

The Exploits of Elaine

A Detective Novel and a Motion Picture Drama

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SYNOPSIS.

The New York police are mystified by a series of murders and other crimes. The principal clue to the criminal is the warning letter which is sent the victims, signed with a "clutching hand." The latest victim of the mysterious assassin is Taylor Dodge, the insurance president. His daughter, Elaine, employs Craig Kennedy, the famous scientific detective, to try to unravel the mystery. What Kennedy accomplishes is told by his friend Jamison, a newspaper man.

TWENTIETH EPISODE

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION.

Wu Fang sat at a table in his apartment, hidden behind the squalid and balconied exterior of a Chinatown tenement. Before him were a glass dish and a bottle, which contained several sticks of phosphorus immersed in water, and a small capillary glass tube.

For a moment, however, he had laid aside the strange paraphernalia and was writing a note. As he finished he tapped a bell and a Chinese servant appeared in answer.

"Take this letter to that white woman, Inez," directed Wu, adding, "Give it to her yourself—and if she is there, return with her."

The servant bowed and Wu returned to work on the curious machine he was devising.

He had completed his labors when his trusted lieutenant, Long Sin, entered.

"For what did the master summon me?" asked Long Sin, deferentially.

"Come here," beckoned Wu. "Behold this."

With a pair of tweezers he seized a small stick of the phosphorus under water and slowly brought it to the surface. Almost instantly the dangerous element burst into flame, giving off a dense white smoke.

"Here I have a capillary tube, as the white devils call it in their science," went on Wu, pointing out the glass tube. "By carefully bending it and arranging the outlet of the water I can set a fire anywhere at any time I choose."

Even while he was showing the devilish invention to Long Sin, his servant had sought the elaborately furnished apartment of the white woman to whom the note had been addressed.

She was an attractive young woman, known as Innocent Inez. Except for a certain coarseness, she strongly resembled Elaine, both in features and figure.

Inez turned languidly as her colored maid ushered in the servant of Wu, took the note and read it with interest.

"Wait," she said with a sudden accession of energy, nodding at the same time to her negro maid to bring her hat and coat. "I will go with you."

Thus a few minutes later Inez entered the secret den of Wu Fang.

"Ah—this is the young woman," introduced Wu to Long Sin.

Carefully planning each detail down to the smallest possibility of error, Wu Fang and Long Sin completed their arrangements and, finally, with Inez at the apartment, on the street an automobile was waiting at the curb, which did not far away two toughs from the neighborhood stood.

As the Chinamen and the woman came out Wu beckoned to the waiting roughnecks. "Come—get in—lively," he ordered.

They climbed into the car and the five criminals whirled rapidly uptown.

Kennedy had often been amused at my never having a match when I needed it, and it had occurred to him to devise a very novel cigarette lighter for my benefit.

It was simple enough, consisting of a small battery connected by small wires to one of a pair of cuff links. One link had in its face a very fine wire, only a fraction of an inch long. To the link Craig had soldered the wires from the battery and arranged them so that they ran up under his coat sleeve through the armhole of the vest to the battery, which he carried in his vest pocket.

He had just completed his work when he heard me coming and hastily drew on his coat.

"Well, what's new?" I greeted.

"Nothing in particular," he replied. "Have a cigarette?"

He handed his cigarette case to me and I took one. Then, unsuspecting, I began to search my pockets for a match, but, as usual, could not find one.

At last, half mockingly, he lighted his cigarette apparently on his cuff link.

"What sort of a sort of thing is that?" I asked in surprise.

"I thought it might amuse you," he smiled, explaining the arrangement as he opened his vest and showed me how he made the electric connection

by a mere pressure of his arm. "I'll give it to you some day."

Naturally I was delighted by the novelty of the thing.

Elaine was reading to Aunt Josephine in the library when, not long after Wu's car slid out of the maze of streets of Chinatown, it stopped a few blocks below the Dodge house. With Long Sin, Wu got out and assisted Inez out.

"Walk up the avenue—you know the house," he directed Inez; then, turning to the roughs inside the car, added: "You will calculate to catch up with her directly in front of the house. After that, meet us just below, around the corner."

Wu and Long Sin quickly walked downtown again, while Inez went up, following shortly by the car with the two toughs.

Elaine had just finished the book and laid it down.

Suddenly, almost underneath the library window, she heard agonizing screams of "Help! Help!"

An instant later Jennings came rushing into the library from the hall and threw open the window to look out.

Inez had been just about to pass the house when Wu's car drove up and stopped. Without warning, apparently, two toughs had leaped out and seized her.

"Oh, they're trying to kidnap that poor girl!" cried Elaine, remembering her own terrible experience.

Jennings was out of the door in a moment followed by Elaine and Aunt Josephine in a great state of excitement.

