« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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A Gripping Complete Novelet

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Some Day I'll Kill You!

By
SEABURY QUINN

Author of "Roads," "The Phantom Farmhouse," etc.

Oaths That Are Not Nipped In the Bud Burst Into the Evil Bloom Whose End Is Silence

Feverishly she turned for a hassock

WILLIAM SEFFINGTON JEFFERS, JR., and Marilyn Hosmer, were born within twenty-four hours and twenty-five feet of each other, for their mothers occupied adjoining rooms at the Lamson Peel Memorial Hospital. When the nurse wheeled William from the baby-room for periodic feedings, Marilyn lay in the next basket in the carriage and seconded his lusty cries for nourishment with her shrill piping treble. When the time came for them to go home they rode in the same car, but William got out first, for he was going to live at 1632 Bay Avenue, while Marilyn's family lived next door at 1634.

The elder Jeffers was in the insurance business, Mr. Hosmer was a realtor. Both were active in Kiwanis, held memberships in the Shore Acres Country Club, subscribed to the same newspapers and voted the same ticket on election day.

When Bill—they had begun to call

him that already—and Marilyn were four, their mothers entered them at Mrs. Brink's Select Kindergarten. When they were six they entered public school together. Thereafter Bill was waiting at the front gate every morning and walked home with her each afternoon. When they graduated to the upper classes and homework was required of them, Bill strapped their books into a common bundle and bore the burden as a matter of course. On Saturdays they played croquet in her back yard, or, in Indian suit and armed with tomahawk and wooden scalping-knife, Bill rescued Marilyn from hostile Redskins, or sometimes, by way of diversion, scalped Mary Jane, her favorite doll, while she emitted piercing shrieks and begged mercy for her child.

When they were twelve the Jeffers family took a cottage in the Poconos and the Hosmers rented one next to it. That was a wonderful summer. Bill had a new book, "King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table," and within a week the children knew it by heart.

There was an added zest of adventure when you went for apples if you could tell yourself that they weren't really apples, but a hoard of precious "jools" to be recaptured from a wicked knight, and that the old gnarled tree wasn't just a tree, but a darksome castle, moated and battlemented, which had to be attacked by storm. The war-cry of King Arthur's doughty knights rang through the orchard while Bill swarmed up the tree and shook the apples down for Marilyn to gather in her pinafore, and "Well done, Sir Gawain!" or "Strike bravely, Lancelot!" Marilyn encouraged while she retrieved the booty from the orchard grass.

HIGH summer passed and on the hilltops fox-grapes ripened. On the tangle-wooded slopes the purple fruit hid under notched leases, pungent with the tang of wild growth and cool from its shadowed secret places. Both Mrs. Jeffers and Mrs. Hosmer were enthusiastic at the prospect of wild grape jelly, and a bounty of a quarter a basket was proclaimed.

"Why Marilyn, we'll make our fortunes!" Bill declared. "We ought to get at least a dozen baskets. That'll be three dollars, an' we can have a choc'late soda every afternoon 'til a'most Thanksgiving!"

It was September, but the sun was hot. The world was fairly drenched with warmth, late locusts whirred their strident cries in the heat, the golden light made latticed patterns on tree-shaded paths, the woods smelt sweet and moist. Bill walked a pace or two ahead, a basket of the precious grapes in each hand, Marilyn brought up the rear with a hamper dripping purple fruit. They were barefoot, a little travel-stained, more than a little dirty. Bill was jubilant.

"Seventy-five cents!" he gloated. "We've made a'most a whole dollar, just this afternoon—hey!"

He broke his computation of their riches on a sharp note of protest, for she pushed against him roughly, forcing him into the pathside bushes.

"Look what you're doin'," he admonished as he scrambled through the briars, for she had dropped her basket in the path and grapes were spilling on the stones like rice from a burst bag.

"Stay back, Bill; keep away!" she panted, reaching for a stick that lay across the trail.

Then he saw. The "stick" she seized with her bare hands was a two-foot copperhead which had been lying stretched full length in a warm patch of sunlight. Another step and he'd have put his unprotected foot upon it.

The reptile had the sinuous strength of its kind, but desperation gave her greater strength. Before it could writhe from her grasp or slip its head far enough forward to sink its fangs into her wrist she had thrown it

twenty feet away into the bushes, and she and Bill were racing down the path in panic flight.

"Gosh, but you're brave!" he complimented when they finally paused for breath. "Weren't you scared a' tall?"

"More than I've ever been in my life," she panted, "but I was more scared that the snake would bite you than of what it might do to me, Bill dear." Then she began to cry.

