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THE BEARDED MEN—

by Adam Hull
Shirk

Author of "Mandrake," "Into the Fourth," etc.

I HAD come to the end of my rope. The statement lacks originality, I am aware. Many men have made the same admission before me; many others will make it after I am forgotten. But to every man his own troubles seem magnified tenfold. I felt entirely blameless, a victim of circumstances, of the folly or perfidy of others, but this fact did not help me. Considered from whatever angle the fact remained—I had come to the end of my rope.

I do not think I am a coward, but I had almost decided to take the coward's way of escape—the only way, I argued.

I strolled aimlessly along Riverside Drive, taking a northerly course for no other reason than because I had turned in that direction on leaving home. Home! I smiled bitterly at the word. For by what possible stretch of the imagination could I term that miserable little apartment where I had existed since my collapse and the desertion of one upon whom I had counted, home?

The thought strengthened my half-formed determination to have it over and done with. As I walked, already more of a ghost than a living man, among the chattering crowds, hear-

ing, without understanding, the words that floated to my ears, seeing, without taking note of it, the placid river with its pleasure craft and fast moving steamers—as I strolled aimlessly, head bent, my soul involved in the darkest reflections, I realized quite suddenly that I was followed.

It was not that I heard or saw anything to indicate a shadow, but the conviction was positive. Then, out of the void, someone called my name. I did not hear the word spoken; I sensed it.

A feeling of awe, almost of superstitious fear, gripped me. I had been summoned—but for what purpose and by whom? I walked on, forgetting temporarily my crushing load of despair, until I realized that I was weary. A sign on a tall electrolier told me that I had reached Ninetieth Street. An empty bench invited me and I sat down. Again the cloud of troubles rolled back upon my soul. My decision to die took definite form.

I took my revolver from my pocket and looked carefully about me. I had gone beyond the more crowded portion of the drive; indeed, in one of those odd lulls of traffic, I had the spot momentarily to myself. It was my fate playing her last card! The

way to death was opened to me. I raised the weapon to my head.

"Gordon Hunt! Gordon Hunt!"

I lowered the revolver and sat rigidly, for again I had been called, and now the call registered upon my brain rather than upon the tympanum of my ear. It was imperative, brooking no disobedience. I became aware of a figure standing behind my bench—the figure of a man with a heavy beard. His oddly luminous eyes were fixed upon me with a steady gaze.

He came around the end of the bench and sat down beside me. He moved with a stiff, almost decrepit action, as of extreme age. Yet he did not seem so old. His beard was dark, his eyes bright, and his skin, where it showed, but little wrinkled.

I wanted to get up, to leave, but something, possibly curiosity, held me.

"Did you call me?"

"I did," he finally answered, in a voice slightly high and suggestive of age, but which at the same time possessed a dominating quality. "You are Gordon Hunt?"

"Why should I deny it? You have been following me; why?"

He hesitated, and I could feel his bright eyes burning into my brain.

"This is no place to talk," he said, finally. "This much I may say—you are in trouble."

I groaned.

"You had planned to kill yourself."

He pointed to the revolver, which I had still clasped in my hand.

"Put it away. And if you want to escape your troubles without dying to do so, come with me."

"But—"

"Wait! A moment ago you contemplated suicide. You can, therefore, have few scruples. A few hours more or less can not matter to you. If you still wish to die, after our talk, I will not try to prevent you. If not—"

"Who are you?"

He shook his head. "I can tell you nothing here. Will you come?"

Again I was conscious of that insistent call. I knew that I must obey. And after all, why not? What did it matter? What did anything matter to me—now?

HE AROSE and I did likewise. Then he started off with peculiar swiftness and silence. Certainly his years had not affected his activity, though I still noticed that stiffness of movement.

He led me away from the drive up the hill toward Broadway. Along this street we hastened for perhaps a dozen blocks, and then my guide suddenly darted down a cross street toward the drive again. Midway of the block he stopped before an old house in the center of a sizable yard. It was a house that had escaped the fate of its neighbors of old, which had been torn away to prepare for the erection of an apartment house on either side.

The stranger entered the yard and led the way up the tumble-down front steps and inserted a key in the lock.

"Come," said he, and I obeyed. The door he closed softly behind us and I followed him along a narrow and dark hallway, up a flight of stairs, and presently was ushered into a small but over-furnished room which was quite evidently a study, for there were books without number and a cluttered desk.

"Sit down," directed my companion, indicating a comfortable chair.

