

The Vanishing Men

BY RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD.

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WNU Service

(Continued From Last Week)

"I thought it would not require much time."

"Much time?" exclaimed the doctor. "Well, it wouldn't require much time. It requires measurements, it requires the microscope to pick out the area. That is all. I could get it at tomorrow morning and in a few hours."

"Tonight," said Peter firmly. "I know that this sounds unreasonable. Look here. It is worth a thousand dollars for me to know tonight."

The doctor swallowed. "You want a yes or no answer?" "And I want you to telephone me. No matter what hour, I shall be waiting. Here is my number. No matter what hour. You understand. A thousand dollars."

The other swallowed again. "It isn't worth a thousand dollars." "It is to me," said Peter earnestly.

At half-past four in the morning when Peter was staring out at the first color in the eastern sky, filled with strange chill of a sleepless night, his telephone rang at last.

He had his answer. At half-past four in the afternoon five days later Brena Selcous walked into the office of Colby Pennington. She had come directly from the pier on the North river. Her face was white, her sensitive lips moved uneasily as if seeking to suppress emotions of their own. Pennington was moved by her presence.

"I am a friend of Mr. DeWolfe's," she said. "I have sent a wireless addressed to him here. I have been on the sea for eleven days."

Pennington held up the undelivered envelope. "Are you Miss Selcous?" he asked. "Well, Peter DeWolfe sent you a cablegram—something about advising you to delay your coming. You had started. Too bad. Just now Mr. DeWolfe is out of town."

"Out of town?" "Why, yes. He went a few days ago. He had something to investigate. We rather expected to hear from him. He went off in a hurry—some hurry and flurry. I believe he had received some kind of message."

Pennington stopped. "For God's sake what's the matter?" Brena Selcous, leaning forward in her chair, had thrown her arms upon his desk and in the curve of one elbow she had buried her face.

For a moment she appeared as lifeless as if she had been struck a crashing blow upon the head.

CHAPTER XVI

Brena Selcous raised her head from Colby Pennington's desk and stared at Peter's lawyer with an expression of



"You Let Him Go?" She Exclaimed in a Breaking, Shaken Voice.

terror in her parted lips, in her eyes, in her white hands, held out as if to ward away a hideous idea.

"You let him go?" she exclaimed in a breaking shaken voice.

"Let him go?" asked the astounded Colby. "Why shouldn't he go? Is there any reason?"

It was evident to Brena that this man had not been in Peter's confidence; he could not know that a call like this had come to the other two men and that Peter might be the third to go. She interrupted him with a gesture of impatience, saying, "He left no word—no address—nothing with which to trace him!"

"Not with me."

Leaning forward he pressed a pearl button on his desk, then seized a cigar, clipped the end off with his large white teeth, looked again at Brena, lovely in spite of her grief and terror, and threw it back into the box. Usually Pennington was the master of any meeting with a stranger, but now some thing of that immortal personality which was hers, something in her bearing, something in her eyes, something in that calm of distant mountains that she had regained, held Colby silent until the door of his office opened and the chief clerk stepped in from the cork composition flooring outside onto the noiseless padded green carpeting inside.

"Fred!" "Yes, sir."

"Did Mr. DeWolfe say where he was going—did he leave any word with us?"

"Yes, sir."

"What?" "Why, if I'm not mistaken, Mr. Pennington, he said that he was going to New Orleans, Port Worth, and a place called Kremlin Wells, Texas. He was to be there—Excuse me."

The chief clerk picked up from the desk the bronze-framed calendar and moved his pencil on it. He said, "He was to be there on the 24th, but gave no address there. The twenty-fourth is four days from now."

"Kremlin Wells, Texas? I never heard of such a place," said Pennington, scowling after the manner of one who dislikes any fact not within the swing of his own radius.

"Nor had I. I looked it up. Not in the geography. But it's in the railroad guide—a way station, probably with a water tank, on the Texas Central and New Mexico—on the desert near the border between the two states, Mr. Pennington. That was all that he said. He left some papers to put in our safe and asked me to open them and attend to them if he was not back in three weeks."

