



MURDER MAGIC

By ROBERT WALLACE

The Great Gadsden Famous Magician Is Suddenly Confronted by a Grim Murder Mystery Far More Baffling Than His Stage Tricks!

JOHN CARTER known professionally as "The Great Gadsden," halted and stood motionless when he reached the open door of his dressing room. His strong face was expressionless, but his keen eyes narrowed as he gazed at the man who sat looking at him. His visitor reminded Carter of a large and repulsive toad.

"I was under the impression that I locked my dressing room door when I left after the afternoon performance," Carter said in the deep musical voice that was part of the personality that made the Great Gadsden one of the most popular

magicians in show business. "May I ask what you are doing here?"

"Waiting for you," said the toad-like individual. "I want five thousand dollars. Froggy Taunton is the name."

"Five thousand dollars—interesting." John Carter stepped into the dressing room and closed the door behind him. He was an impressive figure as he stood there. A tall man dressed in evening clothes with a silk hat on his head. "And what makes you think I will give you that much money, Mr.—er—Taunton?"

“You will—if you want to live,” “Froggy” Taunton said sadly. He was, it appeared, a lugubrious sort of man. “I opened your dressing room door with a passkey,” he remarked, apparently as an after-thought.

Carter did not speak. He lifted his silk topper from his head and placed it carefully on a corner of the dressing table. The lights that bordered the big mirror were quite bright. The Great Gadsden then drew off his gloves and removed his dark Chesterfield.

Froggy Taunton sat watching in fascination, for Carter managed to make quite an impressive ceremony of taking off his things. The magician’s evening clothes were immaculate. His white shirt front gleamed in the light. He touched his neat little black mustache as he gazed thoughtfully at some small dark spots on the floor of the dressing room.

“You plan to murder me if I don’t give you five thousand dollars?” Carter asked casually. “Is that it, Taunton?”

“Don’t be silly.” Taunton looked like he might cry at any moment. “I want five grand for protecting your life. I happen to know that someone plans to kill you before morning.”

“Oh, I see.” Carter glanced at his wristwatch. It was just twenty minutes before the evening performance of the variety show started and he was not only the feature act, but also master of ceremonies. “Then you’re a private detective, Mr. Taunton?”

“Not exactly,” said Froggy Taunton. “I was a bodyguard for a Big Shot up to six months ago, but Marty got careless. He didn’t need me any longer.”

“How unfortunate.” Carter thrust a towel into his collar and seated himself at the dressing table. “You wouldn’t care to tell me who plans to kill me before morning?”

THE toad-like man shrugged. “I’d like to tell you—but I can’t.” Taunton sounded sincere about it. “This evening I was having a bite in a joint near the theater where most of the actors around here eat. I hear a guy and a dame talking in the next booth, so I listen.”

“It does while away the time,” said Carter, as Taunton paused. “Go on, Froggy.”

“The guy says, ‘So we have to get rid of the Great Gadsden before morning. If we don’t it will spoil our plans.’ The dame doesn’t say anything. The waiter comes to my booth and starts chinning with me. I look for the guy and the dame a few minutes later but they’ve gone without me seeing what they look like. So I figure you need protection.”

“Jolly decent of you and all that,” said the Great Gadsden ironically, a stick of flesh-tint grease paint appearing in his hand. “But I’m afraid I don’t feel your protection is worth five thousand, Froggy.”

“I wouldn’t use that grease paint,” said Taunton sadly. “It is probably poisoned.”

Carter hesitated, then slowly lowered the stick without touching it to his face. The toad-like individual sounded as though he knew what he was talking about. The Great Gadsden felt an instinctive warning of danger stealing over him. At first he had thought the former bodyguard was merely trying to work some sort of a racket—but now John Carter began to wonder.

