upon the map – "right here at the point where my finger rests, two weeks from to-morrow, at or near the hour of darkness, I will meet each of you. You will find me just north of the track; or, if any of you get there before I do, you will wait there for me, and for the others. Whoever arrives first must build a fire. We part to-night, here, now. You must each leave the house separately, and become lost to the world

– you must each become a hobo in the meantime, in your own particular way. Fix yourselves up as you please, and go where you please – only go separately. And keep your appointment for two weeks from to-morrow. That's all."

CHAPTER II. THE YEGGMEN'S CAMP FIRE

Each of the detective's three assistants understood thoroughly that Nick Carter's reason for directing them to do as he did was that they might each have learned the parts they had to play thoroughly by the time the actual work of it should begin.

And not only that, they would have had two weeks during which to wear off the newness of habit and apparel; and by the time they arrived at the place of meeting, each would have become sufficiently schooled in his part to play it quite naturally.

And there was still another reason which Nick hoped they would take advantage of, although he said nothing about it: That was that they would make acquaintances among such of the ilk as they happened to meet. Such acquaintances might be of value later in the game.

When Chick left the house, about two hours after the interview with Nick, he had his traveling bag in his hand, and he went direct to the railway station, where he took a train for the West – for a city far beyond the line of the road upon which Nick Carter's campaign was to be worked out. It was his intention to start from there.

Ten-Ichi took his departure a little sooner than Chick, and he was dressed as usual, also. Outside the house, on the curb, he stopped for a few moments, and appeared to be thinking; and then he started down the street on foot, and disappeared.

Patsy was the last to go, except the chief himself, who was smilingly watching these departures from an upper window of the house. He had said no more than he did to them purposely, for he was curious to see how each would go about it. He knew that each one of his assistants was entirely proficient in his way, but he also knew that each had a way of his own for doing things.

When Patsy left the house he also hesitated in front of it for a moment; and then he walked rapidly away up the street, and disappeared.

And that was all that Nick cared to see; he wished to feel assured that each had departed on his own hook, and that it was their intention to work singly. He had left the map for them to study in the library after he left them alone together, and he had no doubt that each would be fully competent to find the place of appointment when the time should come.

He was the last to leave the house, of course. There were many directions to give before he finally took his departure. Joseph had to know how to account for his absence from home to those who might inquire too particularly about him; and the absence of the three assistants had to be accounted for also.

Having arranged that, and provided himself with everything which he regarded as needful, he selected one of his own disguises – one that he was fond of, and which will appear more particularly later on, and with that in a small satchel which he expected ultimately to rid himself of, he went out, and away also.

And from that moment we will skip to the time of the opening paragraphs of this story, which was two weeks and one day later – to the time when we behold the camp fire made of railway ties, with the four hoboos grouped around it, having enjoyed their evening meal and now ready to smoke and rest; for if there is anything in the world which a hobo really enjoys, it is rest.

It was only a little bit after dark – and the night was not a dark one at that. Already the moon was shining down upon the world.

But around the immediate vicinity of the camp fire it seemed quite dark by contrast, and the light thrown back by the trunks of the trees rendered the scene a picturesque one.

Nick Carter had purposely been the last one to arrive at the trysting place, if such it may be termed; but he had been a close observer of the arrival of the others, nevertheless; and he

accomplished that by arriving in the vicinity early in the day, and by later climbing among the boughs of one of the trees, from which perch he was enabled to watch the coming of his assistants.

Patsy came first. His eagerness led him to do that, and Nick had expected it; and as the detective watched his youngest assistant he was pleased to see the manner in which he made his approach.

Had Nick Carter, concealed in the boughs of the tree, been an enemy, instead of a friend, he could not have had one suspicion aroused by Patsy's manner.

The young fellow was most disreputable in appearance. His hair, and it was his own, too, he had managed to dye to brick-red hue. His face and his hands were grimy, and there was a considerable growth of beard upon the former. He wore good shoes – just out of a store, they appeared to be, and he carried a string of three other pairs, equally new, in one hand. His coat was much too large for him, and he had turned the sleeves back at the wrists for convenience. His hat had once been a Stetson; it had also quite evidently been a target for a shotgun.

When Nick first spied him he was walking along the track, whistling; but directly opposite the place of meeting he stopped, and, after a moment, he dived quickly over the fence into the woods, and approached with care the place which he finally selected for the fire.

And there he scraped some dried boughs together, made his fire, brought an old tie from the track to aid it, arranged his crane of green sticks, and, from a bundle that he carried slung upon one shoulder, he produced the kettle, a package of meat, some bread, and other articles, with which he began the preparation of his supper.

A little later a second figure appeared so suddenly out of the gathering gloom that neither Patsy, at the fire, nor Nick, in the tree, had any idea of its near approach.

"Hello, pal!" he said gruffly; and Patsy wheeled like lightning, with a gun already half drawn, to face him.

"Hello yourself!" he growled, not too cordially, and eying the newcomer suspiciously. "Who are you lookin' for?"

The other came slowly forward without deigning to reply to this direct question, and without so much as glancing again at Patsy; but he slung his own bundle on the ground, and, after a moment, stalked away in the gathering darkness again.

Presently he returned with another tie, which he dropped near the fire; and then he looked sullenly toward Patsy.

"Share up, or chuck it alone?" he demanded, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets.

"What you got?"

"As much as you have, and as good as you have."

"All right. I'm agreeable. Chuck it down."

Half an hour later, when it was almost dark, a third one appeared.

He was shorter and slimmer than the others, and the best dressed one of the three, although he was disreputable enough in all conscience.

He came noisily over the fence from the track, and the two at the fire could hear him long before he reached them. But they made no move. Anybody who approached them with as much noise as that was not to be dreaded, it appeared.

When he arrived within the circle of the firelight, he stopped and strangely enough began to laugh; and he laughed on, boisterously, amazingly, in fact; he laughed until there were tears in his eyes, and until he had to hold to a sapling near him for support.

"Aw, what's eatin' you?" called out one of the men from the fire. "What you see that's so funny; must be in your own globes. Come along inside if you wants to, and don't stand there awakin' up the dead."

"I ain't got any chuck of my own," he called back to them. "I was laughing to think how near I came to getting it – and didn't."

"Well, there's enough here for three – 'r four, for that matter. Come in and set down, pal."

And it was not until the meal was cooked, and spread out upon all sorts of improvised arrangements, that the fourth member of the party appeared – and he made his arrival in a most surprising manner.

He dropped literally among them, seemingly from the clouds – or the tree – just as they were beginning to eat; and he squatted beside them, and, reaching out without a word, helped himself to a hunk of the toasted meat, which he began to tear viciously with his teeth.

"Nice guy, ain't he?" said Patsy, leering at the one with whom he had agreed to share.

"Looks as if he might have come over in the steerage of a cattle ship, inside a rawhide, don't he?" assented the other, who was Chick. But neither Chick nor Patsy was at all assured that this new arrival was their chief, and they determined to play their parts to the end, or, at least, until they were absolutely certain.

In reality Nick Carter looked like a Sicilian bandit in hard luck. He certainly looked the Italian part of it, all right; but even among his rags there was some display of color, which an Italian is never happy without.

