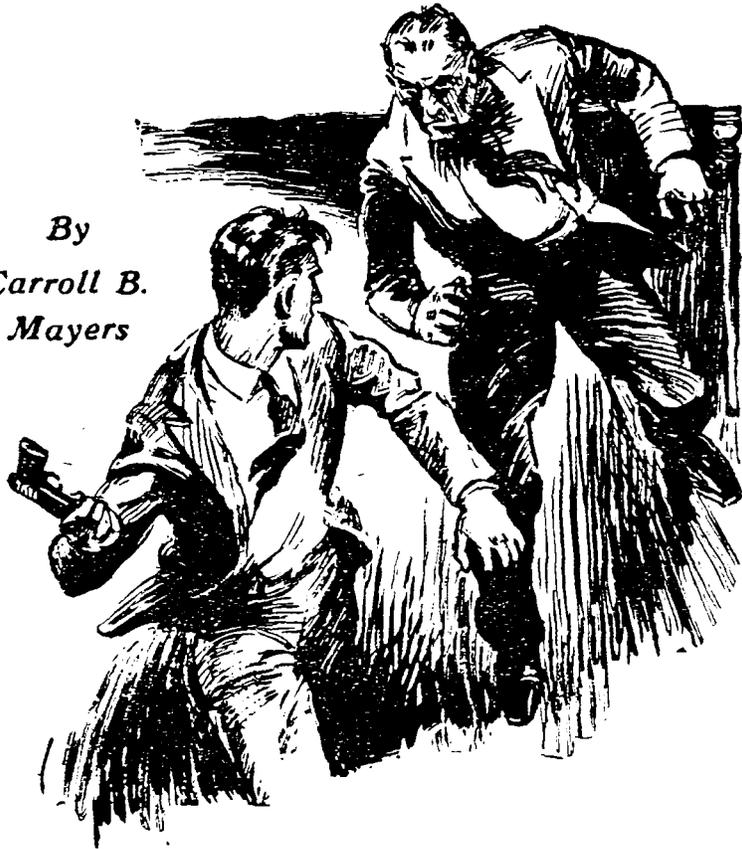


By
Carroll B.
Mayers



Green Doom

In his racket, "Frisk" Kelmar was tops. He could smell a cop a mile away, and lift a cop's badge right under his nose. But when he felt for that gleaming string of green fire, he forgot that a dip should stick to pockets.

IF Frisk Kelmar hadn't taken the watch to old Moses Geisberg, the whole affair would never have happened. But Kelmar had been badly pressed for ready cash, had gone to Geisberg out of sheer desperation. He'd managed to get thirty dollars for the watch; he'd slipped the bills into his pocket with a thin, half-leering smile, and then his keenly shifting-gaze had spotted the necklace.

Shortly after that, Fate stepped in and took a hand.

Ordinarily, all the watches, stickpins, brooches, and similar valuables which Frisk Kelmar's nimble fingers deftly lifted from an

unsuspecting populace speedily found their way into the ready hands of an underworld fence. That was the safest way; you had to use your head in this poke-and-watch snatching game. The cops kept a pretty close check on all the pawn shops; a dip who was smart steered clear of them.

And Frisk Kelmar was plenty smart. Hadn't he been in the racket for five years now? And wasn't he still to get his first jolt up the river?

Of course, he'd been pulled in on suspicion innumerable times, but what the hell was that? The dumb flatfeet had never been

able to hang anything on him, and they never would. How could they when a guy used his head, never took too great chances, and always looked ahead carefully? That was the real secret of his racket, that looking ahead angle. What was the word for it? Foresight? Yeah, that was it. Foresight.

But when Kelmar lifted that gold watch in the noon-day subway rush, his creed of foresight had been temporarily abandoned, through necessity. His desperate need of funds had led him to take the watch to old Moses Geisberg, instead of to his usual underworld connections.

At the moment, Geisberg's pawn shop had represented the quickest, surest, and most convenient intermediary to crisp, ready cash. Geisberg wasn't the type to ask too many pertinent questions; a business transaction was always just that and nothing more.

Accordingly, Kelmar had taken the watch to Geisberg's pawn shop. Then it was that he'd seen the necklace. His roving eyes had just chanced to spot it as they flickered casually over the shabby showcases. But after that one electric instant, Frisk Kelmar had been able to see nothing else in the shop. Emeralds—a brilliant, gleaming string of them—living, breathing, pulsating with sight-searing green fire

Although no expert in jewels, he had realized instinctively that the necklace represented more wealth than had been in his hands for an incalculable period. Four or five grand, perhaps. Possibly double that amount. How the string came to be in Moses Geisberg's nondescript establishment did not concern him. It was there—that was enough.

