

Doughty Francis Worcester

The Bradys Beyond Their Depth: or, The Great Swamp Mystery



Francis Doughty

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CHAPTER I. CAUGHT IN THE ACT

"Help! Police! Murder!"

It was a dark, rainy night in March when this thrilling cry, in a man's voice, came from a house in West Thirty-sixth street, New York.

Two detectives were passing along from Seventh avenue, toward Broadway, when the wild appeal brought them to a sudden pause.

"Hark, Old King Brady!" one of them exclaimed. "Did you hear that cry?"

"Somebody in distress, Harry," replied the tall, gaunt old man, as he shot a keen glance around. "This is a dangerous neighborhood."

The stylishly-dressed youth of twenty nodded, felt to see if he had a revolver in his pocket, and pointed at an undertaker's wagon standing in front of one of a row of houses opposite.

"Queer hour for that fellow to be doing business!" he remarked. "There isn't a light in any of that row of houses, yet the undertaker must be in one of them."

"Help! Help!" came the mysterious voice in smothered tones once more.

This time the Secret Service men located the sound.

It came from the house before which the wagon stood.

"By Jove, the undertaker must be making a job for himself!" exclaimed Old King Brady, pushing his big white hat back, and exposing a strong-featured, smooth-shaven face, in the light of a street lamp.

He unbuttoned the old blue frock-coat he wore, disclosing a standing collar and stock, drew out his watch and fob, and added:

"It's just eight o'clock."

"Shall we go over and investigate those cries?" asked Harry Brady, the youth.

"No, not yet. Get in this area. I see the house door opening."

They glided swiftly into the area of a flat house, and keenly watched proceedings.

Old and Young King Brady, as the pair were called, were the two most celebrated detectives in the Secret Service. They were not related.

On the contrary, they came of different families. But, since the time James Brady took an interest in Harry, and taught him his profession, they had been partners, and made themselves dreaded by all evil doers.

Both were shrewd, brave and daring to a fault, and Harry's ambition made him strive to excel his tutor in every way.

The boy was first to catch view of a man in the open doorway opposite, and he dimly observed that he was tall, thin, dressed in black, wore a high hat, and had a mustache and a pair of bushy side-whiskers.

"Looks like an undertaker," Young King Brady commented in a whisper.

"He's carrying something," added the old detective. "Ah – it's a coffin, ain't it?"

"A wooden box shaped like one. There's another man on – the other end of it," said Harry, whose interest was aroused. "They're coming out."

The second man was a short, roughly-clad negro.

As they staggered under the weight of the box, the detectives inferred that it was heavy. The Bradys could now see a rope tied around it.

The two men carried it down to the wagon, the back doors of which stood open.

Just as they shoved the box into the vehicle, Old King Brady darted across the street, and tapped the tall, thin man on the arm.

He gave a start, a cry of alarm, and wheeled around, glaring at the officer.

"What have you got in that box?" demanded the detective, abruptly.

"My dear sir, really, that is none of your business," replied the other.

"You are mistaken," said Old King Brady, exhibiting his badge. "I am an officer. We heard cries of murder emanate from that building, and this is a singular hour for an undertaker to be removing a corpse."

The tall, thin man nodded, and smiled blandly.

Taking something from his pocket, he handed it to the officer.

"My card, sir," he said, politely. "Name of Solomon Gloom. This is a case of smallpox. House has been quarantined. Here's my Health Board permit to remove the corpse. The rule is to take 'em at night."

He handed over a permit, but it was too dark for Old King Brady to read it.

"Well," said the officer, hesitatingly, "that part may be all right. Who is dead?"

"Albert Reid, the old cotton broker, sir. Got him in a metallic casket in this box. Going to take him to the crematory at Fresh Pond."

"Did he live here?"

"Yes, sir. You can get the particulars inside, if you like."

"How do you account for those yells for help?"

"Came from old Reid's crazy son. He didn't want us to cart away the body. Had a regular fight with him to drive him away. He yelled and fought like a tiger. Really, I thought he'd arouse the whole neighborhood. Had to lock him in a closet."

"Who's in the house with him?"

"No one. We are coming back later, to release him."

"Just wait here. I'll go in and question him."

"Certainly, my dear sir, certainly. Sim, wait in the wagon for me a moment and I'll go up and show the gentleman in. But really, sir, you're running a great risk. It's a contagious disease, and – "

"Oh, I'll chance it," quietly said Old King Brady, as he took a chew of tobacco, and eyed Harry, who was still lurking in the area, opposite.

