The Yellow Letter

by William Johnston

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SYNOPSIS.

Harding Kent calls on Louise, Farrish to propose marriage and finds the house in great excitement over the attempted suicide of her sister Katharine. Kent starts an investigation and finds that Hugo Crandall, suitor for Katharine, who had been forbidden the house by General Farrish, had talked with Katharine over the telephone just before she shot herself. A torn piece of yellow paper is found, at sight of which General Farrish is stricken with paralysis. Kent discovers that Crandall has left town hurriedly. Andrew Elser, an aged banker, commits suicide about the same time as Katharine attempted her life.

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

I glanced quickly at Davis. I fully expected to see in his face something of the same astonishment I had felt. I was disappointed. With a casual glance at the envelope he turned to Dowd as if waiting for him to go on.

"It's evidence in the Elser case," the detective went on, "turned in by the man on post who reported the suicide. He was that old party that was found dead in his room up on West Twenty-third street. To my mind, it's just a plain case of suicide—an old man tired of living. The poison bottle was there on the floor beside him. I don't see nothing suspicious about it, but the chief has taken a notion that there's something behind it and wants to know where this letter came from. We searched the room, but this torn envelope was all we could find. The postmark's torn through, but he thought maybe you could trace it anyhow."

"I see what I can do and I'll let you know in the morning," said the inspector calmly, dismissing the detective with a nod. From his matter-of-fact tone and apparent lack of interest I would not have been surprised if he had refused this undertaking, too, as he had mine, though it seemed to me that the two bits of yellow paper connected the two suicides at the same hour as something decisively more than a mere coincidence.

As soon, however, as the detective had left the room the inspector's whole manner changed. With the glitter of excitement in his alert eyes he turned to me and explosively said:

"Quick, let me see that yellow scrap."

I had placed it carefully in my wallet after he had refused my request. As I drew it out now he almost snatched it from my hand. Putting it on his desk beside the torn envelope, he picked up a reading-glass and studied both pieces carefully. His inspection lasted for several minutes, and meanwhile, I, too, studied the torn envelope.

Both in color and texture the paper so closely resembled the scrap that I was positive that they were of the same lot. The envelope bore the address of Andrew Elser, in West Twenty-third street. Part of the postmark—most of it, in fact—had been destroyed, as if in the careless opening of the letter with the finger. All that was decipherable was a capital "A" and part of another letter that might have been either an "N" or an "R." In the lower part of the circle was a fragment of a letter that looked as if it might have been an "N." I noticed, too, that the stamp had been stuck on rather carelessly, in a lopsided manner.

My friend, his inspection completed, turned to me apologetically.

"I beg your pardon, Harding Kent," he said, "you were entirely right. These two bits of paper are key-notes in an important mystery, one that it is well worth my while to try to solve."

"What made you change your mind so suddenly?" I asked, for though I quite agreed with him, his manner had puzzled me a little.

He leaned back in his chair and turned it so that he faced me. He had a sharp, explosive way of speaking, biting off his words almost before he had completely enunciated them.

"Can't you see? One footprint leads nowhere. Two footprints start a path. When you brought that yellow scrap to me you were merely guessing that it might have something to do with the strange happenings in the Farrish home. There was no way in which you could have positive knowledge, nor could I. You were only guessing."

"Indeed, I wasn't!" I exclaimed indignantly. "What drew my attention to it was General Farrish's exclamation of terror at the sight of it just before he fell paralyzed."

Davis shook his head determinedly.

"That meant much—or nothing. It may have been mere senile hysteria superinduced by the great shock. At some time in his life he may have had some unpleasant experience which was associated in his subconscious memory with a yellow document. Wrought up as he was by the news of his daughter's attempt to kill herself, the brain cells called into action were those that had recorded other distressing experiences, perhaps a month ago, perhaps forty years ago. No impression in the brain records are ever lost. The sight of the yellow paper probably recalled some other yellow paper. There was then no evidence whatever that it was this particular piece of paper that so agitated him."

"But you think so now," I suggested.

"The situation has entirely changed. There was nothing to show that this piece of paper had ever come through the mail. There was nothing to connect it with suicide. Dowd comes in here with a similar piece of paper that plainly has been mailed. We have not one footprint, but two—the beginning of a path. Once started on the path, we can solve the mystery."

"Then you think there is some connection between the two bits of paper?"

"I know there is," said Davis. "These bits of yellow paper are of the same quality and texture—to all appearances the same paper. Two persons in whose possession they were, attempt suicide on the same day. The same person, or at least the same typewriter, wrote both the address on the envelope and the contents of the letter. This envelope came from a country post-office in either New York or New Jersey within a month—some post-office in the name of which begins with 'Ar' or 'An.' There are not many rural offices that will fit in all particulars. In two days or sooner, I can tell you exactly from what office they were mailed."

"Letters—you think there were two? Might not this be the envelope in which this paper came?"

"That presupposes an acquaintance between Elser and Miss Farrish, at least a connection of some sort. Did she know him?"

"I don't think so. Her sister and I were talking of the Elser suicide last night after we saw the evening papers. Louise surely would have known it if her sister was acquainted with him."

"Perhaps," said Davis doubtfully. "There isn't a human being over ten that has not a secret that they keep from some one. It looks to me, though, as if in all probability there were two distinct letters. That is what makes me suspect a plot. It convinces me that the mails are being used for an improper and more than likely a criminal purpose. This brings the case or both cases properly in my domain as a post-office inspector."

