

Chapter One

I

ENCOUNTERING the bright-lighted gaiety of Harlem's Seventh Avenue, the frigid midwinter night seemed to relent a little. She had given Battery Park a chill stare and she would undoubtedly freeze the Bronx. But here in this mid-realm of rhythm and laughter she seemed to grow warmer and friendlier, observing, perhaps, that those who dwelt here were mysteriously dark like herself.

Of this favor the Avenue promptly took advantage. Sidewalks barren throughout the cold white day now sprouted life like fields in spring. Along swung boys in camels' hair beside girls in bunny and muskrat; broad, flat heels clacked, high narrow ones clicked, reluctantly leaving the disgorging theaters or eagerly seeking the voracious dance halls. There was loud jest and louder laughter and the frequent uplifting of merry voices in the moment's most popular song:

*"I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal you,
I'll be glad when you're dead, you rascal you.
What is it that you've got
Makes my wife think you so hot?
Oh you dog—I'll be glad when you're gone!"*

But all of black Harlem was not thus gay and bright. Any number of dark, chill, silent side streets declined the relenting night's favor. 130th Street, for example, east of Lenox Avenue, was at this moment cold, still, and narrowly forbidding; one glanced down this block and was glad one's destination lay elsewhere. Its concentrated gloom was only intensified by an occasional spangle of electric light, splashed ineffectually against the blackness, or by the unearthly pallor of the sky, into which a wall of dwellings rose to hide the moon.

Among the houses in this looming row, one reared a little taller and gaunter than its fellows, so that the others appeared to shrink from it and huddle together in the shadow on either

side. The basement of this house was quite black; its first floor, high above the sidewalk and approached by a long graystone stoop, was only dimly lighted; its second floor was lighted more dimly still, while the third, which was the top, was vacantly dark again like the basement. About the place hovered an oppressive silence, as if those who entered here were warned beforehand not to speak above a whisper. There was, like a footnote, in one of the two first-floor windows to the left of the entrance a black-on-white sign reading:

“Samuel Crouch, Undertaker.”

On the narrow panel to the right of the doorway the silver letters of another sign obscurely glittered on an onyx background:

“N. Frimbo, Psychist.”

Between the two signs receded the high, narrow vestibule, terminating in a pair of tall glass-paneled doors. Glass curtains, tightly stretched in vertical folds, dimmed the already too-subdued illumination beyond.

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It was about an hour before midnight that one of the doors rattled and flew open, revealing the bareheaded, short, round figure of a young man who manifestly was profoundly agitated and in a great hurry. Without closing the door behind him, he rushed down the stairs, sped straight across the street, and in a moment was frantically pushing the bell of the dwelling directly opposite. A tall, slender, light-skinned man of obviously habitual composure answered the excited summons.

“Is—is you him?” stammered the agitated one, pointing to a shingle labeled “John Archer, M.D.”

“Yes—I’m Dr. Archer.”

“Well, arch on over here, will you, doc?” urged the caller. “Sump’ m done happened to Frimbo.”

“Frimbo? The fortune teller?”

“Step on it, will you, doc?”

Shortly, the physician, bag in hand, was hurrying up the graystone stoop behind his guide. They passed through the still

open door into a hallway and mounted a flight of thickly carpeted stairs.

At the head of the staircase a tall, lank, angular figure awaited them. To this person the short, round, black, and by now quite breathless guide panted, "I got one, boy! This here's the doc from 'cross the street. Come on, doc. Right in here."

Dr. Archer, in passing, had an impression of a young man as long and lean as himself, of a similarly light complexion except for a profusion of dark brown freckles, and of a curiously scowling countenance that glowered from either ill humor or apprehension. The doctor rounded the banister head and strode behind his pilot toward the front of the house along the upper hallway, midway of which, still following the excited short one, he turned and swung into a room that opened into the hall at that point. The tall fellow brought up the rear.

Within the room the physician stopped, looking about in surprise. The chamber was almost entirely in darkness. The walls appeared to be hung from ceiling to floor with black velvet drapes. Even the ceiling was covered, the heavy folds of cloth converging from the four corners to gather at a central point above, from which dropped a chain suspending the single strange source of light, a device which hung low over a chair behind a large desk-like table, yet left these things and indeed most of the room unlighted. This was because, instead of shedding its radiance downward and outward as would an ordinary shaded droplight, this mechanism focused a horizontal beam upon a second chair on the opposite side of the table. Clearly the person who used the chair beneath the odd spotlight could remain in relative darkness while the occupant of the other chair was brightly illuminated.

