

BLIND-FOLDED

By EARLE ASHLEY WILCOIT

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SYNOPSIS.

Giles Dudley arrived in San Francisco to join his friend and distant relative Henry Wilton, whom he was to assist in an important and mysterious task, and who accompanied Dudley on the ferry boat trip into the city. The remarkable resemblance of the two men is noted and commented on by passengers on the ferry. They see a man with snake eyes, which sends a thrill through Dudley. Wilton postpones an explanation of the strange errand Dudley is to perform, but occurrences cause him to know it is one of no ordinary meaning. Wilton leaves Giles in their room with instruction to await his return. Hardly has he gone than Giles is startled by a cry of "Help." Dudley is summoned to the morgue and there finds the dead body of his friend Henry Wilton. And thus Wilton dies without ever explaining to Dudley the puzzling work he was to perform in San Francisco. In order to discover the secret mission his friend had entrusted to him, Dudley continues his disguise and permits himself to be known as Henry Wilton. Dudley, mistaken for Wilton, is employed by Knapp to assist in a stock brokerage deal. Giles Dudley finds himself closeted in a room with Mother Borton who makes a confidant of him. He can learn nothing about the mysterious boy further than that it is Tim Terrill and Darby Meeker who are after him. He is told that "Dicky" Nahl is a traitor, pinning both hands in the game. Dudley gets his first knowledge of Becker, who is Knapp's enemy on the Board. Dudley visits the home of Knapp and is stricken by the beauty of Luella, his daughter. He learns the note was forged. He is provided with four guards, Brown, Barkhouse, Fitzgib, and another. He learns there is to be no trouble about money as all expenses will be paid, the hire of the guards being paid by one "Richmond." The help of Henry Wilton is committed to the vault. Dudley responds to a note and visits Mother Borton in company with Policeman Carson. Giles Dudley again visits the Knapp home.

CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

"Oh, Mr. Wilton, you'll pardon my boldness, I'm sure," she said with an amiable flirt of the head, as I seated myself beside her and watched Luella melt away into the next room; "but I was afraid you had forgotten all about us poor women, and it's a dreadful thing to be in this great house when there isn't a man about, though of course there are the servants, but you can't count them as men, besides some of them being Chinamen. And we—I—that is, I really did want to see you, and we ought to have so much to talk over, for I've heard that your mother's first cousin was a Bowser, and I do so want to see that dear, delightful Chinatown that I've heard so much about, though they do say it's horrid and dirty, but you'll let us see that for ourselves, won't you, and did you ever go through Chinatown, Mr. Wilton?"

Mrs. Bowser pulled up her verbal coach-and-six so suddenly that I felt as though she must have been pitched off the box.

"Oh," said I carelessly, "I've seen the place often enough."

"How nice!" Then suddenly looking grave Mrs. Bowser spoke from behind her fan. "But I hope, Mr. Wilton, there's nothing there that a lady shouldn't see."

I hastened to assure her that it was possible to avoid everything that would bring a blush to the cheek of a matron of her years.

Mrs. Bowser at this rattled on without coming to any point. I was listening to the flow of her high-pitched voice without getting any idea from it, when my wandering attention was suddenly recalled by the words, "Mr. Knapp."

"What was that?" I asked in some confusion. "I didn't catch your meaning."

"I was saying I thought it strange Mr. Knapp wouldn't go with us, and he got awfully cross when I pressed him, and said—oh, Mr. Wilton, he said such a dreadful word—that he'd be everlastingly something if he would ever go into such a lot of dens of—oh, I can't repeat his dreadful language—but wasn't it strange, Mr. Wilton?"

"Very," I said diplomatically; "but it isn't worth while to wait for him, then."

"Oh, laws, no!—he'll be home to-morrow, but he won't go."

"Home to-morrow!" I exclaimed. "I thought he wasn't to come till Wednesday."

Mrs. Bowser looked a little uncomfortable.

"I guess he's old enough to come and go when he likes," she said. But her flow of words seemed to desert her.

"Very true," I admitted. "I wonder what's bringing him back in such a hurry."

Mrs. Bowser's beady eyes turned on me in doubt, and for a moment she was dumb. Then she followed this miracle by another, and spoke in a low tone of voice.

"It's not for me to say anything against a man in his own house, but I don't like to talk of Doddridge Knapp."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "A little rough in his speech? Oh, Mrs. Bowser, you should make allowances for a man who has had to fight his way in the roughest business life in the world, and not expect too much of his polish."

"Oh, laws, he's polite enough," whispered Mrs. Bowser. "It isn't that—oh, I don't see how she ever married him."

I followed the glance that Mrs. Bowser gave on interrupting herself with this declaration, and saw Mrs. Knapp approaching us.

"Oh," she exclaimed cheerily, "is it settled? Have you made all the arrangements, Cousin Julia?"

"Well, I declare! I'd forgotten all about telling him," cried Mrs. Bowser in her shrillest tone. "I'd just taken it for a fact that he'd know when to come."

