THE KNIFE THROWERS

By FREDERIC VAN RENSSELAER DEY,
Author of "Not Like Other Men," Etc.

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The relations between him and Pendleton were twofold in character. They had been intimate friends since the day of their first meeting at college, and when years afterward Wyndham's fortunes had not proved to be all that he expected he became by adaptation more than through engagement a sort of alter ego for his rich friend. Pendleton was tall and dark and, as he frequently admitted, lazy. Wyndham was big and fair, somewhat uncouth when in juxtaposition with his more elegant friend, possessed of prodigious strength and tireless energy. Thus it naturally came about that he "did things" for Pendleton, and this relation grew stronger between them as time went on until the management of Pendleton's affairs had fallen unconsciously, it seemed, almost entirely into Wyndham's hands.

For these services there was no recompense given or received—that is, there was nothing in the shape of a stated salary. At times it was Pendleton's habit to deposit a check for a considerable sum to Wyndham's credit at the bank where he kept an account. When that had occurred several times, always under protest from Wyndham, Pendleton had discovered a way out of the dilemma.

"Look here, Craig," he said to him one day more than a year before his departure for Mexico, "I wish that you would do me a great favor."

"I'll try, Burr. What is it?" was the reply.

"You possess such an inexhaustible surplus of energy that I wish I could induce you to devote it all to me."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, just come regularly into my employ as—what is it that kings and queens have about them?"

"Fools principally. I think I'm not up to that, Burr."

"Keeper of the privy purse; that's what I mean. Suppose you look out for my accounts, pay my bills and, in short, attend to everything for me, so that I will not have to think of anything but my shirt front just below the point where a single diamond gleamed was an object sticking out. Underneath that was a splash of red, leading downward until it was lost from sight behind the buttoned waistcoat, and Pendleton—Burr Pendleton—before he had been permitted an opportunity to take his friend Wyndham into his confidence, was dead.

CHAPTER IV.

CUNNING AGAINST CUNNING.

CRAIG WYNDHAM discovered while he was still several feet from the body of his friend that he was dead. He saw in that fractional part of an instant the cause of death. With a swiftness of which he was himself unconscious he turned and seized James, drew him from the room and closed the door almost before the valet was aware of the awful thing that had confronted them.

Then, while the strong and relentless arm of his master's friend drew him into the parlor, his old knees began to tremble and threaten to give way beneath him, so that when at last they were in the center of the room, underneath the chandelier, he was weeping and was devoid of what little strength he had possessed.

"Your master is dead, James. Who killed him?" were the first words that Wyndham uttered. He spoke calmly, but his face was deathly white, and he did not realize with what resistless strength he gripped the arm of the old man.

"God help us, sir, I do not know," was the reply. "Let us go to him!"

"No. Remain here. There is no use to go to him now. He is dead—quite dead. Before others are informed of this you must answer some questions for me. After that I will tell you what is best to do. Can you control yourself, James? Here—take some of this brandy. If ever you loved Mr. Pendleton, show it by keeping your wits about you now. Are you sure that it was half past 5 when Mr. Pendleton returned?"

"Positive, sir."

"Why so positive?"

"Because the clock on the mantel had stopped, sir. I asked Mr. Burr for the correct time so that I could set it."

"Was he alone?"

"No, sir. There was a gentleman with him."

"Who was it? Did you know him?"

"I knew his face, sir, but not his name. I have seen him on the street in the City of Mexico."

"Describe him—or, rather, let me try. I believe that I have seen him also. Not as tall as Mr. Pendleton, eh? Quite handsome. Black mustache, black eyes, complexion rather pale for one with such dark eyes and hair. Does that answer?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Now tell me what they did when they came here together."

"That I do not know, Mr. Wyndham. I did not hear the stranger utter a word. He seated himself in that chair while Mr. Burr went into the room where—where you found him, sir. He came out again a moment later with a bundle of papers that looked like letters in his hand. Then he sent me from the room. Presently he rang for me and ordered some brandy, which I served and again left the room. Nearly an hour later I heard the bell again. Mr. Burr was alone then, although I am sure that I did not hear the stranger when he left the apartment. My master told me what clothes he desired to wear tonight and said that he wished to rest a little while. He then went into his sleeping room and closed the door, and I went out to attend to a commission he had given me. I was not away from the house more than twenty minutes, sir, and when I returned I was surprised to discover that I had left the door which communicates with the hallway on the latch. It was not open, sir, but it was not latched, and I was quite sure that I had closed it when I went out. My idea was that Mr. Pendleton had remembered something else that he wanted and had gone to the door to call me back, but that I did not hear him. That is all, sir—until you came. That is all I know."

The old servant could restrain himself no longer, but sank into a chair, buried his face in his hands and wept. Wyndham strode to the window and let the old man sob on unheeded, while he drummed with the ends of his fingers upon the pane and stared into the darkness.

When James' sobs ceased, Craig Wyndham turned back into the room and, placing one hand gently upon the old man's shoulder, spoke kindly, but with an intensity that had an instant effect. The power of the man shone in his eyes at that moment, and, although his face was pale and drawn, he was outwardly as calm as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"James," he said, "I believe you loved your master very dearly."

"As if he were my own son, sir, or more perhaps. I never had a son, so I do not know."

"You would sacrifice much for him, would you not, James?"

"Everything, sir—life itself, if that could do any good."

"You loved his father also, James?"

"With all my heart, sir."

"Would you be willing, James, in order that justice may be done not only to your dead master, but to his father's memory, and for the sake of the family name, to permit a great shadow to fall upon you for a time?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," replied James humbly. "I only know that I am willing to do anything that I can do if in doing it I can serve him."

