

# The Broken Marconigram

By FRANK LOVELL NELSON

## Master Mind of Carlton Clarke in a Unique Criminal Solution



"TELEGRAM for you, Clarke," I said, as I took the message which the boy delivered at the door of our Oak street apartments one morning in mid-summer. A shade of anxiety passed over the face of my house mate. Strange, I thought, that Carlton Clarke, the great telepathic detective, should be disturbed by so ordinary an event as the receipt of a telegram. Clarke took the yellow envelope and held it thoughtfully in his hand as a woman studies a telegram before summoning the courage to open it.

"Do you remember Thaida?" he asked suddenly, still holding the envelope as I signed the messenger's book.

Did I remember Thaida? As if I could forget that glorious vision of young womanhood that had flashed into our presence in the ghetto district of New York and whose psychometric mind had aided us in the solution of the puzzling mystery of the "Blue Bokhara."

"I see you do," continued Clarke. "Well, my mind has been filled with forebodings concerning her all morning. I have no word from her for several weeks. Something tells me that this message concerns her and that the news is not good. We will see," and he tore open the envelope and read it hastily. A look of distress, passing quickly to a black frown of anger, overpread his face. Without a word he passed the message to me. I read:

"On board S. S. Magellan, off Pensacola, Fla., Marconi Station. The wolf's fangs—"

No signature. A cipher? None that I was familiar with, yet it must have a meaning and a deep and terrible one, for as I looked at Clarke his eyes blazed with anger and beneath it he wore a look of the deepest concern.

"It is from her. The wolf! I must save her, but how? Sexton, can I count on you?"

"You know that without asking," I replied; "but I haven't the slightest idea what it all means."

"Of course not. Come into the library and I will tell you while we plan some method of action, I do not yet know what."

"I first met Thaida," continued Clarke, when we were seated in the library, "when I was an interne at Bellevue. She was a student, delving deeper than the mind of woman ordinarily goes into subjects philosophical and psychological. She was a true friend, a jovial companion, and these traits, allied with the beauty of which you can testify, had the effect of gathering about her an ever enlarging court. But with an admirable reserve she held them all at length."

I alone came the nearest to her confidence, and the life we lived was ideal, both too busy for our chosen work to mar it by thoughts of anything closer, both protected, she by her womanly reserve, I by my sincere respect for her.

"Then Comte Armand de Loup came into our lives. He was a young French nobleman, very rich, living where and how he pleased. We were attracted to him by his love of the occult which he had studied in India, in Tibet, wherever the minds of thinkers run in the direction of the unknowable. He was suave, handsome and, at first, charming in every way. It was not long however until his advances to Thaida became so pronounced as to cause her to fear him and me to hate him with all my heart. When it became necessary for her definitely to repel his offers he went out of our sphere as suddenly as he had entered it, but leaving behind him his curses and his vows of the most terrible vengeance his fiery Gallic spirit could invent.

"Nine years have passed since then and no blow has fallen, unless this is it. After he left, translating his name literally, we called him 'the wolf.' We often talked jokingly of the time when the threatened fangs of the wolf would close upon us. 'The fangs of the wolf' it must be Thaida."

As Clarke was speaking the bell rang again and a second messenger arrived. Clarke feverishly tore open the cover and reading it passed it to me. It was:

"— have struck. Save me."

Like the first it was sent by Marconi system from the steamship Magellan.

"Wait," exclaimed Clarke. "We can do nothing. There will be a third. She is sending me word despite some terrible obstacle."

He had hardly finished when the third message arrived. Sent from the same station, it read:

"— come to —"

Would there be a fourth that would give us the final clue? All the day we

waited with all the patience we could summon, but it came not. Clarke spent the time poring over the timetables of the North and South lines. At last he gave up and throwing the timetables from him he exclaimed: "Something has happened. She cannot finish. But there is another means if only she will try it."

Then he lay back in his chair and closed his eyes. For more than an hour he did not stir. I began to think he slept. Then he jumped up so suddenly that he startled me.

"Quick! I have it. We are going. Pack. Don't forget the arms and plenty of ammunition, and put in those four automatics we got the other day. There may be hot work before we ever see Chicago again. Let's see, the train leaves in an hour and a quarter."

"But where we are going?" I asked, involuntarily.

"New Orleans," he shouted as he dashed into his room to throw his clothes out to me to pack.

We reached New Orleans at dusk and took a cab from the railway station. As we drove away looking out of the cab window I saw a swarthy, roughly dressed man enter another cab which immediately followed us. I thought nothing of the incident at the time except to wonder how such a looking individual happened to be riding in cabs.

And then the full import of Clarke's devilish cunning, his mastery of the minds of men by the use of forces which bordered on the supernatural, dawned upon me. Here was the pilot which would guide us to the lair of the wolf and to Thaida, the spy turned to account against his own employer. The path lay by water, this evidently Clarke had discovered.

"Yes, it was absurdly simple," remarked Clarke, quietly, divining as he so often seemed to do my train of thought.

