

# AN OLD SPANISH CUSTOM

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The hooded stranger picked up the unconscious Towersend

**A Desperate Plea for Aid Brings Federal Man Graham Right Into the Thick of a Grimly Mysterious and Murderous, Smuggler Plot!**

**Q**UEER? It was crazy as hell—the telegram which had been forwarded to Dick Graham from Headquarters. It was a despairing and desperate appeal from out of the past.

COME AT ONCE. THE LIFE OF MY FIANCÉE, GERALD TOWERSEND, IS

IN TERRIBLE DANGER. HE HAS BEEN THREATENED BY THE BLACK FRIARS.

MARCIA BROUGH.

A message from Marcia, his childhood sweetheart, begging him to come to Fernandina, Florida, to protect the life of

Gerald Towersend.

The crazy part was that Graham was already in Fernandina. He had just arrived—to check clues which led to Gerald Towersend as the probable partner of Louie Corellio in a smuggling racket.

Louie Corellio was the slickest international smuggler the Department had run across in years. He smuggled anything, everything that paid money. He had a dozen different setups with points of unlawful entry into the United States along the Canadian Border, the Mexican Border, and the Atlantic seaboard. And not a shred of evidence which would stand in court had the Secret Service operatives been able to get on him.

But because of a telephone conversation between the smuggling king and a man by the name of Gerald Towersend, Graham had been sent here to investigate. Corellio was lazing away the season in Fernandina. Graham had never heard of Towersend before—and here Marcia Brough was engaged to marry the guy.

Graham shoved the message into his pocket and set about learning the lay of things in the old Spanish city. Inside an hour he had learned that though Fernandina was not as old a town as St. Augustine, it was nevertheless hoary with age. On a slight prominence was an old monastery which had been built by an order of monks called the Black Friars. But today the building lay in ruins. No monk had been seen around the ruins for a hundred years. So somebody was nuts about the Black Friars being dangerous, but this Towersend business was right down Graham's alley.

**G**RAHAM first got a line on Louie Corellio. As the smuggler did not know him by sight, Graham went to the Royal Palms—Corellio's hotel—to start

his casual inquiries. Mr. Corellio, he learned, had left the hotel the evening before about seven o'clock, saying that he was going to the Marble Casino, a de luxe gambling house in which Corellio had spent many expensive hours. However, he had not arrived there last night.

This trail petering out, Graham took the bull by the horns and went to see Marcia. It was still morning and the sweet scent of honeysuckle was heavy in the air. Memory of Marcia smote him keenly as he walked up the winding drive to the Brough mansion.

To Graham's surprise he found the Brough home lousy with cops. A suspicious sergeant with a hard gray eye was all set to question him when Marcia came into the library. She was as lovely as ever. But her sweet face was wan beneath its crowning glory of auburn hair.

"Dick!" she cried. "How glad I am to see you!" And she was suddenly in his arms, sobbing and laughing.

"Here, here, kitten," he soothed. "What goes on around here?"

"It's Gerald!" she cried. "And you're too late! Gerald has been—kidnaped." She turned quickly to the hard-eyed sergeant. "I will vouch for Mr. Graham, Sergeant Clausen," she said. "I want to talk to him privately—at once. You can question him later, if it's necessary to question a secret—"

"Marcia!" said Graham sharply.

The policeman was not dumb. He caught, wise and stared keenly at the stalwart Graham. Graham nodded imperceptibly. The sergeant grinned and withdrew from the library.

"What's all this about Towersend?" Graham asked Marcia a bit grimly.

"He was here for dinner last night," Marcia began, her lips trembling. "I knew he had been threatened by a mysterious organization called the Black Friars, and I

told him I had sent you a wire. He had already agreed that it might be a sensible thing to do. I told him what an old friend you were and—and—”

She began to cry softly.

“Go on,” he said.

It seemed that the engaged couple had been seated at the table discussing the inexplicable warning note Towersend had received, signed “The Black Friars,” when, as if appearing by magic, a hulking figure in a black robe and cowl that completely masked his identity had suddenly advanced out of the shadows like a ghost.

In one swift leap the strange intruder jumped behind Towersend and brought the barrel of his gun down on Towersend’s head with a dull and ghastly clunk. Towersend had groaned once and sagged to the floor. Then, before Marcia could cry out the cowed man had menaced her with his gun.

“One peep outa you, sister, and the Black Friars will be saying a black mass over your soul!” he had warned.