“A guy came in here and borrowed your lining pencil before you arrived,” said Taunton. “Guess he was the first actor to show up tonight. I told him you asked me to wait for you in your dressing room. Said for me to tell you that Tony Fairmont had borrowed the pencil. He—”

Froggy broke off abruptly as there came a knock on the door of the dressing room. Carter went to the door and opened it. Nancy Gardner, the Great Gadsden's slender blond assistant stood there dressed in street clothes, an expression of great anxiety on her pretty face.

"What's the matter, Nancy?" asked Carter.

"It's Tony Fairmont, the high wire act," said Nancy. "I just passed his dressing room. The door was open and he was lying there on the floor. I—I think he is dead!"

"We'll go see." Carter saw Nancy looking over his shoulder at Froggy Taunton, who had risen to his feet. "Miss Gardner, this is Mr. Taunton who feels he may be of assistance to me."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Gardner," said Taunton as Nancy nodded to him. "Let's take a gander at the stiff."

John Carter led the way to Tony Fairmont's dressing room with Nancy and Taunton close behind him. Fairmont was a dark-haired, wiry looking middle-aged man who was one of the greatest wire walking acts in vaudeville. He was lying on his back on the floor and it only required a brief examination for Carter to be sure that Fairmont was dead.

In the right hand of the corpse was still clutched the lining pencil he had borrowed from the Great Gadsden's dressing room. Carter stood up and glanced at Taunton and the girl. The magician's gaze centered on the collar of Froggy's soft white shirt. There was a black mark on the left side of the collar.

"We'd better send for the police," Carter said. "This is murder!"

"What's going on here?" demanded a gruff voice from the corridor. "All I have is trouble—the stage door keeper gets sick—and is away for nearly an hour. The

place might have been robbed. Now what's this?"

A thin gray-haired man shoved past Froggy and the girl and stepped into the dressing room. He frowned as he saw the body lying on the floor. John Carter nodded as he recognized the gray-haired man. It was Fred Buckley, the stage manager of the show.

"Fairmont is dead, Fred," Carter said. "And it looks like murder."

"Murder! How awful!" The stage manager looked anxiously at the magician. "Who did it, John?"

"I don't know." Carter glanced down at the corpse. "Good grief!"

For the first time Carter noticed a little spot of blood that had half dried on the floor near the dead man's left shoulder. The Great Gadsden leaned down and turned the corpse over. There was a thin dagger sticking in Tony Fairmont's back. Evidently it had pierced his heart.

"You wait in your dressing room, Nancy," Carter said. "Taunton, you stay here while I go phone the police. You better come with me, Buckley."

Nancy Gardner left hastily. The Great Gadsden and Buckley stepped out of the dressing room leaving Taunton inside with the body. Froggy Taunton looked quite unhappy. Carter quietly closed the door. He glanced at his wrist watch. There was still eight minutes before the show started.

"I had lunch with Tony Fairmont today," said Buckley as he walked along the corridor beside Carter. "He was worried. Told me that when vaudeville went on the rocks a few years back he was desperate and he worked with a tough gang for awhile. Racketeers of some sort, led by a man named Marty Logan. He left them and they didn't bother him. But within the last few months the police rounded up Logan and some of the rest."

“And the gang was afraid that Tony Fairmont might know enough to talk?” asked Carter. “Is that it, Fred?”

“I guess so.” Buckley frowned. “That may be why he was killed.”

AT THIS moment they reached a phone booth. Carter called the police and reported what had happened. Buckley waited outside the booth.

“We’ll give the show, of course,” said the stage manager when Carter joined him. “But we’ll have to fill in for Fairmont’s act.”

John Carter nodded. He felt old and worried. It seemed strange he should feel that way, for he had been looking forward to his birthday tomorrow. After all he had never considered forty so very ancient. He smiled as he thought of Nancy. Maybe that old one about a woman not being able to keep a secret was true.

Buckley left him and Carter went back to Fairmont’s dressing room alone. The other performers did not know anything had happened. Froggy Taunton was still with the corpse.

“Who was that guy you called Fred?” Taunton asked.

