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THE GRATEFUL CORPSE

It seemed like the right thing to do, and he felt really grateful. So he sent a thank-you note. It saved his life.

BY

BOB BRISTOW

PHILIP MELTON leveled the .38 snub nosed revolver at the chest of the man who stood before him. He squeezed the trigger until his finger turned white and the hammer eased slightly back.

"Philip," the man said, pushing his hat back with his thumb, "I don't think you ought to do that."

"No . . . I don't guess you would. But you try to scratch your chest inside that coat and you are one dead man."

"They don't send me to do that kind of work, Philip."

Which was true. The little hatchet faced man was not one of the shotgun crew. He was a messenger. A little fish.

"So you want to have a chat."

"That's right, Philip. You've got to admit it's time to talk over a few matters."

"So . . . talk," Philip said, keeping his finger tight on the trigger.

"Well . . . honestly, Philip . . .

you've got things in a terrible fix for the big guys. To start with, the Joe Velasquez character *had* to be killed. You knew that. If he'd opened his mouth it would have embarrassed the big guys." The fish talked persuasively. "Then they put the rap on you when it got into a squeeze. They told you . . . Philip, don't you see, boy, they told you to hold still for it and the big guys would get you the best lawyers and you'd get maybe ten years . . . even five or six maybe, and you'd be out. Set up for good. Philip . . . that was a good deal for you. They offered you a big wad to hold still for that rap."

"Sure . . . how 'bout that? Except that maybe I'd have gotten life. Or maybe the death house. Who knows? I couldn't use that."

"I know. See, Philip, you didn't trust the boys, but they were honestly all out to see that you didn't catch a big rap."

"You tell jokes to somebody else. I'm not stupid."

The fish smiled slightly. "Maybe you *are* stupid. Anyway it was pretty stupid to tell the prosecuting attorney you'd turn state's evidence and play canary. That wasn't smart at all, Philip. If word hadn't leaked out, you might have hurt somebody up there. As it is, it's two weeks before the grand jury and anything you've said so far isn't on record. Even if you signed an affidavit, it wouldn't be admissible before a grand jury. It's hearsay unless you appear for cross examination. It's all very neat. The guys could nail you good."

"You mean the shotgun squad?"

"I mean the shotgun squad, Philip. This is serious."

Philip drew back the hammer with his thumb. The little man watched him thoughtfully.

"You might hurt me, Philip. They knew that when they sent me. You don't honestly think that would stop it, do you?"

Philip felt the sweat rising on his face, hot and damp on his lip.

"Go on," Philip said, his voice unsteady.

"Well . . . it's this way. You've got a wife and two kids. Little Phil seven years old and Linda only three . . ."

Philip shoved the revolver closer to the little man's chest.

"Wait, Philip . . . think, boy. We've got a deal."

"Deal?" Unbelievably.

"Yeah . . . now don't get excited and do anything crazy. The big guys said if you were dead you couldn't testify. They could do that, boy. You know it. But they're for giving you a break, if you'll quit being stupid and take it. They'll fix it so it looks like Philip Melton committed suicide. I've got a note here all typed and everything. The idea is you sign it. Then when it's fixed, the note will be mailed to the prosecuting attorney. The note tells about how you really killed that Velasquez guy after all. They've arranged to get a body, about your size, color hair, all that. Even down to the dental records they've got it figured, Philip. They burn this body so that nothing is recognizable and leave it where the note says you'll be. Legally you're dead. Only before it happens, you come with us and we ship you out of the country. You'll go down to South America and work for us there. In a few weeks your family will join you. As long as you never come back, and keep your mouth shut, you can live a real happy life. Now what do you say, Philip? Is this breaking their backs or is it not breaking their backs?"

"I'm supposed to believe that?"

"Look. Philip . . . the big guys didn't have to send me here to do this. Get smart, boy. They could bomb you out in five minutes if they wanted to. And besides, like I said, you got a wife and kids. You know what they can do. I'm

here to give you a good pitch. And friend, believe me, you'd better take it."

"So I sign that paper. Do I keep it?"

"No, Philip . . . you know better than that."

"So they can burn me to death and mail the letter if they want to and they won't have to get me out of the country at all. That way I'm gone and they have no worries."

"Right, Philip . . . you sure do figure it every way all right. But the only chance you've got in this world is to take their word. Even if you don't do this, they can stop you before grand jury time. Philip . . . be smart. This is your last chance."

Philip Melton sighed deeply. It came down to what the little man said. He could sign and take a chance that the syndicate would protect him, or he could refuse and sometime within two weeks they would take care of him and perhaps his family in another more permanent way.

He took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, pressed it between his lips and lighted it. He breathed the smoke for a moment and exhaled wearily.

"I'll sign," he said finally.