AS Marcia had sat there, paralyzed with terror, the stranger picked up the unconscious Towersend and swiftly stepped out onto the veranda. Then Marcia had sent scream after scream out of her throat. The servants had come rushing to her, but both the cowed man and his victim had completely disappeared. The police had been on the job since midnight, but so far had learned nothing.

“Just what was this warning of the Black Friars about?” demanded Graham, his mind already busily at work fitting stray bits of information together—Corellio, smuggling, Towersend’s possible complicity, Corellio’s disappearance after leaving his hotel the night before.

“He didn’t explain clearly,” whispered the girl. “He just laughed about the sinister

warning, saying it was an old Spanish custom.”

“What do the police think of it?”

“I haven’t told them about the Black Friars,” she confessed. “Gerald said not to tell anybody but you. But if you hadn’t come so promptly I think I would have told Sergeant Clausen.”

“It seems melodramatic,” admitted Graham, though he knew that Louie Corellio would have put Towersend out of the way if he knew that there was a chance an investigation of Towersend might pin certain nefarious matters on Corellio. “Tell me something about this Towersend bird. Do you love him?”

“Gerald is a splendid gentleman,” said Marcia. “Dad liked him, and when he wanted to marry me I—I—well, somehow, I accepted him.”

Graham’s lips tightened grimly. He only hoped, for Marcia’s sake, that Towersend was not mixed up in any shady business. He couldn’t even tell her that it had not been her telegram which had brought him to Fernandina.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he comforted her. “We’ll find Gerald for you.”

Excusing himself, he went in search of Clausen, and revealed his identity.

“Keep this to yourself, Sergeant,” he said. “And here’s what I want you local police to do—find Louie Corellio, quick! He’s been missing since last night.”

The hunt was on. But neither Corellio nor Towersend could be found. It was late in the afternoon that Graham returned to talk to Marcia.

“No news,” he admitted gravely. “But I’m going out on a special trip tonight, and if you don’t hear from me by nine o’clock in the morning, kitten, tell Clausen about everything. Understand?”

“Yes,” she said. “But where are you going?”

“I’m going to poke around about that

Black Friar stuff. I'm going to explore the old monastery ruins after dark."

"I'm going with you," she declared.

He tried to protest, but she was adamant. He shrugged. After all, what difference did it make? There wouldn't be anything at the ruins, and if he did find Towersend and Corellio in cahoots there, this would be as painless a disillusioning as Marcia could expect.

Armed with a flashlight and a couple of .45s, they set out. It was scarcely nine when they approached the desolate stone ruins. Not a soul was in sight as they picked their path into the black interior of the gloomy old structure. Only a night bird or two, flapping away from a roost, disturbed them.

THEY explored the ground floor without encountering any evidence that a living person had been here for years. Then Graham discovered the stone steps leading down an interminable distance to the dungeons which had been put to unpleasant use. They descended, Graham using his flashlight.

They entered what proved to be a veritable labyrinth of passageways and prison cells, all of stone and with arched doorways. And still no evidence of recent human occupancy. The walls were moldy and damp, lichen-covered. The stones were wet with green slime. A nice place for a ghoul and ghost ball.

Graham and Marcia were midway in a vaulted passage tunnel when they heard the slithering, whispering sound far behind them. She clutched his arm fearfully.

"Listen, Dick!" she whispered. "Do you hear that? Like the whispering of monks' robes!"

Graham listened, without moving or breathing. But the sound had stopped. He flashed his light back the way they had come. It revealed nothing—except one

uncomfortable thing. The floor of this tunnel was bare and clean, free of debris, as if it were in use.

"Nuts to the Black Friars!" growled Graham. "There's a bend in the corridor just ahead of us. Come on, we'll see where that leads. Then I'm ready to call it a day."

Fifty feet beyond the angle of the passageway the tunnel opened into a queer sort of a room. There was a light, the source of which was not visible from where they stood to one side of the arched opening. The far end of the room looked like a steel and riveted wall with a rectangular window of plate glass. Seated motionless on a crude sort of straight chair was a man in his shirt sleeves. His arms were strapped behind him, and a black hood completely covered his face.

Marcia gave a little cry. "Gerald! He's being held prisoner!"

"Seems so," admitted Graham. And then before he could grab the girl or caution her, she darted forward, crying out her fiancé's name.

Graham drew one of his guns and followed.

