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# In the Borderland

by PEDRO DIAZ



"Benson prepared to open the skull. The poor wraith's hands came up to ward off the saw."

**A**MONG the effects of one Joe White, a beachcomber fisherman of Apalache Inlet, Florida, was found the following papers, together with others that fairly assured of the correctness of his identity. As county prosecutor they were given into my custody. Since their publication at that time might have reflected seriously upon certain Northern state officials, I suppressed them. However, since that date those most concerned have died, and I am giving to the world what is perhaps the oddest and most terrible experience ever recorded by a living being. It will be given in the words of its chief actor:

**I** AM known as Joe White. That is not my real name. Most folks have wondered why I stay here, and where

W. T.—2

the money that keeps me comes from. I am nothing if not accommodating. So, since now I am gone beyond their bothering, I will tell the curious the whole tale. Not that they will believe it, but it is the unvarnished truth none the less.

If you remember back some ten years ago you will remember the Shelton murder case. You will remember that old Granny Shelton was tortured, burned, and finally strangled. All the evidence pointed to two people, Joseph Shelton, her nephew, and Slippery Mike Donelson, with whom young Shelton had been seen in company. You will remember that they were convicted after a sensational trial, sentenced to the chair, and were in fact executed the following February. Well, I am Joe Shelton.

Mike and I did the job. I was desperate for money, and old granny, who was as tight with me as she was generous to others, refused it to me. I was a weak young fool, and Slippery Mike persuaded me that the old woman would scare. Well, she didn't. Before I realized it Mike had so tortured her that it would have meant a long sentence at the least. So we strangled her, stole what was in the house and left. You know most of the rest until the night of February 19th.

They posted the death watch on me on February 17th. I was pretty nervous, but kept up well. I'll admit it was a test of nerve when the lights winked early in February for George Nelson, and again the Friday before my date when the negro boy, Wilky Boone, sat in the chair.

I had seen my attorney, John Blake, the morning of the 17th. Into his hands I gave my will. Strange as it may seem, I had inherited granny's money. On the 18th I ate a good dinner, and a light supper, and was sitting in the death cell waiting for midnight.

The warden had told me that Mike was to go first, as he was not holding up very well, but that I was to follow as quickly as possible after him. I was seated on my cot about eleven-thirty when I heard a slight sound by the cell door. I looked up quickly and saw three men standing just inside. At first I thought it was the guards waiting for me, but then I saw that my death watch was still sitting unconscious of their presence. From what Warden Benton has told me since, I know he was never conscious of them.

The three motioned me to remain as I was, and walked over to stand beside me. The first was a heavy-set, brutal-looking chap, with one green and one blue eye and a deep scar from the corner of his mouth to his left ear. He told me he was Cooky Burns, who had died in the chair a year before. The second, a big strapping

Swede, said he was Ole Peterson, who I knew had been executed the night before I dressed in. The third was a little, bestial-faced negro, Wilky Boone. I knew him, for I had passed his cell in coming in, and he had shouted to me the week previous as he was led to the chair that he would be waiting for Mike and me. I stared at them open-mouthed. Cooky it was who did most of the talking.

"Well, Joe, you are due to burn," he said. "You see we know. We have ways of knowing that other people don't. We've come to see you through. George Nelson, Bat Muggins and Tony Caporetti are with Slippery Mike. We are your committee."

I looked at them only half comprehending.

"You see, Joe," Cooky went on, "though the rest of the world don't know it, we chaps who have been burned, or hung, or have had our heads chopped off, make a custom of seeing the new ones through. We always send a sort of welcoming committee. Well, we are yours. We have all been through the door there, we've all sat in the hot seat, we have all been burned. So we know just what you have coming.

"Now, Joe, just keep up your nerve. It ain't half bad, really—not very damned funny, for a fact, but no worse than a good many other ways of shufflin' off. We'll be with you, and stick to the end. Then it'll be your turn to see Butch Schroeder through next week. You see Wilky is here to see you. We find a right fresh one sort of helps keep up the pep; one you've seen, and watched the lights wink for. No doubt Slippery will be here in time to see you through as well; that is if he gets loose O. K. Sometimes they used to be a little bit careless in there, and a chap didn't get loose very good. That is rather unpleasant, but I'll say for Billy Jones, he gives you a plenty and does a good job.

"You see there is really two parts

to us here. If Bill does a good job, why, you're loose; if he don't you're only half loose, and have got an unpleasant hour or so getting the other half free. But Bill always does a good job."