When the other referred to him in this slighting way, he raised his eyes sullenly toward them, and he also released his hold upon the food he was eating long enough to finger the hilt of his knife suggestively; for Nick was aware of the fact that not one of the three was sure of his identity, and he preferred not to make himself known just yet.

"Me understands da Inglis you spik," he muttered, in a sort of growl. "Better hava da care wota you say dees times. I hava da bunch uh banan in da tree ifa you want more chuck. Go getta it – you!"

He drew his knife quickly and leveled the point of it at the one whom the others had already christened 'Laughing Willie'; but Ten-Ichi, nothing daunted by the implied threat, only shrugged his shoulders, and went on eating.

"Go getta da banan, or I slice you up fora de chuck," repeated the supposed Italian, rising slowly from his seat by the fire and advancing toward Ten-Ichi; but he had not taken a step before he found himself looking into the muzzle of a pistol, and Patsy, in his capacity as host over the meal, said sourly:

"Sit ye down, dago, or I'll make a window of your liver. We're three friends enjoying a feast, and you're welcome to part of it if you want it, but if you make any more breaks, out you go – feet first, if you prefer it that way."

The Italian subsided with a grunt, and the meal continued undisturbed until all but Ten-Ichi, who appeared to have been really very hungry, had drawn back from the fire; and then it was that Chick made the remark about his hurrying that was mentioned in the beginning of this story.

But Nick had in the meantime managed to make it known to the others who he was, although he had said no word in reference to it. They each one of them knew that there might still be others concealed in the trees or somewhere near at hand watching them. There was no telling how many pairs of eyes had observed them when they entered the wood. Yeggmen are as cautious and as careful about what they do in the lonely places among their brethren as the cave man used to be in primitive times.

For they prey upon one another, those men, as readily as they prey upon society. Among them it is always merely a question of the survival of the fittest – and the fittest is always the quickest, and the strongest, or the most alert.

It was not likely that they would have this firelight to themselves for a very long time, and they knew it; and, in fact, it was not ten minutes after their meal was finished, and their pipes were alight, before, like shadows, three other men suddenly loomed beside the fire, as if they had sprung out of the ground.

And they stalked forward from three sides at once – came forward as if they owned the woods.

But not one of our four friends, already seated there, made a motion or uttered a word. They smoked stolidly on, but with their eyes alert for anything that might happen.

And then, out of the darkness around them, appeared three more figures, and then two more; and the eight, who had seemed to come together, grouped themselves with their backs to the fire, and gazed sullenly and silently down upon the four they found there.

CHAPTER III. THE "KING'S" LIEUTENANT

The moment was an ominous one, and no one was better aware of the fact than Nick Carter. Everything depended now upon the perfection which his three assistants had attained in the parts they were to play.

The sudden coming of the eight yeggmen, arriving as they had, so closely together, could not be the result of mere chance, and Nick had no doubt that they were in reality members of the very gang he was seeking. For the detective had determined in the beginning that the headquarters of the gang was somewhere in this vicinity. Everything in his first investigations pointed to that. And if their headquarters were located near that wood, or below the track in the swamp, it was certain that they kept outposts stationed where the arrival of newcomers could be reported at once.

Thus the appearance of Nick Carter on the scene, and the coming of the others soon after his arrival, had doubtless been reported, and their actions carefully watched from the very beginning.

The detective was intensely glad now that his own actions, and those of his friends, had been so perfect – that is, perfect in the sense of creating the impression in the mind of a possible observer that they were strangers to one another. He knew perfectly well that if a watch had been kept upon them there could be no doubt in the minds of the watchers that the four men grouped around the fire were unknown to one another.

But here were eight burly men grouped around them, each standing in a position so that he could make himself extremely dangerous on the instant should he choose to do so. And there was no telling how many more might be concealed out there in the darkness of the woods around them.

It is not the fashion among yeggmen to welcome an addition to their party, no matter whether that addition is composed of one or of many. Sullen silence is the rule at first, during which each man studies the others. Suspicion is always the first impulse at such meetings. Their attitudes are exactly that of strange dogs which encounter each other for the first time, and walk round and round, with the hair on their backs raised, and with their tails straight out, every nerve on a tension, and every impulse prepared for mortal combat.

And people who have watched dogs while they go through with these mannerisms know that it requires only a few moments for them to determine whether they will be friends or foes, or if they will only politely tolerate the presence of each other on the scene.

So Nick Carter sat silent, making no movement, save to puff vigorously at the short pipe he was smoking; and so the others of his party did likewise; for the forces of the newcomers were much stronger.

This tableau – if tableau it could be called, continued for five minutes, and then one of the late arrivals cast aside the stub of a cigar he was smoking, and broke the silence.

"Where might you hoboos be from?" he demanded, in an even tone, and without a gesture of any kind.

Nobody made any reply whatever to this question, and after a moment he spoke again.

"Which one of you is the leader of this outfit?" he asked.

Again nobody replied to him; the assistants kept silent because they well knew that their chief would answer if he considered it wise to do so; and Nick remained silent merely because he did not consider that it was yet time to speak.

And now the spokesman of the other party addressed himself directly to Nick Carter, as being, doubtless, the fiercest and most villainous-looking one of the bunch.

"You heard me, didn't you?" he demanded.

"Yes; I heard you," was the calm reply.

"Hello! You can talk United States, can't you?"

"Quite as well as you, if necessary," was the cool response.

"You look like a dago."

"What I look like, and what I am, is none of your business – unless you show some authority for questioning me."

"Ho, ho, ho, ho! Hear him, my coveys! What do you think of that?" And then to Nick again: "What sort of authority do you expect me to show?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders, knocked out the ashes of his pipe, rose slowly to his feet, and stood facing the other calmly, as he responded:

"There is only one kind of authority, signor, in a party like this. You know what that is. I don't know you any more than I know these other guns around here. It may all be a put-up job, for all I know. I don't much care if it is. I am quite willing to fight you all, one at a time, if necessary – and with guns, or knives, or fists, as you please. I come here, and I get into a tree and wait. Why? Because I have been told of this place, and that always there is somebody around here. I thought I would see who the somebody was before somebody saw me. So I get myself into a tree. Pish! And then not only one, but two, and three arrive on the scene; and then eight more come. If you want to know who I am, and are brave enough to fight me, and man enough to lick me – then you'll know. If not – mind your own affairs, and leave me to attend to mine."

It was a long speech, and the others listened in absolute silence to the end of it. But the instant Nick ceased speaking, the man to whom he had addressed his remarks drew back his arm with a sudden motion, and drove his huge fist forward with the quickness of a cat.

Any other person than Nick Carter might have felt the force of that treacherous blow. Even he might have done so had he not been expecting it, and, therefore, been entirely ready for it.

But the bony fist of the man struck only the empty air, for Nick sidestepped in a manner that would have made Jim Corbett, in his palmiest days, green with envy; and the battering-ram flew past his ear harmlessly.

And then the man who had delivered it, before he could recover from the effect of his own effort, found himself seized in a viselike grip, raised from his feet, and hurled backward straight over the fire, and beyond it, so that he sprawled at full length among the bushes.