At the threshold of the room Marcia cried out in horror, her voice echoing weirdly through the tunnel. And there was reason for her cry. The hood over the prisoner's head had copper disks in it which were connected to heavy wires. There was an electrode about his left ankle. Some fiend had strapped this silent, helpless figure in a crude sort of electric chair.

The girl darted forward to tug at the straps which bound the motionless figure. "Gerald! We'll free you!"

At that instant a shot roared out from the tunnel behind them; and the slug *spanged* against the steel bulwark that was the far wall of the room. Graham leaped behind the angle of the archway and returned the fire. But no more shots came.

He flashed his light down the length of the corridor, and saw nothing, but he heard the trampling of feet as several persons ducked back around the bend.

“Release him, Marcia,” he flung over his shoulder, “while I hold these devils back. If they reach the tunnel they’ll shoot us down! Get him out of line behind the wall shoulder.”

Another shot ricocheted screamingly down the tunnel, and Graham hastily returned the fire. Unseen by the detective, a black-cowled and robed figure wearing rubber-soled shoes dropped down the ladder of iron bars which led up the face of the steel wall. Behind the rectangular window another cowled figure with the same sort of pasty-gray face was reaching to throw a heavy switch.

**T**HE cowled man in the black domino leaned out from the ladder behind Graham’s back and suddenly grasped Marcia by the upper arm, snatching her from the side of the bound figure just as his confederate closed the switch.

The girl screamed. There was a crackling discharge of electricity and the faint smell of burning flesh. But the figure in the chair did not move. Graham whirled, placing his back to the stone wall, just in time to exchange shots with the “Black Friar” above the struggling girl’s head. A slug knocked the detective’s flashlight to pieces, but his own bullet neatly drilled a hole at the base of the cowled man’s nose.

There were renewed shots and shouts down the corridor, and then more noise from overhead. And as the man in black released Marcia and crumpled to the stone flagging, bluecoats came charging along the tunnel. Sergeant Clausen was in the lead.

“We cleaned ‘em out, Graham!” he bellowed. “Not a one got away. Are you

and Miss Brough all right?”

“Yes,” panted Graham. “Get a man inside this steel bulkhead and capture anybody there—and turn off this juice. They’ve electrocuted this man!”

Marcia was moaning as she stared at the smoking figure in the chair. Then the crackling of electricity and the hum of the dynamo suddenly ceased. A door opened in the steel wall, and an officer came through.

“Got all the rats, sir,” he announced. “And you ought to see what a storeroom’s behind there. Boy, have they been smuggling in goods!”

“Gerald!” moaned Marcia. “He’s been killed!”

Sergeant Clausen leaped forward and ripped off the hood from the man in the chair. The burned features of Louie Corellio were exposed. But the jolt of electricity had not killed the king smuggler. He had been shot. His body was already stiff.

“That’s not Gerald,” Marcia cried, and looked wildly around.

“Brace yourself for a shock, kitten,” Graham said tersely. “This is going to be a little rough on you.”

He bent down and ripped the cowl and domino from the face of the man who had snatched the girl away from the chair and then had tried to shoot down the Federal man. The pasty-gray features, smeared with make-up, were scarcely recognizable, thanks to the bullet Graham had planted there. But Sergeant Clausen had no difficulty.

“This is Gerald Towersend!” he grunted. “You were right, Graham.”

“I was afraid so,” the Federal man said grimly. “He arranged his own abduction when Marcia told him I was coming. He had already made plans to leave Corellio holding the sack. When he learned the United States Government was on to him,

he planned to kill his partner to silence him, and somehow get himself out of the jam with his mumbo-jumbo Black Friar stuff. He would claim that some mysterious organization had kidnaped him and killed Louie Corellio who was their leader. Then he'd say he had learned of Corellio's smuggling and was about to expose him. But I've an idea we'll have no trouble making the rats you caught in this trap squeal."

"But how did you know it would work out like this?" asked Clausen.

"I didn't know Towersend was planning to kill Corellio," said Graham,

"but I was sure they were linked up together. I was on the way here when Towersend learned from Marcia that she was going to wire me. So I had a twenty-four-hour jump on him."

Marcia looked down at the body of the man to whom she had been engaged.

She gave one shuddering sigh, then wilted in Graham's arms. The Federal man held her gently.

"You finish things here, Sergeant," he said. "I've got some unfinished business of my own to take care of."