At the moment the toughs saw aid coming from the Dodge house they ran to the car as if thoroughly frightened and drove away as swiftly as they had come, while Inez sank down on the sidewalk, seemingly overcome.

"Take her into the house, Jennings," directed Elaine, soothing Inez, who by this time had faked a perfectly convincing case of hysterics.

In the library, where she was placed in an easy chair, Elaine, her aunt, Marie and Jennings gathered about while between smelling salts and cold water Inez, weeping and trembling like the good actress that she was, managed to tell a pitiful story of how she was just a poor lady's maid who had lost her position and now was pursued on the streets by white slavers.

"Oh, please, miss, may I stay here a while till I feel better?" she pleaded.

"Oh—if I could only work for you and the kind lady who is like a mother," she sobbed, turning from Elaine to her aunt.

It was a touching story, and it reached the hearts it was intended for.

"Don't worry; I'll see you through this affair," nodded Elaine, wiping away the girl's tears and smiling bravely at her. "Take her upstairs, Marie. She can find plenty to do in this big house, I'm sure."

Even while Inez was looking her thanks from her swollen teary eyes, already the car containing the toughs had drawn up around the lower corner, and Wu and Long Sin had taken the places of the thugs.

"Everything worked fine, master," reported the gunmen.

I had gone over to the apartment where Kennedy had perpetrated his little joke with the new cigarette lighter, and there I found several letters waiting for him.

Having nothing better to do, I decided to go back to the laboratory, where I left him at work, and take along the mail in case there might be something important in it for him.

He opened one or two letters, then came to one which I had laid on his desk in a plain envelope, addressed evidently in a disguised hand. He tore it open and read it with a scowl.

"Well, Walter, what do you think of that?" he remarked, tossing it over to me.

I read it in astonishment:

Another attempt is about to be made to kidnap Elaine Dodge.

A FRIEND.

I looked at him and shook my head blankly, while Craig took up the telephone and called the Dodge house.

"No one answers," he muttered, working the telephone book up and down. "But I'm sure someone took off that receiver over there and listened in. Operator—will you ring that number again?"

Unable to get any reply over the Dodge telephone, Kennedy thought a moment, then scrawled in his familiar hand on the bottom of the anonymous note, sealed it in another envelope directed to Elaine, and called a messenger.

Inez, meanwhile, had transformed herself into a full-fledged maid, looking very pretty in her neat cap and apron, and making herself useful in a hundred ways about the Dodge house.

Without being obtrusive she was seldom out of hearing of the telephone, however, and it happened that at just the moment when Craig called up she was there to intercept the call,

described proves that even in the hospitals in which the wounded soldiers are nursed back to life, a touch of the ridiculous sometimes lightens the work.

"The nurse of this ward," said Mr. Oakman, "a pretty and distinguished looking lady, in a wide-winged coat, was at some pains to show us her pet patient, a very big, very black, and very contented Turco in a green fez. She told us that when he was first brought in, he was quite badly wounded and unconscious. They removed

his clothing, soaked with mud and blood, and put him in a hospital wrapper, while his uniform was sent to be cleaned. After the Turco had been placed in his bed and the clothing was out of the way, the interpreter, an old African soldier, rushed up to the surgeon in charge.

"For the love of heaven, bring him back his green fez before he wakes up!" gasped the interpreter.

"Why?" returned the surgeon. "It's dirty enough—"

"Yes, yes, but he wears it to show

taking off the receiver, but not answering. Instead, she hung up and wedged the telephone bell with a piece of paper so that it would not ring at all.

She was about to move away from the desk when Elaine entered the library.

"Didn't I hear the telephone bell ring?" she asked.

Inez was quick. "Yes," she replied, "my former mistress telephoned that she is sending my trunk today."

"Oh, very well," smiled Elaine, passing on through the library with an encouraging nod to the girl.

Inez had killed two birds with one stone. Not only had she disarmed suspicion about the interrupted call, but she had laid the foundation for the delivery of a trunk which at that moment she knew Wu and Long Sin were preparing and packing.

It was a large trunk, and in it the two wily Chinamen were packing a chair, as well as the phosphorus machine.

"Once Mistress Inez induces Elaine to sit in this chair," observed Wu, tapping it significantly as he closed the trunk, "half our work is completed."

Uptown Inez, always on guard, was watching for the safe arrival of the trunk, when she saw a messenger boy coming up the steps of the house.

Perhaps, it flashed over her, it was some message from Kennedy. She must get it, whatever it was.

Without hesitating a moment she slipped back into the library while the boy was still at the door and wrote a note of her own at the desk. She had thought out beforehand just what plan she was to adopt and the note read:

Dear Miss Dodge:

The ladies of the First Baptist church will send a collector for our rummage sale this afternoon. We thank you for whatever you can give him.

Yours truly,
Miss Ella Burns,
Secretary, Woman's Guild.

