

*A Powerful Story of Life After Death
With an Unexpected Climax*

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By BRYAN IRVINE



CALL it the soul, call it the sub-conscious mind, call it plain personality, call it what you will, but even if you have not given it a name, even though you do not confine it to words or letters, this—shall I say “intelligence?”—lives on after the mortal or material body has gone back to dust. This hypothesis or theory is, of course, as old as the hills. It is heard, read, preached in every clime and by every race on the globe.

I contend, and I have very strong convictions on which I base that conten-

tion, that the activities of that “intelligence” after the death of the mortal body is governed solely by suggestions impressed upon it during the life of the material body. I believe—yes, I am positive—that the human mind after material existence has ceased, will obey to the letter the commands impressed upon it by autosuggestion during the life of the fleshy body and brain.

Proof! I have that yet to advance. I cannot give it until after this so-called death has visited me. After my death the proof shall be forthcoming. My

mind—“intelligence”—will not die, and through the medium of a mortal being my ambition, my work shall live on. I shall write as I am now writing. I will tell my readers all about this last great experience, this so-called death. My fiction will appear as usual and my articles on the subject of *Life After Death* will go on. Wait! Watch!

I am impelled at this time to reveal to my readers a secret that I have heretofore jealously guarded. Why have I selfishly kept it to myself? Because: I am vain enough to believe, considering

the wide circulation of the magazines and papers that have published my stories and articles, that no less than five millions of America's most exacting readers of fiction have followed my writings regularly.

Five millions; I am vain enough again to say that is a conservative estimate. Considering this, then, is it not only reasonable to believe that my publishers and a majority of my readers will attribute this article to a—well, a mental aberration? Read this and you will probably say: "At last it has come; Crutchfield is insane."

But here is the secret: For the past five years I have been merely a medium for the spirit of some literary genius whose mortal existence ceased perhaps a thousand years ago. The spirit of whom? I do not know. I do know this, however, that five years ago I had not written a line that the editors cared to publish. My stories were cheap mechanical constructions on commonplace themes. They failed utterly to arouse human emotion or portray human attributes. I ceased writing only when the editors told me frankly that I was an utter failure.

Then came the call. I awoke one morning to find myself sitting before my desk. Before me on the desk was a sheet of paper on which was written: *You wish to write. So do I. I have written nothing for centuries. Put not your own weak mortal mind to the task. Lend me your hand, oh, unhappy scribe. Fame and fortune shall be yours. Inject not your own insane thoughts. Put to sleep your mortal mind. Lend me your hand.*

The handwriting was my own!

Without any effort of my own mind, I obeyed that spirit command. I wrote. I have changed nothing in those daily dictations. They have appeared in print just as I have received them. Sitting at my desk, perhaps in the still night hours, perhaps while the sun shone and the world was awake and busy, I have written without a single thought of what I recorded.

Insane? Perhaps. In that case, insanity has brought me the fame, the fortune promised in that brief message from the astral plane.

Why do I tell this now? Why, at this late hour, awaken in the minds of my skeptic readers a doubt as to my sanity? Well—premonition. Life is like the pendulum of an old clock; at any moment it may stop. I have—if you will pardon a new but good Anglo-Saxon word—a hunch.

THUS ended the last article written by that literary genius, Cyrus Crutchfield, whose writings, especially those soul-gripping stories, had entranced the fiction reading public. Even before this last article appeared in print, Cyrus Crutchfield was found dead in his paper cluttered den. His dead fingers still clutched the revolver. The bullet had entered his brain squarely between the eyes. On the desk was a brief note written in his own peculiar style:

"I am impatient. Why should I wait? Watch for my successor; for, immediately after pulling this trigger I will go in search of him. The world has lost nothing in my material death. Watch for my stories. "CRUTCHFIELD."

Perhaps I, Amos Hillworth, was more intimate with the eccentric Cyrus Crutchfield than any of his friends. It was in my magazine, *The Pastime*, that his first published story appeared. I readily recall the surprise of our entire staff when that story came. It was read first with little hope on the reader's part of its being worth a second reading.