BILL suffered oddly mixed emotions. No female, other than his mother, aunts and cousins, had ever called him "dear" before. Certainly none had used the term in that tone. It gave him a queer and rather puffed-up feeling. Then, too, Marilyn was crying. In their twelve years of companionship he'd seen her cry perhaps a thousand times, but somehow this seemed different. What would Galahad, or Gawain, or Lancelot du Lac have done in such conditions? He had the answer instantly—a grand and noble, knightly gesture.

Down on one knee he went before her, took the hem of her dress in his hand.

"When anybody saves another person's life, that life belongs to him or her," he announced solemnly, and raised the hem of her brief gingham pinafore to his lips.

She laid her hand on his hair, and it was like an accolade.

"I am your liege lady, and you are my true knight," she answered. "You will bear me true and faithful service, and when we're grown I'll marry you and you must love me always—oh, Bill, please do!" she ended in entreaty. "I'll just die if you don't."

"'Course, I will," he replied stoutly. "Didn't I *swear* it?"

So, armed with stick and treading warily, they went back for the grape baskets, and in due time received their reward. But neither of them told of the adventure. Parents had a queer way of misunderstanding, and there were too many pleasant walks in the woods to be taken in the two remaining weeks of vacation.

THEY went to their first formal dance together, and it was there that Marilyn began to have misgivings. For two years she had known, with all the certainty that she knew sunrise follows darkness, that they would be married. Secure in this knowledge, she planned their life together serenely, longing with impatience hardly bearable for the time when they'd be old enough to marry and settle down.

But Bill had grown into a handsome boy, tall, slim, attractive, laughing readily, wearing his clothes with an air of smart distinction. And she was not a pretty girl. Her little, heart-shaped, sharp-chinned face was too small for her large, brown trustful eyes, and though her mouth was sweet and tender it seemed almost childish in its smallness. The slenderness which might have seemed alluring in another girl seemed adolescent immaturity in her. Her clothes were well made and expensive, but they hung on her like smart gowns shown on window-mannikins—well displayed but definitely no part of her personality.

Only her hair was remarkable. She had never had it cut. In childhood she had worn it rippling down her back, or in two long braids. Now, unbound, it reached well past her knees. Braided and wrapped about her head in a coronal, it was like a Grecian head-dress and made wearing almost any hat with *chic* impossible.

When she was in Bill's arms as they danced she was ecstatic. She never noticed that he did not talk, she did not know if he smiled at her or not. Her eyes were always closed. But when another partner claimed her, she was like a bird in a strange nest, and her eyes were opened and alert. Watching Bill and the girl he danced with, seeing how he smiled at her,

noting how he kept up a continual flow of small talk.

Bill was too used to her, too certain, accepting her as he might take a match or lighter proffered when he lit a cigarette. She must make him jealous—coquette with other boys.... Pshaw, this was childishness! He might flirt with other girls; he belonged to her. He'd sworn it. . . . "My life belongs to you. . . ." Soon they'd be out of school, Bill would go in business with his father, then. . . .

They were in their senior year at college when the Serpent entered her Eden. A very lovely Serpent, all the more disquieting for that reason.

Ernestine McMurtie was the essence of everything Marilyn was not. Tall, willowy, smooth-skinned, with a red mouth chiseled in long curves, raven black hair piled in Vigée Lebrun curls upon her sleek head, she made every move in the way of a lithe, silky cat. There were flecks of yellow in her amber eyes, giving them the effect of hot green. She knew her beauty. All her life the applause of men's eyes had told her she was different from other girls, more alluring, more desirable. Her father had some sort of vague connection with the theater, and she brought all the glamor of the mummer's art with her when she enrolled at State College. The sophomores were wild about her, juniors fought to dance with her, the senior class were her slaves to a man.

Sangreal, the quest of Galahad for the Holy Cup of Antioch, was the class play. Bill played Sir Galahad; Marilyn and Ernestine both tried for the part of Sir Percival's sister. Perhaps the acting honors went to Ernestine, but when Marilyn let down her hair so that it almost swept the floor and recited:

> The girdle, lords, I'll weave of mine own hair
> Which while I yet was in the world I loved full well . . .

the rôle was given her.

But triumph could be as bitter as defeat. At the dance held after the play, Bill waltzed the first number with her, and was her partner in the rhumba just before the intermission. Every other dance he had with Ernestine, and when the other men cut in he stood against the wall, hands almost elbow-deep in trouser pockets, and glowered jealously.

The two girls joined issue in the powder room. Ernestine pre-empted the best mirror, posing and preening before it as she renewed her make-up. She spoke, and at once it was evident that the loss of the part was still on her mind.