"There he is—jes' like Jinx found him."

And now in the dark chair beneath the odd lamp the doctor made out a huddled, shadowy form. Quickly he stepped forward.

"Is this the only light?"

"Only one I've seen."

Dr. Archer procured a flashlight from his bag and swept its faint beam over the walls and ceiling. Finding no sign of another lighting fixture, he directed the instrument in his hand

toward the figure in the chair and saw a bare black head inclined limply sidewise, a flaccid countenance with open mouth and fixed eyes staring from under drooping lids.

“Can’t do much in here. Anybody up front?”

“Yes, suh. Two ladies.”

“Have to get him outside. Let’s see. I know. Downstairs. Down in Crouch’s. There’s a sofa. You men take hold and get him down there. This way.”

There was some hesitancy. “Mean us, doc?”

“Of course. Hurry. He doesn’t look so hot now.”

“I ain’t none too warm, myself,” murmured the short one. But he and his friend obeyed, carrying out their task with a dispatch born of distaste. Down the stairs they followed Dr. Archer, and into the undertaker’s dimly lighted front room.

“Oh, Crouch!” called the doctor. “Mr. Crouch!”

“That ‘mister’ ought to get him.”

But there was no answer. “Guess he’s out. That’s right—put him on the sofa. Push that other switch by the door. Good.”

Dr. Archer inspected the supine figure as he reached into his bag. “Not so good,” he commented. Beneath his black satin robe the patient wore ordinary clothing—trousers, vest, shirt, collar and tie. Deftly the physician bared the chest; with one hand he palpated the heart area while with the other he adjusted the ear-pieces of his stethoscope. He bent over, placed the bell of his instrument on the motionless dark chest, and listened a long time. He removed the instrument, disconnected first one, then the other, rubber tube at their junction with the bell, blew vigorously through them in turn, replaced them, and repeated the operation of listening. At last he stood erect.

“Not a twitch,” he said.

“Long gone, huh?”

“Not so long. Still warm. But gone.”

The short young man looked at his scowling freckled companion.

“What’d I tell you?” he whispered. “Was I right or wasn’t I?”

The tall one did not answer but watched the doctor. The doctor put aside his stethoscope and inspected the patient’s head more closely, the parted lips and half-open eyes. He extended a hand and with his extremely long fingers gently palpated the scalp. “Hello,” he said. He turned the far side of

the head toward him and looked first at that side, then at his fingers.

“Wh-what?”

“Blood in his hair,” announced the physician. He procured a gauze dressing from his bag, wiped his moist fingers, thoroughly sponged and reinspected the wound. Abruptly he turned to the two men, whom until now he had treated quite impersonally. Still imperturbably, but incisively, in the manner of lancing an abscess, he asked, “Who are you two gentlemen?”

“Why—uh—this here’s Jinx Jenkins, doc. He’s my buddy, see? Him and me——”

“And you—if I don’t presume?”

“Me? I’m Bubber Brown——”

“Well, how did this happen, Mr. Brown?”

“’Deed I don’ know, doc. What you mean—is somebody killed him?”

“You don’t know?” Dr. Archer regarded the pair curiously a moment, then turned back to examine further. From an instrument case he took a probe and proceeded to explore the wound in the dead man’s scalp. “Well—what do you know about it, then?” he asked, still probing. “Who found him?”

“Jinx,” answered the one who called himself Bubber. “We jes’ come here to get this Frimbo’s advice ’bout a little business project we thought up. Jinx went in to see him. I waited in the waitin’ room. Presently Jinx come bustin’ out pop-eyed and beckoned to me. I went back with him—and there was Frimbo, jes’ like you found him. We didn’t even know he was over the river.”

“Did he fall against anything and strike his head?”

“No, suh, doc.” Jinx became articulate. “He didn’t do nothin’ the whole time I was in there. Nothin’ but talk. He tol’ me who I was and what I wanted befo’ I could open my mouth. Well, I said that I knowed that much already and that I come to find out sump’m I didn’t know. Then he went on talkin’, tellin’ me plenty. He knowed his stuff all right. But all of a sudden he stopped talkin’ and mumbled sump’m ’bout not bein’ able to see. Seem like he got scared, and he say, ‘Frimbo, why don’t you see?’ Then he didn’t say no more. He sound’ so funny I got scared myself and jumped up and grabbed that light and turned it on him—and there he was.”