It was so intensely gripping that we were inclined to doubt that Crutchfield wrote it. For, be it understood, we had patiently read his stuff for several years. We saw it go from bad to worse until it was utterly hopeless. Then, like a bolt from a cloudless sky, came "The Starboard Light." What a story! It was as unlike Crutchfield's previous attempts at fiction as night is from day. Those short, snappy sentences, each conveying a distinct thought, each being an indispensable part of the story. It required no editing whatever. No blue pencil marred the copy. To the very punctuation it was technically perfect. "The Starboard Light" was a perfect gem.

But, we wondered, could he, would he ever do another story so well? He did—even better. And from that day until Crutchfield sent a bullet into his brain he had written nothing that did not bring home to him the top rate from the cream of America's and Europe's periodicals.

Simultaneously with Crutchfield's plunge to the head of our army of fictionists, five years previously, came his articles on "Life After Death" and kindred subjects. I will not go into that again. Enough to say that his queer theory of one's hereafter being governed solely by autosuggestion before death, was as greedily bought and as greedily read as were his stories. Both his articles and his fiction were written with

the distinctive, inimitable Crutchfield "style"; a style that baffled those who would copy, and captivated those who read.

Why Crutchfield selected me as a sort of confidant I cannot say. Perhaps it was because my own humble domicile was only a block from his palatial home on Cottonwood Drive. Perhaps it was because, during his first frantic efforts to get into print, I patiently criticised, advised and encouraged. In any case, it was not a sense of gratitude on Crutchfield's part that won for me the coveted guest's chair in his study. Neither was it sentiment.

Sentiment seemed to be the least factor in Crutchfield's character. He was utterly unlike his stories or the famous characters in them. "Sentimental puppets!" he often remarked while discussing his characters, and his long, sallow face usually took on an expression of contempt.

I can see him now as he used to sit in his study. His male stenographer and I were the only ones who ever saw the actual preparation of his stories. There he would sit, his long, gaunt frame stretched out in a half lying position in a great easy chair, reading from penciled rough draft while the typist typed it. Now and then a cynical smile fitted across his thin lips as he read some particularly tense situation in the story. Occasionally he held up his hand to stay the flying fingers of the typist and turned his gray eyes on me. His deep voice was ever seasoned with sarcasm.

"Now, Hillworth," he would say, "take this character Moody in this yarn. He is a damn snob. It would have been a much better story if I had killed Moody in the first paragraph. I hate him. Then Sylvia, the girl—isn't she sickening? Just like all women, a soft-hearted idiot who will win our hero, then throw him over for a longshoreman or a soda dispenser. Rotten story! But you fool editors and the fickle public like such rot, eh? Very well; it is for sale and many more like it where it came from."

He was, I began to realize in time, in deadly earnest while voicing this iconoclastic sarcasm. Which takes us to Mariam, his wife.

Mariam was a woman of perhaps twenty-five while Crutchfield was crowded forty-five. How that dark-eyed beauty ever endured life in that gloomy mansion, I could not—at that time—understand. Certainly it was not through love for her eccentric husband, for I, among others, was instinctively aware of her fear for the man and his unnatural beliefs. They were seldom to-

gether, Crutchfield and his wife; and she, for some mysterious reason, chose not to make friends.

I, however, won Mariam's regard after several chats with her. I could not help but believe that her husband was the cause of her evident unhappiness. She actually seemed to be a prisoner in that great house; held, I thought at that time, by some strange mental power of her taciturn husband.

One day I ventured beyond the usual chat on commonplace topics. We, she and I, were sitting in her conservatory. Her husband—she always spoke of him as "Mr. Crutchfield"—was, she informed me, in the city.

"Mariam," I began, "perhaps I have no right to ask you this question; but please do not think it is asked through mere curiosity. "Why are you not happy?"

"Oh, please, Mr. Hillworth," she sighed, hurriedly rising and looking about the conservatory, her eyes wide with what I took to be fear, "please do not ask me that."