"Just what is it like?" I asked somewhat tremulously.

"Oh, it might be worse. Sittin' there while the screws strap you in is the worst. Bill is pretty decent about not waitin' after they step back. When they let go of you, you know you ain't got more than a breath or two before he gives you the juice. Bill's a good workman; he gives you a hot shot the first crack. That knocks you silly. Mostly it loosens you up right now, and it's all over but the shoutin'. If it don't he gives you a second tingler that pretty nigh shakes everything loose, and follows that with a third that will finish you for fair if the others don't. I don't know myself after the first shot. Bill figured I was a pretty tough bird and handed me forty-five hundred right off the bat. I shook loose right now. Ten seconds after I got it, it was all over. Now Wilky here took all three cracks. How about it, Wilky?"

The little darky grinned ruefully.

"'Twa'n't so hot," he said. "Dat white boy figgah's Ah's puhty small an' gives me on'y twenty-six hund'ed foh de fust shot. Done shook me up an' knocked me plumb silly, but Ah knowed hit when he tuhned hit off. Couldn't wiggle a toe, but Ah could see and heah ev'ything. Second crack was twelve fifty. Dat sho done tickled me up right. Ah could feel mahse'f kicking 'gin dem straps, an' Ah done let out a grunt. Couldn't see nuffin' till he done let loose agin. Ah was done half loose den. Ah could see dem white folks sittin' thah lookin' sohtah green round dey gills. Reckon dat grunt fotechd 'em. Den Billy give me de thuhd shot. Thuhty-eight hund'ed dat was. Golly! I done shook loose right now, buddy, and dat was all.

"Billy hain' neveh missed shakin'

'em loose sence he been doin' de 'cutin' heah. You jes' pin youah faith in Billy, Joe. Dat las' crack he hands 'em 'ud shake a efulunt out'n his cayheass."

"Does it hurt much?" I asked them.

Wilky grinned.

"Sho hell when de fust crack hits you, white boy. Dat sho knocks yo' plumb silly. De rest ain' so bad. But doan' you git de idee hit's any picnie, 'case 'tain't. Main thing is she is sho quick. Bingo! She hits yo'-all, you squihm a bit, and den if yo' lucky dat's all, an' eff'n yo'-all hain't so lucky, why yo' gotta take a couple mo' shots maybe. Dey doan buhn yo' any moh, like dey did ol' Bunny Coopah. Bunny was de fust heah. Took seben shoots, Bunny did. Dey didn' know dey business dem days. Bunny'll tell yo'-all 'bout it sometime. We doan' let Bunny on 'ception committees. He'd sho' scare 'em eff'n we did. But doan' yo' wo'ey none. Billy knows he business. Ah jes' fooled him a little was all, but he done got me jes' de same."

He turned to Cooky suddenly.

"Dey's comin' atteh Slippery. Hope Geo'ge kep' his min' off'n hit. Mike was sho in a bad way. Dere dey go."

I heard a slight commotion out in the passage. Slippery was nearer the door than I and so didn't pass my cell. My visitors seemed able to see as well as though no walls existed.

"Slippery's puhty shaky, Wilky. Think he'll make it?"

"Sho will, Cooky. Dat Nelson boy he sho wuhkin' on Slippery. Ah see dey got Johnson and Puhkins foh de screws. Dey had me. Nice boys dose. Dey sho do a quick job on de chair. But if Bill ain' mo' careful he gwine burn one o' dem boys. I bet Puhkins didn't mo' an' get his han' off'n me when Billy tuhned on de juice. Deh, dey is at de do'. Sho hits Slippery, doan' hit. Good t'ing Johnson hab him tight. Always did t'ink Mike was

yalleh. Lookit dem boys wuk! Johnson's frew fust. Deh, Puhkins is puttin' on de headpiece. Deh, he jump back! Dat Billy sho good!"

As he spoke the lights gave the familiar flicker, dimmed for a full minute, then brightened. My companions peered eagerly.

"Missed it," said Cooky quietly. "Only gave him three thousand. Watch him this time."

Again the lights flickered and dimmed.

"That loosened him up. Half out, Wilky. Billy'll give him forty-five this time."

A third time the light dimmed.

"Yep, forty-five. Huh!"

All three watched with intentness but said nothing. The lights flashed up.

"Is it all right?" I asked anxiously.

