

CALLED BACK

By DAN W. TOTHERON

YOU remember the case. The papers were full of it. It was a sordid, gruesome affair. A scrub girl was killed by a fanatic. His name was Will Hoist. Hers was Gladys Rogers. It was known as the Hoist-Rogers case.

I was reporter for the "Page," and, as a sort of last horrible chapter, I was sent to see Hoist electrocuted. He behaved disgracefully. He was as backboneless as a jelly fish. His eyes stared. His lips were positively blue. He had all the ear marks of an abject coward. I think he was the worst specimen of physical fear that I have ever seen and in my reporter days I have witnessed many men on their short journey to the chair. The last words Hoist ever spoke were ones familiar to me:

"I didn't kill Gladie," he protested until the end. "You ask Peter. Peter knows the truth."

During the long trial, he had often reiterated those sententious sentences, to us, meaningless. I knew them by heart but I had recorded them only as the jargon of a man demented by his crime. To probe him on the subject brought nothing. He would go so far and then stop.

Peter was his twin brother's name, Peter Hoist, the sculptor, whose new art was the sensation of last year's art exhibit. He was found dead in his bed from heart failure, three months before his brother, Will, became a murderer.

I therefore gave little heed to Hoist's parting words and in my story for the next day's "Page," I merely mentioned that he had gone to his death still protesting his innocence and implicating his deceased brother.

Since that time I have stumbled upon strange things and have, at this writing, more respect for Will Hoist's utterances. That is why, at this late date, I am digging up this gruesome affair and turning the poor Hoist brothers over in their graves. Strange and impossible as this story may seem, I feel duty bound to publish it. Hoist's name is on the black list and there is only a cross with a number marking his grave and if what I have learned can in any way exonerate him, if only in the eyes of a very few, I shall consider myself repaid.

I had almost forgotten the case being immersed in other matters. Hoist had gotten his judgment and fitting punishment and that was all there was to it. It was not circumstantial evidence that had convicted him. He had been seen plunging the knife into Gladys Rogers's breast by a girl living in the flat next door. She had come forward timidly the last moment and had clinched the matter. We were all angry at the stupid creature. She was a shop girl and fearing anything connected with cops, she had lengthened the life of the trial by holding back her valuable testimony. But you, who followed the trial in the papers, know all this.

Believing, thoroughly, Hoist's guilt, it annoyed me to have Jack Hayes, a fellow journalist on the "Page," come bursting in on me one lunch time at the Palace grill and interrupt my mastication of a thick steak, by exclaiming:

"Remember the Hoist case, Bert?"

Jack was always abrupt and annoying and he loved to slap people on the back, especially when they had a mouthful. I sputtered and glared at him and when I finished coughing and getting my wind pipe cleared, I said, "Of course, I remember it. Don't resuscitate unpleasant memories, Jack, and, for the love of Mike, kindly refrain from hitting a man on the back when he's in the act of swallowing."

"My error, Bertie," he laughingly apologized, at the same time sitting beside me in a place just vacated. He ordered a steak too, having no originality, all his stories are cut and dried journalism, and while he waited for the steak to fry, he told me that immediately after I had left the office, a woman had rung up the editorial room enquiring for me.

"No, you young devil," he chortled, although I had not flickered an eyelash. "It wasn't Mary Pickford asking for an interview or Lady Duff requesting you to visit her fashion show. It was only an old lady. Get it? An old lady with a cracked voice. I spoke to her myself and she was as ancient as the hills."

Here he poked me viciously in the ribs and here I state frankly that I never did like Jack Hayes.

"Well, what did she want?" I demanded, ignoring his scanty humor, if humor one could call it.

"Have no false hopes, Bertie. This old crone doesn't want to leave you her fortune. She simply wants to have a confidential chat with you about the Hoist case. It'll be cheerful no doubt. She says she hasn't long to live and her one desire is to see you before the Grim Reaper cuts her down. Sounds like Eddie Poe, doesn't it, or Annie K. Green?"

I was angry. I had dallied long enough with Will Hoist. He was dead. Let him remain in his ignominious resting place.

"But why should she pick me out of the millions for her death bed confession?" I cried, pushing away my coffee cup with disgust. "Check please, waiter. I'll not bother with it. You follow it up, Jack, if you care to. I'm through with Hoist and his whole nasty affair."