The little man smiled and started to reach for his coat pocket. Philip's gun inched forward slightly. "The note's in my pocket. You can take it out if you like." Philip eased the hammer of the gun forward

carefully. He put the revolver on his lap.

"Get it out," he said. "I'll sign."

The little man opened the paper and handed Philip a pen. Philip glanced at it briefly. There was no use in reading it. What did it matter? He *had* to sign.

When he finished, the little man returned the paper to his pocket.

"We'll be in touch, Philip. Just go on like nothing has happened."

The man turned and left. Philip had signed his suicide note. It was no longer in his hands, if in reality, it had ever been. He got up and walked to the table, poured a shot of bourbon and sat down heavily, holding the glass with both hands.

In a moment he heard the bedroom door open behind him. He did not look up as the footsteps drew close.

"You heard it?" Philip asked.

"I heard. They have it figured all right."

Philip glanced up into the face of the investigator from the prosecutor's office. His name was Dan Cornelius, a tall, greying man with light blue eyes. Dan Cornelius sat beside him and lighted a cigarette.

"What did the paper say?"

"I didn't read it," Philip stared at the investigator. "Why read it? They told me what it said."

"It doesn't matter, Philip. Don't get excited."

"No . . . why get jazzed up. I just committed suicide."

"Was there a date on it?"

"No . . . I noticed that."

"That figures. They'll wait until they have it set up and then give you the word."

"I think I ought to take it. I'm serious," Philip said.

"It's like you figured, Philip. They won't let you live. They'll mail the letter like they said. But you'll be that burned body. Can you think of any reason to let you stay around?"

"That's easy for you to say . . . but maybe they plan to give me a break. I always played square with them before."

"All except once. They won't forget that."

Philip wiped the sweat from his face and finished the drink. He quickly poured another.

"Listen, Dan . . . I was fair with them. I ran a gambling house and I never once gave them any trouble. Maybe they'll give me a break . . . what other angle have I got now? You can't bring in that grand jury today or even next week. It's like the fish said. They don't have to do this. They could bomb me out anytime. Protection or no."

"I doubt that. And you're crazy to think they'll take a dose of publicity like that. They figured a clean smooth angle. They'll let you commit suicide and, Philip, you can bet it would be your body we find."

Philip stood, his legs rubbery beneath him. "I should have kept my mouth shut. Maybe they'd have got me out with ten years."

The investigator smiled grimly. "Not a chance. We had you for the death house. All that saved you was your putting the bug on their backs. They knew you were a patsy. Once you were convicted, it wouldn't make any difference what you said. The syndicate would palm your statement off as a desperate try to beat the chair."

Philip sighed. "A little guy. That's all I ever was. Never got into anything bad. Hundreds of guys run places like I had. All over the world. But they nailed me. Why me?"

"Because you had trouble with the dead man anyway. He was in debt to you. And you have a family, like the fish said. They figured you'd be too afraid to say anything for fear of what they'd do to them."

"What about them?"

"They won't be touched. They don't want the extra publicity. It smells bad. Just you, Philip. They figured you all the way."

Dan stood, rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Philip . . . you sit tight I'll go downtown and see what I can figure." He walked to the door, opened it, then turned, "Don't panic. We've got an eye on the place. You're safe now. I'll call you later. Let the phone ring six times. Then I'll hang up and dial again as before."

Philip made no reply. He watched the detective close the door. Then he began to move nerv-

ously about the apartment. He went to the table and took the revolver. Empty. The fish probably knew it all along. He hadn't seemed very worried about it. But it wouldn't have to stay empty. He could get some cartridges. Maybe he could shoot a couple of them when they came for him . . . no, they wouldn't come for him. They'd tell him to take a cab someplace and they'd pick him up. He wouldn't get a chance to use the gun. They weren't stupid. That much he was finding out.

He remembered how he got started. He'd owned a small club, a decent one. His business wasn't the biggest, but he was making it. They muscled him a little, not too much, and promised him a wad, a nice fat wad, if he'd let them operate in his place. At first Philip had turned the deal down. He didn't want any part of it. Then they kept at him. No risk. They'd protect him. Get in, boy. *Better get in*, they said. And they had been deadly serious that last time. So he went along. Why not? Lots of legitimate operators went along. Why get your club blown up for nothing? Why *not* take the money?

They had moved in the gambling equipment. And it had been all right. Then the Velasquez character started giving them trouble. He knew too much. But they did a sloppy job of it and the heat was on. Somebody had to take the consequences or the whole operation

would blow up. Yeah . . . Hello . . . Philip!

Now they had him. Once they put the finger on him for the Velasquez murder he was finished. That's the way they operated. Philip Melton had to go and it was too bad. Philip wished he had read the suicide note before he signed. Why didn't he? Now it didn't seem reasonable that he could have done it without reading. But the cop was in the other room. And like the fish said, they could comb him out anytime. But the cop had said they wouldn't have done that. But maybe the cop was wrong. Philip paced the room.