"They're takin' him out," Cooky replied. "There comes the stretcher. It ain't often we get two a night. They're rollin' him back o' the screen. All set again. Billy's lookin' over the chair. All O. K. Well, Joe, buck up. They're comin'."

IT WAS a scant half-minute when the procession reached my cell door—the chaplain, the turnkey, and two guards. The chaplain spoke.

"We are ready, Joe. The time has come."

I laughed a bit nervously and replied huskily but steadily.

"All ready, chaplain."

"Good boy," said Cooky at my elbow while the other two nodded cheerfully. "You're a damned sight steadier than I was."

One of the guards patted me on the back encouragingly as the other slit my trouser leg. Then we started.

"Keep up your nerve, Joe," said Johnson the guard. "If you need help just lean on us. You are doin' fine. It won't take long. Just a step. Just step out with your head up. Only a few feet now. Here's the door."

As he spoke they hurried me along the corridor. It seemed but a moment when we paused at the door leading into the death chamber. It swung open and I stepped in between the guards. My eye fell at once upon the chair in the middle of the room. It was big and clumsy-looking, with the cable leading from it that was to convey my death stroke plainly visible. The manacles on the arms and legs seemed to gape for my limbs. I caught my breath quickly, and felt the hands of the two guards clutch the tighter.

"Steady, big boy," came the voice of Cooky. "It gets us all a bit to see the damned thing. There, that's better. Get into it. The quicker you are in the better. After you are down it don't matter much if your legs shake."

I was hurried across the few intervening steps. I caught a hurried glimpse of the white faces of the witnesses and noted queerly enough that they seemed rather sick. I even grinned a bit. I heard a slight noise behind the chair, and just as I was forced into it made out the little alcove with Billy Jones fingering his switches. On my left was a second small door, and a third large one in front of me just behind the chairs of the witnesses. Beside the second door was a low screen and I could glimpse the end of a white covered stretcher behind it. There lay what was left of Slippery Mike Donelson.

The guards were hurrying at their work. I felt the straps tightened on my wrists, elbows, ankles and knees. A band came across my chest; then I heard Cooky again.

"Lean back, buddy. Perkins can't fasten the head-strap."

I leaned back, and felt the strap, still warm from Slippery Mike's forehead, pulled tight across my own. The warmth reminded me of something.

"Where's Slippery?"

I remembered he was to have met me.

"Oh, he's over there behind the screen. Let yourself go, Joe. Here comes the headpiece. It'll be all over in a second now. Now grab a-hold and hang on! Here she comes!"

The headpiece came to rest on my head, I felt the cold grip of the leg electrode and then——

God! They hadn't told me what was to come. I would have been a shivering, suiveling coward if they had. The first shock was like a sudden blow, stunning for a second or so. I saw a million colored lights wheeling and bursting before my eyes, and then a steady knife-like lancing pain that seemed to permeate my whole being. At every alternation of the current it cut. I tried to scream but couldn't. I know now I did groan, and that some of the witnesses fainted. For a full minute it continued, then as suddenly stopped. Oh, the relief of that surcease!

For some reason the surgeon approached me with the stethoscope. From some source I gathered my will-power together. I feared he would pronounce me dead, and that I would be taken to the autopsy table a living being. I could hear my voice, an unnatural droning guttural thing:

"My God, I am not dead! Don't turn it on again!"

That voice really came through. I saw the witnesses shudder and the doctor stepped back. Then Billy gave me the second jolt. That was five thousand five hundred volts, the heaviest charge ever given a prisoner. Again the lancing pains. I could feel my body straining and tossing against the straps, and I tried to scream. The reports said I groaned audibly twice. Then suddenly the pain eased as the current was shut off. It had lasted two minutes three seconds, the heaviest and longest shock ever given. Somehow I seemed to be free from the chair and standing by my limp body. Then I heard Cooky's voice deep with awe.

"Gawd, what a shot! An' only half

out! That boy is hell for punishment!"

Then the voice of Wilky.

"No mo' dan dat Slippery. He aim' cleah out yit, poh devil!"

So that was why Slippery had not met me as promised! Then came the third shock. It was not quite as bad as the others; the pain seemed duller, though still terrible. I could still feel my body tossing against the straps. Then it was shut off. My body lay limp in the straps. The surgeon approached and placed his instrument. Again I tried to tell them I was not dead; but I was helpless. He listened and then turned to say solemnly:

"I declare this man dead!"