I sank into its depths, watching with some renewal of interest as he removed his hat and hung it, with the crooked stick he carried, in a corner. Then he came over and sat down facing me. In the better light I could see that he was not so old, though his beard was certainly dyed. He had no hair whatever. His head was like a billiard ball, or, apter simile, the shape suggesting it, the egg of some

colossal bird, say a roc. But his eyes! They scintillated, snapped, or burned with a steady glare, burned into my very soul, it seemed. They were young eyes; they had not aged with their owner.

"You are Gordon Hunt," he remarked.

"You have already named me," I answered, a bit sharply.

"Until recently," he went on, unruffled, "you were vice-president of the Gotham Trust Company, which failed through, as announced, the unwise speculations of the president, James Q. Moffitt, who afterward committed suicide."

"All that is public property," I snapped.

"By the failure of the company many poor persons lost all they possessed."

I could not repress a groan. That was, indeed, the tragedy of it all.

"Moffitt is not dead!"

"What?"

I sprang from my chair, but he motioned me back, a bit impatiently.

"It is true—he planned very cleverly. After accumulating all the funds, turning all available securities into cash, he arranged the suicide carefully by means of a body obtained from a professional dealer in cadavers. Perhaps you did not know there is such a man in New York? It is so. Well, the face was disfigured by a pistol shot so as to be entirely unrecognizable. Otherwise the resemblance to Moffitt was marked. He had no close friends or relatives to tell the difference. The body was buried—and the brunt of the whole business fell upon you—and crushed you!"

It was true! God, shall I ever forget those days and nights of agony? The sound of the pistol shot as one man killed himself before his wife's eyes when he learned that all their little savings had been swept away; the crying of widows whose pittance

had been lost—these will ring in my ears forever.

"If this is true—"

The man with the beard nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on mine.

"It is true. Moreover, Moffitt still lives in New York City. He bears an assumed name, of course, and not even you would recognize him if you should pass him in the street. He has lived a double life for years. As James Moffitt, he had, as I have explained, few friends. You know that. As William Bowers he is well known. This coup had doubtless been planned for some time."

"William Bowers? Surely you don't mean—?"

"Bowers of the Hemisphere Life Insurance Company—yes."

"But man—I know Bowers, not intimately of course, but there must be others who—"

"He is shrewd. As Moffitt, he was retiring, almost diffident, keeping aloof from his associates. He also wore a heavy beard like mine; he complained of weak eyes and covered them with dark glasses. He spoke gruffly—and seldom. As Bowers, he is smooth-shaven, debonair, and his eyes are perfect. He talks much and lightly; he is a favorite with the fair sex, a frequenter of cabarets, what is known as a 'good spender'. In short, he is a rounder. There you have it. Bowers is the real man; Moffitt was the unreal. The latter is dead—in that sense. But Bowers is very much alive—and he is the robber of widows and orphans, the man who ruined your career—"

I jumped to my feet again. I raised my arms to heaven and cried out to God, if this were true, to let me get my hands upon the fiend.

"Why do you tell me this? What is your motive? How can I believe you?"

The stranger got up and came closer to me.

"You believe because I tell you. I have told you because I intend to take you to this man."

"You will—take me to him?"

"Yes; but there must be no violence. He will be punished. But not by your hand. And that is not the only thing I shall require of you."

"If this man can be brought to book," I returned earnestly, "you may ask what you will of me. I will be your slave if necessary."

"I may require even that," he answered in a low tone. And something in his eyes sent a chill to my heart; I was afraid, that was it. But with my fear was a fierce exulting joy. Despite his words, I might gain the opportunity I coveted: to exact from the wretch who had ruined me and many others, the payment that was due!

"Tomorrow will be time enough," he went on, "and tonight you shall be my guest. I will introduce you to some of my friends."

I wondered silently, but made no demur as he asked me to follow him to another and even smaller chamber, which seemed a sort of dressing room.

He took from a drawer a false beard.

"I must ask that you wear this," he said, almost apologetically. "I will explain why later."

Astonished, I seemed unable to refuse even this singular request and adjusted the beard to my face. It was a complete disguise.

He surveyed me approvingly.

"Good," he remarked, with a chuckle. "Now we will go in."

I followed him downstairs and into a large room, brilliantly lighted, at the rear of the house. In it, to my surprise, I saw that a number of men and several women were gathered. And each man wore a beard, similar to mine, or else of natural growth, while the women were masked. It was like a theatrical green room or some grotesque masquerade.