"As you please, sir. Come ahead," said Mr. Gloom, and as they went up the steps into the big front yard, the man called Sim swung himself up on the driver's seat, and took the whip and reins in his hands.

Beside the undertaker, Old King Brady mounted the front stoop.

Mr. Gloom seized the knob, pushed open the door and said, affably:

"Go right in, sir. The hall is dark, but – "

"Oh, I ain't afraid of that," said the old detective. "I've got matches."

He stepped into the gloomy vestibule ahead of the undertaker, when Mr. Gloom suddenly struck him in the back with both hands.

The old detective was knocked forward, plunged into the hall and fell upon his hands and knees.

Quick as a flash the undertaker darted back, slammed the door shut, fastened it with a key already in the lock and rushed down the steps.

"Go like fury!" he cried, as he sprang upon the wagon.

But Harry had seen him lock Old King Brady in the house, and was at that moment rushing across the street toward them, crying:

"Stop, you scoundrels, or I'll shoot you!"

He had his pistol in his hand.

The undertaker saw him and whipped a revolver out of his hip-pocket.

"Perdition! There's another of them!" he hissed in tones of alarm.

The next moment he aimed his weapon at Young King Brady and fired.

Bang!

The shot echoed loudly through the silent street.

Up went Harry's hands, and he fell prostrate, with blood streaming from a wound on the side of his head.

The driver lashed the horse furiously.

With a snort, the galled beast sprang forward and raced madly along the street toward Broadway, from whence a policeman was running.

"Hello!" yelled the patrolman. "Who fired that shot?"

"Man lying wounded up the street!" shouted the undertaker.

Away dashed the policeman to investigate and the wagon kept on to Sixth avenue, swung around the corner and dashed downtown, under the elevated road.

In the meantime, Old King Brady had risen to his feet.

Realizing that he had been victimized by Mr. Gloom, he tried to open the door.

Finding that it resisted all his efforts, he lit a match, and going hastily into the house, he was astonished to find it empty and untenanted.

In the middle of the parlor floor lay a curious-looking dagger, which looked as if it had been buried in a human body, and the bare boards were stained with the same life fluid.

"There's been a murder committed here," flashed through the detective's mind, as he picked up the knife and put it in his pocket, "and those men have carried away their victim's body in that box!"

He rushed to one of the parlor windows and flung it open, just in time to see Harry get shot. The sight made Old King Brady frantic with fury.

"They've killed the boy and escaped!" he roared.

Then he sprang out the window and landed on his feet in the yard.

It only took him a moment to reach his pupil's side, and lifting the limp form in his arms, carried him to the sidewalk, under the lamp-post.

Here he examined Harry's wound very carefully.

It was only scalp deep, and the rain beating down on his face revived him.

Before the policeman reached the boy, he had regained his senses, and found Old King Brady wiping his face and sticking court-plaster over the cut.

Most of the neighbors had their heads out their windows to see what caused the pistol shot, and the policeman came up panting.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, recognizing the detectives. "It's the Bradys."

"Yes. We had a fuss with the driver of an undertaker's wagon," the old detective explained. "Harry got shot, but it's only a flesh wound."

"I see. How are you feeling now, Young King Brady?"

"A little sore, but otherwise all right," replied the boy, pluckily suppressing a faint feeling, and getting upon his feet. "Where are they?"

"I saw that wagon swing into Broadway and dash downtown," said the policeman.

"Are you able to pursue it, Harry?" asked Old King Brady, in restless tones.

"I think so," the boy replied. "Ride, if you can. It's a suspicious case, Old King Brady. They wouldn't attempt murder to prevent us from prying into this affair, unless they had a powerful reason for it. The policeman had better search that house while we are gone."

"Come on then, my boy. I've got evidence that a dark crime was just committed in that empty house. We'd better verify my suspicions."

And they hastened over to Broadway, boarded a car and were rapidly carried to Fourteenth street, where they alighted to make inquiries.

CHAPTER II. THE BODY IN THE BOX

A cabman was standing beside his horse at Union Square, and the old detective approached him and asked, hastily:

"Did you see an undertaker's wagon just go by here?"

"Oi did, sor, tin minutes ago," promptly replied the driver.

"In which direction did it go?"