Inez read over the note she had written herself as the messenger boy continued ringing the bell impatiently. Then she hurried into the hall to open the door.

The boy came in and Inez took the note he had brought, signing Elaine's name for it in his book. She had acted not a moment too soon, for Elaine had heard the bell and was now coming downstairs herself.

"Was it anything for me, Inez?" she asked.

Inez deftly palmed the letter and substituted the note she had written.

In the meantime a second trap was

Elaine, down in the library, that she had done nothing yet about the letter from the Women's Guild.

"I wonder what there is upstairs that I can give them," she thought, as she re-read the letter. "I think I'll see."

She started up, just as Inez was leaving.

The adventures in the attic heard Elaine coming and quickly slipped behind a door, letting Elaine pass her, without being seen.

In the attic Elaine started to take down and examine several dresses for the rummage sale, laying them aside one by one.

An attic is always a place that calls up memories of the past, and Elaine soon began to think of things that were suggested by one after another of the discarded dresses. Besides, some of them were scarcely worth sending, anyway. She sat down, absently, in the chair to think it over.

Suddenly a secret spring released a set of bands that automatically and swiftly clamped over Elaine's arms and about her body and neck, holding her in a grip of steel. At the same time a vapor bulb in the back of the chair shot out its smothering fumes, rendering her unconscious.

Elaine was caught in a trap.

Inez in silent exultation opened the attic door just a trifle. Then her slender hand reached in and took the key from the inside, shut the door and locked it from the outside.

Steadily Inez crept downstairs from the attic and into Elaine's room. There, taking care that neither Marie nor Aunt Josephine was about, she opened the closet and took out the dress, coat and hat which Elaine had worn when she was kidnaped by Wu and stuffed them into a suitcase. Inez closed the suitcase quickly, threw on her own hat and coat and left the house unobserved.

Half an hour later she entered the opium joint on Mott street.

There were both Wu and Long Sin carefully examining a blonde wig made up as closely as possible to resemble the golden masses that were the crown of Elaine's beauty. Four or five other Chinamen sat and stood about at a respectful distance.

"Have you the clothes?" asked Wu, greeting Inez.

"Yes," she returned. "All has been done exactly as you ordered."

"Good," complimented Wu. "Then you may prepare yourself immediately."

In the meantime a second trap was

"A note of some kind that he dropped," replied Craig, passing over to me the paper he had picked up.

I read in English:

"See what he is doing and report to me in the basement below 116 Mott street."

Beneath the few words, evidently orders, was that mystic sign of the serpent—the mark of the arch-criminal, Wu Fang.

"Is a clue, Craig!" I exclaimed.

For a moment Craig said nothing, as he turned to go back into the laboratory. For some time he continued to study the note, as though revolving something in his mind.

"Whatever it is," he remarked at length. "I'm going to look into it, anyhow. While I'm gone, Walter, I wish you'd just go around and see if Elaine is all right."

At last Kennedy sauntered in casually to the hop joint on Mott street, his collar still up and his hat still over his eyes.

He lounged across the floor among the smokers and picked out a bunk while Hop Sing, the proprietor, brought him a pipe. Kennedy pretended to light it, but in reality did not.

In the back room, by this time, Inez had completed her disguise by placing on her head the wig and had given the little finishing touches to her make-up. Wu was giving final instructions to Long Sin, and the rest, and the four Chinamen ranged themselves in groups of two on either side of the door.

Finally Wu paused and whispered something to Inez. Then both he and Long Sin seized two glass globes that stood on the table. They raised them high over their heads and smashed them on the floor, at the same time stamping their feet terrifically. Inez screamed as if a murderer were being committed.

Outside in the den Kennedy heard the scream and the crashing of glass, muffled by the door. He straightened up in his bunk, now all attention.

Was it some white woman calling for help in this sinkhole of iniquity? The door flew open. Sure enough, a woman appeared, still screaming.

It was only for an instant and she did not even get across the threshold. With a low guttural exclamation, Long Sin pulled her back into the room and slammed the door she had opened.

It was all done so quickly that Kennedy could catch only the most fleeting glimpse of her clothes and face. But that glimpse was enough.

It was—apparently—Elaine!

Craig sprang up instantly, drawing his revolver, and threw himself against the door, recollecting the warning message that had come through the mail.

The door yielded and he rushed through. In an instant the four Chinamen crouching on either side leaped on him.

The struggle was terrific. He downed two and seemed in a fair way to win against even such odds, when the disguised Inez turned, with a mocking laugh, pulling off both the hat and wig.

Kennedy's amazement gave the Chinamen a chance. Before he realized it, in his complete surprise, he was forced back on the post and held there just long enough for Long Sin to wind a rope around him, binding his arms, legs and body to the post.

Then Wu Fang walked over before him and faced him.