My guide was greeted with every indication of deference. I noticed that those present moved with a sort of mechanical precision and seemed to be going about their various pursuits—playing cards, smoking, talking, like so many automaton figures. Only one seemed an exception to this peculiarity—a woman, young, as I could easily determine by the smoothness and beauty of her neck and shoulders gleaming from the black evening gown she wore. She seemed nervous, watchful, alert.

The room was richly furnished, like a club lounge; there was a piano, and a woman played with that queer lack of expression characteristic of the mechanical instrument.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said my guide, "allow me to introduce to you, Mr. Black."

The guests bowed stiffly. Only the woman in black made no move, but watched me, furtively, from the eye-holes of her domino mask.

Suddenly as I stood there, I felt (that is the word) I felt my name called. I turned involuntarily and met the eyes of my host. They were bright, like two pinpoints of light. And then I ceased to know anything.

2

I RECOVERED myself in a small room, sparsely furnished and with white walls unrelieved by a single picture. I was lying on a couch, and it was dusk, for though there was a high window, no light came from it. I sat upright, and in doing so flung out an arm which tipped over a chair standing by the couch. In response to the sound, apparently, the door opened and a woman entered. She was the one I had noticed when I first entered the mysterious house, where, I now suspected, I still remained. She still wore the domino mask but had discarded the evening gown for a charming negligee.

"It is all right," she said soothingly, as she replaced the fallen chair.

She glanced at her wrist watch.

"Nine o'clock," she muttered. "It never fails."

"What has happened to me?" I blurted, and got up from the couch.

My head was a trifle befuddled; I recalled the incidents imperfectly.

"Nothing," she returned. "You have been asleep—that is all."

"Where am I—on One Hundred and Ninth Street?"

She nodded.

"Where is he—who is he—the man who brought me to this place?"

"He will be here presently. I can't tell you who he is—now."

I put my hand up to my face. The false beard was still there. I started to remove it, but she stopped me.

"He wouldn't like it," she explained softly.

As she spoke her face paled at a sound of approaching footsteps.

"He's coming—lie down," she whispered; and so evident was her fear that I obeyed.

She sat down a distance from my couch and was reading when the queer man entered. He came in with that same active, yet stiff-jointed movement I have mentioned and stood looking down at me. Apparently satisfied, he turned to the girl.

"Freda," he said, "you may go."

I watched from beneath half-closed lids as she darted one fearful glance at me and then hurriedly left the room. When the door had closed behind her, he turned to me again. For a full minute he stood looking at me. Then he said:

"You are awake. I am not to be deceived. I have something here to show you."

I opened my eyes and then sat up. From his pocket he took a part of a newspaper and I saw that it was dated June 11, the second day following that upon which I had first heard him calling me out of the void. He

pressed it into my hand, pointing with a long, bony finger at a marked article. With bulging eyes I read the headline:

WELL-KNOWN CLUBMAN MURDERED.

William Bowers, Man-About-Town,
Noted as Raconteur, Found Slain
in his Apartments.

The article went on to tell how, the evening before, a servant had discovered Bowers with a knife-thrust in his heart, and no trace of the assassin had been discovered. Robbery, it said, might have been the motive, since there was nothing of value found in the room, and a small strong box let into the wall was open and empty.

I finished reading and looked at my queer host.

"What does it mean?" I gasped.

"That you killed Bowers—or Mof-fitt," he said slowly.

"I killed him? But I don't remember anything."

"You went with me to denounce him as we had planned. He turned over the contents of his strong box—two hundred thousand dollars in banknotes—to me. Then without warning you picked up a jeweled dagger used as a paper knife, from the table and stabbed him. I got you away—"

"It's a lie!" I cried. "How could it be true? I've no recollection of anything of the kind—you're trying to frighten me—you can't prove it."

"Oh, yes, I can," he chuckled. "There was a witness—Freda, my foster daughter, accompanied us. She waited in the other room. But she saw the murder—"

"I can't understand—this is terrible—he deserved death—but I—I—"

"You must have gone temporarily insane," he said, soothingly, "from your worry. However, you're safe with me—you were in disguise—the beard—and there was no clue. It will

be another 'unsolved mystery.' But you must understand one thing—you *are in my power*. Unless you do as I wish—I will tell the police."

"The money," I cried, suddenly remembering; "what will you do with it? It belongs to those poor depositors."

"Half of it has already been sent to them—that is, to the receiver of the defunct Gotham Trust Company. The other half I shall retain as my share. After all, that is fair enough: but for me, they would have got nothing."