"Turned inter Broadway, an' wint downtown."

"Drive us after it as fast as you can."

"Yis, sor. Get in."

They entered the cab and were driven to Courtlandt street, as different people they spoke to said they had seen the undertaker's wagon as far as that point.

A policeman was seen on the corner, and Harry accosted him with:

"Hello, Bob!"

"Why – Harry – how are you? What are you chasing?"

"After an undertaker's wagon."

"One just left a box in the baggage room at the Pennsylvania depot."

"Look like a coffin?"

"Yes," replied the policeman. "I just came from there. Two men had it. I'll describe them."

And he gave a good description of Sim and Solomon Gloom.

"Thanks. That's the gang we're after," said Harry, when he finished.

And away went the Bradys to the Pennsylvania depot at the foot of Courtlandt street.

It was a suspicion of the Bradys that the mysterious box would be shipped out of the city by rail, that led them to see if the wagon had gone to the depot.

They did not find the box in the baggage room.

But they learned that a man answering Solomon Gloom's description had checked it through to Savannah, Georgia, and it had been sent over the river and was put in the baggage car.

"How soon does that train leave?" asked Harry, quickly.

"The connecting boat goes in three minutes, sir," replied the porter, glancing at his watch.

"Old King Brady, we must go out on that train," said the boy, quickly. "It's our only chance to find out what's in that box."

"Run for the ticket office, then," said the veteran, promptly. "Mr. Gloom is evidently going out on the train with it. If there's any crooked work going on here we may be able to arrest him."

They rushed to the office, procured tickets, and just had time to jump aboard the boat as it pulled out of the slip.

Reaching the Jersey side, they boarded the train.

Seeing nothing of Mr. Gloom in that car, they sat down to map out a course of action, as everything had hitherto been done on the spur of the moment.

Just then the train started.

"This is a most singular case, Harry," the old detective exclaimed. "We may be on a wild-goose chase, or we may be on the eve of exposing a revolting crime. Everything up to the present moment leads me to believe in the latter idea. We can only verify our suspicion by opening that big box and looking at the contents. This I intend to do."

"Our safest course will be to capture Solomon Gloom first, and then confront him with the contents of the box," replied Harry. "If we find a corpse there, we may learn whose it is and why the man was killed."

"Very true," assented Old King Brady, with a nod, as he pushed his white hair back from his massive brow. "And if we don't find a corpse in the box we'll have the satisfaction of arresting Gloom for shooting you."

"The man lied outrageously to you, in order to fool you," said Harry. "So there isn't much reliance to be placed on anything he said, till we prove it."

"Let's see his business card," said the old detective, "now that I've got a light."

He drew the pasteboard from his pocket and glanced at it.

To his surprise he found that it really was the business card of one Solomon Gloom, undertaker, of Seventh avenue.

"This seems to be all right," he remarked.

"How about the permit from the Health Department?"

Old King Brady drew the paper from his pocket and glanced at it keenly.

Once more he was surprised to discover that it was a genuine printed form stating that Mr. Gloom was permitted to remove the corpse of Albert Reid from the Thirty-sixth street house to the Fresh Pond Crematory. The permit added that the broker had died of small-pox.

"We can't say he lied about this, either," commented the old detective.

"But how about the gory dagger you said you found in the empty house?"

"Here it is. And it's a very unique weapon."

Old King Brady held up the knife.

It had a double-edged blade, eight inches long, as thin as paper, and was embossed with the initials P. V., in frosted letters.

"What an ugly-looking weapon!" Harry commented, with a shudder.

"It's an oddity," replied the old detective. "But it isn't a certainty that these are the initials of the person who last used it."

"You'd better keep those three things," advised Harry, thoughtfully. "They may come in handy if this case amounts to anything."

"If they serve us no better purpose, we can show them to our chief when we get back to New York, so he will have evidence of what we are doing," said Old King Brady, with a faint smile.

"He expected a report from us to-night, on the case he put us on, but he won't get it," said Harry, grimly.

The boy referred to some work they had been doing before they stumbled upon the Thirty-sixth street affair.

Information had reached the Central Office that Oliver Dalton, a Broad street broker, suspected his nephew, Ronald Mason, of robbing his mail.

The detectives had gone to the broker's house in West Thirty-eighth street to get the particulars privately. But the man's daughter, Lizzie, told them her father had not yet come home. They waited for him till nearly eight o'clock, and as Mr. Dalton did not appear, they were going back to headquarters when they stumbled upon the suspicious case already recorded here.

