

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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Published monthly by the RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 234 North Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. Application made for entry at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., as second class matter. Single copies, 25 cents; subscription, \$2 a year in the United States, \$2.50 in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts in transit, by fire, or otherwise, although every precaution is taken with such material. All manuscripts should be typewritten and must be accompanied by stamped and self-addressed envelopes. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright, and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part.

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VOLUME 1

25 Cents

NUMBER 1

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A Five-minute Story

The Gallows

By I. W. D. PETERS

TOMORROW morning, at sunrise, I am to hang for the murder of a man.

At sunrise on the ninth of June, the anniversary of my wedding day. I am to be hanged by the neck until I am dead.

I am glad this state has not yet adopted the use of electricity in executions. I prefer to spend my last moments out in the open under the sky.

The building of the gallows is finished; the workmen are gone, and it seems that the execution at sunrise is certain to take place; but every step along the corridor sends my heart into my mouth. Gladys is working for a reprieve. I am praying she will not succeed.

The Governor is off on a fishing trip, away from railroad and telegraph. If they do not locate him in the next few hours I shall be hanged. God grant they fail to find him!

It is Gladys's will against mine. She usually wins, but every passing minute lessens her chance to have her way in this. It is now ten minutes to midnight. Dr. Brander, the prison chaplain, has just left me, gratified, poor fellow, that he has succeeded in reconciling me to my fate. If he had known that the tall skeleton of wood outside, with its lank line of rope, was in my mind a refuge, he would have turned from me in horror.

The next five hours will be the longest of my life. Every step in the corridor strikes fear to my heart. It is not

because I am guilty of the crime, for which I was sentenced, that I am glad to die. I am guilty, but that doesn't mean that I deserve to die.

I am going to hang tomorrow at sunrise because *I want to be hung!*

I could have saved myself, but refused to do so, solely because life had lost its savor, a great wave of disgust with living possessed and still possesses me. I am writing these words now that Gladys may know the truth. She has tried to see me, ever since I was brought here, and I have refused to be seen. That is one right a condemned man has—to refuse to see visitors.

FROM the day we were married. Gladys demanded to know my every thought, my every act every hour of the day.

If every one of them was not concerned with her she criticised, condemned or cried. She resented, in bitterly-spoken words and equally bitter acts, the small recesses of my soul that I, for the sake of my own self-respect, kept to myself.

Finally she determined to show me that there were other men who appreciated her, if I did not. For a while, after that, all hours of the day and evening my home was infested with lounge lizards. I endured it without a word, which infuriated her.

Lester Caine, a young fellow, honest and simple, was her first victim. The first time I found him seated close beside her on the dimly lit porch I wel-

comed him warmly. We smoked and talked of our days in the army together. I felt that Gladys could safely enough flirt with such as Lester, if that was what she wanted; but Lester called only a few times after that.

For two months there was a succession of young fellows about the place. Our house was not far from the Westmoor Country Club, and the golf links came almost up to our side-yard. Our porch was a convenient place to "drop in."

Suddenly all that sort of thing ceased. Gladys was away a great deal, but as her mother lived in a town just a few miles away I thought nothing of that. She became very quiet, was thoughtful, absent-minded, flushed easily, seemed not herself.

At first I was a good deal puzzled, then, suddenly an explanation for the change in her dawned on me. Joy filled my soul. I was inordinately gentle with her, bought her a small automobile for her birthday, did everything I could think of for her comfort and pleasure.

After all, I told myself, the emotional phase she had passed through was natural. Marriage is a more difficult readjustment with some than others. It had evidently been so with Gladys. If a child came to us it would make everything right.

A child—*our child!* It was wonderful to think of. She had always refused to consider the subject, saying she wished to enjoy life while she was young. But she knew I wanted a son to bear my name, a daughter to inherit her beauty, and she had accepted the inevitable. A wave of exaltation made me feel as if I were treading on clouds. I longed to mention the subject to her, but I felt that the first word about it should come from her.

I spent hours thinking of tender, loving things to do for her. She accepted everything quietly, sometimes with averted face and flushed cheeks. I would draw her inert figure into my arms and hold her close, but she made no response to my demonstrative affection.

At this stage of affairs my firm sent me on a ten-day trip to close a Western deal. It was hard to leave Gladys, but now, more than ever, I felt that we would need money, and lots of it.

