

## THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

INSPIRED BY THE CBS RADIO AND TELEVISION PROGRAM SERIES SUSPENSE

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RUSSELL BRANCH

# RIP TIDE

*As in music, so in fiction. Unwilling to tread well-worn paths simply because they are safe, the experimenters of each generation strike out in new directions. Sometimes they lose themselves, and cacaphony results. Occasionally they hit on something—a wondrous modulation, an unprecedented harmony, a rhythm strange to the ears but closer to the heart. Of course, such explorers take their lives in their hands. Brahms and Wagner were booed no more than the unsung hero who devised the first sonnet. Russell Branch had his nerve, expecting to find publication for a story so radically shaped, so unexpectedly poetic, so fresh.*

*Fortunately, SUSPENSE has no taboos. And it knows a happy marriage of form and content when it sees one. This lyrical treatment of a passion crime may ring a bit strange at first, but we predict the melody will linger on.*

*Sea liting, girl jilting,*

*kissing killer, thriller diiler*

**B**URNING sun and shimmering sand, burning sand and shimmering sea. Haze of heat; squint the eyes. Dark-skinned girl with ash-blonde hair, skin-tight suit of velvet black. Black the black of secret sin, black the shade of murder.

Lora Walton took me like a slug of gin, on that hot empty afternoon. Two short minutes, and I knew the want. A little longer, two long days, to know the price.

Other fish in the ocean, other women on the beach. Lovely, lush; blonde

and brunette. Redhead as usual at the foot of the tower. Halter loose and legs asunder. Green-eyed greed behind Harlequin glasses. Watching me? I cared no longer.

Run the sand, hit the surf. Flash of arms, twinkle of legs. Under the breaker . . . and empty foam. Joyful toss of a sea-slick head.

I knew Lora Walton was a swimmer the minute I saw her. Taut smooth line from under-arm to breast. Long firm undermuscle, from shoulder to elbow. Bleach of sun in her hair, golden tan. From following the sun to golden places . . .

Breaker rising, swelling, piling. Sea-green tower . . . a beauty, get it! Power spilling, crashing, rolling.

She got the first big one, came riding it in. Red lips open, face intent. Body curled over, molding the edge. Using it, holding it.

I saw her husband then; the first time. Little guy, partly bald. Scrawny legs, fortyish paunch. Skin that would only get red, and peel, and get red again. She bounced up and grabbed his reluctant hand . . .

Come play with me and be my love, and we shall some new pleasures prove. Of flashing surf and golden nooks . . . of sea-green graves and grappling hooks?

She led him out into the water, splashing, laughing, mocking. Come play with me and be my love . . . except for that quick look she cast back along the beach.

Under the first breaker. Baldy finally up, choking, struggling. She already out beyond his reach, calling, laughing, tempting.

I straightened up.

Baldy off his feet, going out with the back surge. Swimming, if you could call it that. At least his arms were flailing. The next wave came in, a gentle swell, and buoyed him up.

I stood up and blew my whistle. People staring, turning.

Baldy struggled around, looked at me, started to oblige. But the girl was already by his side, frolicking, mocking, showing him how easy it was. Behind them, another wave began to pile up.

My whistle again, two sharp blasts, and angry motions like a traffic cop. Baldy hesitating, uncertain, reluctant. Blondie kicked herself upward, half out of the water, and gave it right back at me, in reverse.

The gesture meant a lot of things. Go on with you, can't you see we're having fun? Sit down again, and rest your big strong muscles. It meant: we're paying for it, and who are you anyway, but a hired hand with a boy whistle?

It meant murder . . . but did I know that then?

More splashes from Baldy, just to show his independence. But he had had enough, he finally came in and flopped on his belly and started working with the suntan oil.

Blondie kicked some more of the Pacific around for a minute, then came in—a hundred yards down the beach. Not even drying herself, just cutting straight across toward the hotel terrace. Baldy quickly gathered up towel and lotion and tagged after her, like a faithful poodle.

Would have sat up and begged myself, for one chance to do the same. But that was the last I had of her, until the next afternoon.

EXPENSIVE, exclusive and sophisticated: the *Palma Del Mar*. Lifeguard in the social swim? Not exactly, but money has prerogatives and appetites, particularly money like Irene Monteil. The management only hopes they can be satisfied discreetly, is all. Is everything satisfactory, Mrs. Monteil?

That evening a hungry redhead named Irene Monteil fed me Scotch in a discreet corner of the bar, danced a few discreet steps with me across the floor, maneuvered me into a discreet corner off the discreet loggia.

It was her last night, and if she didn't get out of it what she hoped for—neither did I.

Hangover, fingernail welts on my cheek, lipstick marks on my white tuxedo jacket . . . and not one glimpse of a tall, dark-skinned blonde.