THE straps were unloosened and I was placed on a second stretcher and rolled behind the screen beside Slippery Mike. Beside his body stood a faint wraith, like Mike yet unlike him. I found I could not speak, though I tried. Beside him were the forms of three men, and the three with me now joined them.

"Ain't that hell?" spoke Cooky. "Two in one night and didn't shake ary one loose. Well, we can't help 'em now. Our boy Joey took all Billy could give and begged for more."

"Well, Slippery took a plenty," responded one of the others. "Two tough babies, I'll tell a world. Well, then, for the autopsy room. That'll shake 'em loose!"

The six were gone.

Just what had happened I still am not sure. Possibly the old Egyptian idea of the duality of the soul is right. From Cooky's words it would seem so. Possibly the "ka" is attached to the body and although the true soul may leave it it is not truly dead until the "ka" is freed. Mike and I were numbered with the "undead" yet were not of the living. I could feel, even more acutely than in life, the pressure of my body on the stretcher and the coarse covering over my face.

After some minutes Perkins and

Johnson returned, opened the side door and rolled us into a second room. Mike they lifted upon the autopsy table, where they stripped his clothing from him. My body they also stripped, and covered us both again with the sheets.

Then through a second door came the surgeons, Dr. Benson, Dr. White, and Dr. Swanson. They were in operating-gowns, with rubber-gloved hands, and each carried a small instrument case. These they opened and placed upon a little side-table, arranging the instruments calmly and chatting while they did it.

I could see a look of terror upon the faintly discernible features of Mike's wraith. Calmly and deliberately Dr. Benson made the first incision from the inner point of Slippery's left shoulder across to the right. The wraith that was Slippery writhed and the face contorted, his mouth opened as though in a long-drawn-out scream. As deliberately Benson cut from chin to pelvis, laying the abdomen open, I could see Slippery's bowels, still warm and smoking. Again the poor wraith writhed in agony, while his hands tried futilely to ward off the gleaming knife as it tore through the flesh.

Talking casually, Benson grasped his bone-cutters and began to snip the ribs on each side of the chest cut. They were reflected back, and the still warm chest of Slippery was exposed to sight. I could see in its midst the heart, a heart that seemed to quiver and shrink as Benson touched it and began to massage it.

"Queer thing, Swanson," he said laughing. "I've been told that occasionally massage will start the heart for a few beats. Never have seen it myself, but I always try it. By Jove, there it goes!"

I could see the stilled heart of Mike pick up its pumping. The poor wraith sank down in agony and grew fainter as it beat a few beats. Then it ceased, and Slippery's groveling form became

clearer. It quivered all over a moment while the doctors watched in interested silence. Then Swanson laughed shortly.

"Look out, Benson, he'll come to on you. By George, is he dead or not?"

Benson laughed.

"Dead as a herring, Swanson. Merely muscular contraction; tissue reaction, nothing more."

The dissection went on. Bit by bit as the tissue was exposed and removed the three commented on its condition. Swanson alone seemed a bit squeamish, remarking he didn't care for autopsy on still warm corpses. To Benson it had become a commonplace affair. Slippery, poor chap, was in a pitiable condition. The prolonged agony of the hour's slow dismemberment had marked his wraith-features with the same terrible marks that a similar torture would have produced on his face had he been a living, sentient being. Every cut of the knife, each organ torn loose, every muscle wrenched out, each bone disjoined, had produced agony as keen as upon living flesh, with no blessed loss of consciousness to put a period to the agony.

Benson picked up a small saw and prepared to open the skull. The poor wraith's hand came up to clutch his head as though to ward off the saw. Once more he dropped writhing to the floor, groveling and twisting with contorted face and twisted limbs. The skull cap came off, and the keen knives of the surgeons began to tear off the membranes and cut into the substance.

Suddenly the groveling Slippery ceased to writhe. The twisted face smoothed out. I noticed that the dim form grew suddenly clearer. It stood now, beside his dismembered body, smiling. Then he turned to walk toward me.

"My God, that was sure hell!"

Mike was speaking to me.

"Praise be I'm finally shook loose. I'm sorry for you, Joe. I hope they,



make it snappy for you. That is sure hell. The chair was a pleasure beside it. Pray your damndest that Benson don't try to start you up again. Good-bye, till you're loose, Joe. I don't think I could stand watchin'."