We arranged for Gladys to go to her mother's, and I was to join her there on my return.

It is the same old story. I came home before I was expected, and went straight to our cottage, with the intention of having Gladys's room redecorated before bringing her home.

At the gate stood Gladys's car. I rushed into the house, but there was no one on the lower floor, nor in Gladys's room, nor mine. I was about to descend the stairs when I heard a low laugh—a man's laugh—from the third floor. I dashed up there and stood gazing at the closed door of the spare room.

"What's the idea, running away from me?" asked the man. "You can't blow hot and cold with me."

"I told you not to come here again. It's not safe."

"I'm not afraid of that husband of yours. You're mine, and you're going to stay mine."

I had listened intently, but could not recognize the man's voice.

"Go now," pleaded Gladys, "and I'll come to your rooms this evening."

"Not on your life! I'm here now, and I am going to stay."

"Let go of me—you are hurting my shoulder."

There was a sound of scuffling. I tried the door. It was locked. I put my shoulder to it. The lock snapped.

Gladys gave a cry, leaped away from the man—a man whom I had never seen before. The full-lipped, black-browed type, big, soft. As I took in the scene—the tousled woman, the flushed-faced man—a great wave of disgust almost overwhelmed me.

"Well," said the man, sneeringly, "what are you going to do about it?"

"If you take her away now and treat her right—nothing."

"And if I don't take her away?"

"I'll meet that situation when it comes."

"It has come," he said, with a laugh, and walked out.

I am tall, slender, delicate-looking, but I knew I was a match for that over-fed brute.

I listened to the clatter of his feet on the stairs. Then I followed him.

THE man was hastening toward a street car.

I cranked Gladys' car and followed. It was easy to keep the street car in sight and to keep an eye on his sleek black head.

He left the car at Hanson Street. I, without a glance toward him, kept on ahead. I turned at the corner, in time to see him enter an office building. I was not far behind him when he took the elevator. The man in the elevator gave me the number of his office.

He was telling a joke to his typist as I entered, but his laughter died when he saw me.

"You dirty thief! You'll never cheat another man out of money!"

His look of astonishment, as I shouted these words, was amusing. He tried to give blow for blow, but I meant what I said when I shouted at him "I've come here to kill you!"

To choke the life out of an overfed beast is not so hard to an infuriated man. In less than a quarter of an hour he was dead. The police, for whom the typist had called, filled the room even before I had straightened my disheveled clothing.

I practically tried my own case, and I was skillful enough to make every word, apparently uttered in my own defense, sound black against me.

Gladys tried to save me by telling the true story of the affair, but I made a picture of her as a devoted, self-sacrificing wife, willing to ruin even her spotless name to save her husband. I enjoyed seeing her cringe as I did this.

So skillfully had she and the big brute managed that there was not a bit of evidence to substantiate her story. On the other hand, there was the typist's story to help me, and, too, it was known I had speculated in the past, and that I had lost some money.

I made the most of everything against me, and it was enough. I was sentenced to hang on the ninth day of June at sunrise.

Gladys came to the jail to see me while the trial was going on, but I managed to act just as if my story were the true one and hers the false, and, though she pleaded with me to let the truth come out, I would not admit that the truth had *not* come out. The sentence was a terrible shock to her. Her mother carried her from the court-room in a faint. Before she recovered I was in prison.

I SHALL welcome the hour of sunrise as I never welcomed any moment of my life.

Not until then will the fear of a reprieve leave me. Gladys is moving heaven and earth to locate the Governor. God grant that she does not succeed!

It is four forty-five. I have spent much time at the window, gazing out into the darkness. What comes after death? That is the question, I suppose, that all men ask at the end of life. I have never done so. It is a futile question—one which none of us can answer. But I believe there will be surcease from the nausea that comes to those who have known disillusion and disappointment.

Ten minutes of five—now surely I am safe from even a chance of a reprieve!

Footsteps in the corridor! Is it my escort to the gallows, or—what I fear most on earth?

A STATEMENT by the warden of Larsen Penitentiary:

"If Traylor had spent the brief period, always allotted to a criminal for a few last words, his reprieve would have reached us in time to stay the execution; but he walked calmly, unflinching up to the gallows and helped us, with steady hands, adjust the cap and ropes—on he was dead two minutes before the Governor's message reached us."