"And I can count on your assistance, after all," I said joyfully. "When can you begin work?"

"I have begun," he said tersely, pushing over for my inspection something he had hastily scrawled on a pad lying on his desk. It was an order addressed to the superintendent of the railway mails, which read:

"Have all railway clerks on New York and New Jersey routes report from what rural office within the last month they have received large quantities of letters in yellow envelopes. If letters have been discontinued, when? DAVIS."

"Large quantities!" I gasped. "Were there more than two?"

"Of course," he snapped, in a way that showed me he did not wish to be questioned further. Then he reached for his hat and coat, and with an abrupt "Come along!" led the way to the elevator.

"Where are you going?" I asked as he rushed me hurriedly through Park place to the Sixth Avenue Elevated.

"To Twenty-third street," he replied, "to find out what the police have not."

In the "L" train I told him in low tones of Crandall's apparent connection with the case and of his sudden disappearance. He sat silent, his whole bearing indicating such abstraction that I doubted if he had heard a word I was saying, but suddenly, just before we left the train, he startled me by asking:

"Do you know Crandall? What color are his eyes?"

I regretted that I had to say no to the first question, and that I did not, to the latter, which query amazed me greatly. What connection the color of a man's eyes could possibly have with two attempts at suicide and a lot of mysterious yellow letters from a rural post-office was entirely beyond me. Curious as I was, I hesitated to question him on the subject, for experience had taught me that he was better at asking than answering.

Instead of going directly to the boarding-house where Elser had killed himself, he took the other side of the street and turned abruptly into a house, beside the door of which was a doctor's plate.

"Is Doctor Berner in?" he asked of the maid, and on being shown into the physician's office, introduced himself as "Inspector Davis" and began questioning the doctor about the Elser suicide.

Though the papers had made no mention of Doctor Berner, the statement being that a policeman had called an ambulance from Bellevue Hospital, it now appeared that the landlady had summoned him as soon as the suicide was discovered. Elser was dead, so he had withdrawn as soon as the policeman arrived.

"Did you ever have Elser as a patient?" asked the inspector.

The doctor reflected.

"Only once—about two years ago. I gave him something for insomnia. He called here at the office and I wrote him a prescription. He was to return in a few days for further treatment, but he did not do so. Another time—"

The doctor hesitated.

"There was another time I had almost forgotten, a year or two before that. He met me in the street one day and asked what my office hours were on Saturday. He explained that he was the guardian of a boy who was in a boarding-school. The child had some slight throat trouble and he wished me to make an examination. On the following Saturday he brought the boy here, a bright little chap about ten."

"Do you know the boy's name? What school did he attend?" The inspector fired this question rapidly, but it was quickly apparent that the doctor had nothing more to tell, as we left.

"What a wonderful man you are!" I exclaimed as the doctor's door closed behind us. "How did you learn that Doctor Berner had been called in after Elser killed himself?"

"There is nothing wonderful about my knowledge," answered Davis with a laugh. "What is the first thing that people do when anything happens? They run for the nearest doctor. Doctor Berner is the nearest doctor. Could anything be simpler?"

The simplicity of his logic amazed me. It was like a conjurer's trick after it has been explained, or like one of those puzzle pictures with hidden faces. You work hours trying to find them, and after you have found them you wonder how you ever happened not to see them.

We now arrived at Mrs. Trask's boarding-house—one of those dingy ex-residences that proclaimed its retrogression by a white slip of paper on the door frame. I had supposed that here, too, my friend would introduce himself as "Inspector Davis" on account of the prestige it would give him in searching the rooms, but to the slattern maid who came to the door wiping her hands he merely said:

"Tell your mistress a couple of gentlemen are inquiring about room and board."

Mrs. Trask was the old-school boarding-house mistress, fast disappearing before the inroads of the family apartment hotel. "Better days" was written all over her, though somewhat obscured by years in boarding-house grease. Eying us sharply through her spectacles, she inquired how much we were willing to pay, meanwhile debating with herself whether it was necessary to ask for references.

Davis' "not more than twelve dollars a week each" apparently convinced her that references were unnecessary, for she at once led the way to what she described as the second floor front, the room in which Elser had killed himself only the day before. Probably she had no intention of telling us this, but garrulity overcame her caution. She had been expatiating on the advantages of the room—Heaven knows it needed an eloquent advocate!—when suddenly she lowered her voice to a mysterious whisper.

"One gentleman has occupied this room for fourteen years—ever since I've had the house, and a fine old gentleman he was, too. I wouldn't have the room vacant but what happened to him yesterday." She let her voice sink still lower. "If it was a couple of ladies looking at the room, I wouldn't be telling it, but I know you gentlemen won't mind. It was in this room yesterday Mr. Elser killed himself, not on the bed, but right here on the floor. It was poison he took—cyanide of mercury, the doctor said."

"You don't say!" exclaimed the inspector, as if he had heard the news for the first time. "Why did he do it?"

"It's more than I can say," said Mrs. Trask, evidently well pleased to talk about the tragedy. "I did everything I could to keep him comfortable and happy. He spent all his time here since he gave up his office downstairs. I used to go up to Westchester to see a boy that he was guardian of. He had the papers every morning in the parlor. Every afternoon he took a walk. He was always on time to his meals and there never was a complaint out of him. On Saturdays he