"Some day," she threw the threat across her shoulder, looking from her reflection for a moment, "I'm going to crop that mane of yours, my dear, and you'll not raise a hand to stop me."

Smoldering anger and resentment rose and washed a flush across Marilyn's cheeks.

"You *are* a pirate, aren't you?" she replied.

"Oh? Touched on the raw?" Ernestine laughed brittlely. "Don't worry about your boy friend, dear. You can have him—now. I can take him any time I want, you know."

Hatred came into Marilyn's heart then, and she answered almost automatically.

"Some day," she promised in a passionless, cold little voice, "I'm going to kill you, Ernestine."

That autumn Ernestine secured a little part in a road company of *Salute the Gentlemen*, and Marilyn and Bill were married.

TO MARILYN, marriage proved an exception to the rule that realization fails to match anticipation. When the clergyman proclaimed, "Whom therefore God hath joined together let no man put asunder," and Bill put back her veil and kissed her, she responded with the last small cell of her being. It seemed to her that she

had everything that she had ever dreamed of wanting.

Life flowed evenly and peacefully, almost monotonously for them. Bill joined his father in the office, joined the Shore Acres Country Club, addressed the Kiwanis at luncheon conferences, became a member of the Board of Trade.

Marilyn played bridge and attended meetings of the Ladies' Thursday Garden Club. When Bill junior and little Marilyn were old enough for school, she joined the P.T.A. and finally became its president. Everything went on and on, the groove of life deepened, but its course and pattern never changed. She loved it.

One afternoon, as she was coming home from a club meeting, she felt a sudden twinge of searing pain in her right side. For several months she'd suffered from recurrent aches like neuralgia in her stomach and had dosed herself with bismuth, peppermint and all the simple, harmless nostrums from the bathroom shelf, but this was withering in its suddenness. Hardly able to endure it, but fighting with the desperate ability women have to outface pain, she drove to Dr. Trowbridge's. By the time she reached his office the shrill torment had subsided, but her brow was beaded with small gouts of perspiration. She found it difficult to breathe, and where the pain had been there was an all-pervading, spreading numbness.

"Is—is it appendicitis, Doctor? she asked as he completed his examination.

"No," Dr. Trowbridge answered slowly. "It's certainly not that, but I'd like to have you call on Dr. Van Raalte. He's a specialist, you know; more competent to put his finger on obscure ailments."

"Then you think it's something serious?"

The doctor pursed his bearded lips. "One never knows, my dear, and it's best to take Time by the forelock when we're not quite sure."

As the door of the consulting room closed behind her, Dr. Trowbridge reached for the cigar that he'd been wanting for the last half hour.

"I'm not the hanging judge," he murmured as he snapped his lighter. "Let Van Raalte pronounce sentence."

Bill was going out of town that evening. There was a meeting of insurance men at Watertown and he was scheduled to address it.

"But Bill, dear, you don't have to speak till Saturday and this is only Thursday," she protested. "Must you go tonight? I've been feeling—" She halted in mid-word. Perhaps it wasn't really serious, after all. Dr. Trowbridge was an old man, and a general practitioner. He could be mistaken, and Bill must not be worried.

"Yes?" Bill prompted, a thought impatiently, as her silence lengthened.

"Oh, nothing. Just one of my silly premonitions, I guess. Go ahead and enjoy yourself. I know you'll make some valuable contacts at the convention."

IT MIGHT have been midnight, possibly an hour later, when she woke in dreadful pain. It was worse than it had been in the afternoon—tearing, piercing, ripping like a red-hot bayonet. She clasped her arms across her stomach, hugging herself in blind agony.

Bill! His name was like a beacon to a storm-racked ship. Just to hear his voice would be an anodyne. Half blind with suffering, she groped her way across the room, dialed long distance.

"Mr. Jeffers—William Seffington Jeffers!" she gasped when the hotel answered.

A moment's agonizing wait. Then the telephone girl's high-pitched, nasal announcement: "I'm sorry—we have no one by that name registered."

The pain eased slowly, but she was too much shaken to sleep. Switching on the bedside lamp, she opened the

evening paper, glanced through the club notices and turned to the amusement page. A child star's portrait smirked at her, there was a scene from a forthcoming movie, but like a compass needle swinging to the north her startled glance swept down the page to the halftone that was centered under the word "Charmer."