I was reaching for my hat and overcoat. Jack took hold of my arm. "Bertie, she said nobody but you would do. It seems she saw you at court or read your stuff or something. Anyhow she wants you and you only. Better follow it up, Bertie. It sounds like a wonderful story. Here's her name and address. Complete information."

He shoved into my reluctant hand one of his cards on the back of which was a hasty jotting in pencil. I did not read it then but stuck it irritably into my overcoat pocket.

"So long, Jack," I said, leaving him quickly.

"Better take my advice, old man," he flung after me, but I pretended not to hear him.

I STOOD on the sidewalk, for a moment, to light a cigarette and fumbling for my matches my fingers encountered Jack's card. I pulled it out and read what he had written on it:

Lorna Blanchard, 2021 Hubert street, City.

Hubert street is one of the shabbiest streets in our city. It is a pitiful street because it had once been something. It is like an old duchess in poverty. I know the street well with its gray rows of old-fashioned houses. It is a blowy

street with papers and dust always flying. The street had given me many stories, most of them disagreeable. A young girl had committed suicide in one of the gray houses. There had been a murder in another house. It is rich with food for ever hungry reporters. Perhaps the old woman did have something pithy to relate. I recalled Will Hoist's last words and with this new interest they had a portending sound.

I walked slowly up the street trying to decide. The afternoon was mine. I had counted on walking through the park to the beach. I needed exercise. Jack had said that the woman was dying. She was most likely dead now. I detested seeing dead bodies especially old ones. Well, all I had to do was to ask for Lorna Blanchard. If the Reaper had called before me, I could go away.

Looking around to see that Jack Hayes had not followed me, he was always up to tricks. I swung on to a car and got a transfer to the old trolley line that bumps along within two short blocks of Hubert street.

The sun was obscured by fog from the bay when I got to Hubert street and the old gray houses were desolate in shadow. I had never seen the place quite as melancholy. 2021 loomed up like a great gray vault and the iron picket fence around the small space allotted for a garden, but where no garden had bloomed for years, looked like the fences one sees around graves in old church yards.

I found, to my surprise, by reading a stained placard below the door bell, that Lorna Blanchard was a medium. She gave trumpet and cabinet demonstrations every Tuesday and Friday night. I began to imagine many reasons for this woman's summons as I rang the bell and waited for an answer. She had, of course, heard from the spirit of Will Hoist. Or it might be Peter. I have never taken much stock in spiritualism for I had attended many seances and had always run into tricks. These I had written for a Sunday editorial.

The door did not open for some time. I became chilled by the fog and the wind that sang mournfully about the big gray house. Finally the door was opened a very small crack by some one who asked, "What do you want?"

"I am Willows, reporter for the 'Page.' Lorna Blanchard sent for me," I said to the dim face peering at me through the crack.

"Oh, yes, just a moment."

The door closed and I heard slow foot steps ascending a flight of stairs. Then

there was silence and then again foot steps descending the stair. This time the door was opened wide.

"Upstairs, if you please," invited a servile voice coming from an old man in seedy black who stood in the shadows cast by a feeble gas jet. The tiny blue flame served only to illuminate the first few steps and after that it was a case of feeling my way. The old man followed close behind me but he said nothing and made no apologies for the darkness.

At the top of the stairs, I found another dim gas jet and a long cold hall with countless doors opening into countless rooms. To one of these doors the old man led me; paused and knocked. He received no immediate answer, so he opened the door and looked in. A welcome rush of warm air came out to me and I could glimpse, over the old man's head, a small iron stove with rounded, flushed cheeks like a fat man with a fever. A voice, low pitched and musical, asked if that was Barlow.

"Yes, Miss Blanchard, this is Barlow and I've brought the man from the 'Page'."

"Oh, I am glad," said the rich voice followed by a deep sigh of relief. "Tell him to come in, Barlow."

I ENTERED a warm, high room, the one window of which, had a cracked yellow shade pulled down. The place was scantily furnished. It had a few plush bottomed chairs, a table littered with dusty volumes, dirty dishes, newspapers, and a ouija board; a heavy oaken bureau and a heavy oaken bed to match. That was about all. Above the bed, and staring wrathfully at me, was the crayon portrait of a fierce black whiskered man with a transparent veil covering the lower half of his face. Around his head were drawn moons and stars and planets.