He had the gun. That was something. Dan Cornelius was making an effort, but there was nothing he could do. Not really. And if Philip caused big trouble, the big guys would fix his wife and kids. Sure they would. They would do it regardless of the publicity, because every other little operator in the world was watching this now. If Philip got away with something the next guy would figure maybe he could get away with it too. The big guys *had* to fix him.

But the gun. Philip kept his mind on the gun. He could at least do it himself. He didn't have to burn, like they said. They wouldn't care how it happened, just so it was done. He at least had that much choice. He could get some cartridges and go into the bathroom when he was ready and put the

barrel into his mouth and . . . Philip poured a small drink. Then he thought of the suicide note. They were smart. Maybe that's what the paper said. Maybe they figured him to do just that. Do it himself right there in the apartment and they wouldn't have to lift a finger. How sweet they had it figured. And even if the note said something else, like the burned body bit, they had his signature. They could type up another statement, forge his name and mail it. New song. New dance. Same dead Philip Melton.

But he didn't have any cartridges. And that might be a little difficult with the investigators keeping an eye on everything so that he would be safe. *Safe!* Philip put the empty glass down on the table. He was sick. His legs were soft under him and his head ached horribly.

He went to the bathroom. He located his razor and opened it, taking the razor blade out. He sat down on the side of the tub and rolled his sleeves up to the elbows. Then he took the razor blade and looked at it for a long moment. You couldn't think about it at all. You just had to make up your mind and do it quickly.

He sat down on the floor quietly. Then Philip's stomach reacted violently and he leaned over the stool. In a moment he felt better. He *had* to do it. Get it over. Waiting was worse than anything.

A drink. One more big stiff drink

and it would be easy. He'd take one big one and that would be it. He went into the other room and poured the glass nearly full. He was drinking from it as he walked back to the bathroom. It burned in his stomach, but it made him feel better. He sat down and sipped from the glass. Until the glass was empty. So soon. He wanted one more but he rejected the idea.

The telephone rang. He listened to it. Six times and it stopped. Then in a moment it began again. Finally he got up and went to the phone.

"Hello."

"Philip . . . this is Dan . . . we've got an angle."

"Yeah . . . angle."

"Listen to me. We're working on this idea. It's fixed. I had your car taken from the garage. It's already fixed to burn. Then we'll tell the papers your body was found . . . just like they had it planned. But when there is a case like that, they don't open the casket. They'll have a funeral and all but nobody will view the body. We've got a cabin in the mountains and you can stay there a day or two. Then we'll get you to the airport and put you on a plane for Seattle. A car will be by in a few minutes to pick you up."

"I'd better call my wife to let her know."

"I don't think that's wise. If they got a lead on her location, they might risk a lot to use her as ransom to nail you. Leave that to me."

"That's asking a hell of a lot."

Philip listened to Dan's slow, rhythmical breathing. "Look at it this way, Philip. As long as you could appear before the grand jury safely, you were worth a lot to us. Now that the syndicate got word of your plan, we can't use you, unless we are willing to take a big chance that you'll be murdered, either before or after, probably before. So we're playing it square with you. We don't want you killed for nothing. The prosecuting attorney outlined this whole idea to save your neck because you were willing to play ball with us. If you slip and word gets out about your wife . . . well, you can ask only so much of us now, Philip."

"Okay . . . I'll leave it up to you and the department. I just wanted her to know."

"I'll get word to her for you."

"Tell her everything's going to be fine."

"I'll tell her."

Philip tried to put it all together. The *empty* casket. But the syndicate wouldn't know that. Or even if they knew it, they wouldn't know where he was. Not really.

"Philip . . . are you listening?"

Philip replied slowly. "I hear," he said.

"At Seattle we'll have you set up for Japan, first plane out. Once you get over there, they won't bother you. We'll wait a while and send your wife. Now . . . can you be ready in a few minutes? Don't take

anything. Just come downstairs when I call again. Same signal."

"Will it work?" Philip asked thickly, childishly.

"It will work. We've gone all out on this. I'm even sending my own car for you. No police cars. Nothing to tip them off."

"Okay," Philip said "I'm ready."

Philip replaced the receiver. He poured the last of the bottle and sat down. He began to feel good. Nobody would see the body. The car burned just like they said. They could mail the paper he'd signed and he was off the hook. And so was the syndicate. That cop . . . he was no dummy. He'd come up with a real dodge this time. Philip sipped the drink. It tasted good now. He remembered the razor blade and smiled. He'd come so close. So damned close to doing it a few minutes before.

Philip located a clean sport shirt and tucked it into his slacks. No need to take anything else. He'd start out fresh over there. Hello, Tokyo. Hello, Jap land.