He leaped to his feet with a curse, and his hand flew to his hip pocket in search of a weapon; but he did not draw it forth again, for he found himself looking into the muzzle of an ugly-looking forty-four.

"Drop it!" Nick ordered sharply. "I didn't hurt you, when I might have done so easily. Are you satisfied?"

The anger of the man seemed to pass as quickly as it had arisen, and he grinned as he slowly resumed his former position beside the fire.

It was quite true that he was not hurt; it was equally true that he knew that this stranger might have hurt him severely had he chosen to do so, and have been entirely excusable for doing it too.

"All right, pard, you pass," he said. "What's your handle?"

"I'm called Dago John by them as know me. What's yours?"

"Hand – The guns call me Handsome, by way of shortening it. Shake?"

"Yes," said Nick; and they clasped hands for an instant. Then Handsome added:

"Who might these gazaboos be?"

"Search me, Handsome," growled Nick, resuming his seat, and beginning to refill his pipe. "If they ain't a part of your outfit, they sure ain't a part of mine."

Handsome wheeled upon Chick then.

"Who are you?" he demanded, "and where are you from?"

"I'm the 'Chicken'; they know me around Chicago, if they don't here. Maybe you've heard of me; but it don't make any difference whether you have or not. I'm the Chicken, all right; and

it's Chick for short." Chick did not so much as move an eyelash while he made this retort; but his questioner was plainly affected.

"The Chicken!" he exclaimed. "The Chicken is dead. We got it straight. Shot by – "

"Shot by a cop, eh? That's the story, and it goes, all right. Only it happens that it wasn't the Chicken as was shot; cause why? The Chicken is here."

"Who was it, then?"

"It was a pal of mine. A likely gun he was, too. I jest changed hats with him when he slid under. The rest of the clothes didn't make no difference. They thought he was the Chicken – and it didn't hurt him any to have 'em think so, while it helped me a lot."

"All right, Chicken," said Handsome, extending his hand a second time. "I know about you. You're all right. Who are these other two?"

"Search me, Handsome. I reckon we're all strangers."

Handsome turned to Ten-Ichi.

"What's your handle, covey?" he growled.

Ten-Ichi's answer was a peal of demoniac laughter; and he laughed on and on interminably, slapping his thighs and flinging his arms around him after the manner of a man who is warming himself, until the faces of the others around him developed broad grins – and until the man who called himself Handsome brought him to with a sudden thrust of his arm which nearly took the breath out of the lad.

"What's eatin' you, you loon?" he demanded.

"I was laughing," replied Ten-Ichi, now as solemn as an owl.

"You don't say so! Were you? What at?"

"You. It is so funny that you should be called Handsome."

Handsome grinned with the others.

"Well," he said. "What's your name? Out with it!"

"I'm Tenstrike – Ten, for short. That's what."

"All right, Ten; you pass. You're harmless, I guess – unless you let out that laugh of yours at the wrong time. I would advise you not to do that. And *you*?" He turned now to Patsy, with a sudden whirl of his body. "You were the first of this bunch to get here. Who are you?"

"Sure," said Patsy, with a slow drawl, "I'm an Irishman, and me name doesn't matter to you. It's enough that they call me Pat. If ye don't happen to like it, sure you can call me Tim, or Mike, or Shamus, or any old thing that suits ye. And what am I here for, is it? Sure, I'm on a still hunt for a man I want to find. Mebby ye're after knowin' him."

"Maybe I am. Who is he?"

"Faith, I wish I knowed that. He calls himself Hobo Harry – that same!"

A dead silence followed upon this unlooked-for announcement. The boldness of it surprised Nick, startled Chick, and frightened Ten-Ichi, lest unpleasant results should come of it. But it was evident that Patsy knew his ground, and had prepared for this very moment, for he was cool and smiling, and he appeared to enjoy hugely the effect that his words had had upon the others.

It was Handsome who finally broke the silence that ensued; and he replied:

"That's a name, Pat – if that's your own handle – which isn't spoken lightly around these parts. What do you want with him?"

"By your l'ave, mister, I'll tell that to him when I find him. In the meantime, if youse be afther mindin' yere own business, it wouldn't hurrt ye any. Ye seem to be making of yerself a sort of highcockalorum elegantarium bosski. If ye tell me that ye know Hobo Harry, an' will take me to him, so's I can tell me story to him, mebby I'll answer ye; but not unless."

Again there was silence; and this time it was Nick who brought it to an end.

"Handsome," he said sharply, "who's this other bunch? What I want to know is, are they wid you?"

"They are," was the quick reply. Then he wheeled quickly to Patsy again, and added:

"Come with me – you – if you want to see the chief. I'll take you to him. The rest of you can wait where you are."

CHAPTER IV. THE OUTLAW'S HOME

A dead silence reigned around that camp fire for several moments after the two departed; but then the seven strangers who were left seated themselves in various attitudes, filled their pipes – or lit the stubs of half-smoked cigars, produced from their pockets; and after that, little by little, conversation was indulged in.

The night was warm and balmy. There was no reason why any of them should seek other shelter than the boughs of the trees which already covered them; but Nick knew from the manner in which Handsome had left them that he expected to return, and that there was some other place near by to which he intended to take them – if the chief should say the word. And he saw now that Patsy, by rare forethought, had prepared for that very emergency.

More than an hour had passed before Handsome made his appearance again; and then he loomed suddenly beside the camp fire, as silently and as stealthily as an Indian. Even Nick Carter, who was on the alert for his approach, did not hear him coming.

"I'll take you now!" he said briefly to Nick. "The others can wait."

Without a word more he turned away again, and Nick, leaping to his feet, followed him in silence through the darkness.

The night was almost black in there among the trees, although the moon was shining above them; but nevertheless Nick had no difficulty in following his guide.

They made directly for the railway tracks, and crossed the fence that intervened; but when they reached the top of the grade, Nick's guide halted and faced him.

"You said you are Dago John," he said slowly. "Who might Dago John be, pard?"

"They call me Dago John because I look like an Italian, I suppose, although I am not one," replied the detective. "But I try to carry out the idea. If you have worked your way through the South at all, maybe you've heard of Sheeny John. It will do as well as Dago John. A name doesn't make much difference."

"It makes a sight of difference here, my friend. What's your lay?"

"Anything that I can turn my hand to – or my brains."

"You have an education?"

"Yes."

"Can you write a good hand?"

"It's my one fault that I can – too good a one."

"Have you looked through the screens?" (Been in prison.)

"Never yet – to stay there. What do you want to know all this for?"

"I've been telling the main guy about you."

"What about me?"

"I told him of your strength, for one thing. There isn't another man in our outfit who could lift me off my feet the way you did it."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"I could have done it as easily if you had been twice the man you are," he said contemptuously.

"There is no doubt of that. I don't bear you any ill will for it, either. Neither does the boss."

"And who may he be, Handsome?"

"Don't you know, Dago John?"

"Maybe I do, and again maybe I don't."

"Didn't you come here looking for him?"

"Maybe so."

"Well, who were you looking for?"

"Maybe the same one that the other fellow was looking for – maybe not."

"That's all right. You can come along, I guess. But I warn you to have a care what you say to him."

"Say to who?"

"To Hobo Harry. He isn't one to be trifled with."