These details I had short time to notice for my whole attention was instantly drawn to the woman lying in the middle of the heavy oaken bed. Her face was most unusual although so much of it had wasted away that her eyes and nose and high cheek bones were all that seemed to remain. What held me and stimulated my interest were her remarkable eyes. They were the eyes of a dead woman who was still lingering, with eyes only, between life and death. They were not of this earth and yet they still held the spark that is not for the dead. She fixed those startling eyes upon me and said:

"I was afraid you wouldn't come, Mr. Willows. You don't know how afraid I was. I am pausing between this world

and the greater one to come but the door is rapidly closing. It is a heavy black door and I can push against it only a short time longer."

I leaned over her, anxious to catch every word. She was like a well written story, interesting from the start.

"What is it you want to tell me, Miss Blanchard?" I asked.

"I want to try and prove to you that poor Will Hoist did not kill Gladys Rogers. I want to lay the guilt at the right door. Please sit down. It is quite a long story. Tell Barlow to keep up the fire. It is cold here for you but not for me. I am free from all that. Can you hear me? My voice used to be very loud and clear. It sounds now as if I am whispering."

"I can hear you perfectly, Miss Blanchard," I said, seating myself on one of the plush bottomed chairs. Barlow was refilling the round stove with coal and the reflections of the flames danced on the room's stained walls.

"How did you come to send for me?" I enquired.

"I saw you often at different seances and when I saw you in court I remembered your face. In your writing you were always so kind to poor Will Hoist. You did not condemn him from the start as most of the newspaper men did."

Looking back, I had been rather square with Will Hoist even though he did exasperate me with his weakness. I did not tell the public he had played the coward before he died.

"How did you know my name?" I pursued. "I never had the pleasure of signing my stories."

"The board told me that," she said, and she indicated the ouija board on the table.

Barlow had taken a seat beside the stove and sat slumped over, his shadow, huge and black, cast behind him on the bare wall.

Lorna Blanchard turned her head slowly on her pillow; fixed me with her eyes and began her strange story.

"To begin with, Mr. Willows, I was nursing Mrs. Hoist when her twin boys were born. I was not a professional nurse. In fact, my father was training me to follow in his footsteps. That is his picture over the bed. He was a wonderful man but too far beyond us to be fully understood. I always feared him when he wore the black veil. We lived next door to Mrs. Hoist. She was a widow, a queer weak little woman who always leaned on me for advice. Her husband had treated her brutally and had bullied her. She had a bad habit

of cringing. Perhaps you noticed that poor Will cringed, too."

"Yes," I said. "Will Hoist was not a strong character."

"Peter and he were as different as the day and night. They were born a few months after their father had been killed in an accident. Mrs. Hoist was alone and without funds so my father permitted me to nurse her and be with her when her hour came.

"I remember the night well. There was a storm and far off rolls of thunder. The doctor we had called in a hurry, was fussy and inefficient. He made me very nervous. Will was born first and Mrs. Hoist, her heart failing, was almost gone. Peter was yet to be born. I saw that in a moment it would be too late. I took Mrs. Hoist's cold hand in mine, and with all my strength. I called her back. It was part of my father's training. She came through the black door reluctantly for she had been given a glimpse of what was on the other side and it had been fair to her.

PETER was born while she lingered between the land of the living and the dead, just as I am lingering now. We, the doctor and I, had to work strenuously to keep Peter alive. At first we thought he was born dead. His little body was blue and cold. The doctor and I swung him around in the air and at last succeeded in bringing the flush of life into his body. He gave a faint cry. As we laid him down beside his mother and brother we found that Mrs. Hoist had slipped through the black door and had closed it forever behind her.

"I did not want to see the children taken to a charity institution, so I prevailed upon my father to let me take them home and care for them. My father was a man of means and I was ready to strike out for myself in the world. I had already conversed with the dead.

"The twins were, from the start, the queerest children I have ever known. They were deeply interesting studies. Will was the clinging kind just like his mother. Peter was absolutely independent. He led Will about by the nose. Will was glad to be led. He followed Peter like a dog and tried his best to obey Peter in everything. Will could never be depended upon, however, for his weakness always got the better of him during crucial moments and Peter would have to step in and do the thing himself.

"As children, they played strange games down near the river that flowed through the dark woods at the rear of

my father's estate. They were not popular with other children so they played alone. Peter would invent the strange games and Will would play with him, half the time not understanding, yet he was not a stupid boy. I often watched them playing there, in those dark woods beside that sluggish river, and I never heard them laugh.

