

The Vanishing Men

BY RICHARD WASHBURN CHILD

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(Continued From Last Week)

"Seven years ago," she whispered. "Yes, seven years. And four years of torturing fear—that was the pay of the one who rode away."

"Compton Parmelee?"

She said it without any external sign of emotion.

"Yes," said Peter. "He had succeeded in wiping out one Mackinac. But another, more terrible, sprang up—fear."

"He feared discovery?"

"Yes, and something else. He could never feel sure that Hennepin was dead. That was the curse upon him—the fear of the murderer's feet, twisting and alternating with the fear of a physical coward who ever hears those threats, those curses, those promises of vengeance coming across the night desert as he rode away that night."

She shuddered.

"Yes," said Peter. "That was why Parmelee rode the map. He had probably ridden back to some other settlement after shooting Hennepin's horse in some gully and he wanted to wipe out all evidence. For months he rode the map, that, burned and scorched inside—to me you."

"To find out whether I had been told anything about Hennepin's destination? And then when he wasn't sure—when there was that scrap of paper not accounted for—Peter, it is too horrible; he proposed that strange marriage agreement in order to go away and take me with him. He was afraid I might remember some word—give some clue."

"No," replied Peter. "It was that of course. But that was not all. The spark of real man that you saw in him was there, Brena. Terror put it out at last, but the real tragedy of Parmelee was that he had that redeeming spark."

He waited for her to look up again; she had been staring down at the yellow-gray dust.

"I suppose you can see," he went on, "I suppose you can see now what was in his mind. Two pictures. One was the picture of Jim Hennepin alive—that great muscular athlete who drank hard, who had the false traditions of the South, the love of death on his lips, the degenerate temper, the sly smiling ways of carrying a vengeance through. He saw him escaping from the desert. Brena—heaven knows how—but escaping by some desperate effort, some chance, some miracle, some way that Parmelee's brain could not conceive, but yet couldn't be put out of range of possibility. He saw Hennepin seeking him. Yes, he saw it—a picture—a thousand haunting pictures—Hennepin with his malicious, desperate, haunting eyes and his terrible muscles. He saw him smiling along the trail for his quarry. He saw him walking about a quiet picture gallery, and suddenly seeing your portrait and

realizing that Parmelee had taken you, turn red with renewed wrath which would send him out for a knife."

"At last that imaginary Hennepin became almost a reality," said Brena.

"He shot at him once—at a reflection in a piece of glass. He kept Paul because Paul was a brute who would fight. He was afraid Hennepin would send some assassin to get employment as a servant. He never knew when Hennepin might come—and kill."

"But he saw the other picture too. He saw the buzzards hovering over what was left of Hennepin. He saw a white skeleton grinning up at the sunlit sky and at the stars, Brena. That's what he saw. And some day some one would somehow come there. Perhaps some one had been there already. Perhaps at the very minute a prospector, dirty and unshaved, or some accursed archeological explorer from a university was in that very town where they had bought the horses and was telling of the skeleton and of finding the skeleton of the riderless horse with the bit still held between the white teeth. He might have that bit in his pocket. Some one recognizes it. Somehow the chain once started never ends until—"

"There comes a hand upon the shoulder," said Brena, as if in a dream, "and a voice saying, 'We have looked a long time for you.'"

"Yes. There wasn't one fear," Peter said, marking two lines in the sand with his forefinger. "There were two fears. They fought each other and their battleground was Parmelee's soul. It was trampled into a wallow of terror, of questioning, of doubt. Do you know, Brena, that somehow there creeps into me a great pity for him?"

"If he had been able to put his finger upon some button that would have blown him to bits he would have taken that way," she said. "But he had an exaggerated instinct for self-preservation. It threw him back from any approach to suicide."

Peter, getting up, came to her and put his hand upon her shoulder as if to give her strength. She had spoken with a voice too evenly measured to deceive him as to the strain she felt. It had been a long pull for her, he thought. The last steps, though they might lead out into the sunlight of freedom, were upon rough ground—rough even for a man. He was wondering how he could save her from pain. He wanted to have this surgery over, and to have it over there was only one way.

"It was inevitable that he would come here—in the end," he said. "He had to see. He had covered his eyes with a cowardly process of trying to make you believe that some mystery that clung to you was the cause of them. He began to fear disclosure."

He feared that he would allow you to know in some mad moment. He was coming to the end of his rope. "Yes, the end of his rope."

Peter stopped and looked up at the ugly symbol of Kukulcan carved on the rocks.

"He procured a copy of Father Carlos' map a second time," he said. "He had to have it to find the way. After four terrible years he revisited the Pueblo Mescalero, two hundred miles from nowhere. It called him back. He had to come."