Old King Brady smiled at Harry's remark.

"There's no great hurry about that case," he remarked.

"Well," said the boy, "are you ready to go through the cars on a hunt for Solomon Gloom? We must make sure of our man before he has a chance to alight at a way station and elude us."

Old King Brady bent nearer to Harry, to reply, when suddenly a cloth was thrown over their heads by a man who sat behind them.

The cloth was saturated with chloroform.

While the detectives were struggling to extricate their heads, they inhaled the deadly fumes and were overcome by the drug.

Not until they were fast asleep did the man remove the cloth.

No one had seen the deed, as they occupied the last seats in the aisle and not an undue noise had arisen to attract attention.

Seeing the detectives stupid from the drug, a low chuckle escaped the man, and he rose to his feet and muttered:

"Sleep, you dogs! Tracked me, eh? Well, it won't do you any good. You'll be snoring long after we reach Georgia. And when you do arouse yourselves, you'll find the box gone from this train. This must be a mighty good disguise, if you failed to recognize Solomon Gloom in it – really, a very clever disguise."

And he chuckled again, glanced at the gray suit and bicycle cap he wore, felt of the false beard covering his face and walked into one of the forward cars where he had a chance to remain until the opportunity came for him to alight at his destination.

The lightning express train went thundering along over the rails and the Bradys slept on until mid-day.

When they aroused themselves, the cars had left Charleston.

Their fury knew no bounds, and Old King Brady said, bitterly:

"It must have been Gloom who did that."

"If it were, he was cleverly disguised and must have been the fellow who sat behind us apparently reading a newspaper," replied Harry.

"Perhaps he's on the train yet."

"If he is, we'll find him."

"All I want is to get my hands on the rascal!"

"Are you ready to search for him?"

"Come ahead," replied Old King Brady, rising to his feet.

They passed slowly through the car, carefully studying each passenger.

There were two more passenger coaches, a smoking car and a baggage car ahead, and the detectives searched them thoroughly for the undertaker.

But to their disgust he was not found.

They paused on the platform of the baggage car and Harry exclaimed:

"He must have checked the box through on a ticket he bought for Savannah, and then hid somewhere on this train."

"Which shows what a foxy gentleman we have to contend with," muttered Old King Brady, grimly. "He feared pursuit."

"No doubt of it."

"Here comes the conductor. We can explain matters to him and open the box."

They had no trouble to persuade the conductor of the importance of seeing what the box contained, and they all had a talk with the baggage master.

He held them off until nightfall.

As the Bradys promised to have him absolved from blame, he finally gave his permission to them to open the box.

Harry cut the rope that bound it and Old King Brady pried off the lid with an axe taken from one of the racks.

The conductor held a lantern over the box.

As the lid fell off, they were startled to see the body of a man lying in the box.

His face was partly averted, as he lay upon his side.

But the detectives saw that he was a man of about fifty, his portly form clad in a dark suit of clothes. His head was partly bald on top and his hair was gray. There was a closely-trimmed mustache of the same color on his upper lip, and his flesh, although pallid, had not yet changed to the waxen hue of death.

It was evident that he was a victim of foul play, for his hands were bound behind his back, and his ankles tied together, while a gag was secured over his mouth as if to stifle his outcries.

The detectives had no chance to observe any more, just then, for there suddenly sounded a quick danger signal of the locomotive's whistle.

The engineer shut off steam, put on the brakes, and the startled conductor rushed from the car with the lantern, leaving the place in gloom.

"What can be the matter?" muttered Old King Brady.

"There's a fire on the track ahead!" said Harry, peering out the side door.

"Where are we?" queried the baggage master, hastily.

"Next to a big swamp," replied Harry. "And, by Jove – see – see! There's an obstruction – a heap of sleepers piled across the rails beyond the bonfire."

"What the deuce can that mean?" muttered Old King Brady. "Bandits trying to rob this train? It don't seem possible, in this neighborhood."

The train paused and they all alighted.

Some of the brakemen ran ahead, and under the conductor's direction they removed the obstructions from the rails.

The fire seemed to have been built where it was to show the engineer the pile of sleepers, and the brakemen scattered it, when the barrier was removed.

As the bell rang, every one got aboard and the cars slowly went ahead.