He located a pen and paper. He'd at least be able to let the prosecuting attorney know that he appreciated the break they were giving him. Philip wrote hurriedly . . . *and especially I want to tell you how much I appreciate the way Dan Cornelius has handled the whole affair. The plan about the empty casket, getting me safely out of the country and sending my wife . . . all of it was great. Even the little*

things like Dan sending his own car after me. I hope he is recognized for the help he has given me.

Philip signed the note, stamped and addressed it and put it in his pocket. His drink was finished a half hour before the phone rang. It was Dan's signal. Philip lifted the receiver.

"Philip . . . this is Dan. My car is downstairs. Blue two tone coupe. Everything you need is there. Are you ready?"

"I'm ready," Philip said.

"Good . . . now go downstairs and get in."

"My wife . . . when will she come?"

"Soon. Let me worry about that. I've got to take care of you first."

"I'm with you. I nearly killed myself. I was going to do it before you called."

"I'm glad I got to you in time. We didn't want that."

"So long, Dan. Thanks."

Philip opened the door, peered down the hallway. It was empty. He moved quickly to the elevator, caught it down, dropped the letter to the prosecuting attorney in the mailbox, and moved hurriedly outside. He saw the car immediately. It pulled up close and stopped as he reached the curb. He got in quickly and the car moved away fast.

"Is everything fixed?" Philip asked the driver.

"Everything," the driver said.

Philip did not speak often during

the drive. He leaned back against the seat and breathed deeply. They had driven slightly over an hour, had entered the edge of the mountains when the car turned off, moving along a deserted road.

"This is certainly nowhere," Philip remarked.

The driver did not reply. He merely nodded. Soon he turned the car into a clearing and stopped. There were two cars there. One Philip had never seen before. The other was *his* car, the one Dan had taken from the garage earlier.

Immediately two men appeared from the bushes and stepped up to the door, opening it abruptly. One of them was the fish that had come to the apartment. The fish smiled an evil, cynical smile. As Philip stared into the eyes of the second man, he got a sick, dead feeling in his stomach.

"Get out, Philip," Dan Cornelius said softly. "Your suicide note is in the mail. We've got to hurry."

The fish clutched a length of pipe in his hand. When Philip was out of the car, the fish told the driver to leave and return Dan's car to the city. Philip watched as the car backed around and drove away.

"No trouble, Philip. There's no use," Dan said.

The fish took him by the arm.

"Big Dan, real helpful weren't you?" Philip said, finally understanding the entire operation. A smooth, well oiled machine, reaching all the way into the prosecuting

attorney's office. But not to the top. They hadn't gone that far. Philip laughed softly. "Your idea was perfect, Dan," Philip said. Tears appeared at his eyes as he laughed, as he trembled uncontrollably.

The fish raised the pipe.

"Except you've had it. The whole mess is blown up. Just because I was grateful. You stupid bastard. You didn't plan on a punk like me being grateful."

"I'll tap him," the fish said.

"Wait." Dan took Philip's shirt tightly in his hand and drew him close. Philip could feel Dan's revolver through his coat, but he was afraid to try for it. "What do you mean, Philip?"

"I mailed a note. To your boss. I told him I hoped you'd get a promotion for helping me . . . even using your car to help get me out of town. He'll get that one when he gets my suicide note, Dan. No matter what you do, you've had it. Now the big boys will have to stop you next. Because they know you'll talk loud. Think about that? It'll be *your* wife waiting alone in a lousy dump, hoping they haven't killed you."

Dan stepped back, stunned.

The fish grew thoughtful.

Dan's mouth twisted grotesquely. "Don't touch him," he shouted. "If you kill him, I'm in it for mur-

der. We'll have to figure out. . . ."

The fish swung the pipe, hitting Dan a solid blow across the temple. He fell back against the car suddenly, then twisted two steps as if to try to run. He lunged forward, falling at Philip's feet. As he fell, his .38 revolver pulled free of his coat. Philip pounced on it, cat-like, jerking it up just as the fish raised the pipe

Philip drew back the hammer, and growing calm, managed a smile.

"Drop it," Philip said. The pipe fell to the ground. "Fish," he said, "burned to a crisp in my car, you might easily pass for me. Think about it, little man. The attorney's office gets the note, finds Dan dead, finds a body burned in the car. Who's to say, fish? Buried in a closed casket, who could tell? It'll look like the syndicate finished two instead of one, now won't it?"

Philip tightened his finger against the trigger. The fish shook his head violently. His voice was velvet, but unsteady. "Wait, Philip . . . we can make a deal. . . Listen to me. A deal. . ."

"We already have," Philip said softly. "Remember?"

He watched the little man fall to his knees, his arms outstretched, pleading with his eyes. And except for the wind in the pines, there was no sound at all.

