THE BLACK CIRCLE

A Thrilling Detective Story

By Mansfield Scott

Chapter XII Continued

He extended the case. The man hesitated, reached forward with apparent satisfaction, then drew back in sharp doubt. The reason for his sudden uncertainty was so clearly registered upon his features that it was almost ludicrous. Caldwell chuckled quietly.

"Go ahead, my good man," he invited. "It really won't hurt you, if that is what you think."

He slid the open case, together with his matches, upon the table. The servant seriously weighed the question. He wanted a smoke. And he had no cigarettes. Yet he felt vaguely apprehensive about accepting one. Soon, however, his brain began turning over the fact that these cigarettes could not be harmful when the guest himself was smoking them. He arose and approached the table.

"Thanks," he muttered. Selecting a cigarette, he struck one of Caldwell's matches. He dropped again into his chair, and inhaled with satisfaction.

"That's better," declared Caldwell in a friendly manner. "It isn't the most pleasant experience for either of us, this wait before morning. We may as well make the best of it."

At length, after several more efforts on the part of Caldwell, Garrish returned a sociable grin.

"Good smokes, these," he offered by way of response.

"Yes. They are excellent. Have another, Garrish, any time you wish. I'll leave them there for the present."

There followed silence, while the two cigarettes were consumed. Caldwell seemed deep in meditation. At length he arose, flung the last of his cigarette into the fireplace, and suppressed a yawn.

"I am rather tired," he remarked. "I think I'll go in and sleep."

A grunt of assent was the answer. Caldwell strolled to the door of his bedroom. As he passed the table, his eyes swiftly counted the cigarettes in the open case. He would learn the extent of the servant's liking for good smokes.

Sleep, he knew, would be impossible. He did not expect to sleep. He had taken eight hours of slumber earlier in the day, in anticipation of a long period of wakefulness. A rest, however, would be welcome. Removing his coat, he wrapped a blanket around his shoulders and lay down upon the bed.

He wondered what Garrish would do. He had purposely left his door wide open. After an interval of a few minutes, he heard the servant arise. His great boots squeaked as he stepped to the connecting door. Caldwell was unable to see him, but judged that he was glancing within. Soon his footsteps creaked once again. There were four more steps this time. And the guest reasoned that his guardian had sought the comfortable armchair instead of the one which he had occupied before.

An hour passed, while Caldwell lay motionless, planning his efforts for the coming day. The morning would bring the supreme test. He would know then whether the host had suspected his double intention. The question of the misdirected shipment would, for the immediate present, decide his fate. If he could convince the older man of the existance in some safe place, yet at the same time leave sufficient uncertainty as to its location—uncertainty, he realized, which might in turn lead to vague doubts of its existence.

He could not think of the approaching test without experiencing a deep thrill of expectation. It would decide far more than his subsequent escape from this stronghold. It would decide more, even, than the question of his own safety or destruction.

After a time he glanced at his watch, and noted that it was after midnight. He listened vainly for sounds from Garrish. The silence caused him to wonder whether the giant could have dozed in the armchair.

If thi. should prove to be the case, he would not disturb him. He would do nothing which could call attention to the guardian's propensity for quiet naps. However, there was a way in which he could test the other's alertness, without awakening him if he should be asleep. Reaching silently for his coat, he secured his fountain pen, and unscrewed the cap, upon which was fastened a metal clip.

Softly his left hand stole downward along the edge of the bed until he touched the metal bar which supported the springs. Now, touching the cap of the pen to the bar below, so that the two metals were together, he began very gently to scrape.

It was a thin, grating sound, vastly like the filing of steel. He intended it to be just loud enough to reach the ears of an alert listener.

For perhaps fifteen seconds it continued. Then a chair back creaked sharply in the other room. The grating sound stopped instantly. Heavy, quick footsteps clumped on the floor; and Garrish thrust his head through the doorway.

In a moment he saw that Caldwell was watching him.

"What was the noise?" he demanded abruptly.

The guest stirred and rubbed his eyes.

"Noise?"

"Yes," returned the servant promptly. "You heard it, brother. What was it?"

"Well—I did think I heard something that sounded like the hum of electric wires."

Garrish muttered anxiously. He strode across and put on the light. With evident suspicion he paced the floor, peering everywhere, noting everything—except what lay within the palm of the other's left hand. Finally he swung back, and stood facing the man upon the bed with distrust plainly spoken in his sullen black eyes.

"Lectric wires, rot!" was his comment. "What was you doin' ?"

The other returned a puzzled and annoyed frown.

"Garrish you have disturbed me so that I shall probably not sleep for the rest of the night. If your master knew of this—"

"Say!—stow that bunk, brother, will you? I ain't no fool."

Caldwell stirred upright, with quick apprehension.

"You—you wish me to overturn the bed?" he asked, puzzled.

