

CARVED IN THE FLESH

By TOM RAWSON HILBOURN

SLOWLY, as though devoured by a fiery dragon, the sun disappeared behind the distant hills, painting the sky until it was as a shield that had caught the stain of blood from the dying orb. The white-washed walls of a cell in the State Asylum for the Criminal Insane were encrimsoned by reflected light.

"Blood!" shrieked a crouching figure from the corner of the cell. "Blood on white flesh!" and trembling hands covered his gleaming, staring eyes.

"You'd better look at Number 47, Bill," advised a corridor-keeper to a guard.

The guard nodded, walked slowly down the passage-way between the grated cells, his slippered feet soundless upon the concrete floors. The red glint of the setting sun invaded even the gloom of the dismal corridor.

"He's always worse when he sees anything red," grumbled Bill. "He'll rave the rest of the night. I suppose."

From within the cell occupied by Number 47 came low moans, then a jumble of words—words uttered in a pleading, halting voice; a short silence, and the pitch of the voice rose to a shriek.

"Blood! Blood on white flesh! The blood of my name!" screamed the man who crouched in the farthest corner of the cell.

Bill Waterman, though he had been guard in the asylum for many years, shivered slightly. He peered into the cell, quite unseen by the cowering man within. Although Waterman had heard the ravings of the cell's inmate time after time, always would he pause, as if fascinated. Well did he know the story of the imprisoned man, but the tale's horror enchained him, held him there to listen to its repeating. He leaned against the wall out of sight of the man in the cell.

"I loved her. Oh, God, how I loved her!" the voice of Number 47 had sunk almost to a whisper. "And she loved me. She was mine—mine. I thrilled with the light of love that shone in her eyes when we were together. I trembled when her beautiful, soft arms crept lov-

ingly about me. I flamed when her lips sought mine.

"For years I had loved her, waiting for the wonderful day when she would kneel at my side before the priest. And when that day came, the happiness was even greater than I had dreamed. She was my sweetheart, my mistress, my wife, all three in one. She was my all.

"I was called away. My firm sent me far away into the swamps of South America. The parting was terrible, but we both knew that it meant my advancement, my chance to make the fortune for us that would enable me to provide her with all the luxuries that she craved and that I longed to place at her feet.

"Through fever-drenched swamps, battling the dangers of the jungles, fighting for life itself day after day, I made my way. I had before me always the picture of her when we parted—sob-shaken, trembling with grief. 'God speed you and bring you back to me,' she had prayed as I sailed away.

"There is no mail in the rubber country. My party was far beyond the comforting blessings of messages from loved ones. Each day I wrote love-messages to her in my diary. I would show them to her upon my return. She would treasure the words that I had written during the lonely nights in the camps of the fever country.

"Endless were the days before my work had finished. Delays piled upon delays. I burned with impatience to return to my loved one, but for her welfare I stuck to my post. I sent love-thoughts hurtling through space. I felt that they must reach her and tell her of my great love.

"Came the day of my departure for our home. Ours was a slow sailing, ancient craft that seemed to creep through the waves. Day followed day of ceaseless yearning for the woman I loved. I paced the deck, hour by hour, longing for the journey's ending.

"At last the ship slipped into dock. I hastened through the customs, burning with the desire to rush to my loved one. I cursed the slowness of the taxi that bore me homeward. Would it never arrive! Finally the machine drew up be-

fore my door. I leaped to the ground, flung a bill to the driver and fairly flew up the pathway.

"I noticed that the grounds seemed unkempt, the pathway was weed-grown. These were but fleeting impressions which flashed upon me as I leaped forward so that I might the sooner clasp my adored one to my pounding heart.

"It came to me suddenly. The house was deserted. What could have happened? Was she ill? Could she—? But no! it could not be that. She could not have been taken from me. God could not be so cruel. Frantically I rang the bell. No answer came. I peered in at the windows. The house was deserted.

"Then began my search. Friends at first sought to conceal the truth from me, but I forced it from them. My wife had proven faithless. Another had robbed me of my dearest prize. From the moment I learned the truth the world took on a crimson tinge. Always was there a red blur before my eyes.

"I sacrificed everything—my position—my worldly goods. I turned everything available into money—money that I carried always with me. I trailed the pair from place to place. They were always ahead of me, but my searching was as relentless as death itself.