“Fred Buckley, the stage manager of this theatre,” answered Carter, “Why?”

“He’s the guy who told the dame about getting rid of you by morning,” said Froggy. “I recognized his voice.”

“Let’s go back to my dressing room and talk this over before the police get here,” said Carter thoughtfully. “You’ve got me wondering about Buckley now, Froggy.”

“I told you that you needed protection.”

They went back to Carter’s dressing room, leaving Fairmont’s door closed. It was time for the show to start. Carter put on his Chesterfield and then turned his back on Taunton for a moment as he

picked up his silk hat and something out of a drawer at the same time. The object vanished inside of the hat as Carter placed the topper on his head. .

“You planned it rather well, Froggy,” he said. “You are no longer Marty Logan’s bodyguard for the simple reason that he is in jail. But you are still loyal to your boss and, like the rest of your gang, got afraid that Tony Fairmont might talk—after having been with the gang.”

“Yeah?” Froggy Taunton’s expression changed. He looked more sinister than tearful. “Go on.”

“You must have been hanging around that restaurant near the theatre hoping to find a way to get a chance to kill Fairmont. Then you heard Buckley and the dame talking, saying they had to get rid of me before morning.”

“For a guy who may be bumped off you don’t worry much,” interrupted Taunton. “I did hear Buckley say that.”

“I don’t doubt it.” The Great Gadsden smiled. “And he was talking to Miss Gardner at the time. You see she told me about it before we came to the theatre tonight. But let’s stick to you. You decided that if you could sell me the idea of hiring you as a bodyguard that would give you a chance to be back-stage and kill Fairmont.”

“Why, you talk like I did kill that guy,” said Taunton.

“You did,” said Carter. “Killed him when Tony came into my dressing room tonight to borrow the lining pencil. He picked up the pencil. Then you grabbed him and stabbed him with the dagger. I know he was stabbed here for there are still a few drops of dried blood on the floor. The stage door man was sick—there was no one in the corridor—so you carried the body to Fairmont’s dressing room and left it lying on the floor.”

“How do you know?” demanded Taunton.

“Because Tony was lying on his back,” said Carter. “A man who was stabbed in the back would normally fall face downward. So the body must have been moved. And the blood spots are here.”

“Aw, you’ve got me all wrong,” protested Froggy. “Didn’t I warn you that stick of flesh tint was poisoned? Haven’t I been trying to protect you?”

“That stick wasn’t poisoned,” said Carter. “I took it out of my pocket, though you didn’t see me do it. No one could have poisoned that. I merely wanted to see what you would do.”

“But what about Buckley and Miss Gardner wanting to get rid of you before morning?” demanded Taunton. “Are you gonna let them bump you off?”

“They’re not going to bump me off,” said Carter, his eyes narrowing as a gun appeared in Froggy’s hand. “Tomorrow is my birthday. They merely wanted to get rid of me long enough to arrange a surprise party for me tonight after the show.”

“I’m getting out of here,” growled Taunton. “You know too much!”

Carter’s right foot suddenly shot up and kicked the gun out of Froggy’s hand. At the same time the magician barely seemed to touch his high silk hat, but there was an automatic in his hand covering the toadlike man.

“I think the police have arrived,” said Carter as he heard voices out in the corridor. “So I’ll turn you over to them.”

Nancy opened the door of the dressing room clad in her costume for the show and there were police behind her. A few crisp words of explanation from John Carter and the police grabbed Froggy Taunton.

“You’ll find that black mark on the left side of his collar comes from the lining pencil in Fairmont’s hand,” said Carter as they took the prisoner away.

“On stage, John,” ordered Nancy. “The show has started and it is time for your entrance.”

“All right.” Carter put down the gun and settled his hat on his head. “Our friend Taunton tried murder magic—but he was strictly an amateur.”

“You’re a swell boss,” said Nancy as she hurried him toward the stage. “And I adore you—but at times I’m afraid you are strictly ham!”