"Q'wan, now!" came savagely at him. "You know what I mean, you. I ain't makin' no jokes, and you needn't. What was you doin' to make that noise?"

"I can't imagine why you think I was making a noise."

"Well," retorted the servant, "whatever it was, you better not do it no more. I guess you ain't done no harm yet. But cut out the monkey business, will you? I don't want to hurt you, friend."

At length he put out the light, and left Caldwell in semidarkness. But he had clearly been aroused and angered. For a long while he paced the floor of the living room, as if trying to decide how he had been deceived.

It was between six and seven in the morning when dawn finally arrived. Caldwell saw the first gray glimmer of daylight as it appeared in the windows. He had not slept. When the room had become lighter, and a deeper glow presaged the rising of the sun, he stood upright, and clenched his muscles. Garrish strode in at the first sound, and for a time hung close at his side. But once again, the guest's manner of patience and of disinterest brought reassurance; for the servant presently ceased to eye him with suspicion.

At length Caldwell stepped to the table in the living room and obtained a cigarette. He still left the case open upon the table. He noted silently that Garrish had helped himself to two more during the night. He was conscious of a decided satisfaction at this discovery. It would be well, he reasoned, to keep this big man in as friendly a mood as possible.

Shortly after seven he saw Garrish step to a bell near the bolted door. The man was aware of his gaze.

"I'm ringin' for yer breakfast," he explained.

Caldwell nodded. The food would probably not be ready for a short time. He went to a window and gazed out.

The surroundings were now clearly visible; but upon that side he saw only two wooden structures, three or four stories in height. He was unable to be certain whether they were apartment houses or private dwellings. From the windows of the bedroom the view was more extensive. He saw a row of well modeled residences, which fronted upon another street; the back of the houses were facing him. In the background he could discern the faint, similar in appearance to the one that fronted the house in which he was just then being held.

What circumstance, what possible contrivance, could give an inkling as to his location? It loomed as a task beyond earthly power. In the metropolis and its suburbs there must be thousands of such streets, and of such groups of houses. Not alone was it impossible for him to gain a message of his whereabouts to any friend; he himself was without knowledge to send. Any chance of his being rescued from the situation must clearly depend upon other information than that which he himself could supply.

There was no other hope. He followed with his eye the course of the second street, which was visible from the bedroom. At some two hundred yards to his right, a cross street intersected. He could discern vaguely a break in the line of houses; and the frequent blasts of automobile horns from that vicinity strengthened his belief that the place was a crossing. Now, if he could manage to discover a signpost on that distant corner, and learn the name of either street, it was just possible—

He turned to glance at Garrish. The man was seated, although he was watching. Caldwell turned his back, drew a hollow object from his pocket. It was his glasses-case. The servant had examined it on the previous night, but had evidently not been surprised at the fact that it had contained gold-rimmed spectacles while the visitor had dressed a pair with bone rims upon his eyes. Even if such a realization had penetrated to Garrish's brain, he would probably have dismissed it on the theory that the guest regularly used two pairs of glasses—the one for ordinary purposes, and the other for close vision.

In actuality, however, the gold-rimmed pair were a very peculiar set of glasses. The junction which represented the bridge of the nose was entirely a sham affair, and the two lenses supposedly one for either eye, were detachable. Removing guardedly his bone-rimmed spectacles, Caldwell now held the two separate circles of glass before one eye, with the lenses held steadily several inches apart.

A one-eyed field glass of great power was thus formed. The street corner took shape before him as though he stood only at a short distance. Yet, although he tried repeatedly, he could discern no trace of any identifying mark.

The hope had vanished; and the location of the house must remain a mystery.

He considered the houses which were visible from his window. They were of quiet and select appearance. He felt that their occupants knew nothing of the affairs which transpired within the abode of his present host. Suppose that he should shout at the top of his voice, from an open window, that he was a prisoner? After a moment of consideration, he dismissed the thought. Long before he could make his position understood, the two hundred and twenty odd pounds of Garrish's brawn would be flung upon his shoulders; and thereafter he would be watched more closely than before.

Yet there was a way! There was one way. The shadowy lines of his features, half concealed beneath the external covering of his disguise, grew for an instant more keen and more indomitable as he considered the plan upon which he had placed his hope of success. He had reasoned it all, and had measured it all, in his calculating, impersonal manner, refusing to recognize the hazards to himself as a factor in the problem. Whether he should survive—let that be as it might. The great question lay in whether his preparations for the ruin of the opium syndicate would prove adequate in the moment of test. He counted the odds once again, and believed that they now stood even. With Allen Walker absent, the vital ratio of his hopes had become one in two. It was an even draw. Red cards or black cards for death. And he was ready to begin play.