"Say, Handsome, on the level now, *is* there such a person?"

"Sure there is. You'll find that out all right, too, before you are much older. Didn't you come up here to get into the gang? Isn't that what you are here for?"

"Sure thing; but, on the level, I didn't think that I could do it so easy."

Handsome laughed as if he were intensely amused.

"If you think that you are in it now, you are very much mistaken," he said, with a shrug. "We don't take men into the bosom of our family quite as easy as that. But with us there is always room for a good man, and he always has a chance to prove whether he is good or not. That is the sort of chance you are going to get."

"Will you tell me about it?"

"I will if you will agree to teach me that hold by which you threw me over the fire into the bushes a little while ago."

"Sure thing, Handsome. I'll teach you that, and a lot of others as well, if you wish. That is one of the ju-jutsu tricks."

"I've heard about that. It's all right, all right."

"Sure thing. Now, where are we going? Are we to stay here all night, Handsome?"

"Not quite."

"Tell me what is expected of me, then; where we are going?"

"I am to take you to the chief; to Hobo Harry himself, for he happens to be here to-night. It is only once in a while that he is here, too; but it happens that he is to-night. He is to interview you. Otherwise – that is, if he were not here, you would have to hang around on the outside until he showed up to pass upon you in person."

"I see."

"He is the only man in the whole bunch who has a right to do that. I've got to blindfold you after we get across the fence on the swamp side of the tracks."

"All right."

"I suppose you would like to know what you are up against before I take you into the old swamp, wouldn't you?"

"Sure thing, Handsome."

"Well, it's just this: If you don't pass muster with the boss, you'll never come out again. There are deep holes in that swamp, Dago."

"Oh, I don't doubt that; but what do you mean by passing muster?"

"I mean just this, and nothing more: If you are not what you appear to be, and what you say you are, it's a slit across the windpipe for yours; see?"

Nick did see, and he nodded understandingly.

"I reckon I'll pass, all right," he said negligently. "If you are ready, I am."

They descended the embankment, and climbed the fence on the swamp side of the tracks; and then, as soon as they had penetrated a short distance into the wood, Handsome stopped again, and, drawing a huge bandanna from his pocket, proceeded to bind it around the detective's eyes securely.

"Now," he said, "can you do the lockstep?"

"Never tried it," said Nick.

"Sure about that?"

"Never learned – never had to."

"Well, you'll have to learn it now – unless you wish to fall into the swamp. Get up close to me, and take hold of my sides under my arms. Then follow in my footsteps as nearly as you can."

"I say, Handsome, you've got some education yourself."

"Never mind that now. We're not going into pasts just at present."

"All right. Lead the way. I'm ready."

Nick's eyes were so securely bandaged that he had not the least idea where they were going, or where his footsteps tended; but even had he been without the bandage he could hardly have told that, for the deeper they penetrated into the swamp, the darker it became, and only those who were perfectly familiar with the pathway could pass that way in safety in the night.

There were times when Nick's feet slipped from the precarious footing, and he slid into the water up to his knees; and once he went in to his waist; but Handsome was always ready to seize upon him and support him to dry land again at such times.

And their way wound round in a serpentine course. They climbed over fallen and moss-grown logs; they slushed through shallow water; they crawled on their hands and knees under embankments and rocks, and at last, at Handsome's order, they stepped into a boat of some kind which the latter pushed away from the bank with a pole.

After that a long time passed while the boat was propelled steadily onward with the pole, sometimes gliding under trees that hung so close to the water that they were obliged to get flat down inside the scow to avoid them; and they wound around many curves and twists, until at last they stopped, and Handsome removed the bandage from Nick's eyes.

They were beside a high bank, and directly ahead of them, through the trees, the detective could see the lights of many gleaming fires; and he could also discern the shadowy forms of men grouped around them, engaged in different occupations.

"Now, keep your mouth shut, and your eyes and your ears open," was Handsome's warning, as he led the way from the scow, and signed for Nick to follow him. "If anybody speaks to you, don't answer; and when you get in the presence of the chief, answer questions, and don't ask any."

"Right you are, pardy," was Nick's reply; and then he followed his conductor through the trees toward the fire.

They came out presently upon an open glade in which a dozen camp fires were burning. At some of these men were engaged in eating; others were preparing to eat; and still others had finished their meal, and were lying around in various attitudes, smoking. Some were playing cards by the light of the fires. Nick judged, in the rapid estimate he made, that there were in all at least twoscore of men gathered there.

He saw, too, that around this circular glade there were sheds built, and some of these had lights behind the brush or canvas fronts. Two of them had board fronts, and he judged that they were used when the weather was too inclement, or too cold, to remain in the open.

As they passed through the circle of light cast by the fires, many of the men looked up lazily toward them; but beyond one stare, no attention was paid to them; and they passed on into the gloom beyond.

Here they traversed a narrow but well-beaten pathway through the thick growth of alders, and presently came out upon a second glade that was larger than the first; and higher and dryer, too.

But that was not what attracted the detective.

In the very centre of this patch of clearing was a house; or a cottage, it would more properly be called; but it was large, and apparently comfortable. The roof extended down in front of it and over a wide piazza, where Nick could see that two men and a woman were seated.

But directly in front of the piazza, a man – one of the hoboos, without doubt, to judge from his appearance – was pacing regularly up and down, with the precision of a sentinel; and he carried a rifle in the hollow of his arm, which, as soon as Handsome and Nick appeared, he raised and pointed at them, while Nick could hear the click of the lock as he raised the hammer.

Handsome threw up both hands, holding them high over his head, and Nick did the same; and thereupon the gun was lowered, and, still with their hands held high, the two men advanced.

There was not a word spoken; the sentinel resumed his pacing up and down, as if there had been no interruption; and Nick's guide approached the edge of the piazza, still with his hands raised.

One of the men who were seated there rose and stepped forward; then he peered long and earnestly at the two men, and then he said:

"You may advance. Go inside."

And as they crossed the piazza, and stepped inside the house, the woman of the group rose and followed them, closing the door behind her; and Nick Carter wondered if Hobo Harry, the Beggar King, was a woman.

CHAPTER V. NICK'S WONDERFUL STRENGTH

When Nick Carter gazed upon the woman who stood before them, with her hands clasped behind her, he thought that he had never seen another like her. She could not by any stretch of the imagination have been called beautiful; she was too masculine in her appearance for that – that is, the expression of her face, her manner, and the position she assumed were masculine; but the suggestion of it ended there.

She was as tall or taller than the detective, and her complexion was as dark as the hue to which he had stained his own. Her eyes were large, and round, and full, and fierce, and she held her head, with its crown of dead-black hair, as if she were monarch of all she surveyed. And the strangest part of it all was that she did not appear to be more than twenty years old.

With a steady stare she took in every detail of Nick's appearance, from the top of his head to the shoes he wore on his feet; and then she turned slowly to Handsome.

"Whom have we here?" she demanded.

"Dago John, he calls himself," was the reply.

"The man you spoke of?"

"Yes."

"Who is so strong that he could throw you over the fire into the bushes, and who did not harm you when he might have done so, after you had struck at him with your fist?"

"The same."