"I believe you, James. Now, listen closely to what I have to say. Your master is dead and by the act of an assassin. A great crime has been committed, and that crime is the result of events that happened long ago. I know something of the history that led to this deed, but my information is very meager. I have no doubt that you are aware of many things connected with this strange history which will assist me to unravel this tangled skein. We will talk of that later. The death of Mr. Pendleton must be reported to the police and to the coroner at once. If we say anything concerning the visit of this stranger and the subsequent open door, as you believed you had closed and latched it, suspicion will point its finger at him, but we cannot say one thing or prove one circumstance to convict him of the crime, and he would therefore escape. By connecting him with the affair at all we would strengthen the position he is in, for you may be sure that he has planned thoroughly to save himself. On the other hand, James, there are those who will suspect you of the crime."

James started back with a cry of horror.

"Suspect me!" he almost shouted.

"Yes, James. If you look at it calmly, you will see that I am right, and, James, that is precisely what I want the world to believe. I want you suspected of this crime, but only for a time."

"But why, sir, why?"

"So that the person who really did it may be thrown off his guard; so that I will have time to work out to the end all of the facts connected with the crime that I now know so little about; so that I may have time to guard against the revelation of things that I am sure Burr Pendleton desired never to be known; so that I may be enabled to fulfill what I know would be his wish were he still alive to direct us what to do, and finally so that I may in the end palsy the hand that struck your master to death. Mr. Pendleton lived in a shadow, James—a shadow of the past. He guarded it jealously, even from me, his closest friend. Now it becomes my duty to work it out until I know all that I am sure he meant to tell me tonight. Lastly, James, there is one reason more vital than all. It is more than probable that suspicion will fall upon me also. I think the man who committed the deed will endeavor to bring that about. If you disappear, thus convincing others that you are guilty, it will leave me free to work; if I am hampered in any way, that fact will play into the hands of the enemies of Mr. Pendleton. Will you do what I wish you to do, James?"

"I will do whatever you think best, Mr. Wyndham," replied the old man simply. "I know that Burr loved you and trusted you more than any other person in the world. Tell me what I am to do, sir, and I will do it."

"Then you must leave the house at once, taking nothing with you. I will write an address upon this card where you are to go. Assume the name of Thomas Judson. Wait; I will write a line for you to take with you."

"Wyndham tore a leaf from his notebook, wrote rapidly upon it and passed it to the old servant.

"Give it to the lady who will admit you at that address. Wait there for me until I come, no matter how long that time may be. Will you do it, James?"

"Yes, sir."

James, very much in the manner of one who is stupefied, found his hat and then returned to the room where Wyndham was awaiting him. The friend of his master was still standing in the middle of the floor and evidently had not moved after the instant when James left him.

"I am ready, sir," he said. "Can I—would it be possible—I mean are you willing that I should see—him—before I go?"

"No, James," was the calm reply. "Go as you are. Forget that you have seen him at all except as you saw him last in life. What comes after that—ah, well! Go as you are, James. Do not forget your overcoat. The night is cold."

James hesitated at the door. He stopped and looked back, but Wyndham was still in the same position in the middle of the floor. He did not raise his head or make a sign, and the old servant stepped sadly into the hall and closed the door.

Wyndham still remained in the attitude of one who is listening. He could, in fact, hear the old man's footfalls as he descended the stairs; he could hear the bang of the outer door when it closed, and not until then did he make a move. Even then he only raised his head, so that he could listen more intently, and waited.

Many minutes passed in this manner, but at last, as if satisfied that there was no chance that James would return, he closed the inside shutters at the windows, after which he helped himself to a portion of the brandy on the center table.

After that, with distinct deliberation, he opened again the door which communicated with the room where Pendleton's body had been discovered.

He approached it and for a moment stood silently regarding the grewsome aspect. Twice he sighed deeply. Once he bent forward and intently examined the hilt of the weapon that had taken the life of his friend, but he did not touch the body or the chair in which it rested. Once he looked toward the door—he had left ajar—but not with the startled glance of one who expects to discover somebody peering in upon the scene; it was more as if he were measuring the distance and relieving by calculation some mathematical doubt that still possessed him.

There was a safe in one corner of the room, one of those little iron safes that lock with a key. The key was in the lock, and from it dangled others attached by a ring—a ring that he had often seen in the possession of his friend.

He threw the door of the safe open without hesitation, and with an air of familiarity that is indescribable selected certain bundles of documents which he deposited on the floor beside him. Then he removed the key from the lock, selected another from the ring that was suspended to it and with that one opened an inner drawer of the safe. From that, also, he removed the papers, but those he placed in his pocket. Then he relocked the drawer, replaced the larger key in the safe lock, closed the door again, arranging it as nearly as possible as he had found it and deposited the papers he had abstracted from the safe in various pockets about his clothing.

Then he sighed while he looked again intently upon the body in the corner.

For a moment after that he remained apparently in deep thought, with bowed head and tight lips, and then he went out of the room and sought the one habitually occupied by James.

There he selected a handkerchief, which bore the name of the old valet, and returned with it to the room of the tragedy.

Ten minutes later he quietly left the house, and as quickly as he could traverse the distance he re-entered the club where he had parted with Pendleton less than five hours before. He went at once to the desk.

"Has Mr. Pendleton returned?" he asked, and on being informed that he had not he added: "You may destroy the message I left for him. I expected that he would be here a half hour ago. When he comes in, say that I am in the cafe." And as he turned to go to the cafe the outer door opened, and the very man with whom Pendleton had left the club entered.

From that, also, he removed the papers.

But Wyndham did not turn his head. He went calmly on his way to the cafe.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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