Emeralds! Green, radiant stones of fortune.

NOW, as he stood on the sidewalk before Moses Geisberg's shop, ostensibly ascertaining the time from a cheap electric clock in the window, Frisk Kelmar's slack lips

curled slightly, baring feral teeth. This was going to be easy. A little out of his line, yes, but, hell, a dip could branch out a bit, couldn't he?

Besides, when you came right down to it, grabbing that necklace wasn't going to be so very different from snatching a well-filled wallet from some doddering old pedestrian. It was all the same racket, a racket Kelmar knew thoroughly, in all its multiple angles. That was the reason he'd decided upon this way, once he'd actually determined to acquire the necklace. A midnight robbery might have appealed to some, but Kelmar was shrewd enough to stick as close to his own line as possible. The fine points of the art of breaking and entering were entirely foreign to him.

As he carelessly teetered on his heels before the pawn shop, Kelmar's loose smile broadened still more. This was going to be one of the smoothest jobs he'd ever pulled. Nothing to it; just a little more foresight, that was all.

During the past three days, Kelmar had kept a close but unnoticeable check on old Moses Geisberg and his shop. He'd learned that promptly at noon Geisberg invariably retired to his quarters in the rear of his establishment for his midday meal, leaving his clerk in charge of the shop.

Kelmar had also noted that this clerk was new, had been hired subsequent to the watch-pawning episode. This was a stroke of sheer, unadulterated good luck, as it reduced Kelmar's chances of identification to the minimum. That identification angle mightn't seem so important, but it paid to figure out all such eventualities, however remote their possibility appeared. A little judicious foresight before swinging into action never hurt anybody.

It was now a few minutes after twelve. Kelmar, who, for the past quarter hour, had been keeping the pawn shop under close observation, knew that old Geisberg had

retired to his quarters as was his noon-time custom, knew that, save for the sole clerk, the shop was empty.

A faint leer still playing about the corners of his mouth, Kelmar hunched his shoulders slightly, pulling his cap brim down over his eyes. He whipped out a handkerchief from his pocket, held it bunched in his left hand. Then he wheeled about abruptly, entered the shop.

Once inside the door, Kelmar was apparently stricken with a sudden paroxysm of coughing. Handkerchief before his mouth, half screening his features, he nodded shortly to the clerk, mumbled something purposely unintelligible, and moved rapidly toward the rear of the shop. His right hand slipped casually into his coat pocket, his fingers curling tightly about chilled metal—the butt of a heavy .38 automatic.

As he moved, Kelmar's eyes seemed to be studying the showcases questioningly. Behind the counter, the young clerk kept abreast of him, leaning forward with polite inquiry.

"Yes, sir!"

Kelmar coughed again, wiped his lips with the handkerchief. His knife-keen brain was functioning with machinelike precision. Yes, there was the necklace. And he'd drawn the clerk into the rear of the shop. Now was the time!

With a short nod, he indicated something in the showcase behind the clerk's back. "I—" he began, and then he acted. Even as the clerk half turned his head to see the object apparently desired, Kelmar whipped his right hand from his coat pocket with the rapidity of light. Dull, blued-metal glinted in the half shadows as he swept the automatic above his head, brought the butt down upon the young man's skull in a vicious, flashing, sweeping arc.

The clerk had been entirely unprepared for the sudden, murderous attack. A hollow groan burst from his lips as he fell backward,

collapsed inertly behind the counter with a dull thud, glazed eyes staring sightlessly upward.

Kelmar smiled grimly with tight-lipped malevolence. That was that! And now, ten seconds more and he'd be out of this place.

WITH a lithe spring, he vaulted behind the counter, the counter wherein reposed the emerald necklace. Swiftly he slid back the rear panel. He could have smashed the glass from the other side, but this way took only a second longer, was safer. Old Geisberg would have heard the breaking of the showcase.

There, it was open! Kelmar's left hand flicked out with the speed of a striking adder. His clutching fingers closed about green fire—and then the necklace was in his pocket.

And that was all! Now to get out of here! Straightening swiftly, Kelmar again vaulted the counter, pivoted quickly upon his heel, whirled about toward the front of the shop. And then a harsh, grating oath burst from his thin, leering lips.

There, standing in the doorway, narrow shoulders hunched forward, bony knuckles clutching a gnarled walking cane, stood a man. An old man, clad in a tattered overcoat, whose startlingly blue eyes gazed at Kelmar with an expression of vacuous incredulity.

Again Kelmar cursed obscenely— then lunged madly forward. Of all the times for this blundering old fool to visit the shop! In the excitement of snatching the necklace from the showcase, Kelmar hadn't heard him come in. Well, now that he was here, it was his funeral.