"As soon as I found we were watched I knew I had the master key to the situation. It was easy to turn from the shadowed to the shadow. I slipped out of the hotel through the kitchens, prepared the way for you, and while our pilot here was watching the front entrance of the hotel I was within a step of him and watching him. You know my method and it was not long before I had him in my power and knew all that he knows. It is not much except that de Loup has some sort of rendezvous on an obscure island about 30 miles up the coast from the delta. It is called the Ile des Serpents and we are going to find out what goes on there. God send we do not get there too late!" Clarke's eyes took a faraway look and I knew he was thinking of Thaida.

"Before midnight we make eet," said Bloc, who was steering by the compass. Silently we drew on the ladder for a repast consisting of whatever we could find that needed no cooking. Then despite the tossing of our craft I succeeded in making a pot of steaming hot coffee. We were too near the unknown to be in the mood for conversation.

About 11 o'clock Bloc, who was peering into the darkness ahead, whispered, "A la droite, L'île des Serpents." I looked and rising out of the darkness was a black mass against the softer shades of the shore line.

With directions given in whispers we made fast to the landing.

"You will stay here with the launch," whispered Clarke to Bloc, "and have it ready to get away at once in case we need it."

We stepped lightly out on the landing and found ourselves facing a door of iron in the otherwise blank wall; a heavy door incrustated with knobs and beset with strange heraldic devices in his relief. These latter drew Clarke's attention and he studied them earnestly in the dim light. Then turning to me with a smile of triumph he whispered: "Ah, I thought so. I have the master key. Come, we will go in."

No sound broke the stillness. There was nothing to denote that a human habitation of any sort lay beyond the blank wall.

Clarke lifted a heavy knocker in the center of the door and began a tattoo of alternating long and short raps. These were answered from within and my companion in his turn answered these signals.

"What is your age?" challenged a deep voice.

"I was thunderstruck at Clarke's answer in an even, fearless tone.

"Five years," he said.

"Whence do you come?" again inquired the voice.

"From the eternal flame," answered my companion.

"Whither do you go?" rang out the question.

"To the flame eternal," was the reply.

"Whom do you bring?"

"A hitherto deluded soul who would gain admission among us and thus

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learn the true story of the fall of the great Baal-Zeboub."

And then it dawned upon me that no matter with what diabolical fraternity we were dealing Clarke, with his wonderful knowledge of the vagaries that have possessed the human mind since the dawn of the ages, had its ritual at his tongue's end.

"But you waste our time, which is precious. If the examination is satisfactory lead us to the Vice Regent of Lucifer and if he so desire he may question us further," commanded Clarke in a tone of authority.

"Tis well. To the Temple of Bahomet," answered the sentry. He turned and motioned us to follow. We entered and heard the door close behind us with a click leaving us in utter, absolute darkness.

And then, seeming to come from the roof over our heads, spoke a voice so terrible in its menace, so steely cruel in its tones that I felt my knees begin to batter against each other.

"Let them that would look upon the face of the Vice-Regent of the Evil One enter through the eternal flame," it said. "If they come on the business of the great Lucifer they pass unscathed. Otherwise they wither up and die."

Our guide had disappeared as if by magic. Motioning me to follow, Clarke pressed forward. We neared the flame and still there came no heat. Then Clarke stepped into it and was lost to sight while I stood alone in that awful corridor. Summoning all my courage I too stepped into the flame. Beyond a tingling of the nerves and a stinging of the skin I felt no sensation.

I found myself with Clarke in an immense hall, the counterpart in devilish decoration of the passageway we had left. The walls, roof and floor were of stone and the whole scene was so broken with recesses, grottoes and innumerable stone images of satanic beings that it was difficult to judge its size. Behind us the flame alternately flashed and flickered. If there was another entrance it was so cunningly concealed as to escape our notice. Before us was a massive altar, apparently hewn in the solid rock, though upon closer examination I found it, as well as all of the interior decoration, to be of moulded concrete.

We were alone. At least we saw no forms but those of the devils and imps that, as in the corridor, flashed their many colored eyes upon us from all sides.

Suddenly the stillness was broken by a voice from somewhere in the deep recesses of the cavern, a voice steely and cruel in its icy suavity.

I looked. Yes, Thaida was there.

She seemed even more beautiful than in the brief period when I had before seen her. Her robes clung to the graceful outlines of her willowy form. Her black hair was coiled tightly into a crown about her beautifully shaped head and in its tresses one red rose, matching perfectly the coral of her lips, was the only bit of color. Proudly she walked, and Hypatia, beside the monks of Cecil was not loverlier nor more disdainful of her executioners.