But I got the name the next morning from Sammy the beach boy. Also a wise look. "Want me to park 'em near you, if they take out an umbrella and back rests?"

"Hell, no. Just want to know who I'm dealing with, when I fish him out of the drink. He thinks he's Johnny Weismuller."

Harold B. Walton. Mrs. Harold B. Walton. . .

The morning wore on, the sun got hotter. Redhead gone, but a chunky little brunette had taken her stand. The brunette dropped her straps, too, but her eyes weren't greedy.

Just hopeful—hopeful like mine.

And what could she be finding to do in a hotel room all morning—with a guy like Harry?

I was splicing a new line on a life ring, she was there before I knew it.

"Guard. . ."

Down, straight down into cool, almond eyes slanted up at mine. Unfathomable eyes. Older than her figure, old as sex.

I smiled. "Guy. Guy Sherwood."

She also smiled. A brief, cold smile that made my own grin as silly as a toothpaste ad.

"I'd like to use your board."

I'd like to kill my husband?

"I'd like you to, but—"

"I know how to handle one."

"Rules, Mrs. Walton. Rules and regulations. Part of the lifesaving equipment. . ."

Wandering eyes. She didn't miss a hair. And still waiting expectantly, one eyebrow arched.

I jumped and proved how athletic I was. I lifted and proved how strong I was. Sixteen feet of polished mahogany, all the way to the water's edge.

Harry was standing back away, kicking off his sandals and watching us.

"Ask your husband to take it easy today, will you please?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

She gave the board a shove and was gone. Thank you kindly, Mr. Sherwood? . . . Not even a backward glance.

Ebony against dark mahogany, Ashen hair and smoky skin. White

spume at the crest of a breaker.

Harry looked like a mutt who had lost a bone. I didn't ask him anything. I went back to my platform and picked up my glasses.

They were piling up around the point today. Not breaking, just building up slow and lazy. But if you were an expert, if you could sense the surge and shift of balance with every last muscle and nerve in a knowing body. . .

If you were Lora Walton, in other words, you could ride the downhill ride all the way. All the way in until they started building up again, then over and down the summit for the final burst.

She used the board as she would a man. She caught one and rode it to a fare-thee-well. She waved to her husband gaily—and went back for more.

I watched her all the way, I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Knees down, body crouched, long arms working in even strokes. Heaving ocean and caressing woman, moving as one. The pause, the lift, the surge of power. Gathering speed, the woman coaxing. Beating the crest, keep on ahead. Then knifing the downslope, erect and exultant. . .

I didn't see Harry until she was almost upon him. Out, too far out, paddling gamely like a worried pooch. Watching his wife proudly, watching his love on the flying splinter.

Splinter? Sixteen feet of knife-edged murder.

No one else on the beach saw it, although they were all watching. I wouldn't have been sure myself,

without the glasses. The quick raise of her arm, sure; a friendly greeting. But that subtle shift of weight, that sudden twist of balance?

The board swerved. I saw its sharp nose shoot upward as she threw herself away from it. I thought I had seen Harry duck the instant before. But that was all I had seen before I jumped. The waves were hiding them now, the swelling rolls and the breaker ahead. I kicked down and under, and came up stroking.

They were together when I got out there, and what do you say? Pleasant afternoon, a lovely day?

"Your board's over there, you'd better get it."

Too heavy to lift and too much to handle. This time I dragged it, the hell with the sand.

SHE KNEW, I KNEW. We met in the bar that evening.

Dim lights and smell of whisky. Soft music and the smell of money. The touch of her hand, and. . .

"Your husband?"

"Too much sun. Poor Harry."

Poor Harry.

"Close call, this afternoon."

"Mmm . . . my cigarette's out. Try it again?"

Almond eyes through smoldering smoke. Hand as cold as the touch of death.

"But you do know how to handle one. The Islands?"

Of course the Islands. Waikiki and the Outrigger Club. Rio, Nassau, and Bermuda, too. Cool linen dresses and the kiss of the sun, long cool drinks and. . .

"Me too, but I work my way."

Cold and wise, the slanted eyebrow. "You think I don't?"

And what do you say to that? Nice work, if you can get away with it?

Long slim leg, bare as her shoulders. Long slim finger, flicking the ashes. Ring on the finger, rings on the bar. Rings within rings.

"Dance?"

Honey won't you hold me hold me tight, the night is ours and you are divine all mine. . .

"Sorry."

"Mr. Muscles."

"Mr. Clumsy."

"I think I like you better on the beach."

"Well. . . ?"

"Swim?"

"My trunks are in the locker room . . . locked."

"And Harry's in my room . . . reading."

"Well?"

"Well. . ."

Nice work—if you can get it.