The Bradys and the baggage master returned to the latter's car.

"We'll finish our examination of that body," said Old King Brady.

"Yes," said Harry, "and – Good gracious! Where's the box gone?"

Box and body had vanished.

Every one was astounded.

Then, like a flash, the truth suddenly dawned upon Harry's mind, and he cried:

"Now I see through it. Those obstructions were put on the rails to stop the train at this point so that the body could be removed from this car."

"By whom?" demanded the startled baggage master.

"Accessories of the villain who killed that man!" cried the boy. "They've carried the body off in the swamp to hide the evidence of their crime. Come, Old King Brady, alight here and see if we can trace it."

The detectives made a rush for the door and leaped from the train.

They landed beside the roadbed, and the cars went on without them.

CHAPTER III. THE GREAT SWAMP MYSTERY

Heavy banks of dark clouds were flying across the lowering sky. Occasionally the big silvery moon burst from the rifts and flooded the landscape with its mellow light.

During one of these intervals the two detectives gazed around.

The train had disappeared in the distance.

Not far away from where the Bradys stood they saw the big box lying beside the track, turned over on its side.

They ran back and hastily examined it.

"Empty!" ejaculated Harry, in some surprise.

"What has become of the man it contained?" asked Old King Brady.

"Search. He may have fallen out."

They carefully examined the ground within a wide radius.

But they found nothing of the missing body.

"Mysterious, what became of him!" Old King Brady exclaimed.

Harry was completely at his wits' end.

"I'm afraid we are beyond our depth, Old King Brady," he remarked. "This mystery keeps growing all the time, and we can't seem to fathom it."

Just then the moon appeared again.

It showed them a river on one side and a broad expanse of gloomy swamp land on the other.

Night insects were chirping amid the weeds, and frogs were croaking dismally among the waving reeds and rushes.

Off in the centre of the swamp were some tangled trees and bushes, heaps of rocks overgrown with moss and trailing vines, and an object which had the dim outline of being an old rookery of some sort.

It was a dismal, lonesome scene.

Young King Brady moved along the edge of the boggy ground with its little pools of water, tufts of coarse grass and tracts of black, oozing mud.

An old, rotten board walk from the railroad bed to the trees, caught his view and he suddenly called to the old detective:

"I see a light among those trees. Here's a path. Let's follow it into the swamp."

"Be cautious!" warned the old detective. "If those rascals have carried the body from the box to the midst of those trees, they will be on the lookout for any possible pursuers and may give us a warm reception."

"We need not let ourselves be seen," replied the boy.

"How are you going to avoid it?"

"By creeping along the path on our hands and knees. The reeds on each side will hide our bodies from view."

"Go ahead, then."

They went down on their haunches and crept along in single file, out into the dismal swamp, and drew near the oasis.

In a few minutes they reached firm land.

From behind a clump of bushes they beheld an old wooden shanty, in the windows of which there glowed a dim light.

The detectives keenly watched it, hoping they might catch view of some human beings about the place.

At the end of quarter of an hour, they were suddenly startled by hearing a wild, piercing cry in human tones, of:

"Help! Police! Murder!"

The Bradys were intensely startled.

It was the same voice, using the very same words they had heard the night before in West Thirty-sixth street, New York!

"Good gracious! That's queer!" exclaimed Old King Brady, in tones of intense astonishment. "Did you hear it, Harry?"

The boy was thinking.

A startling idea flashed across his mind and he muttered:

"That cry was uttered by the same person we heard in New York, and I'm convinced that it was the man called Albert Reid."

"But he was murdered – "

"You only suppose so. There was circumstantial evidence that he was. But after all he may yet be alive."

This was a startling view to take of the matter.

Old King Brady shot a quick glance at Harry and exclaimed:

"You may be right. The man in the box may not have been dead after all. Perhaps he was alive, under the influence of a drug. The man who drugged us may have drugged him, too, you know.

"Hark!"

A chorus of fierce cries came from the hut.

There was the noise of a scuffle, then a voice which sounded very much like that of a negro roared in furious tones:

"Keep still, or I'll kill you!"

Old King Brady rose to his feet, very much agitated.

"I can't stand this much longer, Harry!" he muttered.

"Come on to the hut and we'll investigate the row," replied the boy.

Casting aside all caution, they rushed toward the old building.

Not half the intervening distance had been covered, when suddenly the noise ceased and the light went out.

The detectives halted.