"Come over here, my dear," he called to Inez. "Let me introduce Prof. Craig Kennedy to you—Innocent Inez."

"By the way," he went on to Inez, "how did you leave the real Elaine?"

Inez looked at her watch. "She is locked in her attic," she replied with evident enjoyment. "The house will start to burn by spontaneous combustion in exactly twenty minutes."

Upstairs in the attic of the Dodge house Elaine, in the queer chair, was just recovering a bit from the effects of the vapor.

Still as the minutes lengthened she began to breathe more regularly as the stupefying effects of the vapor wore off, and was just beginning to move her head in the first unconscious endeavors to grasp at consciousness.

It must have been just at this point that, following Kennedy's instructions, I arrived at Elaine's house.

As Jennings led me into the library I was met by Aunt Josephine.

"Craig has gone off on a clue," I explained, "and has asked me to drop in to see how things are. Is Elaine all right?"

"Why, I haven't seen her for an hour or more," answered Aunt Josephine. "I think she must have gone out. Won't you sit down?"

There was nothing else to do. On the chance that she might come back, I sat down, considerably worried now, about the note and her absence.

Upstairs, if we had only known it, Elaine had now feigned consciousness.

Worse than that, the time was up for the water to be drained off the phosphorus.

As the last drop was siphoned off the vessel by the capillary tube, the deadly element seemed to burst into flames and white fumes. Instantly the dry tinderlike excelsior and other stuff caught fire.

Helpless, tied to the post, Kennedy had not ceased struggling to free himself, though without avail.

Suddenly an idea occurred to him. He gazed down at his hands and wrists. Suppose they were not free? Was there no way to use them?

Slowly he turned his arm around until the outside of his wrist pressed on a rope. Then he drew his upper

arm tight to his side, still with his wrist pressing on the rope.

His heart fairly leaped. It worked! The cuff link which he had devised as a cigarette lighter as a joke on me was burning the rope.

Then he pulled at the weakened ropes as he had before in his futile struggles.

They broke.

Just on the other side of the door he could hear the low buzz of the argument as Long Sin urged Wu to allow him to kill Kennedy.

"Very well, then," Wu at last agreed, looking at his watch and nodding to Long Sin and the others who sprang forward.

Free from his bonds, Kennedy had been standing a second wondering how to escape from the room. Just

as he stepped forward, he saw

the white girl is slowly being burned to death," he hissed, brandishing the knife. "The allotted time is spent."

As he poised the knife in fendish glee, Kennedy leaped forward from his loosened bonds and knocked him to the floor.

So unexpected was the assault that before he knew it Long Sin was also sprawling beside his master.

Craig seized the only weapon at hand, a tobacco pipe, and brought it down with smashing blows on the heads of the other astounded and unnerved Chinamen.

Once on the street, even in Chinatown, he was safe.

But it was not his own safety now that had nerved up his strength to escape from the unescapable.

Was he in time?

"I think I had better go back to the laboratory and wait for Craig," I said at last to Aunt Josephine after waiting for a time that seemed like hours. "Please let me know the moment you hear from Elaine."

I was about to turn from the foot of the steps to the Dodge house, when a taxicab came dashing up almost on the sidewalk urged on by some maniac inside. Imagine my surprise to see Craig, wild and disheveled, leap out.

"Is Elaine here—safe?" he demanded.

"She isn't home," I managed to reply.

"Are you sure?" he repeated. "Did you search?"

He uttered a sudden cry, pointing up at the roof.

"Look!" he gasped horrified.

I stared in blank amazement. Smoke was pouring out of the attic windows in dense black columns, lighted by an angry flame.

"Fire!" shouted Kennedy, dashing instantly into the house.

As we mounted the stairs now we could hear muffled screams from the attic.

Smoke was pouring out from under the door and even through the key-hole. Jennings had heard Kennedy's call and was now dashing up after us with a fire extinguisher. Back of him came Aunt Josephine and Elaine's maid, Marie, screaming for help.

Like a human battering ram we went through that door. A sheet of flame shot out at us with the draft. But Kennedy stopped for nothing.

There was Elaine in a chair which the devilish mind of Wu Fang had devised to imprison her while the flames licked out her beauty and life. Instantly Craig understood and acted.

"Carry her out!" he cried, gasping for breath himself.

Together we seized the chair and its precious burden. Not a moment too soon we set the chair down outside in the hall, ourselves scorched and blistered.

It was as though Craig had accepted the challenge of the fiery monster. He seized the extinguisher from Jennings and attacked the flames.

By this time Jennings, Marie and Aunt Josephine had succeeded in unfastening Elaine, as our sudden onslaught with chemicals and force brought the fire demon under control.

"Are you—all right?" gasped Craig, stooping over Elaine as she leaned back half-fainting in his arms.

"Are you?" she murmured heroically, forgetting her own hurts in her fear for him.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"Goodies!"

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