"A great deal of their queerness was my fault. I was too serious with them. My adventures in the spirit world were unconsciously conveyed to them. Peter was fond of asking questions and often I found him with my father in precocious conversation. My father was amused by him and told me that the boy was clever, and, with proper training, would make a brilliant medium. Father called him Spirit Peter because he had been born while his mother lingered in the doorway.

"I foolishly told Peter how I had called his mother back just long enough to give him birth. That filled him with wonder and uncanny amusement.

"I was born while mother was as good as dead.' I often heard him telling Will and you can't imagine how terrible it sounded and how sorry I felt because I had told him. Will would stare at him in horror and he would go on to explain that auntie Lorna could call people back from the dead. His eyes would grow round and pale green like cat's eyes. Will's would, too. My, how they used to frighten me. They were so peculiar looking with pale skins, white eyebrows and lashes, and straw colored hair. They made me think of plants growing in a cellar away from sunlight.

"Peter developed early the artistic talent that later made him so famous. He found, near that dark river, a red clay that was fine for molding and with it he would shape the figures of his mind. When only eleven years old he brought to me his conception of his mother as a spirit that so pleased my father that he made arrangements to send him to an art school when he became older.

THE next year my father died and left most of his money to a research society that he had founded. I took the twins into the city and rented a hall where I began my life's work. I carried out my father's plans and sent Peter to the best art school I could find. At sixteen he won the first prize for a bust of his brother Will. During this time Will was developing along literary lines. You remember he was a contributor to a socialistic periodical at the time of the Gladys Rogers murder. He admired

Peter and still looked up to him and still leaned on his judgment.

"One night when Peter was away sketching in the country, I was awakened from sleep by his voice calling to me, and I felt his long fingers clutching my arm.

"What do you want, Peter?' I asked. 'Are you in need of me?'

"His voice answered me distinctly. 'Call me back, auntie Lorna. Call me back as you did my mother when I was born.'

"I worked myself into a trance and called him back not knowing into what harm he had fallen.

"Three days later he returned looking even paler than usual and wearing dark purple shadows under his eyes. He explained that he had been in an automobile accident and had been nearly killed. He said that if I had not come to his rescue that he would not have lived. He limped when he walked. He kissed me and explained that he would not have minded passing had he not a great gift to give to the world. He was constantly talking about that great gift, my poor Peter.

"They were kind and thoughtful boys, those two queer ones. Will loved me most and it is only of late that I have learned how real and unselfish his love was. Ah, if I had only known sooner. My poor brave Will."

Here she paused and closed her eyes. A deep sigh escaped her. I saw her wasted form, under the covers, spasmodically quiver and then relax.

"Miss Blanchard, not yet," I cried.

She faintly smiled and opened her eyes.

"No, not yet, but very soon. The door is heavy. I must close it soon. Do you recollect the ruthless attack upon my religion a few years ago, when the fakers were exposed and we, who were sincere, were forced to fly from the storm of ridicule? Well, I was one of those who fled. I came to this place and have been here ever since.

"Will lived with me for a time and then moved uptown. Peter had a gloomy studio on Grant street. The two boys came to see me often and I was not unhappy.

"Peter first met Gladys Rogers at a friend's studio where she was doing the cleaning. He gave her his studio work to do, more as an act of pity than anything else. I cannot see what Will found in her. She was plain and unattractive. You know that from her pictures. She had no brains either. But yet he lost his heart over her. As it often happens,

she wouldn't consider the man who loved her. Her silly heart fluttered after the unattainable. It was Peter she wanted and Peter hardly knew she was alive. He was engaged in planning his great gift to the world. He was blind to all else.

"I often saw Gladys puttering about the studio and I quickly saw the situation. Will shamelessly neglected his writing and hung about the studio to feast his eyes on Gladys. I tried to make her appear to him in all her defects but he was love-blind.

"Peter was constantly in search of a model for his great gift. He insisted upon a certain type and turned many beautiful women away. He finally decided on an exotic creature, long and as graceful as a leopard. Her eyes were gray and almond shaped, dreaming like still mountain pools. She was stupid but she was given to long silences and did not betray herself. She posed in the nude for Peter and her body was the whitest I have ever seen. She looked almost transparent.

"Gladys, of course, became instantly jealous of Nina. She thought that because Peter chose her that he was in love with her. Nina came every day and stood on the model's throne and scintillated like a queen and Gladys was the little cat who looked and slunk about and did spiteful things behind Nina's back. Once I found her crying in the dressing room, where Nina kept her clothes, and when I asked her what was the matter, she spoke rudely and ran away.