"Thank you," said Pennington. "That's all, Fred."

"Wait!" Brena had spoken in a low tone, but with that authority sometimes heard in her voice.

The chief clerk stopped as if her word had been a bullet in his lungs. "Will you help me?" she said to Peter's lawyer. "I assure you that he would wish it."

Colby looked at her as one would look at a new model of some automobile; at last he nodded.

"I want to know the first train leaving New York for St. Louis and Texas," she said. "I want some one to go for a ticket and reservations to Kremlin Wells or the nearest point. I want a taxicab. I want you to do everything in your power to get me to Kremlin Wells before the twenty-fourth. It must be done!"

Pennington stared at her. "Very unusual," he muttered. "But I said we'd do it, Miss Selcous."

Partly because of the assistance of his office force, Brena was on her way to St. Louis, without even hand baggage, but within an hour; partly because of it she was on a train that rolled into Dallas through the railroad yards with the shabby wooden settlements, seen again from her berth through the slit of window beneath the curtain as she raised her weight on one elbow. It had not changed completely since she had seen it on her return after Jim Hennepin had disappeared. This morning began the 23d of the month; she had the sense of racing to Kremlin Wells in a contest with death.

At the final junction point of her long journey, tired, nerve-wrecked by unrelenting heat of night and day and by the strain of suspense, she found it necessary to wait under a train shed, where in the mid-day humidity created a smothering steam filled with the gases belched from locomotive stacks and the ear-smashing explosions from engine exhausts and the impact of car couplers. The train for the West was three hours late. She could not leave the station; she walked back and forth, her weary eyes held open wide by will, her jaw firm. And dogging every step she took was the fear that she would be too late, that when daylight came on the twenty-fourth she would not yet be at her destination.

The conductor on the westbound mail was not of the same mind. Beautiful young women traveling alone do not alight every day in "holes in the desert" as he called the Wells; he considered it less desirable to set her down some time in the dark hour between three and four. He said the place consisted of a siding, a water tank, a general store, five houses, two saloons where roulette wheels were going during the sheep herders' season, an adobe ruin and a hotel with three rooms above a bar.

"I am sure it will be all right," said Brena. "But even if it were not I would have to leave this train there."

At about three the porter woke her. There were ten minutes of dressing, and then she heard the whine of the brakes, and with muddy, sleep-thickened senses, with the ache of stiff bones and muscles and nerves after the heat, the inadequate sleep and the strain, she felt out from the lower step with one foot into the bottomless depths of blackness for the boards of the platform.

When the soft night breeze that flowed in a steady stream from the southwest had blown the dust away as if it were a dust that had settled on her, the train had been swallowed in the dark.

She could hear the splash of water leaking from the bottom of the railroad tank and occasionally the heat lightning on the horizon covered the desert toward the south with the white flare of a photographer's flashlight powder, disclosing the vast expanse broken by black patches of desert vegetation. But her attention was now held by a dim swinging lantern that came toward her out of the black plush of the dark, as if it came with volition and movement of its own.

When this light came close to her, she felt an impulse to leap back into the dark as one who is desperate might leap into the depths of black waters; when the light was raised toward her face so that its possessor might see her, she wished that she had fled.

The face on the other side of the light was the essence of brutality—the black pupils in bloodshot eyes, the sun-baked skin drawn taut over immense protruding cheek bones, the thin wrinkled upper lip over a full red drooping under lip, the broad, wide nostrils, the thick gleaming muscular neck of the halfbreed Mexican and Indian.

Brena closed her fingers under cover of the dark and made the pressure of nails in her own palm summon her will to put her face nearer his and to speak before he could speak, so that she might escape from all manner of being on the defensive.

She said in a firm voice, "I came to find some one."

The other grunted incredulously.

"He came here within a day or two."

The Mexican raised one dark hand and pulled the long lobe of one ear; his expression was crafty. He said, "Maybe so, guen abey?"

(To be continued next week.)

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