I sat down again on the couch from which I had arisen in the excitement of his revelations. I bowed my head in my hands. It was maddening. My brain refused to act with its usual quickness. I seemed unable to think clearly. He continued talking:

"If you try to escape, you will be arrested. In the meantime consider yourself my guest. Here you are free to do as you wish. But you must not go out without my permission. Do you understand?"

I nodded weakly. Why was I unable to pull myself together? Why did my brain seem clouded? If only I could remember—

"Who are you?" I said suddenly.

He started at the abruptness of my question. Then he frowned slightly.

"There is no need," he declared, "that you should know my name—I may tell you that few do. I am called—by my guests—by the members of the club—the Chief."

"The club? What club?"

"Oh, you did not understand? We call it the Club of Bearded Men—the ladies are merely auxiliary members—"

"But what is it for?"

"That," he returned, as he left me, "you will find out later."

I WAITED until he was out of hearing and then tried the door quickly. I had half expected to find it locked, but it yielded to my touch and I

emerged into the hallway, only to be confronted by the girl—Freda he had called her.

"Where are you going?"

"He told me I had the freedom of the house. I am tired of that stuffy room."

"Please come back—I want to talk with you."

Her tone was so filled with pleading that I obeyed wonderingly. She closed the door and sprang the latch.

"Now we can talk undisturbed for a while," she added.

"What is it?"

"This: I am tired of this life—this has been the last straw, this affair of yesterday."

I remembered, and eagerly I questioned her. But she would say nothing of the killing of Bowers.

"Did you see me strike him?" I asked.

"Don't ask me," she murmured.

"We must get away. I tell you I'm tired of it all."

"Won't you remove your mask? I'm going to take off these absurd whiskers."

I suited the action to the words and tore the false beard from my face. For a moment she seemed uncertain and then followed my example, stripping the domino from her face. I had made no error in my surmise. She was beautiful.

"What is all this masquerade?" I exclaimed, petulantly. "What is this club?—tell me."

"If I tell you what I know, will you swear not to betray me to him?"

"I betray you? Heaven forbid!"

"Well, then, I am the daughter of a woman whom I never saw, for she died when I was born. I am told she was one of the auxiliary members of the club. I don't even know that I have a name except my given name, Freda. He claims to be my foster father. Perhaps he is really my father. I don't know. I've lived here always. I've gone about very little

and then always with one of the elderly women. We are always veiled, even in the warm weather. It is dreadful."

"But who is he? What is it all about?" I persisted.

"He is called the Chief," she said, with a little shudder. "I don't know any more about him than that he is the leader of this crowd of men and women who appear always masked and bearded. They meet every night here. But they talk of nothing in particular. Then, frequently, he takes one of them aside, as he did you the other night. What happens then I don't know, except in your case, when he compelled me to go along—as a witness, he said."

"And what did you see?"

"I saw—I saw you go up to that man, after the talk you three had—and which I only heard a part of—and raise a knife to strike him—and then, I—I forget."

"You forget?" I repeated in astonishment.

"I remember nothing more until we started homeward. He said you had killed Bowers."

I groaned in my own effort at remembrance. But I could recall nothing. I walked across the little apartment and then turned back upon the girl, who stood, trembling, near the door.

"Why do you tell me, a stranger, that you have sickened of this life of yours? Why didn't you decide to escape long ago?"

"Because," she answered slowly, "I was afraid. I am afraid now—horribly afraid. But I had vowed that the next time a new member came I would confide in him, if he was of a sort to whom I might speak."

"You believe me of that sort?"

"Your face shows it—you are good—"

She broke off quite suddenly and her eyes overflowed.

"Oh, take me away—take me away! I shall die if I stay here another night!"

I went over and patted her upon the shoulder gently.

"Don't be afraid any more," I said soothingly. "We'll get out of this, somehow."

"Oh, thank you—"

"But listen: you must tell me all you know, if you haven't done so already. Who are these people, these members?"

"I don't know. They may be criminals. Or they may not. Strangers come; sometimes the old ones disappear. None are called by name. There is never any talk of their business. That is, I never hear it."

"Have you a weapon of any kind? A revolver?"

"Only a knife!"

She produced it from her bodice. I shuddered as I thought of that other knife with which, I had been told, I had struck down a fellow creature, a man who certainly had deserved death, but not at my hand. For after all, despite my desire for revenge, I was a God-fearing man, and I believed that he should have been punished by Providence.

"Give me the knife," I said.

She handed the weapon to me and at that moment we both heard the queer footsteps of her foster father approaching.

"Stand behind me," I ordered. She obeyed and I unlocked the door and stood ready, my knife poised.