"Peter's work progressed rapidly. He seemed consumed by inward fires. He would even phone Nina at three or four o'clock in the morning and insist that she come down and pose. Nina always came. She was afraid of him. His gift to the world was a mystery and always will remain one. He kept it under lock and key.

I SHALL never forget the night when Peter came to me and told me that the great gift was ready for the world. He was the happiest man alive, poor Peter. I was very proud of him. He went back to the studio and found his great gift smashed into bits. The door had been forced open and a mallet and chisel had done its cruel work. I think Peter almost went mad. He was never the same afterward. It was reported that he died of heart failure but it was really his brain. He never suspected Gladys

until I foolishly suggested her. When he became convinced, he started out to find her. She had already proven her guilt by dropping out of sight.

"Peter lived only for revenge. His great gift had meant more to him than his life and now, that it had been ruined, there was nothing left for him but to destroy the wanton destroyer. He combed the city from top to bottom. Gladys had most likely gone to some suburban town. Peter never found her. He took to his bed, worn out, a skeleton of his former self. I went and nursed him. He prayed for God to make him strong until he had ended his search.

"Will came just before he passed away. He held Will's hand and fixed him with his eyes.

"'Will,' he said. 'I'm dying but you must finish my search. You must avenge me. Promise that you will find Gladys Rogers and—'

"He did not need to finish it for poor Will understood. He shrank away but Peter's old will held him and made him give the promise. Then he passed beyond the door.

"After the funeral, Will told me that he was going to keep his promise. This time, he told me, he would not be weak and fail. It was my duty to prevent him and inform the police but I did not. I am a wicked woman, Mr. Willows. I had it in my power to save a human life and I let slip the chance.

"Will was gone for three months. I never heard a word from him during all that time and I was worried. I consulted my board but it told me nothing. I had not had communication with Peter since his death. That was worrying me too.

"On the night of June twenty-eight, you know the date, Peter came back. I was sitting in my room thinking of Will. Suddenly I felt Peter's long fingers clutch my arm and his voice asked me to call him back to earth. In obeying him, I was again dreadfully wicked. I don't know what made me so weak. It must have been my love for my boys.

"I called him back and I heard him come through my room, from my cabinet, and go out the door. I called him but he had gone. I began to cry for I knew he had returned for his revenge. I sank into a trance and knew nothing until the next day. And then I heard of the murder of Gladys Rogers."

"But nothing of this came up in

court," I said. "Why was it you did not testify?"

"Because Will forbade it. But I would have testified, in spite of Will, had I known what I know now."

"What do you know now?" I asked, for I saw that she was breathing heavily. I seemed to feel the ominous presence of the Reaper.

"I know now that Will did not kill Gladys. I know now that Peter did not kill her either. Gladys killed herself. Yes, don't interrupt. Will left this with me. I followed his instructions and did not open it until he was gone."

She held up, for me to see, a few hastily written pages.

"In this Will has written the truth. He kept it a secret to shield me. It is really my fault that Gladys Rogers killed herself. I called Peter back. You see, on the night of June twenty-eighth, Will found Gladys in the Grayson flat. He fully intended to kill her but his love for her and his weakness prevented him from plunging the knife. It was then that Peter was called back by me. He went and stood behind Will and Gladys saw his spirit form. Mad with fright, she pulled down Will's upraised arm, and stabbed her breast with the knife. It was this scene that the girl, in the flat next door, witnessed. Gladys died in Will's arms and Peter went back to the beyond. Through me, he had accomplished his end. I am the guilty one."

Her wasted face turned slowly on the pillow. I could almost see the black door closing.

"Of course, no one will believe the story. They always said Will was insane. My religion is not considered seriously. But I know that you will present it to the world, Mr. Willows, in the best way you know how; and we will let them judge for themselves. Thank you—it is—Ah, the door—Will, I'm coming—Peter—"

She smiled as the door closed behind her and Barlow came up and leaned over her.

"She was a wonderful woman," he said, shaking his old head.

"Yes, very wonderful," I agreed with him, as I rose to go.

I felt dazed when I gained the street and I walked for a long time and let the fog and wind blow against me. I then caught a car and rode to the office and banged this off on my typewriter and here it is. Take it or leave it. Laugh at it or scratch your head over it as I have done many times since.

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The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers' main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill. Subscription, \$2.00 a year in the United States; \$2.50 in Canada. Single copies, 50c.

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