"Were we seen?" panted Harry.

"Perhaps. Listen a moment."

They remained perfectly still and the trees cast a dark shadow over the scene which the moon could not dispel.

Five minutes passed.

Hearing and seeing nothing unusual, Harry said:

"Come on."

"Wait till I light my lantern."

"I'll stand guard with my pistol."

Old King Brady drew out a match and lit his bull's-eye.

Moving forward, they reached the hut and made a circuit of it.

The door was wide open.

They boldly entered the building.

It contained only one room, and to the amazement of the officers, it was empty.

Staring around, Old King Brady observed that there was only one door and the two windows they had been watching – one at the rear and the other at the side of the little building.

The door was at another side.

"Gone!" ejaculated the old detective.

"Where?" asked the astonished boy.

"Heaven only knows."

"Search outside."

Old King Brady dashed out the door.

He saw by the moonlight that the little island on which the hut stood was in the midst of the swamp.

If any one left it, he was bound to see them.

But not a soul met his view.

No one could leave the hut, cross the swamp and reach the mainland so quick that he could not see them escaping in such a short space of time.

Yet he failed to see any one in the swamp.

That convinced him that no one left the oasis.

And nobody was on the solid island of earth.

He could not have failed to observe them if they were there.

"What the deuce does this mean?" he gasped in bewilderment.

Then he finally returned to his partner.

"See any one?" eagerly asked the boy.

"Not a soul. And you?"

"I've searched this place, but no one is here."

"Then where did they disappear to so mysteriously?"

"Blessed if I know."

"You heard two human voices here, didn't you?"

"Of course I did."

"Have you thoroughly examined this place?"

"Every inch of it, and couldn't find them."

Old King Brady made a round of the room and came back.

He plainly saw that the walls were not double, and that the floor was merely covered with common dirt.

There was not a piece of furniture nor a lamp in the place.

Yet the detectives had seen a light distinctly.

"They ain't here, sure enough," said the old detective, "and they didn't leave here. Now, how could they vanish, and where did they go?"

"I'm completely rattled. Beyond my depth entirely."

"So am I. This mystery is too much for me to solve."

"See! Daylight is breaking."

"Let's search the place again."

They went at it with renewed zest, and spent two hours vainly searching for the means those speakers employed to drop out of sight.

Finally they desisted.

The great swamp mystery was too much for them.

By this time the sun had risen and flooded the scene, dispelled the vapors that hung over the bog and lighted up the surrounding country.

"We'd better get out of here," said Old King Brady. "I see a fine old residence over there on the mainland. Let's get over there and get our breakfast. I'm going to keep at this swamp till I solve that mystery."

Crossing the board walk, they made a detour and reached the house.

It was a fine country residence with many acres of ground, part of which was formed by the swamp.

They saw a big negro in overalls standing at the gate and Harry asked him:

"Say – who lives here?"

"Oliver Dalton, the Broad street broker, sir," replied the colored man.

This reply startled the detectives, for the owner was the very man whose case of mail robbery had been placed in their hands.

They glanced significantly at each other, and that look spoke volumes.

CHAPTER IV. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MR. DALTON

"See here, my friend," said Old King Brady to the darky, "do you know anything about that little hut standing out there in the swamp?"

"Dat hut? Sho'. Nobuddy nebber go in no mo'. Useter be fo' Massa Dalton when he go out shootin' reed birds."

"Then it isn't in use any more?"

"No, sah."

"Does Mr. Dalton live here all the year round?"

"Golly, no. Only in de winter. Comes heah wif Missy Lizzy an' his nephew, Ronald. Me an' my ole gal keep de house fo' dem de rest ob de time."

"I see. Then you don't expect them here for a long time, do you?"

"Dey only jes' lef' heah las' month, an' went back to York. But Lawdy, whut should Massa Ronald do but come back all ob a sudden las' night wif dat ornary niggah cuss, Sim Johnson, an' git bilin' drunk, an' dey gwine out an' didn' come back till de roosters crowed dis mawnin'."

"Who is Sim Johnson?"

"Massa Dalton's valet."

"And does the broker know his nephew drinks?"

"Mah goo'ness, no. If he did, dey would be a fight sho's yo' bo'n, sah."

"Is Ronald Mason in the habit of going on spees with his uncle's negro valet?"

"Nebber done seed dem so thick befo'."

"Does he intend to remain here long?"