He was gone. Trembling with anticipated anguish I watched the three unconscious ghoul's chattering over the poor twisted brain-stuff of Slippery Mike.

**W**ELL, it finally ended. They hustled the remnants of Mike back into his gutted shell, except for the fragments they retained to satisfy their curiosity. They moved him off the table, and the three lifted my limp form upon it. I tried in vain to fight them off. My hand met nothing, or rather it seemed to go through their solid flesh as though it were not there. My body, still warm and limp, would not respond to my will. I was stretched out, and Benson was reaching for his knife. I shut my eyes; then a sharp lancing pain from shoulder tip to shoulder tip, as the keen blade cut through skin and flesh.

I writhed, I tried to scream, and then—a million multicolored lights burst and wheeled before my eyes, the world spun crazily, thunderous rushing winds roared in my ears—I was lying nude and helpless on the table, but again a breathing, sentient being. I groaned, and my thick tongue tried to mumble words.

The three stepped back in horror. Swanson seized my wrist, while White fumbled for his stethoscope.

"There is a pulse, rather weak but gaining," exclaimed Swanson. "Respiration is beginning. I'll be damned!"

"Good God, he's not dead!"

Benson stepped back, his eyes dilated with horror.

"But I'll take my oath that there was no sign of heart action when I pronounced him dead! Why—why—doctor, he took three of the heaviest

shocks ever given in this prison! What can we do?"

The three looked at each other in doubt. Then White turned to Benson.

"By God, Benson, I'm no state executioner. If you expect me to finish him, or stand by while you do, you've guessed wrong!"

"My God, no!" shouted Benson; then turning to Swanson, "Go for the warden."

In the five minutes before the warden came I had begun to breathe naturally and to recover muscular control. He looked pretty sick when he came. Painfully I gasped out that I was not dead. He turned nonplussed to the doctors.

"Well, this is a pretty mess! Came to on the table, eh? And he is semi-conscious, more's the pity. Will he recover, doctor?"

Swanson shook his head doubtfully.

"You can't say for sure, but my idea is he will. What do you two think?"

"Undoubtedly, Swanson," replied White shortly.

The warden looked angrily at them.

"Look here, you three, what have you been up to? Artificial respiration, or what? This is no joke. This man is supposed to have been executed; he has been, and has been officially pronounced dead. The witnesses are gone, the executioner is gone, and only God and the Supreme Court know what his status is. I doubt that I can legally re-execute him, and I'll be damned if I'll take the responsibility for doing so. Benson, you pronounced him dead; it will be your official neck that goes for reviving him."

"But, good God, warden!" protested Benson. "As God is my witness, we did nothing. Ten minutes ago we finished with Mike and put Joe on the table. I made the first incision—you can see it there now, bleeding—and the damned corpse groaned! Then he came to. I tell

you he was dead, dead as Judas Iscariot! No pulse, no heart, no respiration, no reaction of life in him. If he wasn't dead, I never saw a dead man. Why, man, he took fifty-five hundred volts for over two minutes! If that won't kill, then juice never kills. Ask the other two. They saw everything here. They have been with me every minute until he groaned."

The warden looked at the others, who nodded agreement.

"Well, what's to be done?" he finally asked.

"That's up to you, warden," replied Benson.

"It's a damned pity he wasn't cut up too far to come back. Well, no, I won't say that either, I'll say it's a damned pity it happened. I can't re-execute him; I doubt I could legally, and I'll resign before I try it. Poor devil, do you suppose he knew all the time? Oh, Lord, what a mess! I'm phoning the governor and the attorney-general. If they tell me to try it again, I'll resign."

Well, they revived me, and I told my story. They didn't believe it at

first, but even Warden Benton agreed that my description of Cooky was perfect, even to his little mannerisms of walk and movement. And I had never seen Cooky alive. They finally believed my tale. The attorney-general was of the opinion that since I had been legally executed once, and had been legally pronounced dead before witnesses, the state was through with me. I stayed with the warden under cover for a couple of months, and then on the suggestion of my old attorney, Blake, I was released to come down here. Blake has furnished me my money from old Granny Shelton's estate, which I had left to him for his efforts in my behalf.

That is all. Believe it or not, this is a true tale. You may see the scar from Benson's knife across my shoulders, or may ask any of the people who know the truth.

\* \* \* \* \*

It may be noted in closing that the scar was plainly visible, and that the story has been corroborated by those who knew of it at the time.