THE door opened and the queer man came in. In a moment I had pinioned him against the wall, my knife at his throat.

"I am going away from here," I gritted, "and neither you nor anything else will stop me. And Freda is going with me."

He gurgled and stuttered in incoherent rage and I pricked him slightly with the knife point.

"Before I go," I added, "you will tell me what and who you are, and the truth about Bowers—or I will kill you."

He stopped struggling and his eyes burned into mine. I felt that insistent calling of my name, knew my senses were leaving. She saw it, and cried out:

"Don't let him look at you; stop him or it will be too late."

With a frantic effort I drew my eyes away from his and pinned him closer to the wall. And now the absurdly simple truth came to me. He was a hypnotist! But I was warned now. He should not again obtain the mastery over my will. I pressed the point of the knife against his throat.

"Stop," he cackled finally. "I'll tell you what you want to know."

He was a feather in my hands, for beneath his clothes he was a mere bag of bones. I carried him bodily to the couch and laid him down. I held him firmly and, my eyes averted, told him to go on.

"You did not kill Bowers," he muttered. "He died by his own hand. I tried to make you kill him, but not even I have the power to make a man do while under my influence what he would under no circumstances do naturally."

"I do not believe you," I said; "you killed Bowers yourself."

"You lie," he panted.

Suddenly he writhed out of my grasp, and with a burst of strength entirely unsuspected threw himself, clawing, tearing with nails and teeth, upon me. I was taken by surprise and almost overcome while Freda, a prey to her old terrors, fell back against the wall and stood with staring eyes. But all at once the grip relaxed and the creature dropped from me like some loathsome spider and lay writhing on the floor.

It was a fit of some sort, and I believed it was likely to prove fatal. Presently he lay quite still and I

knelt down to feel of his heart. It fluttered feebly and he opened his eyes, which now, however, had lost their unwonted brilliance.

"I'm dying," he gasped, faintly. "Look in my desk—the secret panel—the paper explains—"

His voice broke off abruptly and his eyes closed. A tremor went over his body and he died very quietly.

I arose: "Come," I said to the girl, "let us get out of here. But first, where is his desk?"

She cast a last, frightened look at the body and then led me to the room I had entered when I came first to the house. An old-fashioned desk stood by the wall. A search revealed a small button which, when pressed, released a small panel and disclosed a folded paper. This I thrust into my pocket, and with Freda at my side I slipped quietly from the house into the night. Not until we were far from the place did I take the document from my pocket. And together, Freda and I read this queer statement:

"To be read after I am dead: I am the founder of the Club of Bearded Men, otherwise the Lost Men's Club. Every member is a man or woman who has found it advisable or imperative to drop out of sight of the world. It was my idea, conceived years ago. I watched carefully, and when through some event I knew that a certain person must find it essential to vanish, I went to that person in one guise or another, and gained the mastery over him by my hypnotic power. In the club, the men wore beards to insure that they should not recognize one another. Sometimes they have temporarily been released from the trance, but usually I have kept them partly at least under my control. They have done my bidding and remembered nothing, because that has been my will. None of my subjects has ever been apprehended; I have seen to that. Many mysterious crimes

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The Bearded Men

(Continued from page 184)

were committed by my people—crimes that have remained unsolved. And I have grown rich. My fortune is in trust for my daughter, Freda.

“A hypnotized person is far less likely to be captured in the commission of a crime than one in his normal senses. Why? Because the latter thinks of what he is doing, and in thinking he endeavors to cover his tracks. My people think only my thoughts, do only my bidding; when they have completed their work, they are finished thinking even my thoughts, more than to return to me. I plan shrewdly and direct all their actions mentally. Sometimes my plans fail. It is known that a person cannot be made to do a thing hypnotically which he would not do in his normal senses—a criminal act, I mean. But most of my people, having been carefully selected, lack scruples in that direction and are good material. Occasionally I, myself, care for important matters. You who read this may have heard of ‘the Little Black Man’, supposed to be a figment of the criminal brain. But not so. I am ‘the Little Black Man’—the ‘Mysterious Egyptian’ of newspaper headlines. He is one of my disguises: at that I am an adept. My people can mingle with those who have known them without fear of detection, after they leave my hands.

“That is all. Should I die suddenly, a competent hypnotist could release any of my mesmerized subjects from their trance. Then will the papers have another sensation. Involuntarily, by my own disappearance years ago, a mystery which has become proverbial in such cases, I afforded the world a sensation. This you will no doubt appreciate when I sign myself—

“The Lost Charley Ross.”