

CHAPTER XIV

A COOL ENCOUNTER

On leaving the house Mershone buttoned his overcoat tightly up to his chin, for the weather was cold and raw, and then shot a quick glance around him. Diana's suspect was still lounging on the corner. Charlie had little doubt he was watching the house and the movements of its in-mates--a bad sign, he reflected, with a frown. Otherwise the street seemed deserted.

He had dismissed the cab on his arrival, so now he stepped out and walked briskly around the corner, swinging his cane jauntily and looking very unlike a fugitive. In the next block he passed a youth who stood earnestly examining the conventional display in a druggist's window.

Mershone, observing this individual, gave a start, but did not alter his pace. It was the same pale, red-haired boy he had noticed twice before at the hotel. In his alert, calculating mind there was no coincidence in this meeting. Before he had taken six more steps Mershone realized the exact situation.

At the next crossing he stopped and waited patiently for a car. Up the street he still saw the youth profoundly interested in drugs--a class of merchandise that seldom calls for such close inspection. The car arrived

and carried Mershone away. It also left the red-haired youth at his post before the window. Yet on arriving at the Bruxtelle some twenty minutes later Charlie found this same queer personage occupying a hotel chair in the lobby and apparently reading a newspaper with serious attention.

He hesitated a moment, then quietly walked over to a vacant chair beside the red-haired one and sat down. The youth turned the paper, glanced casually at his neighbor, and continued reading.

"A detective, I believe," said Mershone, in a low, matter of fact tone.

"Who? me?" asked Fogerty, lowering the paper.

"Yes. Your age deceived me for a time. I imagined you were a newsboy or a sporting kid from the country; but now I observe you are older than you appear. All sorts of people seem to drift into the detective business. I suppose your present occupation is shadowing me."

Fogerty smiled. The smile was genuine.

"I might even be a lawyer, sir," he replied, "and in that case I should undertake to cross-examine you, and ask your reasons for so queer a charge."

"Or you might be a transient guest at this hotel," the other returned, in the same bantering tone, "for I saw you at breakfast and luncheon.

Pretty fair chef here, isn't he? But you didn't stick to that part, you know. You followed me up-town, where I made a call on a relative, and you studied the colored globes in a druggist's window when I went away. I wonder why people employ inexperienced boys in such important matters. In your case, my lad, it was easy enough to detect the detective. You even took the foolish chance of heading me off, and returned to this hotel before I did. Now, then, is my charge unfounded?"

"Why should you be under the surveillance of a detective?" asked Fogerty, slowly.

"Really, my boy, I cannot say. There was an unpleasant little affair last night at the Waldorf, in which I was not personally concerned, but suffered, nevertheless. An officious deputy caused my arrest and I spent an unpleasant night in jail. There being nothing in the way of evidence against me I was released this morning, and now I find a detective shadowing me. What can it all mean, I wonder? These stupid blunders are very annoying to the plain citizen, who, however innocent, feels himself the victim of a conspiracy."

"I understand you, sir," said Fogerty, drily.

For some moments Mershon now remained silent. Then he asked; "What are your instructions concerning me?"

To his surprise the boy made a simple, frank admission.

"I'm to see you don't get into more mischief, sir."

"And how long is this nonsense to continue?" demanded Mershone, showing a touch of anger for the first time.

"Depends on yourself, Mr. Mershone; I'm no judge, myself. I'm so young--and inexperienced."

"Who is your employer?"

"Oh, I'm just sent out by an agency."

"Is it a big paying proposition?" asked Charlie, eyeing the diffident youth beside him critically, as if to judge his true caliber.

"Not very big. You see, if I'd been a better detective you'd never have spotted me so quickly."

"I suppose money counts with you, though, as it does with everyone else in the world?"

"Of course, sir. Every business is undertaken to make money."

Mershone drew his chair a little nearer.

"I need a clever detective myself," he announced, confidentially. "I'm anxious to discover what enemy is persecuting me in this way. Would it--er--be impossible for me to employ you to--er--look after my interests?"

Fogerty was very serious.

"You see, sir," he responded, "if I quit this job they may not give me another. In order to be a successful detective one must keep in the good graces of the agencies."