She turned her attention to Nick then.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Just what you see, missus; no more and no less," replied Nick, speaking boldly, for he deemed that to be the surest way to her favor.

"I see very little; nothing whatever that betokens the strength you are said to possess."

"You can't always tell what's inside of a crib before you crack it," was the reply; and the woman smiled.

"Where do you come from?" she asked.

"I ain't giving out my past history, lady, if it's all the same to you," said Nick coolly; and she frowned. Evidently she did not like this answer.

"What errand brought you to this part of the country, and finally induced you to make your camp in the woods out there?" she asked, smiling again.

"I suppose you want the plain truth, lady?"

"Yes," she replied, in an easy tone; "that is, if you put any value on your life."

"Well, the truth is this: I have heard, here and there, a good deal about a certain person who is known as Hobo Harry, the Beggar King. I have heard that he has gathered around him a lot of my kind, and I reckoned that maybe he'd give me a show to be one of them. That's what I came here for, and that's why I camped out there in the woods."

"And who are the three men who came with you?"

"Nobody came with me. I came alone."

"There were three other men there when Handsome found you? No?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Handsome can tell you that as well, or better, than I. He did the questioning."

"Why do you want to join the forces of Hobo Harry?"

"Because I'm tired of going it alone, and because I have heard that he takes good care of his followers."

"What can you do?"

"I can do anything that I am told to, once I have acknowledged a chief."

"That is a good answer. It covers a good deal of ground. Now, who told you about Hobo Harry?"

"I have heard about him in a good many places."

"Who told you where to find him?"

"A gun friend of mine, who croaked down in Indianapolis, a month ago or more. Jimmy the Sly he was called." (It was true that there had been a Jimmy the Sly, who was one of the many of the band who had been arrested and imprisoned; and after his release he had gone to Indianapolis, and died there, in a hospital. Nick knew this from his interview with the railroad president, and therefore he was not afraid to make use of the name.)

"So you knew Jimmy the Sly, did you?"

"Yes."

"Describe him to me."

"He was tall and slender, with a pock-marked face, and the longest fingers I ever saw; and he had a wart on the side of his nose, and a –"

"That will do. That is sufficient. How comes it that Jimmy never mentioned you to me?"

"You'll have to ask Jimmy that, I reckon – and you might burn yourself if you undertook to do it. I reckon it's hot where Jimmy is, madam."

She smiled at this. Nick could see that he was making a good impression upon her. He was still wondering if she were indeed the chief, or if she were only his representative. It was certain that he had had no expectation of finding a woman in this place.

"And what do you wish me to do with you, now that you are here?"

"I reckon that I'll have to leave that to you. I didn't come with my eyes shut. I guessed pretty well what I was up against. But I came here to be made one of you, and I hope you will give me a chance."

"What do you know of Hobo Harry?"

"Nothing."

"What do you think he is?"

"The head gazabo of this bunch."

"What do you suppose he is like?"

"Just at present writing, madam, he looks to me very much like a beautiful woman who has the grace of a siren and the courage of a lion."

"You should be a Frenchman instead of an Italian."

"I am neither one nor the other. I'm just a – a yeggman."

"You were about to say something else."

"I was going to say – a crook."

"You have not been a yeggman always, have you?"

"I never knew anybody who had been, madam."

"You are not really a yeggman, or a hobo. Confess the truth now; aren't you under cover, and playing the rôle for the purpose of being out of sight for a time?"

"I'm willing to say yes, if it pleases you."

"What has been your line of work, Dago?"

"Well, I'm a fair penman; I'm a good mechanic; I could be a passable druggist if I tried, and I wouldn't shy at taking a hand at running a bank, if it was big enough for the risk."

"I begin to think that you are all right, Dago."

"You can betcher life that I'm all right, madam, if it comes to that. But I don't reckon that you'll take me on my say-so. You'll be wanting some sort of proof of me before you consent to take me into the fold."

"You are correct about that."

"I'm ready for anything."

"You have told me that you are a penman, which means that you could be a forger; you have said that you are a mechanic, which means that you could crack a crib if necessary; you called yourself a druggist, which means that you know how to use the chemicals, and the poisons, too, if necessary; and you would not refuse to tackle a bank job if one should come your way. Do you happen to have the mark of blood against you, too?"

"I don't suppose there is any mark that I haven't got."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Well, I wouldn't stay in a house if I wanted to get out when a live man stood in my way, if that is what you mean."

The woman turned to Handsome quite suddenly.

"What time do you start?" she asked of him; and he replied, as if the question were a continuance of their conversation:

"I ought to start now – inside of ten minutes."

"Very good," she said. "Take Dago with you. Break him in. Let him have the worst of it. If he makes good, all right. If he doesn't – shoot him."

"All right," said Handsome cheerfully. "What about the others? There are two more out there near the tracks."

"I will attend to them. Go, now. Take this man with you. Give him all the rope he needs – but watch him. I'd sooner trust him with you than anybody else, anyhow – and I believe he is all right."

"Come!" said Handsome, seizing Nick by the arm; and he pulled him through the door after him. But all the way to the door, Nick kept his eyes upon the woman, who was looking at him strangely, and with a curious smile on her face.

Outside, when they had passed the sentinel, and were again in the part which led to the other glade, he stopped.

"Wait a minute, Handsome," he said. "I want to ask you a question."

"There isn't time now, Dago. Save it until later. We must get away from here at once. Do you remember where we left the boat?"

"Yes."

"Go there alone, and wait there for me. I won't be three minutes."

He did not await a reply, but darted off to one side as soon as they reached the glade, and Nick saw him disappear inside one of the cabins before referred to.

"I am in for it now, to the whole length of the tether," he told himself, as he stepped briskly forward toward the place where he knew the boat to be; and he was halfway across the glade when suddenly from one of the groups of men near a fire, one of them leaped up and confronted him, with his hands upon his hips, a cigar pointed at an angle in the corner of his mouth, and a leering grin upon his face.

"Where to now, my pal?" he demanded, standing in front of Nick, and thus stopping him.

Nick looked at the man, and smiled. He did not answer. He guessed instantly why Handsome had left him to find his way to the boat alone. This was doubtless one of their tricks – to see what a new recruit would do under these circumstances. Possibly, too, he thought, the woman wished to see an exhibition of his strength, and they had for that purpose pitted one of their best bullies against him.

He surveyed the fellow with a quick and comprehensive glance; and in that glance he saw that the man was a burly one, who evidently possessed great strength. But Nick did not care for

that. He was only turning over in his mind in that instant what course it would be best for him to pursue. And the answer came to him when the bully repeated the question.

"Where to, pard?" he demanded again, still with the sarcastic leer on his dirty face.

"When you get back, I'll tell you!" exclaimed Nick; and at the same instant he darted a step forward and seized the man by the throat-and-hip hold of ju-jitsu, and the next instant had sent him whirling through the air as if he were a cartwheel.

He struck the ground ten feet away, and went rolling over and over among the bushes, where there happened to be a mass of cat brier, or creeping thorn; and the series of howls and curses he sent up was a wonder.

A roar of laughter from every side proved to Nick that all had been watching for the outcome of that episode; but he looked neither to the right nor the left, but strode onward toward the boat.