Even before the old gentleman had advanced two steps, Kelmar was upon him. His frantic fingers clamped viciously over the old man's mouth, stifling any sudden cry of alarm. Once again Kelmar swiftly brought up the butt of his gun. Just as swiftly did it descend in a glittering half-circle. Once, twice,

three times he struck the old man savagely over the head as he struggled feebly, tried vainly to cry out.

Mere seconds, and it was all over. As the clerk had done before him, the old man suddenly collapsed. Weakly, his arms fell from around Kelmar's body as he slumped forward heavily, then toppled to the floor. His twisted cane, slipping out of his fingers, clattered to the boards beside him.

Kelmar half-straightened, panting. His keen ears had already detected rapid footsteps behind him—undoubtedly old Geisberg rushing from his quarters, aroused by the sound of the struggle. Kelmar's jaw muscles bunched thickly, his beady, shoe-button black eyes glittering with an insane light. Just let anybody try to stop him now.

He leaped forward, trying to spring clear of the motionless form at his feet, and his left ankle crumpled beneath him; he'd stepped on the old man's walking cane. Arm flailing wildly, Kelmar lurched sideways. His right hand, still clutching the automatic, smashed solidly against the side of the counter. Reflex action caused his finger to catch, tighten upon the trigger convulsively—

Spat!

With a vicious whine the slug ricocheted sharply off the metal rim edging the counter, crashed through the plate glass window at the front of the shop. The shock of the weapon's recoil in his hand caused Kelmar, still partially off balance, to slip to one knee. As he went down, his left temple struck the top edge of the counter with shattering, nerve-numbing force. The gun fell to the floor.

On his knees, now, head whirling sickeningly, a blinding, all-enveloping red haze swirling before his eyes, Kelmar cursed savagely. Old Geisberg's excited footfalls were more distinct now, a veritable thunder of retribution.

Frantically, Kelmar struggled to get to his feet. His legs refused to support him; the floor

boards swam before his eyes. Once more he swore viciously. He couldn't get up! He was caught! Caught like a damned rat in a trap! Another second, now—

Suddenly something seemed to snap within his feverishly reeling brain. He wasn't caught yet, not Frisk Kelmar! He'd show them. Foresight, that was it. He might be practically "out" on his knees, but he could still figure ahead, still work his way out of this corner.

Fingers fumbling frenziedly in his coat pocket, fighting desperately for time, Kelmar snatched out the emerald necklace. An instant later, he'd collapsed over the body of the old man on the floor beside him—but not before he'd managed to stuff the neck-lace into the old gentleman's overcoat pocket.

FATE played the balance of her hand quickly after that. Even as he slumped weakly over the old man's inert form, Kelmar was conscious of a rough, grasping hand on his shoulder. A moment more, and he was jerked unceremoniously to his feet. He weaved and swayed unsteadily, half falling back against the counter. His straining eyes vaguely discerned old Moses Geisberg before him, right hand still tenaciously clutching his collar.

"You! You!" Old Geisberg fairly screamed the words as his wizened form tried to shake Kelmar's considerable bulk roughly, "What is going on here? What is the meaning of this?"

Kelmar managed a sick smile, a faintly leering grimace. Although his knees still felt somewhat weak, his head was clearing a bit now; he felt more sure of himself. Right now was the rime to talk his way out of this, before that clerk revived, blabbed too much.

"I—" he began, and then broke off sharply, his beady, shifting gaze suddenly flashing toward the front of the shop. For the first time he became aware of the shouting,

milling crowd on the sidewalk outside, attracted to the shop front by the sound of the shot, the breaking of the plate glass window. The throng now fell back momentarily as a burly, broad-shouldered, blue-uniformed figure elbowed its way forward, flung back the door of the shop with a quick, determined snap, and strode inside purposefully, with a curt admonition to the crowd to keep back and out on the sidewalk.

Kelmar recognized the stolid, well-set-up figure immediately, and felt no better for having done so. His encounters with Patrolman Brian O'Hara had been both numerous and varied. True, O'Hara had never been able to definitely pin anything on him, but there had been several rather uncomfortable instances in the past.

Now, as O'Hara's hard heels pounded briskly into the pawn-shop, his shrewd gray eyes lighted with sudden recognition.

"So it's you again, Kelmar," he snapped curtly.

Instinctively, Kelmar realized that his best defensive lay in taking the initiative. "Get it straight, O'Hara," he protested abruptly, with a rising whine of innocence, "get it straight. An' give a guy a break." His beady eyes glinted with smug self-complacency as he rushed on eagerly.