"But I do not want to see any of my friends unhappy," I persisted. "I want to be your friend, Mariam. I want to help you—lift this burden which seems to make you discontented," I ran on. "Cannot I do or say something that will help, if only slightly, in making you happier? You can trust me implicitly, Mariam, to—"

"Oh, I know I can trust you, Mr. Hillworth," catching my sleeve and smiling faintly. "You—you—oh, you are so human, so unlike those who would smother our most cherished and sacred hopes of what is to come, of the hereafter."

She sank into the chair, still clutching my sleeve like a frightened child, and I stood looking down upon her dark hair as she sobbed softly. I knew more was to come. Those pent-up sorrows and fears, I knew, would flow forth now. I knew, also, that the queer tightening sensation about my heart presaged something more than mere friendship between Mariam and me. For several months, in fact, my visits to the Crutchfield home had been becoming more and more frequent, though I had forced myself to believe that it was Crutchfield's stories that attracted me.

Mariam looked up, brushing the tears from her eyes with an impatient movement of her hand.

"Mr. Hillworth," she resumed, "why cannot mortals leave their destinies to the one great Master of destinies? Why should man presume to refute the laws of nature, of God? What a terrible be-

lief, that we die only to yearn again for our earthly ambitions and our material lives! Who wants to leave this earth only to wish to return to it as mere shadows of our former selves! The scheme of things is not, could not, be so barren of something better beyond the grave. Why—"

"There, there, Mariam," I soothed, putting her hand. "Why should these outlandish beliefs affect you and your wholesome convictions? I am positive, though, that those queer, weak theories of others are not the real cause of your unhappiness."

"No," she confessed hesitatingly, "there is something else; something that I dare not—" She stopped abruptly and stared beyond me at the door.

I knew before I turned about that Crutchfield was there. Even as I looked at him the dark scowl on his lean face vanished and the characteristic cynical smile took its place. Mariam arose and flitted away among the flowers as I arose to greet him.

I wondered guiltily how long he had been standing in the open doorway, how much he had overheard. I was relieved when he asked me in his nonchalant manner to accompany him to his study and listen to him read "another silly yarn that I hope to sell to some fool editor."

CRUTCHFIELD'S death came as a shock, especially to those editors who had contracted with him for material. I, for one, was patiently waiting the completion of a serial. He had prepared about half the story when he committed suicide.

At that time the characters in the story were entangled in a complex plot that completely baffled my powers of deduction. There were three entirely original dramatic situations that, to me, seemed beyond the possibility of logical handling or a convincing denouement. Very inconsiderate of Crutchfield, I thought, to take himself off at that time. What rankled the most was the fact that he did it merely in hope of proving an insane theory.

I worried less about the unfinished serial, however, than I did about Mariam. I secretly hoped that Crutchfield's death would mean more freedom and a healthier state of mind for Mariam. But, strange to say, she appeared to be more despondent than ever. Did she fear or expect Crutchfield's theory to work out? She finally consented to close her gloomy home and become the guest of my mother and myself for several months.

About the continuation of Crutchfield's work through a living medium; I cursed him for a fool even after his death. Of course, stories came. We were expecting them. There were not a few cranks among Crutchfield's readers who believed they could put it over. Some of the stories were fair imitations, too; but none of them had a very marked Crutchfield "style."

All of the submissions were from persons who had previously endeavored to break into print. Regardless of what others thought or expected, I resigned myself to the conviction that Crutchfield and his literary work were irrevocably defunct. Strangely enough, I regretted his abrupt leavetaking less than I did his neglect to finish that serial. I dutifully gasped when I heard of his rash act; I dutifully attended the funeral, then I washed my hands of him. But still I bemoaned the unfinished story.

Having made a liberal advance payment on the story, Mariam insisted that I take it and turn it over to one of our staff writers. This I did, but I was not surprised when the staff writers, after giving the manuscript a careful reading and analysis, figuratively threw up their hands and passed it back to me. I could not blame them. There were the situations as Crutchfield had worked them out up to the time of his death; a complex though fascinating plot cut off at the very apex of suspense and defying now all attempts to work it out consistently or logically. I even turned the manuscript over to Henrick Hennessy, the renowned criminal investigator. He returned it ten days later.