And then he heard a cry of warning from behind him, and he leaped aside just as the fellow he had thrown fired a bullet pointblank at him from close behind.

As it was, the missile pierced his coat sleeve inside his arm.

As Nick leaped aside he also turned.

The hobo who had fired the shot was already running toward him, and now he was endeavoring with every effort in his power to discharge the weapon again; but for some reason the mechanism of the lock refused to work, and in an instant more Nick had leaped upon him and grasped him a second time.

He was determined now that the fellow should have a lesson indeed; so while he held him at arm's length with one hand, he pummeled him with the other until his face was a mass of bruises; and then, when the yeggman was in a condition bordering upon insensibility, Nick raised him bodily from his feet, and holding him in his arms, ran with him down along the path toward the water.

And reaching the edge of the swamp, he threw him out into the muddy water, headfirst.

It was not deep, but it was filled with soft ooze, which filled the ears, and eyes, and nose, and mouth of the fellow, so that, when he rose to his feet, he was sputtering and spitting, and coughing and swearing when he could.

The detective left the man to make his way out of the water to dry land as best he could, and turned coolly away to rejoin Handsome, who approached at that moment, grinning.

"Well done, Dago," he said. "You served him just right. Come along."

They entered the scow without more words, and Handsome poled it away from the shore, and along the waterway through the almost impenetrable darkness – but there was never a word said about the use of the blindfold.

"How is this?" Nick asked, after a little. "Aren't you going to tie that handkerchief over my face again?"

"No. I ought to do it, I suppose, but it's too much trouble. Besides, you're all right. I can tell a man when I see one."

"All right," said Nick. "It's your funeral; not mine. Only if the lady should raise a kick – what then?"

"She would raise a kick, too, if she knew about it," replied Handsome dubiously. "But how is she going to know it? You are not likely to tell her, and I won't."

"No," said Nick, "I won't tell her."

"Well, then we'll dispense with the handkerchief."

They poled on in silence for a time after that; but presently Nick asked:

"What's the lay to-night, Handsome?"

"I can't tell you that, Dago. You'll have to wait, and find out; and you'll have to do your own part, too; for if you flunk by so much as a hair, it's my duty to kill you."

"Which I suppose you would do, eh?"

"Sure I'd do it – why not? If you ain't what you seem to be, I'd as soon put a hole in you as dip this pole into the water. You hear me!"

"Sure thing."

"And that notwithstanding I like you. I reckon you're all right, and I'm going a great way toward proving what I think about it by not binding that handkerchief over your eyes now."

"Are there any others in this thing with us, Handsome?"

"You'll find out soon enough. The best way for you is not to ask too many questions, but to be satisfied to do as you're told."

They lapsed into silence after that, and there was no more said until after they had arrived at the bank where the scow was to be left.

"I suppose I can ask about those other guns that we left in the woods to-night, without giving offense, can't I?" asked Nick then.

"That depends on what you want to ask about 'em," was the reply; they were now hurrying in the direction of the tracks.

"I want to know if Hobo Harry is going to send for them?"

"Didn't you hear her say so?" was the rejoinder; and then, when Nick laughed softly, Handsome turned on him with fury, and would have seized him had he not suddenly recalled the fact that his own strength was no match for that of the man beside him.

But his anger disappeared as quickly as it came, and he joined in the laugh.

"I gave it away that time, didn't I?" he said. "You were too cute for me, Dago. But it is dangerous knowledge, Dago. I'll tell you that."

"You didn't give it away," replied Nick. "Any fool would have known that the woman was Hobo Harry."

"Then there are a lot of fools in the outfit. You're wrong, Dago. Lots of 'em don't suspect it. They think only that she is Hobo Harry's wife, or sister, or sweetheart, or something like that. There isn't half a dozen of us who really know for certain that Black Madge is Hobo Harry. And there! I've let the cat out of the bag again. But you're all right. It won't do no harm to tell you."

"Not a mite," replied Nick; but he chuckled noiselessly all the same. That last admission made by Handsome was worth hearing.

"Black Madge, eh?" he was thinking to himself. "Now I know why it was that there was something so strikingly familiar about the woman. Black Madge, eh? Well, well, who would have supposed that?"

For Black Madge was a character well known in the criminal world, and to the police, although very little was known about her really. There was a picture in the Rogues' Gallery in New York that purported to be of her; but Nick knew now that it was not.

Nevertheless, he remembered that once upon a time he had seen Black Madge, who was the daughter of a Frenchwoman by an Italian father; Black Madge, who had already made an unenviable record for herself on both sides of the ocean.

It was a long time before that when Nick Carter saw her. She was only a grown-up child at that time, but she was already a hardened criminal, nevertheless; and he recalled now the circumstance of his meeting with her.

It was in Paris. He had gone to the prefecture of police to see the chief of the secret service, who was awaiting him, and had found the girl in the room with the chief, who was engaged in questioning her closely in reference to a crime that had been committed, and because it was thought that she knew the parties concerned. But she had given no information, and had been allowed to go; and after her departure the chief had said to Nick:

"Monsieur Carter, some day that young woman will appear on your side of the water. I hope you thought to take a good look at her face."

"I did," replied the detective.

"Remember it, for some day you will have cause to do so, I do not doubt. She is a terror, and she has brains. The worst kind of a criminal. She should have been a man, for she has a man's daring, a man's recklessness, and a man's way of doing things. Black Madge, we call her here."

Nick recalled all that conversation now, plunged into a reverie about it by Handsome's use of the name. All the time he had been in the room with her in that house in the swamp, he had felt that he ought to remember where he had seen those eyes before. Now, he counted the years that had passed since he saw her, and, to his astonishment, they were five.

"She was seventeen then, the chief told me," he thought, "that would make her twenty-two by now."

And then it came back to him how strangely she had looked at him while he was leaving her presence, and he wondered if her recollection for faces was as good or even better than his own.

"But," he argued, "it could not be possible that she would remember me from that one short glance she must have had of me at that time. And, besides, I was not disguised at all, and now I look no more like myself than – well, than she does."

"What the devil are you so silent about?" demanded Handsome. They had reached the fence at the railroad track, and Handsome was leaning against it.

"I was trying to figure out in my mind what sort of a lay we are on to-night," replied Nick. "I'm not used to starting out without knowing where I am going. I feel like a horse – with you for a driver."

"Well" – Handsome laughed – "I won't use the whip unless you get skittish."

"What are we waiting here for?"

"We are waiting for our chauffeur with the automobile," grinned Handsome. "Nice road for an auto, isn't it? – bumping over those ties."

"Hark!" said Nick.

"I'm harking, my gun."

"It does sound like an automobile, sure enough," said Nick.

"Didn't I tell you that we are waiting for one. Come on."

He leaped the fence, and Nick followed him over; then they climbed the grade, and paused beside the track.

And then, while they stood there, and the droning sound peculiar to automobiles came momentarily nearer and nearer, the detective began thoroughly to realize for the first time that something really serious was afoot for the night.

But he was not long left in doubt as to the character of the approaching vehicle, for in a moment more it swept around a curve in the railroad, and came to a stop immediately in front of them.