At length, sinking into a chair, Caldwell drew from his pocket, the photograph of Mrs. Walker, nee Helen Durant, and gazed at her features in a reflective manner. There was character in that face, character and fineness. It was strange indeed that such a girl should have chosen Allen Walker. He paused for an instant to draw a mental comparison between this countenance and that of Miss Dorothy Staples. The former was the more gentle, and bore the greater suggestion of an artistic temperament. The latter was more self-reliant, and more firm. Such a young woman as Dorothy Staples would never be deceived by Allen Walker. One such as Helen Durant, although having been deceived by him, would be likely to remain true to him notwithstanding.

The contemplation brought still another, that of the young woman who had conducted him to the headquarters. He felt, for some reason, that there was an opportunity for vast and hidden possibilities in the study of her character. She must be, undoubtedly, the unknown and notorious Frances. Yet Caldwell could not escape a vague suggestion which had occurred to him during his ride in the limousine.

He was firm in his belief that every criminal organization in the world contained one weak link in its chain. Might the mysterious Frances, after all, prove the vulnerable spot in the great opium syndicate? It seemed to him possible. Yet he shrank from regarding it as a probability. He must keep the mind open—be ever on the alert—for another.

There was a knock upon the heavily-bolted door. Stepping out to the living room, Caldwell found that Garrish had taken in a tray with his breakfast. The servant set a place at the center table.

Caldwell was hungry. Yet he felt vague misgivings. This food, he knew, instead of providing nourishment, might bring illness, insensibility, or even death. The master of the house and his associates would not hesitate at such a course, if they had suspected his true intention. He peered closely at the breakfast, while he considered. It seemed that these men would scarcely make such an attempt before they had at least been told something of the hidden shipment.

He felt reasonably confident that so far they had taken him at his word. Otherwise, they would scarcely have sent for him. He took his place at the table.

The food was excellent. Caldwell tasted very sparingly at first then, having discovered nothing of a foreign taste or odor, he continued without restraint.

He had not quite finished when there was a second knock upon the doro. Garrish operated the bolts and admitted his master.

"Good morning, Mr. Caldwell," exclaimed the older man. "I am truly delighted—and shall I say also relieved?—to see that you are still in our midst. I trust you have enjoyed breakfast. Did you sleep well?"

"Not quite as well as usual," admitted the guest.

"That is too bad. However, I can scarcely say that my own rest was entirely tranquil. Garrish, you are to be relieved now until early this evening. Ring four times and Barnes and Ward will come up."

He smil d frankly at Caldwell.

"I could safely trust Garrish alone with you," he explained. "But with our smaller physique, we felt that there should be two."

"I see."

"For a very little while longer, I must leave you," the host stated. "It will not be long. As soon as my colleague arrives, we'll begin our discussion of business."

The other men took their places as Caldwell's guards. Barnes was a silent, sly-faced man, respectful in demeanor; Ward was short of stature and belligerent of countenance, plainly another gunman.

Teh host was true to his word. At nine o'clock he entered with a small, slight man of middle age, whose nervous and haggard features suggested unwillingness to be present at the interview. When the door had been closed, the chief director glanced at the servants.

"Barnes, wait in that room for the present, and close the door. And Ward, you might stay outside this door, in the hall."

When they had obeyed, the host drew up three chairs and placed them by the table.

"Now, Mr. Caldwell," he suggested, "let us consider the purpose of your little visit."

The guest accepted the armchair at the other's gesture. Merrivale chose the seat at the end of the table, with the assistant director upon his left.

"Clearly and briefly stated," began the chief director. Stepping out to the living room, Caldwell found that Garrish had taken in a tray with his breakfast. The servant set a place at the center table.

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"I see."

"For a very little while longer, I must leave you," the host stated. "And—what safeguard?"

"Definite knowledge of where I am," replied the other. "The location of this house."

Pale blue eyes met his in questioning uncertainty. But the chief director immediately shook his head.

"You positively cannot do that," he stated. "Whatever else we might grant you—not that."

Caldwell was silent.

"But now let me suggest," continued Merrivale. "I think we can find a satisfactory arrangement. Consider this, for instance. First of all, we'll make out the identification papers. We'll let you see the papers. Meanwhile you'll give us the information. You'll either give some proof of your statement, or allow us time to look up the shipment. As soon as we've had it located, the papers will be yours—and the limousine will carry you in safety to the steamer."

He paused expectantly. The guest was silently considering.

"You see," added the host, "we can't affrd to play this game at any risk. We couldn't put such a trump card in your hand as you have asked. We must hold at least a majority of the strong cards, or we aren't willing to play at all. Nevertheless, we certainly intend to play fairly with you. What do you say? How does my proposition seem to you?"

For a moment longer Caldwell was thoughtful. At length his glance met that of his host, and, although his features were still expressionless, his eyes seemed suddenly more direct and more keen as he shook his head.

"I'm afraid not," he answered flatly. "If you decline to tell me the location of this house, then I must be safely away from the house with the papers in my possession before I will explain about the shipment."

(Continued in Tomorrow's Daily Press.)

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