"At last I found them. They had fled to a cabin in the western mountains. Unknown to them, I watched them—watched them and planned.

"I am a strong man—my hatred made me the stronger. I came upon him one day alone on a high peak in the mountains. I crept upon him slowly, cautiously. He did not hear my approach—and then I had him in my arms. He was as helpless as a child. In spite of his struggles, I bore him to the edge of a cliff and lowered him until his fingers clutched it. He could not draw himself to safety, and I laughed as I saw his fingers cling to the rock. They slipped—slipped. On his face was written agony, but there was also agony engraved upon my heart.

"As his hands loosened, I brought the heel of my shoe down upon his finger tips. I did not stamp, but pressed firm-

ly and laughed at the pain I knew I was bringing to him. He had brought pain to my heart. He begged, pleaded, entreated, but I watched him smilingly—watched him until he fell with a shrieking curse flung from his lips. I watched him fall—fall and then crash upon the jagged rocks below.

"I had far to go before I could reach the cabin where he had left her. I knew she would be awaiting his return as she had once awaited mine. Night had fallen before I reached the cabin.

"A light gleamed from the tiny window of the log-built cabin. I saw this light gleaming through the openings among the massive trees long before I reached their love-nest. It was her bescon light, the light that would guide him to her. Did she long for his coming as I had thought she longed for mine in the days of my happiness?

"Approaching in silence, I crept close to the cabin wall. I peered through the window. She was there, nervously pacing back and forth across the tiny room. The light of the fire burning in the open fireplace painted her—painted her scarlet.

"Noiselessly, I opened the door, but she saw me almost as I entered the room. She did not scream, but her face grew white and she trembled and swayed as a slender tree sways before the rush of storm.

"My eyes drank in all her splendid beauty, but my heart did not quicken as it had in those days when I had possessed her. It beat with the slow, dull throb of the heart of a wounded beast. I was strangely calm.

"Her lips parted as though she would speak, but there was no sound issuing from them. I saw her tongue make the effort to moisten them, but they remained dry, pallid.

"Slowly I approached her. She shrank from me until she was backed against the wall of the cabin. I reached forth and grasped her arm. It was cold; I could feel the tremor of fear at my touch.

"'I have come,' was all that I said.

"'What—what are you going to do?' she faltered, shrinking from me.

"I did not answer. My other hand sought her free arm, and as I grasped it, I could feel her flesh quiver under my clasp. I drew her to me and looked at the stark naked fear in her eyes.

"There was a crude bunk built in one corner of the cabin; an upright post ran from its corner from the floor to roof. Claspng both of her arms within the grip of one of my hands, I loosened my belt, forcing the fear-ridden woman slowly toward the bunk. I bound her with the leathern belt tightly to the post.

"When she was securely bound, I reached forth and pulled the clothing from her quivering body. Deliberately, ruthlessly, I stripped every vestige of covering from her. She stood before me, her glistening white flesh shrinking from my touch. I could hear the rattle in her throat as she made an effort to cry out.

"I had planned all that I would do. My hand sought the sheath-knife that I wore in my belt. Slowly I drew it from its sheath. I tested its point with

my finger. The steel felt cool beneath my touch.

"Again my eyes sought those of the woman standing helplessly before me. She finched under my glance and then there broke from her lips a torrent of prayers—of entreaties—and finally she was silent. She had fainted.

"I set to work rapidly. There upon her tender flesh I began carefully to carve my name. She was mine, and upon her I would place my mark of ownership. None other could have her without the knowledge that she belonged to another man.

"As my knife bit into her flesh, she recovered from her swoon, but under the sting of pain she again collapsed. During her conscious moment, I told her of what I intended to do.

"Carefully, slowly, taking all pains that my knife did not bite too deeply, I carved my name upon the fair flesh beneath her firm, rounded breasts. The crimson blood flowed steadily downward making branching paths upon the white skin.

"JACKSON KERREY HIS WOMAN

"These are the words I left engraved with all my skill upon the woman to whom I had given my name and who could never belong to another. Blood! Blood on white flesh! The blood of my name!" screamed Number 47, crouching shiveringly in the corner of his cell.

"Poor devil," muttered Bill Waterman. "We'll have to put a colored glass in the window. He's always worse when he sees red."

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