The picture was that of a woman beautiful in a well-tended way; a woman of high gloss and a hard finish: large eyes with long lashes, a straight and well-formed mouth chiseled in long curves. Her skin was flawless, her dark hair hung back from her face in a long bob that emphasized the good modeling of her head. Beneath the cut was the caption:

Ernestine McMurtie, star of "These Charming Ladies," now having its tryout at Hanneford. According to all indications both the charming Ernestine and the Charming Ladies are due for a long run on Broadway.

Ernestine . . . Hanneford . . . Watertown . . . Bill! The words clicked through her brain in series, like a telegraphic message. Hanneford was just ten miles from Watertown. The best hotel there was the Savage.

Hating herself, she ran almost headlong to the telephone, dialed long distance once more. It was mean, ignoble, disloyal and suspicious—but she had to know! Presently, the Hotel Savage's response: "Just a moment, please . . . Yes, there's a Mr. William Jeffers here, but he's not in his room. Shall we have him paged?"

"No, thank you." Marilyn hung up the phone and stumbled back to bed. No need to page him. As well as if she had been present in the flesh, she saw him . . . him and Ernestine.

In a little while the pain returned, and agony of body gave her some surcease from agony of heartbreak.

THREE people stood beside her cot: Bill, Miss Masterson, the nurse, Dr. Van Raalte. The room was banked with flowers—"just as if I were already gone," she thought bitterly. Early sunshine gilded everything. A bird, deceived by warm September weather into thinking summer still lingered, was twittering outside the window.

"Everything'll be all right, dear," Bill said heartily. "You see if it isn't."

"Of course, it will—it's just a simple little operation," seconded Miss Masterson with a smile that was bright and artificial.

"How do you feel, Mrs. Jeffers?" Dr. Van Raalte asked. He was a tall, lean man in his early forties, with prematurely gray hair brushed so sleekly that it shone almost like a skullcap of burnished pewter. Trained at Heidelberg and Vienna, he had brought home something of the Old World with him. His lean features, studious and unsmiling, had a hint of Prussian arrogance. He held himself as if he were in uniform and on parade. His tailoring and haberdashery had the trans-Atlantic perfection of Saville Row and Bond Street.

"In half an hour, if you please, Nurse," he told Miss Masterson, speaking with the sharp-clipped, cold precision of a drill master.

"Yes, Doctor—oh, you can't come in!" Miss Masterson ran toward the door. "No one else is allowed—"

"Oh, you can't keep me out, you simply mustn't. Mrs. Jeffers and I are old friends."

Arms filled with a bouquet of lilies, Ernestine McMurtie stepped into the room.

Her black sheer-crêpe redingote with the silver fox scarf draped across her shoulders, emphasized by contrast the ivory of her skin and enhanced the vivid black of her hair. She was poised and beautiful as she postured in the doorway—but she was not lovely. Something too closely akin to gloating malice shone in her eyes.

"Why, Ernestine!" Bill's heartiness of greeting almot hid his consternation and embarrassment. "It was kind of you to come—"

"See the lovely flowers Ernestine has brought, dear." He turned, smiling broadly toward the woman on the bed. "I'll get some water for them."

He leaned to take the lilies from the visitors, his back turned momentarily on his wife, and as he reached for the flowers his questing fingers found Ernestine's and clung to them, as if for strength.

Marilyn's great dark eyes seemed darker, deeper, and a small frown, as of sudden pain, brought her brows down. In the mirror of the dresser standing opposite her bed she had seen Bill's fingers seeking Ernestine's, and finding them.

"Doctor," she asked in a whisper, "how much chance have I?"

He answered coolly, impersonally. "Not much more than one in a million, Mrs. Jeffers. You waited too long—"

"Doctor," she cut in, speaking softly, but with dreadful bitterness, "if—when—I die, will I be truly dead, or will I just seem so, with a consciousness of what goes on around me still remaining?"

He gave her a look hard and keen as one of his own scalpels. He, too, had seen the furtive hand-clasp.

"You need not give yourself uneasiness, madame. You will be completely blotted out."

Two hours later as he stripped his rubber gloves off he reverted to the language of his student days.

"*Herr Gott,* there's hardly enough left of her to bother about putting in the ground!"

"I'M TAKING charge of things for Mr. Jeffers," Ernestine told Miss Masterson. "A woman can handle such things so much better than a man. Have you a pair of scissors?"

"Scissors?" echoed the nurse.

"Yes, my dear, scissors. I want you to cut Mrs. Jeffer's hair. Cut it very short, please."

"Well," Miss Masterson prepared to carry out instructions, "all I can say is that if I had hair like that I'd want it buried with me. I never saw such fine, long silky—"

"That's just it," Ernestine broke in. "It's not to be buried with her. She's to be cremated. It would be a shame to burn that lovely hair, wouldn't it?"