"That's a little too much to expect, I'm afraid," said Mrs. Knapp, smiling gaily at Mrs. Bowser's management. "I see that I shall have to arrange this thing myself. Will Monday night suit you, Henry?"

"As well as another," said I politely, concealing my feelings as a victim of feminine diplomacy.

"You have told him who are going, haven't you?" said Mrs. Knapp, to Mrs. Bowser.

"Laws, no! I never thought but that he knew."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Knapp. "What a gift as a mindreader Mr. Wilton ought to have! Well, I suppose I'd better not trust to that Henry. There's to be Mrs. Bowser, of course, and Mr. and Mrs. Carter, and Mr. Horton, and—oh, yes—Luella."

My heart gave a jump, and the trip to Chinatown suddenly became an object of interest.

"I mama?" said an inquiring voice, and Luella herself stood by her mother.

"Yes," said Mrs. Knapp. "It's the Chinatown expedition for Monday night."

Luella looked annoyed, and tapped her foot to the floor impatiently.

"With Mr. Wilton," there was the

and joined Porter and Barkhouse on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XVI.

An Echo of Warning.

"All quiet?" I asked of my guards, as we took our way down the street. "Dicky Nahl was along here," said Porter, "and he said Terrill and Meeker and the other gang was holding a powwow at Borton's, and we'd best look out for surprises."

"Was that all?"

"Well, he said he guessed there was a new deal on hand, and they was a buzzin' like a nest of hornets."

"Well," said I, "we had better go down to Borton's and look into this matter."

There was silence for a time. My guards walked beside me without speaking, but I felt the protest in their manner. At last Barkhouse said respectfully:

"There's no use to do that, sir. You'd better send some one that ain't so likely to be nabbed, or that won't matter much if he is. We'd be in a pretty fix if you was to be took."

"Here comes Dicky now," said Porter, as a dark figure came swinging lightly along.

"Hullo!" cried Dicky, halting and shading his eyes from the gaslight. "I was just going up to look for you again."

"What's up, Dicky?"

"I guess it's the devil," said Dicky, so gravely that I broke into a laugh.

"He's right at home if he's come to this town," I said.

"I'm glad you find it so funny," said Dicky in an injured tone. "You was scared enough last time."

"Well, I've kept out of his claws this far, and it's no use to worry. What's he trying to do now?"

"That's what I've been trying to find out all the evening. They're noisy enough, but they're too thick to let one get near where there's anything going on—that is, if he has a fancy for keeping a whole skin."

"Suppose we go down there now,"

I had grown used to the silent terrors of my house. But as we stumbled up the stairway the apprehensions of Dicky Nahl came strong upon me, and I looked ahead to the murky halls, and glanced at every way as though I expected an ambush. Porter and Barkhouse marched stolidly along, showing little disposition to talk.

"What's that?" I exclaimed, stopping to listen.

"What was it?" asked Barkhouse, as we stopped on the upper landing and gazed into the obscurity.

"I thought I heard a noise," said I. "Who's there?"

"It was a rat," said Porter. "I've heard 'em out here of nights."

"Well, just light that other gas jet," I said. "It will help to make things pleasant in case of accidents."

The doors came out of the darkness as the second jet blazed up, but nothing else was to be seen.

Suddenly there was a scramble, and something sprang up before my door. Porter and I raised the revolvers that were ready in our hands, but Barkhouse spring past us, and in an instant had closed with the figure and held it in his arms.

There was a volley of curses, oaths mingled with sounds that reminded me of nothing so much as a spitting cat, and a familiar voice screamed in almost inarticulate rage:

"Let me go, damn ye, or I'll knife ye!"

"Good heavens!" I cried. "Let her go, Barkhouse. It's Mother Borton."

Mother Borton freed herself with a vicious shake, and called down the wrath of Heaven and hell on the stairward guard.

"You're the black-hearted spawn of the sewer rats, to take a respectable woman like a bag of meal," cried Mother Borton indignantly, with a fresh string of oaths. "It's fire and brimstone you'll be tasting yet, and you'd 'a' been there before now, you miserable gutter-picker, if it wasn't for me. And this is the thanks I git from ye!"

"Come in," I said, unlocking the door and lighting up my room. "You can be as angry as you like in here, and it won't hurt anything."

Mother Borton stormed a bit, and then sullenly walked in and took a chair. Silence fell on her as she crossed the threshold, but she glowered on us with fierce eyes.

"It's quite an agreeable surprise to see you," I ventured as cheerfully as I could, as she made no move to speak. My followers looked awkward and uncomfortable.

At the sound of my voice, Mother Borton's bent brows relaxed a little.

"If you'd send these fellows out, I reckon we could talk a bit better," she said sourly.

"Certainly. Just wait in the hall, boys; and close the door."

Porter and Barkhouse ambled out, and Mother Borton gave her chair a hitch that brought us face to face.

"I reckon you don't think I come on a visit of politeness?" she said sharply after a brief silence.