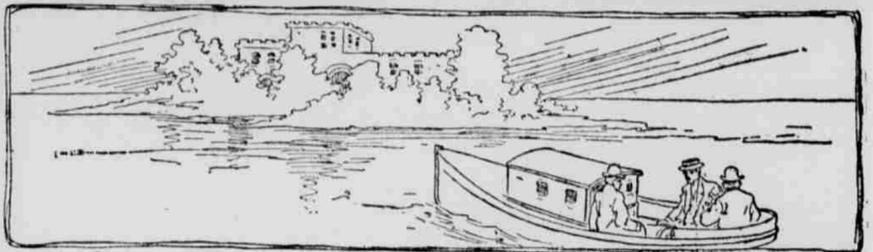
She took her place calmly before the center of the semicircle. The count approached her and taking her hand touched it to his lips with a triumphant smile. She offered no show of resistance. Had she steeled herself to submit meekly to whatever he in store for her? Then ensued some ritualistic gibberish of which I could not catch the import, during which each member of the semicircle seized what looked to be a chalice from the altar and beat upon it with a short stick.

"O, Lucifer, Star of the Morning, answer thou unto the conjuration of the Four and say if it is thy will that this maiden become a faithful Paladinist in thy service." This the count intoned in a solemn voice.

From somewhere in the roof came the answer in hollow reverberating tones:

"It is my will."

"Then come, thou art mine," said the count as with outstretched arms he advanced toward Thaida. She stood disdainfully erect as he neared



her and I trembled to see such loveliness profaned by his unholy touch.

His arms were just about to fold her in their embrace when my straining eyes saw a livid green flash strike from the whiteness of her throat. Full upon the forehead of the count it boomed. I saw him throw out his arms wildly as if trying to fight it off. But there it clung, a writhing, glistening streak of green.

The count tottered. His face and hands began to turn to the sickly shade of tarnished brass. With a great cry he reeled headlong.

Leaping over the prostrate form Thaida flew like a deer. I heard the bar of Clarke's prison house fall. Then the door of mine swung open. In the twinkling of an eye we were behind those little steel cages, Thaida between us. At that instant the lights went out and we were in stygian darkness.

At the end of the hall we heard the hurrying of many feet and the moans of men in terror of an awful death. Almost mechanically we drew our weapons and began to empty four automatics into the blackness ahead. I do not know whether or not any of our shots took effect. I heard no cries. When we stopped to reload and the reverberations of the fusillade had died away in the recesses of the roof all was still.

"To the boat," whispered Clarke. We picked up the now fainting Thaida, dashed through the aura of flame and down the corridor, now in utter darkness. The door barred for a moment our progress, but Clarke's fingers soon found the bolt and we were safe.

"It was by ruse," said Thaida. "I

had no thought of de Loup and had long since hoped that he had passed out of our lives, when I was summoned by a false letter on board the Magellan in New York harbor. Once there I was seized and locked in a cabin.

"We were sitting in the ladies' cabin. I was watching the waves dashing over her bows. De Loup sat watching me. Writing materials were on the desk at my elbow, but I dared not even look at them for fear of arousing his suspicions. Then suddenly I looked up. He was dozing. I snatched a pen and wrote your address and three words of the message. Then he roused and I had only time to snatch the paper and conceal it in my dress before his sharp eyes were again upon me. I would send it anyway. I knew your intuitive wit would make something of it. I intrusted it to the stewardess. Fortunately they had left me my money. I told her it was a cypher and she swore to give it to the wireless operator in his little rookery on the upper deck. That was in the morning. In the afternoon I again had a chance to write a few words when I was again stopped by de Loup's eye. I again went to my cabin and calling the stewardess sent it to the same address. I had one more chance to write. But when it came to telling you where to find me I suddenly remembered that I did not know. I sent the dispatch anyway. I had no more chance to write. I believe that de Loup already suspected. I now think he knew it all the time and was anxious that I lure you on, for that same day he told me that our destination was near New Orleans. I still hoped for a chance to get you word, but all the time I telephated

those two words to you with all the intensity of my being."

Woman like she had omitted that part we were most anxious to hear, the cause of the death of the wolf.

"O, yes," she continued. "But the blow that struck him I had reserved for myself when all else had failed. We were on the launch going up the narrow harbor of the island. I was alone on the after deck watching the snakes that coiled and twisted in the branches that almost swept the sides of the boat. They had no horror for me, for as you know, I have a strange power over all animal life. Suddenly a peculiar little green snake fell from a tree limb onto the deck almost at my feet. From its triangular head I knew it to be deadly poisonous. Here was my weapon. I snatched it up and concealed it in my dress. I might be able to turn it upon the count. If not I should force it to bite myself. When I dressed for the ceremony I placed it at my throat. I was about to reach for it when it struck."

"And the sheet of flame and the lights?" I interposed, unable longer to restrain my curiosity on these points.

"Oh, that's all simple enough," answered Clarke. "Mere buffoonery. I saw through it at the time. The count was no mean electrician. He had his own plant. As for the sheet of flame, have you never seen a high frequency current pass between two poles? Two million volts of violet rays from such an apparatus have been sent through the human body with no effect but a slight tingling and the visible stream of fire."

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