"Spec's not, kase dey didn't bring no luggage."

"Did they explain why they came back so unexpectedly?"

"Not to me."

"I'd like to see Mr. Mason."

"Better come back later, sah. He am too full now."

"Very well. What's your name?"

"George Scott."

"Can you tell me where we can get our breakfast?"

"Right heah, if yo' like, sah."

"Thanks. We'll accept and pay you for your trouble. Is there a town near?"

"De railroad station ob Swamp Angel, two miles down dis road."

"I suppose we could find board there?"

"Yassah. Dar am a little hotel neah de depot. Come in, sah – come in."

He led the detectives up a path to the house and when they were seated in the kitchen, his big, fat wife, Dinah, bustled around and soon had a savory breakfast set before them.

The detectives praised her cooking and paid the old servants so well for their attention that the faithful pair voted them as fine gentlemen.

Soon afterward the detectives started for Swamp Angel.

"The action of Ronald Mason in coming here so oddly with his uncle's valet strikes me very strangely," remarked Old King Brady, as they trudged along the road toward the station. "In fact, it is a most singular proceeding. He evidently poses before his rich uncle as a paragon of virtue. Behind the old man's back he is evidently a high roller."

"Then he must be a deceitful man," said Harry.

"Of course, for he's deceiving his trusting uncle."

"You are suspicious of him, ain't you?"

"Well, yes. It takes plenty money for a young man to lead a riotous life. If Mason draws a big salary in his uncle's office, where he is employed as a clerk, he may be able to afford it. If he is poorly paid, he may be at the bottom of the mail robberies we were called upon to investigate. See the point?"

Harry nodded and smiled; then he thought for a moment.

"You're pretty keen," he remarked. "It's a fair presumption, though."

"I think we had better keep an eye on that frisky young gentleman when we return to New York," continued the old detective, wisely. "It may lead to a solution of the problem we are so anxious to solve for the broker."

"Are you going back to Dalton's to see him?"

"Yes, this afternoon. I merely wish to size him up."

"How long do you intend to remain here?"

"I'd like to unravel the great swamp mystery before we go."

"Perhaps we may in a few days."

"Well, we'll give the matter a fair trial, anyhow."

Upon reaching Swamp Angel, they soon located the little hotel and there turned into bed for a few hours' sleep.

It was late in the afternoon when they returned to Dalton's.

Here they met the old negro again and he said:

"Yo's come back too late, gemmen."

"How so?" asked Old King Brady, in puzzled tones.

"Massa Mason an' Sim done gone an hour ago."

"Where to?"

"York."

The detectives were keenly disappointed.

However, they did not complain, and went away to search the swamp again for some trace of the missing body.

No success crowned their efforts.

In fact, after a useless search, covering a period of three days, they at length gave up the hunt in despair and returned to New York.

It was useless to remain prowling around that bleak swamp trying to dig up a mystery that baffled all their ingenuity.

"We went beyond our depth," said Harry, when they reached New York. "The game was too hard to solve. The mystery of the murdered man in the box must remain unsolved. It can go on record as one of the many strange cases that have baffled the detectives before. It's our duty now to report the matter to our chief, drop it, and resume our attempt to locate the broker's mail thief."

"Then come to headquarters at once," said Old King Brady, as they left the cars.

They met the chief in his office and he smiled pleasantly, and asked:

"Well, where have you two been keeping yourselves hidden during the past week? I haven't seen or heard from you lately."

The Bradys told him what they had been doing.

He listened attentively, with a grave look upon his face, while they were giving him the facts, and said when they finished:

"Then that murder mystery was too much for you, and you went beyond your depth trying to solve it, eh? Well, it's just as well you let it drop."

"Anything new going on?"

"Yes. Something relating to your mail robbery case."

"Indeed! What was it?"

"Oliver Dalton has disappeared."

"Where to?"

"Nobody seems to know."

"That is very strange."

"You had better go up to his house and get the particulars from his daughter. She is frantic to find her father. Some points might be gained in the broker's Broad street office."

"We'll follow your advice, sir," said Old King Brady.

The chief did not seem to have many facts in relation to the case, so the detectives finally left him.

Going to the broker's office, they found it occupied by half a dozen clerks.

Having asked for Mr. Dalton, the office boy said to them:

"You'd better see Mr. Mason about that matter, sir."

"Is the broker's nephew in?" asked Harry.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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