"Yes'm," answered the nurse, as the shears cut through the gleaming coils of chestnut hair with the neat precision of a guillotine blade.

Ernestine McMurtie smiled at her reflection in the hotel dresser mirror. She was beautiful; she knew it, and the knowledge pleased her mightily. Her night robe was cut like an evening gown, sheer amber crêpe, sleeveless, almost backless, cut so low in front that it exposed the shadowed hollow between her breasts. It was belted at her slim waist with a tasseled golden cord, Grecian fashion.

On her bare feet she wore little gilded sandals whose wide instep-straps made a pleasing contrast to the brilliant lacquer of her carefully kept nails. Across one slim bare arm she looped a braided length of hair—there must have been five feet of it, heavy as a ship's hawser, gleaming with the semi-iridescence of a chestnut fresh from the burr. She was thinking back twelve years, back to a scene in the powder room of this same hotel at the dance that followed the class play.

"I said I'd do it—and I did." Delighted laughter bubbled up between the words. "I promised that I'd crop that mane of hers some day. . . ."

She ran her hands along the smoothly plaited hair, kicked her sandals off and rose upon her gleaming-tipped toes to pirouette across the room.

"Stay there tonight," she tossed the heavy braid up on the shelf of the clothes closet. "Tomorrow I'll decide about you."

The coiled hair struck the back wall of the closet with a sound like that of a dropped coil of rope, partially unwound, and dropped a loose end over a clothes hook. Ernestine laughed again.

"I'm half a mind to hang you there all night, like an old gown," she said, then shrugged bare shoulders as she closed the closet door. Why bother? She'd won all along the line. No need to rub it in. Not now, anyway.

SHE had been sleeping soundly, but all at once her eyes were open. Involuntarily she sat up in bed, in a state of semi-wakefulness. The room was heavy with rich, creamy, silky perfumed darkness that buried her completely as earth thrown in a grave. What was it? She was feeling it, physically, like a cool draft over face and arms and neck and breast, yet there was no sound, no hint of movement in the room. All the same, she knew that she was not alone.

Some deep instinct, some inner warder of the senses, was telling her there was someone, something, in the darkness with her. She sat waiting, breathless. It was so quiet she could hear the ticking of the tiny watch clasped to her left wrist and the click-click-clicker-click of the little traveling clock upon the dresser.

Something stepped—no, wafted!—toward the closet. Light, invisible, impalpable as air it was. It couldn't be a person, couldn't even be a thing, but that it was some sort of presence, some entity, she knew. Reason denied it clamorously. Instinct affirmed it, and mankind had its instincts a million years before it attained reason.

The closet door creaked softly, hardly audible, as if a stealthy hand were trying it, or a light wind blew on it.

"No, you don't!" she murmured as she flung the covers back and leaped from the bed. "Oh, no! I took it, and I'm going to keep it. You shan't have it!"

Automatically her hand strayed out and turned on the bedside lamp. Beside it lay a folded copy of the evening paper. She snatched it up, ripped it apart, crumpled it and thrust it crackling into the empty fireplace.

"You think you're going to take it to be burned with you? Oh, no! I'll burn it myself, right here and now, and you can't do a thing to stop me. *You're dead!*"

She was at the closet now, jerking back the door, reaching for the braid of hair that lay coiled on the shelf. Too high. She couldn't reach it. A hassock was the answer. She dragged the little slipper-stool across the room, mounted it, reached for the hair, seized it, dragged it toward her. . . .

The thing seemed imbued with sentience of its own. It resisted. She stood on tip-toe for a better grasp on it.

It came away so suddenly, she lost her balance, swaying backward, almost falling from the hassock. But only for an instant. Like a snake that holds its stroke until its victim is in easy reach, the loose end of the plaited hair lashed out. There was a double loop twined round her throat. The hassock, slipping on the polished floor, slid from beneath her.

She struggled with the clutching coil of hair. It might have been a hempen hangman's rope for all the effect that her frantic fingers had on it. She stretched her feet until they were continuations of her legs, like a ballet dancer's when she rises on her toes. They missed the floor by something like two inches, and she swung clear in a small, struggling arc.

Now she was thinking back twelve years again. Back to the scene in the powder room of this same hotel at the dance that followed the class play. ". . . I said I'd crop her mane some day, and she said some day she'd . . ."

The pounding in her ears increased its volume till it rumbled like the thunder of a thousand kettle-drums. And Ernestine ceased thinking.

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Next Issue: Another Unusual Story by SEABURY QUINN