"I'm admittin' it looks bad for me, O'Hara, but as sure as I'm standin' here now, here's the straight dope. I just happen to be passin' by outside, see, an' I take a sorta careless gander in the winder. Outside the clerk, there ain't nobody in the shop but this old bird, here," with a short jerk of his head toward the motionless form on the floor, "an' when I happen to look in the winder, I see him crack the clerk over the head with his cane, hop behind the counter, an' grab out some kinda necklace or somethin'. He sticks it in his pocket, quick like, an' then starts to lam outa the shop.

"I know there ain't no time to call a cop, or nothin', so I jump in here to stop him, an' we tangle. I manage to conk him with his own stick, an' that ends it—an' that's the real McCoy, O'Hara. As far as the shootin' goes," indicating the automatic on the floor casually, "the old duck took one shot at me just before I managed to brain him. He had the gat in his pocket."

Here, old Moses Geisberg attempted to break in protestingly, but O'Hara cut him short. He eyed Kelmar keenly.

"Okeh, Kelmar," he lipped succinctly. "That sounds good, but right now I'm looking for a little something to back it up. If your story's straight, it shouldn't be very hard to find."

AS he spoke, O'Hara stooped suddenly, bent over the old man's inert form, and inserted questing fingers in the pockets of the shabby overcoat.

Kelmar watched him gloatingly, checking a leering sneer of derision which threatened to curl the corners of his slack, saliva drooling lips. Hell, this was easy! That foresight angle came in mighty handy, sometimes. A couple of minutes more, and he'd talk his way right out of this mess, before that clerk came to and spilled too much.

But, then, even if he did regain consciousness prematurely, what of it? Frisk Kelmar had talked his way out of worse difficulties. After all, the clerk hadn't actually seen Kelmar move to slug him—his head had been turned at the moment. Kelmar could claim the old man had managed to sneak into the shop without the clerk's knowledge, had struck him down before the clerk had been aware of his presence.

Yes, that was it. It would be his word against the clerk's; against the old man's, too. And while O'Hara might have his suspicions, how the hell could he prove anything any

different? When a guy looked ahead, used a little foresight—

By now O'Hara had finished his search of the old man's coat pockets. Finished—because in his hands he held the emerald necklace. He eyed it keenly for a moment, then:

"This makes one for you, Kelmar," he admitted slowly. Pausing for a moment, he bent over the old man.

"He'll be coming around in a minute or so," O'Hara added. "You hit him pretty hard, but he'll pull out of it all right. I think."

At this point, Kelmar could not restrain a crooked smile of triumph; he looked at the necklace leeringly. There was one decided point in his favor, he told himself. Regardless of any subsequent claims or accusations of Geisberg, his clerk, or the old man, how were they going to get around the angle of O'Hara's finding the necklace in the old gentleman's coat pocket?

He indicated the gleaming string eagerly. "There you are, O'Hara: just like I told you, see? I know you been sorta suspicious of me in the past, but—"

"No! No!" The interruption, excited, vehement, came from old Moses Geisberg. During O'Hara's brief inspection of the old man's coat pockets, Geisberg had spied his clerk's sprawled form back of the counter. He had rushed over to him. Now he was back, fairly screaming at the police officer. This time he was obviously determined not to be cut off.

"No! No!" he shouted again, eyes blazing, shaking forefinger pointing at Kelmar. "He is lying!" With impassioned emotion, Geisberg indicated the old man who was faintly stirring on the floor. "This man, he is my friend. I

know him many years. Just a short time ago I learn his son is out of work. I give him a job as my clerk."

Geisberg jerked his head backward toward the motionless form behind the counter. "He is a good boy. And his father, here, he is my friend for many years; he would not try to rob me. He must be here now because he wished to talk to his son. Often, he stops by here at my shop."

Kelmar's feral lips writhed back malevolently. Here was an unexpected angle, yes, but it would take more than that to trip him up. He still saw a way clear.

"Maybe the old bird, here, was his friend." he snarled savagely at O'Hara. "That don't prove nothin'. He an' his kid mighta been hard up, mighta staged this whole thing as a last resort to get somethin' they could turn into ready cash. They fake a hold-up, the kid lets his old man knock him out to make it look on the up an' up. They—"

Here, old Moses Geisberg again broke in. Strangely, his attitude now was as though somehow he realized his frenzy of a few minutes ago had been unnecessary.

Now, he spread his hands widely, shrugged narrow shoulders. "It could have been as you say, yes," he agreed, eyeing Kelmar squarely. His voice dropped curiously low, yet still held a vibrant, half-hidden note of triumph. "It could have been; but it was not. And you, you could have made your escape with my necklace; but you did not."

And then, with a quick glance at the floor, at the faintly-stirring old man with the gnarled walking stick beside him, Geisberg added slowly:

"You see—my friend, here—he is blind."