

The HIDDEN DOOR

BY FRANK L. PACKARD

SYNOPSIS: Colin Hewitt, writer of detective fiction, has got himself into a tangle more exciting than any he ever imagined. Reddy Turner, crook, has been killed in his apartment by the Mask, underworld boss, whom Reddy himself was trailing to avenge his sister. Colin had promised to deliver a mysterious letter for Reddy should this happen. Although he has been warned by the Mask not to meddle, Colin has gone to Reddy's old room and has found the letter in a curtain pole. Now he stands, holding the pole over his head—trapped by one of the Mask's killers.

Chapter Nine

FLIGHT

LOOK here, I want to be frank with you," Colin confided earnestly. "You've got me at your mercy anyhow, so just a moment. I had a telephone call from the Mask tonight. He said he was satisfied that I knew nothing more about Reddy Turner than anybody else did, and that I was out of the picture so far as he was concerned; but in practically the same breath, I have to admit, he warned me not to meddle in the affair.

"What I don't understand is why, if he thought I knew nothing that would be of any value to him, he still kept a watch over me; or why, if he thought I did know something, he should warn me not to meddle, when, if I had followed his advice he would have defeated his own ends."

The man's lips in the moonlight, practically all that Colin could see of the other's face, widened in a wicked grin.

"God, you're a fool!" he jeered pityingly. "It's like taking candy from a kid. I'll tell you. If you were okay, you were okay, and that's all there was to it. If you weren't, that warning was a hurry-up invite to sit in and show your hand. Well, you fell for it—hard. That's the answer."

"I must confess that thought crossed my mind," Colin admitted; "but—"

"Never mind the rest!" the other cut in roughly. "I've had enough of your cursed jaw! You've talked a lot about the Mask. Well, I'll tell you something now. He had a hunch that Reddy left some little memento behind him. But it wasn't never found—until now. And now you're going to come across my buck!"

"But if I can't?" protested Colin.

"If I tell you I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about?"

The man took a step forward—threateningly.

"You saw Reddy put on the spot, didn't you?" he rasped. "You know what happened to you once before, don't you? Try any of that guff on me and I'll plug you where you stand!"

Colin shook his head judicially. If he could blind the man a little, draw him on a bit!

"Oh!" Colin drawled insolently. "I see! Well, you wouldn't—er—plug me. I'm calling your bluff."

"Is that so?" There was a cold fury in the man's voice now.

"Yes, that's so!" mimicked Colin. "Shall I tell you why? If this absurd ringmaster of yours with the lurid name believes that I possess some coveted secret or know the whereabouts of some memento, as you call it, that Reddy has left behind, I wouldn't be much good as a source of information if I were dead—would I?"

"I'll take a chance on that!" rapped out the other. "I know all I need to know now without you having to tell me about it. Reddy hid something in this room, and the hiding place had something to do with those curtains or that pole, or you wouldn't have been monkeying with them. When I came into this room you weren't taking that curtain pole down, you were lifting it back into place. You'd got what you came for, that's all."

"My eye!" exclaimed Colin ironically. "That's marvelous! Imagine thinking that out all by yourself! But in case you were wrong what would the Mask say if you killed the goose that might have laid a golden egg?"

With an oath, his lips working, the man thrust himself angrily forward.

"Get down off that chair and hand over!" he ordered hoarsely. "And be damned quick about it! I've had enough from you!"

While the fraction of a second slipped away, Colin measured the distance with his eyes. The man stood some three feet from him now. The trap was baited. Perhaps too well baited. The revolver's muzzle was scarcely more than twelve inches from the pit of his stomach. An even chance? It wasn't that. It was just a chance. The only one.

"All right," said Colin resignedly. "Look out, then, while I drop this thing."

The revolver muzzle strayed for an instant, as the man moved slightly to one side—and in that instant, Colin leaped. The brain registers with incredible speed. In mid-air he saw the flash, heard the roar of the revolver shot, knew that it had missed because the tumbling portières had engulfed the other's hand as he had hoped they might; and then, his hurrying weight backed by every ounce of his strength behind the blow, the brass pole, where it lay bare for a foot or two between his outspread hands, crashed with terrific force full into the man's face—and Colin lay sprawled atop him, a smother of portières around them.