And, strangely enough, it was an automobile arrangement, only that it was equipped with car wheels instead of with rubber tires; wheels that had flanges to fit the tracks. But it was provided with a gasoline engine, and Nick knew from the appearance of the apparatus that it was capable of great speed.

When it came to a stop Nick saw that it already contained two men, one of whom was driving; but he got down from the seat under the steering wheel, and climbed into the rear of the machine, while Handsome took his place.

"New man; Dago for a handle," said Handsome briefly, by way of introducing Nick to the others. What their names might be he evidently did not deem it important to mention.

"Try-out?" asked one of the men, while Nick was climbing into the box of the machine.

Handsome nodded curtly – and that was all that was said at the moment.

It was significant, however, to Nick, for it meant a lot. It meant that these other men entirely comprehended the situation, and that all three of them were prepared to shoot him in the back at any moment when his conduct of the business in hand did not entirely satisfy them.

But Nick was resolved not to be shot in the back that night. Whatever the business might prove to be upon which they were engaged, he was resolved to see it through to a finish, even to the extent of helping them burglarize a bank, if that was the lay.

"To do a great right, do a little wrong," he muttered to himself. Whatever might be stolen or whatever damage might be done that night, he would charge up in his expenses, and see to it that the railroad people made it good later on, when his work should be done.

In the meantime the railroad automobile had been gathering speed, and now it seemed to Nick to be little less than wonderful that it remained on the tracks at all, for if he was any judge of speed, he knew that they must be flying along at much more than a mile a minute – and he wondered what would happen if the headlight of a locomotive should loom suddenly before them – and then, just as the thought occurred to him, they rounded a short curve, and came to a sudden stop.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER ROBS A BANK

The instant the strange machine was brought to a stop – and it was done wonderfully soon, considering the speed at which they had been traveling – the three men leaped to the ground beside the track, and Nick was ordered to follow them.

He did so, and then he was told to bear a hand; and, following directions that were given him, he seized hold of the boxlike tonneau.

Almost in a twinkling of time after that the machine was lifted from the track in sections, and finally, still in sections, was carried to a highway near at hand, where it was put together again, minus the iron wheels. But there were other wheels concealed in that commodious body, and these were quickly taken out and adjusted.

Within twenty minutes of the time when they came to a stop on the track, after rounding the curve, the machine was fitted with regular automobile wheels, and was ready to proceed along the highway.

Nick saw in this arrangement much that had puzzled other men who had been on the job. He had no doubt from what he knew of automobiles that this machine was capable of sixty miles an hour, or even more than that, on the highway; and, if that was true, it, of course, could make a half greater speed than that on rails.

But he made no comment. That was not expected of him, and would have been resented had he attempted to do so; but he climbed to his place when he was told, and again they sped away toward some destination, the nature of which he did not know.

Once he ventured to ask the man nearest him what time it was, and received a curt "Shut up!" by way of reply; so he remained silent after that.

And after a while – less than half an hour – they drove into a village, and presently ran the machine around behind a church, where it was placed in one of the stalls of a shed.

And still his three companions worked in utter silence. Beyond now and then a curt word uttered by Handsome, who seemed to be in command of the expedition, nothing at all was said.

Nevertheless, each man there seemed to know exactly what to do; as if every move they made had been nicely planned out for them – and such Nick believed to be the case.

When the machine was stored away, the men fell into line, Nick being shoved into position directly behind Handsome, and then, in Indian file, they moved silently forward toward a high fence that was near at hand.

They went over this one by one, Handsome waiting with patience until the last one was over, and then the march was taken up again.

They passed now through the rear of a large yard, and before them loomed a brick building, which Nick figured must be a courthouse; and after a moment they made a half circuit around, and came to a stop between two buildings of brick, one of them being that one already mentioned.

The night was dark now, for the moon had gone down, and there were no street lamps in that village evidently; or, if there were, they were not burned on nights when there was supposed to be a moon.

But there was light enough for Nick to discover that they were close to the main street of the village; he could see the store windows on the opposite side; and it suddenly came to him that the building that was next to them – the second one – was a bank, and that they were about to rob it.

He knew now what was expected of him; and again he determined to see the thing through to the end.

It was not to prevent one robbery that he was engaged; but to prevent many. It was not to apprehend the participants in a minor job like this one promised to be, but to capture the head that directed many such robberies, and so stop them altogether.

And still no word – not even a whisper – was spoken between the men. They worked on in utter silence, as if their plans had been thoroughly conned until they were learned absolutely by heart.

Nor did they pause in the yard next to the bank. There was scarcely a halt there; but they passed to the rear of the building, and followed one another over the high fence that was there, to the rear of the bank building.

Keeping themselves well in the shadows, they crept forward silently to a rear door of the building, and here Handsome paused for a moment, and put down a canvas bag that he had been carrying all the way; and now he whispered in Nick's ear:

"There are the tools, Dago. Let's see what kind of a cracksman you are."

Nick did not need a second bidding. Having determined upon his course, he did not hesitate, but he seized the bag, pulled open the mouth of it, and, having selected such tools as he wanted, he applied himself to the task that had been set for him.

A professional burglar of long experience could not have gotten that huge oak door open more quickly and silently than Nick Carter did, and Handsome gave him an approving pat on the shoulder.

He was the first to enter the bank, Nick following, and the others coming behind them; and presently, after forcing another door, they stood crouching inside the bank itself.

A dim light burned in a gas jet in the centre of the large room, which was divided only by the wire screen which separated the customers' side of the rail from the clerks; and almost beneath the light, exactly where it could shine full upon the steel doors, was the huge safe of the institution.

A person might not stand in front of that safe for a moment without being in full view from the street should any one happen to pass there. Nick saw that at a glance; but nevertheless Handsome silently placed a drill and a bottle of liquid in his hand, and motioned that he was to begin the dangerous part of the work.

"Didn't you bring a screen with you, you chump?" demanded Nick, in a whisper. "If you had told me what the lay was, I'd have made one."

Handsome nodded, evidently well pleased; and at the same time he produced a roll from under his coat, and gave it to the detective. Nick unrolled it, and found that it was merely a piece of burlap, rather more than a yard long, and about two feet in width, and with a roll of cord attached to each corner of it.

He knew what that was intended for readily enough, and, taking it in his hands, he crept forward without another word, and quickly attached the four strings to objects which he selected as being situated about right for his purposes.

In two minutes the screen was in place, and it afforded a perfect shelter from view from the street, and just the sort of one that would never be noticed from the outside at all, unless a person stopped at the window and deliberately peered inside – and that nobody was likely to do, unless something else first attracted attention.

In fixing the screen in place so quickly and perfectly, Nick evidently won over not only Handsome, but the others; and now there was no more question of his doing the drilling alone. Each man took his own part of the work in silence, as if Nick had always been one of them; and, besides, now there was no time to be lost.

Drilling through the steel doors of a safe is not an easy task, and it is not done quickly, although expert burglars carry tools these days which will cut anything.

They took their turns at the drill, as they took them also with the acids and oil; and the work went on merrily until the holes were ready for the charges.

And here again it seemed that Handsome was determined to try Nick out to the last, for he bent forward and whispered in his ear:

"Prove one thing more, Dago, and you're made."

"Want me to do the blowing?" asked Nick.