I murmured something about being glad to entertain her at any time.

"Nonsense!" she sniffed. "I'm a vile old woman that the likes of you would never put eyes on twice if it wasn't for your business—none knows it better than me. I don't know why I should put myself out to help ye." Her tone had a touch of pathos under its hardness.

"I know why," I said, a little touched. "It's because you like me."

She turned a softened eye on me.

"You're right," she said almost tenderly, with a flash of womanly feeling on her seamed and evil face. "I've took a fancy to ye and no mistake, and I'd risk something to help ye."

"I knew you would," I said heartily.

"And that's what I come to do," she said with a sparkle of pleasure in her eye. "I've come to warn ye."

"New dangers?" I inquired cheerfully. My prudence suggested that I had better omit any mention of the warning from Dicky Nahl.

"The same ones," said Mother Borton shortly, "only more of 'em."

"What is the latest plot?" I asked gravely, as I fancied that my light manner grated on my strange guest.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "But you know something," I argued.

"Maybe you know what I know better than I know it myself," growled Mother Borton with a significant glance.

I resigned myself to await her humor.

"Not at all," said I carelessly. "I only know that you've come to tell me something, and that you'll tell it in your own good time."

"It's fine to see that you've learned not to drive a woman," she returned with grim irony. "It's something to know at your age."

I smiled sympathetically upon her, and she continued:

"I might as well tell ye the whole of it, though I reckon my throat's as like to be slit over it as not."

"I'll never breathe a word of it," I replied fervently.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Skeleton at the Feast.

"The dinner was going all right," said the superstitious man, "until the cross-eyed girl came to the telephone and stood facing the table, talking with a friend, but looking straight at us—not straight exactly—with her mismatched eyes. Then the waiter got cross and spilled the soup and brought the macaroni without the cheese and the cheese without the macaroni and forgot the butter and nearly forgot the bread and froze the coffee and left out the sugar, and, well, just about everything happened that could happen at that table after the cross-eyed girl came and stood there telephoning and looked at us."



"MOTHER BORTON SULLENLY TOOK A CHAIR"

slightest emphasis on the words, "to accompany the party, I shouldn't think it would be necessary for me to go."

"It is either you or I," said Mrs. Knapp.

"You will be needed to protect Mr. Horton," said I sarcastically.

"Oh, what a task!" she said gaily. "I shall be ready." And she turned away before I could put in another word, and I walked down the room with Mrs. Knapp.

"And so Mr. Knapp is coming home to-morrow?" I said.

Mrs. Knapp gave me a quick look.

"Yes," she said. There was something in her tone that set me to thinking that there was more than I knew behind Mr. Knapp's sudden return.

"I hope he is not ill," I said politely.

"I think you will find him all right when you see him. But here—you must meet Mr. and Mrs. Carter. They are just from the East, and very charming people, and as you are to do them the honors on Monday evening, you should know them."

Mr. and Mrs. Carter had pleasant faces and few ideas, and as the conversational fire soon burned low I sought Mrs. Knapp and took my leave. Luella was nowhere to be seen.

"You must be sure that you are well guarded," said Mrs. Knapp. "It quite gives me the terrors to think of those murderous fellows. And since you told me of that last plot to call you down to Borton's, I have a presentiment that some special danger is ahead of you. Be cautious as well as brave."

I thanked her as she pressed my hand, and, with no Luella awaiting me by the stair, I took my way down the stone steps, between the bronze lions,

I suggested, "We might find out something."

Dicky stopped short.

"Caesar's ghost!" he gasped; "what next? Wouldn't you like to touch off a few powder-kegs for amusement? Won't you fire a pistol into your mouth to show how easy you can stop the bullet?"

"Why, you have been down there and are all right," I argued.

"Well, there nothing much to happen to me, but where would you be if they got hold of you? You're getting off your cabana, old fellow," said Dicky anxiously.

"If I could see Mother Borton I would fix it," I said confidently.

"What! That she-devil?" cried Dicky. "She'd give you up to have your throat cut in a minute if she could get a four-bit piece for your carcass. I guess she could get more than that on you, too."

Mother Borton's warnings against Dicky Nahl returned to me with force at this expression of esteem from the young man, and I was filled with doubts.

"I came up to tell you to look out for yourself," continued Dicky. "I'm afraid they mean mischief, and here you come with a wild scheme for getting into the thick of it."

"Well, I'll think better of it," I said. "But see if you can find out what is going on. Come up and let me know if you get an inkling of their plans."

"All right," said Dicky. "But just sleep on a half-trigger to-night."

"Good-night," I said, as I turned toward my room, and Dicky, with an answering word, took his way toward the Borton place.

An Outrage.

Mr. Fisher—A man fell into a mill pond where I was fishing to-day and was drowned.

Mrs. Fisher—Why, wasn't that terrible?

Mr. Fisher—I should say it was. They stirred up the water so looking for the body that they simply spoiled the fishing.

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