"No . . . NOW, WAIT . . . Guy! . . . first there's something to get straight."

"You mean fun's fun, but I'm just the lifeguard?"

"Silly. I mean this afternoon."

"Accident."

"Of course."

The velvet night, the sighing surf. This night was ours and you were . . . thinking.

"Accidents do happen, sometimes."

"Sometimes."

"And there you are, quick as a flash, Mr. Muscles."

"That's why I'm here."

"Here?"

"You know what I mean. Here. The Palma Del Mar."

"The season's nearly over. Then what?"

"Bermuda, Key West . . . maybe the Royal Hawaiian. You?"

"Honolulu, maybe . . . yes. Are you always the lifeguard?"

"Sometimes I tend bar, sometimes I teach tennis. All depends."

"Lots of ambition, for a husky young man."

"Husky appetite, anyway."

"And you like the work?"

"Well. . ."

"The yes sirs and no sirs, and how are you today, Mrs. Walton?"

"Look. . ."

"When it could be Lora, and how are you this morning, darling?"

"Lora. . ."

"No. I'm not through, let me finish. You—"

"You don't have to finish."

"All right, then."

"But Lora. . ."

"I'm cold, I'm going in."

I was cold, too. But I didn't go in, not for a long time.

Other talks in other places. Same people—with other faces.

"Good morning, Mrs. Walton. How are you today, Mr. Walton?"

"No . . . no, Guy. No!"

"Here, let me. . ."

"I like to pay my way, Lora."

"Harry can afford it. That's all he's got."

"But a guy with that much. . ."

"Are you kidding? He inherited it."

"Two fifty-three, sir, and a quarter for the cigarettes."

"A million and a quarter, in round figures."

"You enjoy being a lifeguard, Sherwood?"

"You meet such interesting people, Mrs. Walton."

I got through the cold layer just once, and that was when she came to me. Slipped into the locker room, just as I was closing up for the night. Plastered herself against me, dripping wet . . . and was gone again before I quite knew what had happened.

There was hot lava, underneath.

**THERE** was also Harry.

Bald, paunchy, eager little Harry. Harry gaining confidence, Harry gaining skill. Harry the bantam rooster . . . the rooster learning to swim.

At least she made him think he was. She taunted him, encouraged him; she led him out into the deep waters, and filled his cup with oil.

It was never said, it was never spoken. It was just a look and understanding . . . the right circumstances at the right time.

Time and circumstances, time and tide. Late afternoon, sultry overcast. Churning cross-tides, heavy sea. One for the money, two for the show. Twelve for the jury, and here we go . . .

"Mr. Walton. . ."

Million and a quarter—in a round, flabby figure.

"Yes, Sherwood?"

"There's a strong riptide today."

"Well?" That was Mrs. Walton. I wet my lips. "Undertow, too." "Yes?"

Our eyes touched bottom. "Frankly, Mrs. Walton, I wish that . . . well, why don't you wait until tomorrow morning?"

Liquid laughter. They must have spent the afternoon in the bar. "Listen to the silly man, Harry."

"Silly," said Harry.

"You tell him, Harry boy."

"Preposterous. Ridiculous."

"It's worse than it looks, Mr. Walton."

"Nonsense. Going in."

"Of course we're going in, lover. Tell Mr. Hairy Lifeguard to go climb himself a tree."

"Or fly a kite. Good day for kites."

"Please, Mr. Walton, please! You aren't . . . well, you aren't quite the swimmer your wife is, you know."

"He can learn, can't he?"

"Can't condemn a man for trying, m'boy."

Can't condemn a man for murder, either?

The chunky brunette, warm and sympathetic. "Honestly *some* people!"

"Stubborn. I'll keep my eye on him."

And what did you see? Ash-blond hair and tawny skin, wide olive eyes filled with secret sin?

Or a million and a quarter?

Nothing. Nothing but a bottomless ocean, swirling black. . .

"You *knew*, Mr. Sherwood. You knew that—"

"That he wasn't a strong swimmer?"

"And that the surf that afternoon—"

"I warned him."

"But your duty, Mr. Sherwood—"

"And argued with him."

"You had the authority, Mr. Sherwood—"

Authority? Yes sir, no sir. Is everything satisfactory, Mrs. Walton? She screamed.

He wasn't in trouble yet. Too far out and over his depth, but no more danger than usual. Until that scream.

Water building, rising, toppling. . .

She screamed again.

Ride the wild spray.

"Mrs. WALTON WAS CLOSEST, SIR. BUT you see. . ."

"She couldn't reach him?"

"He broke away."

"And you had hold of him, once?"

"I couldn't hang on."

"But your training, Mr. Sherwood—"

"He was too much for me."

"And your experience, Mr. Sherwood—"

"Fear, Mr. Coroner. Blind, struggling fear."