Handsome nodded.

"All right," said Nick. "Light out, then."

"But – "

"Get out, I say. If I do the blowing I'm boss for the time being. Git!"

They did; and again, with the implements and the explosives at hand, Nick went to work; and, as before he worked rapidly and well – as if he were an experienced hand at that sort of employment.

And then, when the charge was ready, Nick pulled up the heavy rope matting from the floor, and after doubling it again and again until there was a huge wad of it, he braced it with desks and chairs against the front of the safe; and when all that was done to his satisfaction, he lighted the fuse, and ran back to the rear hallway, where the others were watching and waiting.

They had not long to wait after that. There was a lapse of perhaps a minute and a half, and then a dull, booming roar shook the building, and the burglars rushed forward.

Now was the time when they were compelled to work rapidly, if ever.

It was true that Nick had so muffled the sound of the explosion that it was hardly possible that the noise of it had roused anybody at all; but there was always a chance of somebody near at hand being wakeful or watchful.

At any moment they might be interrupted – and no burglar likes to be interrupted. It always means a fight, in which somebody is likely to get killed, and burglars rarely do any killing unless they have to in order to escape.

They rushed forward together; but now Nick purposely kept in the background. He had no idea of being taken himself if they should be interrupted; nor did he wish to give his companions an opportunity to kill any person who might interrupt them. It was all right from his standpoint to participate in the burglary, in order that he might ultimately catch all the thieves; but he did not wish to be a party to any fight that might come of it.

But he was made to hold one of the bags while Handsome filled it from the inside of the safe.

They pried open the inner compartments, and threw them indiscriminately upon the floor as soon as they were emptied; they jimmied open the steel boxes as readily as if they had been made of softest pine – and in twenty minutes after the explosion they were stealthily climbing the fence again, into the courthouse yard.

And, so far as they could see, not a soul in the village had been awakened or alarmed.

They returned to the shed, where they had left the automobile, by the same route they had covered in approaching the bank; the machine was backed out; they entered it, turned on the power, and sped away through the silent streets as they had come, with nobody the wiser for what they had done, the havoc they had wrought, and the wealth they had stolen.

Down beside the road where they had made the change before, from the track of the railway to the highway, they paused long enough to secure the iron wheels, and here the change was made back to a railway machine. The car was lifted in sections to the tracks, and with everything adjusted they were soon flying down the shining rails at a frightful rate of speed, and in silence – for it seemed to be a rule among these men that there should be no talking.

Mile after mile they covered in this way, and then the machine was slowed down, and came to a stop at the point where it had picked up Handsome and Nick at first, and here they got down, and, having taken out the plunder, stood beside the track until the machine had disappeared from view.

"Now, Dago, help me with the swag," said Handsome; and together they picked it up, and once more started for the outlaws' retreat in the middle of the impassable swamp.

When they were in the boat, and almost ready to land where Nick had thrown the man into the water, Handsome turned to him, and whispered:

"You're all right, Dago. I'll tell Madge so, too!"

CHAPTER VII. THE DETECTIVE'S PREDICAMENT

When Nick Carter was shown a place to sleep that night – or, rather, that morning, for it was well toward daylight by the time Handsome and he returned to the outlaws' camp – he tumbled upon the bunk that was shown him, and he lost no time in doing so; nor did he open his eyes again until he felt a hand shaking him lustily, and a voice crying out to him:

"Wake up, Dago! You're wanted!"

He sprang up instantly; and, because he had laid himself down with nearly all his clothing still upon his person, he was not long in making himself ready. To have insulted the profession he had adopted by washing his face was not to be thought of.

"Gee! But I'm hungry!" he said to Handsome, who was standing near, waiting for him.

"Madge will give you something to eat. She is at her breakfast now," was the whispered reply. "She wants you."

"Then," said Nick, "if I am going into the presence of a lady, and am expected to eat with her, I'll have to wash my face and hands. Show me where."

Handsome laughed.

"I do it myself once in a while," he said. "Come with me."

And he led Nick to a place along a path through the swamp where he succeeded in giving himself a good wash – for Nick had the satisfaction of knowing that the stain he had used was of such a quality that it would defy water. Alcohol alone would remove it.

They found Madge on the doorstep, awaiting them; but Handsome paused at the edge of the clearing, and muttered:

"I leave you here, Dago. I'm not in this. You're to have this interview alone."

"All right," replied the detective, and was about to move on, when Handsome detained him by a gesture.

"Put in a good word for me, Dago, if you get the chance," he whispered. "I have already said many a good one for you – and I made it as easy for you as I could all around."

"All right," said Nick again.

"And one more word, Dago. I forgot to tell you – "

"What?"

"Cremation Mike has got it in – "

"Who?"

"Cremation Mike – he worked in a crematory once – has got it in for you. He's the chap you chucked into the soup, you know. He sneaked away after you left last night, so I'm told, and he swore black and blue that he would have your life for that act. He will, too. He's sure bad medicine, that fellow. He's a bad member, too. I just thought I'd give you the pointer."

Handsome turned away then, and Nick went on alone to the piazza, where Black Madge was awaiting him.

He stopped just before he put his foot upon the veranda, and waited for her to make some sign; and she approached quite near to him, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Good morning, Dago," she said, smiling.

"Good morning, madam," he replied gravely.

"You look quite like a gentleman this morning," she continued, laughing lightly. "Or, no, rather like a mountain bandit of Italy."

"I could be either if I chose," he replied again, as gravely as he had spoken before.

"I do not doubt it. I have been giving you considerable thought since I talked with you here last night. Come inside. You haven't had your breakfast, I suppose?"

"No, madam."

"Then you shall breakfast with me. I was about to eat mine when I remembered you, and sent for you."

"Madam is most kind."

She led the way into the house, where a table was spread with good things, well cooked, too, they appeared to be; and she pointed toward a chair at the opposite side of the table.

"Sit there," she said. "I declare, we are quite domestic."

"So it would appear, madam. I am afraid that you are doing me too much honor, for one who has been so short a time among you."

"Bah! I am glad to have somebody who can talk decently near me. I tire of all these ragamuffins who are my men. Sometimes I kill one of them just for the mere fun of ridding myself of the vermin."

"Madam is incautious, perhaps."

"Why so?"

"Some day one of them might take it into his head to kill madam."

"Then somebody will have to be mighty quick about it. I'm not so easily killed as all that. Tell me – have you guessed who I am?"

"I am not a good guesser, madam."

"On the contrary, I should suppose you to be a good one – an exceptionally good one. Answer me: Have you guessed who I am?"

"I might make a guess now, madam."

"Oh, drop that madam. I don't want you to madam me all the time. Who do you suppose I am?"

"If I am to make a guess, I should suppose that you are that distinguished and elusive person whom the outside world refers to as Hobo Harry."

She laughed long and heartily, stirring her coffee vigorously the while.

"Upon my word, you are a good one," she said, still with laughter in her voice. "Yes, I am that distinguished and elusive person. There is no doubt about that. I have spent a long time in bringing this organization to perfection, Dago. What do you think of it?"

"I think it is a wonder."

"Right you are, my man! It is a wonder. For example, what did you think of the operation that was performed last night?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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