He stopped again, looking at Brena, whose palms were pressed against her knees, whose face with its wonderful profile was still held uplifted looking into the vast distances of the desert, her lips closed, her eyes unseeing, like some carved diety who had been sitting thus for centuries.

"He bought a high-powered car, Brena," said Peter. "And all alone he came."

"And where is he now?" she cried out at last, in sudden disclosure of her pain. "Do you know? Where is he now?"

She looked searchingly at Peter's sun-bronzed face, where upon the surface of youth lines of strength had been engraved by war, and lines of tenderness perhaps by a great new understanding of love and life.

"He is here again," he answered. "He is here. . . . Do you understand?"

CHAPTER XIX

"I understand," said Brena. "Then come with me," Peter said, holding out his hands. "I will show you all that remains—the record—the story written on the sand and dust."

He led her again toward the charred bones; he found no resistance in her.

"Look there, Brena. Do you see the footprints? Here are yours and mine. But look again on the sand. There are others, too. A thin veil of dust is over them. They move here and there; they cross-cross and move away. They are the footprints of Compton Parmelee. He has come to stand facing down at the white skeleton—white as oyster shells."

"Blackened," she said. "Wait!" Peter said. "There are the spots where he stood looking down. He had his answer; no living Jim Hennepin of Virginia would ever fill him with lead. And as he stood, Brena, perhaps gazing down for a long, long time—because his footsteps are lost in that stew of impressions—he was filled with all the concentrated terror that I suppose only a murderer can know. He went into a crazy wild panic of fear. These bones were his—the grinning skull. They must be hidden."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because he has moved toward this old well. He reached the stone well curb. He sprang up. Do you see the marks? He found the mouth choked with massive blocks. Nothing could be hidden there! His track moved back."

"Go on," said Brena.

"Now he goes running out along the walls searching for something. Look! Here! He ran out along the base of the wall searching."

"For what?"

"For bits of wood—for anything that would burn—for fuel. He must have a funeral pyre. He has been crazed by fear again. But he finds nothing. Brena. There is no wood here, no paper, no grass. There's nothing but sand and stone. Let him run about till he drops. There is no mercy for him. Nothing that will burn. Nothing within a half a hundred miles. Like Hennepin, he too now screams and the scream comes back from the cliff with a terrible mockery."

(To be continued next week.)

GRADE SCHOOL

The following poem was written by Kenneth Parker, a student in the fifth grade:

"The Composer"

Once there was a boy Handel, Who went upstairs with a candle, While all was quiet, still and calm, He used to play the whole night long.

He played the organ at church one day, Which made the people ever so gay. The Weissenfels, Duke liked the little boy, Which made him oh! so full of joy!

The organ again and again he played Till the Duke became so much amazed To know such a dear little boy could play

The organ, from morn till the end of day. At last the Duke to Handel did say, "You shall have a master to teach you to play."

So Handel to study did go with a zest, And composed many pieces which rank with the best.

Fred J. Tooze

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This poem came from the pen of James Filley, a student in the fifth grade:

The Child Handel

There was a small child About ten years of age, He played an old organ Just as though on a stage.

He climbed in the garret Every night, so I'm told, And played on the organ Till at length he grew bold. He forgot about quiet And played with his might; Now low and now high he tuned, Played all the night.

His sound-asleep parents

aroused by the noise Way up the steep stairs in the garret did go. They found their small child And a light burning low.

His father to a great renowned teacher did go And took the small child along with him too.

Now a great music composer is he, Th's child I have told of, to you.

To Trade—One ton Ford truck to trade for Ford touring. C. L. Dempsey, Rt. 4, Beaverton. Adv p 24

Mr. and Mrs. Walter L. Kramer and two children are visiting their uncle, Lloyd Kramer. They are from Marion, Iowa, and will make Oregon their home if they like the climate, etc.

In a race with the stork to the bedside of Mrs. Edna Hulbert Johnson at the Woman's Hospital in Portland Dr. Mason came in 4 laps behind the stork. The stork beat him badly and left a 9 pound baby girl.

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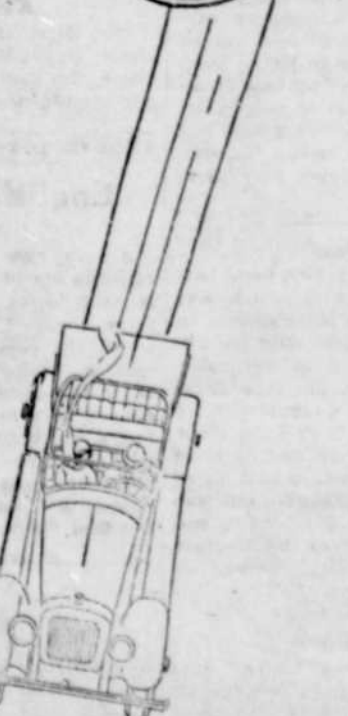
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