Fear, all right, but not blind. Far from blind, near the end. A man can fight for his life, even if he can't swim.

She held him under, but he broke away.

Knife the downslope, ride all the way.

I was the one who showed him that bottomless pit, swirling black.

"And you made every attempt?"

"Until we were both exhausted."

"You didn't see him again?"

"Undertow, Mr. Coroner, undertow and rips. Until finally, the darkness. . ."

The darkness. They didn't find him until daybreak, half a mile down the beach.

*Black the black of secret sin, black the shade of widow's weeds.*

"Lora."

"You fool!"

"But. . ."

"They mustn't see us . . . together!"

"Listen. . ."

"You utter fool!"

"But when. . .?"

"San Francisco, two weeks from now."

"Where?"

"The St. Francis, you fool, get out of here!"

San Francisco, after two long weeks. . .

"Sorry, sir, you must be mistaken."

*Mistaken? I had only killed her husband.*

San Francisco, Honolulu. . .

"Mrs. Walton sailed aboard the *Lurline*, sir. Perhaps you can reach her in San Francisco?"

*And perhaps you can reach her in hell.*

Miami Beach, Acapulco. . .

"Gone for now, she may be back. You like to leave a message, Señor?"

*Message, sure. Remind her I killed her husband.*

Tahoe Lake and Ensenada. . .

"Care to leave your name, in case?"

"Thanks, I'll try again."

*Try, try again.*

"Mrs. Walton cannot be disturbed."



"Mrs. Walton says she doesn't know you."

"Mrs. Walton refuses to see you."

Mrs. Walton at Coronado.

The Coronado . . . and a lucky break.

"Hi-YA, BILL, you've come up in the world."

"Guy, you old buzzard, where've you been?"

"Here and there, everywhere. What's the gag with you?"

"Look at the door, can't you read?"

"Sure. Social director, but what does *that* mean?"

"Same old guff, with a raise in pay. You want a job?"

"Me? I'm looking for a wealthy widow."

"No kidding, my boy, you're the answer to a prayer."

"You mean you're broke—or did the lifeguard quit?"

"Nope. You remember that act we used to do?"

"With two empty bottles and your wife's best plate?"

"No . . . with Mack Sennet costumes and a high diving board."

"And a sprained back and a broken rib? No thanks, my friend, I'm getting old."

"You gotta, Guy!"

"Not for love, nor even for money. Those days are gone forever."

"But for your dear old pal?"

"My dear old pal can go jump himself. What's the pitch?"

"A water tournament, an aquatic revel."

"Good Lord."

"High diving, precision swimming,

water polo, and feats of daring. Courtesy of the guests themselves."

"Now I know you're crazy."

"Don't look at me, it's the manager's pet. We need Eleanor Holm and the Olympic team, but I'll settle for a Guy named Sherwood."

Pause for reflection, and a dawning idea. . .

"How about the customers? You got any talent?"

"Couple of college kids and one lush dame. She swims like a dream, but can't be bothered."

"It wouldn't be . . . a Mrs. Walton?"

"You know her?"

"Yeah, but I'd like to know her better."

"Cut it, Guy, this is serious. Another flop, and I'll be out on my neck."

"And you'd like to get this Mrs. Walton?"

"I'd rather have you."

"Well . . . give her a surfboard, the star attraction. She'd go for that, if you play it up."

"A board? But this is supposed to take place in the pool."

"All right, so the rest of it's in the pool. The guests can walk themselves around, can't they?"

"Well. . ."

"Make a deal. You get Mrs. Walton and I'll play Punchinello off your tower."

"What *is* this, anyway?"

"I told you I was chasing a wealthy widow."

"Mrs. Walton—a widow?"

"Sure. I killed her husband, but she ran out on me."

"You're crazy as hell, but . . ."

"It's a deal? Land Mrs. Walton and I'll help you out."

"Okay. I don't get your angle, but it's worth a try."

"And Bill . . . don't mention my name, or you'll scare her off."

So Mrs. Walton didn't hear of me, and Mrs. Walton didn't know me, and Mrs. Walton was not disturbed. In fact, Mrs. Walton laughed with all the rest.

Laughed when I tripped, climbing up the ladder. Laughed while I trembled on the end of the board, and laughed when I flopped like a bowl full of jelly. Fat, foolish clown, in a

wig and a costume. Laugh, clown, laugh.

BUT LATER, paddling out for her own demonstration. . .

She saw me then, and knew me then, when my head broke through the water.

"Guy!"

"Ready for the big one, Lora?"

The board. . .

"Ready for the last one, Lora?"

Her wrist. . .

"No, Guy . . . NO!"

The board, the wrist, the surge of power.

I had her in my arms at last.