There came a choked cry, a moan, then silence. Colin got to his knees and pushed the pole and portières to one side. He could see the other's face now, and for a moment he studied it intently. No, he had never seen the other before, that was certain, and no more than he had expected; but it was equally certain now that he would not fail to recognize him anywhere if he ever saw him again.

A minute had passed. How long would it be before the other regained consciousness? He went swiftly through the man's pockets. Some money, not an inconsiderable sum; keys, some of them of the skeleton variety; cigarettes; the usual odds and ends; no letters or papers of any description—except a small card in one of the vest pockets.

COLIN lighted another match and examined this. Scrawled in pencil he read: "W.P. 9.30 tonight." Not very informative! He replaced the card and the other articles in the pockets in which he had found them.

Anything else? His eyes searched around the room. Oh, yes! The revolver lying there on the floor where it had fallen from the man's hand! He reached over, scooped the weapon, slipped it into his own pocket, rose to his feet—and a minute later was out on the street.

Here Colin hesitated for an instant, then started briskly in the direction of Sixth Avenue. Fifth Avenue was virtually deserted at this hour, whereas, falling a taxi, Sixth Avenue offered him a choice between the elevated and the surface line to take him—where? He was suddenly not at all sure. Perhaps he had better walk a bit—through the thing out in his mind.

Colin's brows puckered. Not so good! As between himself and the Mask now, the issue was irrevocably joined. Pursuit! What did immunity from immediate pursuit matter if he now went back home? Long before daylight he would be under surveillance again. As well offer himself meekly for the slaughter to begin with! But to be driven out of his own district by this accursed Mask, or anybody else, for that matter! His gorge rose defiantly. The red flushed his cheeks, and his hands clenched.

His one thought while in there had been to make his escape if possible from that room—what the aftermath might be had not entered his mind then. But he was faced with it now.

"I'm in a bit of a jam all right!" A mirkless smile pulled down the corners of his lips. Times without number when at work on a story, he had racked his brains for a situation involving a deliberate case of homicide which was at one and the same time so wholly and obviously justifiable that no reader could have any grounds for quibbling with it.

Well, here was one ready to hand. His own life being in the balance, he had only to go back to that room, bump off the Mask's tool before the man had a chance to communicate with his chief, and so far as he, Colin, was concerned, it would then be as though he had never left his home that night.

Absurd! He wasn't a murderer, no matter how thick the whitewash. He was merely an ass. Damn his imagination! This wasn't fiction! He was up against stark reality this time!

He reached the corner of Sixth Avenue. A taxi cruising by passed unheeded; so did a surface car.

Colin started along the avenue in a downtown direction. "He who fights and runs away will live to fight another day."

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Colin's eyes, tomorrow, decides his future course.

POST PLANNING MORE EXPLOITS

Eager already to realize his dreams of planes traveling at dizzy speed in

the "thin air" of high altitude, Wiley Post pronounces himself completely recovered from the severe strain of his recent solo flight around the world. Veteran aviation men marveled at the physical endurance shown by Post in flying alone around the world in seven days, 18 hours and 49½ minutes. Asked about his smoking preference by an interviewer, Post said:

"I have smoked Camels for a long time, so I don't worry about my smoking interfering with healthy nerves."

DEER LODGE, Mont.—(UP)—A single bolt of lightning killed 150 sheep during a storm near Twin Bridges, Mont. The lightning struck a tree under which the sheep had huddled for protection, and all were killed.

RABBIT THIEF GETS QUANTITY OF GERMS

LINCOLN, Neb., Aug. 7.—(AP)—The theft of 33 rabbits and guinea pigs, including some inoculated with dis-

ease, had Lincoln police and health authorities on the alert today trying to save the thief from harm. Eaten, the animals might spread tuberculosis or arthritis, medical authorities said, and in any event their loss would upset important experiments.

Phone 842. We'll haul away your refuse. City Sanitary Service.

Knives Made From Hazora, MONTREAL, Canada.—(UP)—A safety razor blade manufacturing company here has solved the problem of "what to do with old razor blades." The company is making "utility knives" out of them and giving the knives away to customers.

Auto glass, plate and shatter-proof, Brill Metal Works.

'SMATTER POP—

By C. M. PAYNE



SNAPSHOTS OF A BOY ON THE DAY OF A JOURNEY

BY GLUTAS WILLIAMS



TAILSPIN TOMMY—Ferd Invites Trouble!