"That's easy enough," asserted Mershone. "You may pretend to keep this job, but go home and take life easy. I'll send you a daily statement of what I've been doing, and you can fix up a report to your superior from that. In addition to this you can put in a few hours each day trying to find out who is annoying me in this rascally manner, and for this service I'll pay you five times the agency price. How does that proposition strike you, Mr.--"

"Riordan. Me name's Riordan," said Fogerty, with a smile. "No, Mr. Mershone," shaking his head gravely, "I can't see my way to favor you. It's an easy job now, and I'm afraid to take chances with a harder one."

Something in the tone nettled Mershone.

"But the pay," he suggested.

"Oh, the pay. If I'm a detective fifty years, I'll make an easy two thousand a year. That's a round hundred thousand. Can you pay me that much to risk my future career as a detective?"

Mershone bit his lip. This fellow was not so simple, after all, boyish as he seemed. And, worse than all, he had a suspicion the youngster was baiting him, and secretly laughing at his offers of bribery.

"They will take you off the job, now that I have discovered your identity," he asserted, with malicious satisfaction.

"Oh, no," answered Fogerty; "they won't do that. This little interview merely simplifies matters. You see, sir, I'm an expert at disguises. That's my one great talent, as many will testify. But you will notice that in undertaking this job I resorted to no disguise at all. You see me as nature made me--and 't was a poor job, I'm thinking."

"Why were you so careless?"

"It wasn't carelessness; it was premeditated. There's not the slightest objection to your knowing me. My only business is to keep you in sight, and I can do that exactly as well as Riordan as I could by disguising myself."

Mershone had it on his tongue's end to ask what they expected to discover by shadowing him, but decided it was as well not to open an avenue for the discussion of Miss Merrick's disappearance. So, finding he could not bribe the youthful detective or use him in any way to his advantage, he closed the interview by rising.

"I'm going to my room to write some letters," said he, with a yawn.

"Would you like to read them before they are mailed?"

Again Fogerty laughed in his cheerful, boyish way.

"You'd make a fine detective yourself, Mr. Mershone," he declared, "and I advise you to consider the occupation. I've a notion it's safer, and better pay, than your present line."

Charlie scowled at the insinuation, but walked away without reply.

Fogerty eyed his retreating figure a moment, gave a slight shrug and resumed his newspaper.

Day followed day without further event, and gradually Mershone came to feel himself trapped. Wherever he might go he found Fogerty on duty, unobtrusive, silent and watchful. It was very evident that he was waiting for the young man to lead him to the secret hiding place of Louise Merrick.

In one way this constant surveillance was a distinct comfort to Charlie

Mershone, for it assured him that the retreat of Louise was still undiscovered. But he must find some way to get rid of his "shadow," in order that he might proceed to carry out his plans concerning the girl. During his enforced leisure he invented a dozen apparently clever schemes, only to abandon them again as unpractical.

One afternoon, while on a stroll, he chanced to meet the bruiser who had attacked Arthur Weldon at the Waldorf, and been liberally paid by Mershone for his excellent work. He stopped the man, and glancing hastily around found that Fogerty was a block in the rear.

"Listen," he said; "I want your assistance, and if you're quick and sure there is a pot of money, waiting for you."

"I need it, Mr. Mershone," replied the man, grinning.

"There's a detective following me; he's down the street there--a mere boy--just in front of that tobacco store. See him?"

"Sure I see him. It's Fogerty."

"His name is Riordan."

"No; it's Fogerty. He's no boy, sir, but the slickest 'tec' in the city, an' that's goin' some, I can tell you."

"Well, you must get him, whoever he is. Drag him away and hold him for three hours--two--one. Give me a chance to slip him; that's all. Can you do it? I'll pay you a hundred for the job."

"It's worth two hundred, Mr. Mershone. It isn't safe to fool with Fogerty."

"I'll make it two hundred."

"Then rest easy," said the man. "I know the guy, and how to handle him. You just watch him like he's watching you, Mr. Mershone, and if anything happens you skip as lively as a flea. I can use that two hundred in my business."

Then the fellow passed on, and Fogerty was still so far distant up the street that neither of them could see the amused smile upon his thin face.