"A most profound puzzle," was Hennessy's remark. "Personally, I do not believe that Crutchfield himself knew what to do with it. Perhaps," he added, smiling whimsically, "that is the reason he committed suicide—to escape the task of finishing the story."

I shrugged my shoulders and chucked the now soiled manuscript on to the desk. "Guess it's a dead one, Hennessy," I reflected gloomily. "Never read anything in my life like it, either. If that idiot Crutchfield had only lived long enough to finish it I could almost forgive him for blowing his brains out."

Hennessy chuckled as he calmly rolled a cigarette. "If I was an editor," he drawled, "I wouldn't take twenty thousand dollars for the unfinished story."

I bounded from my chair. He did not have to elucidate. I got the idea immediately.

"Got me, eh?" the detective laughed. "Publicity, eh? Advertising of the very

best kind. The name, Crutchfield, is a byword in every other home in the land. All know him and his fiction and his peculiar ideas about worldbound ghosts. Big prize for anybody who can finish the story logically and with the renowned Crutchfield style, eh? But I see you have the idea. I ought to be a publicity man instead of a poor 'dick'."

I felt like embracing Hennessy, but I didn't: I rounded up my staff.

In six weeks fifty of the largest daily newspapers in America were running our full-page ad in their Sunday editions. Ten weekly magazines were also carrying us in half-page announcements. We were offering \$10,000 for the best concluding instalment of "Cyrus Crutchfield's Unfinished Story." Full particulars were flaunted before the reading public, with the result that every writer and would-be writer in the country was impatiently waiting for the opening instalment in our magazine, to say nothing of the thousands who, for the first time in their lives, were watching the magazine.

We concluded to run the unfinished story in three installments and close the contest two months later.

I no longer attempted to convince myself that I was not in love. Mother had long since diagnosed my case and frankly passed the diagnosis on to me, wishing me the best of luck. The prognosis was unfavorable, however. Mariam was certainly in no mood to listen to me, though I noted with satisfaction that she was easily persuaded to remain in our home.

I wondered if—but, no; it was undoubtedly the cheerful ministrations of my dear, sympathetic old mother that kept Mariam under our roof. But why did she not become more natural? I was sure—in fact, she had even hinted to me—that she had never loved Crutchfield. Had her daily contact with him, her constant fear of him and his morbid thought, corroded her soul? Had he crushed from her sensitive nature those instincts and desires that make up the foundations of wholesome thought and a contented life?

It was maddening to see her fighting—a losing fight—against an invisible enemy that for some reason she chose to fight alone. Crutchfield was gone, his works had died with him, and Mariam was now free to seek happiness and forget the whole miserable business. Yet, she remained despondent and moody.

I found myself wondering if, even in death, Crutchfield's hard, cynical nature—or personality—did not haunt her. I

heartily hoped I would meet his shade some dark night so I could tell him—or it—what I thought of him and his devilish works. Love, it seems, had caused me to forget, even despise, the one-time commercial value of his ravings.

From an advertising standpoint the "Crutchfield Unfinished Story Contest" was a tremendous success. But we found nothing among the thousands of manuscripts submitted that bore any more than a transparent semblance to the Crutchfield style. "Style" was what we wanted; a style that would at least carry some of the marked features of the dead author's. Five logical and truly laudable endings of the story had come in from as many writers. In each case of these five the Crutchfield style was conspicuously absent. Three unknown writers had in a measure copied Crutchfield's style; but they, to use the vernacular, made a flivver of the story's ending. It was a discouraging task, and only three weeks remained before the closing of the contest.

Then, one morning in my mail I found a brief letter from one Ansel B. Heckler, of Silver Center, Wyoming. It was very much like a number of other letters I had received from persons who professed to be in communication with the spirit of the departed Crutchfield. It read:

"Dear sir: Perhaps you know something about a Cyrus Crutchfield who, I take it, died some time ago. I know nothing of him, as I am a farmer and have little time to read. But one morning several weeks ago I awoke to find myself sitting at the kitchen table, when, according to my regular schedule, I should have been in bed. I had nothing on but my pajamas. I remember distinctly that I had retired as per custom at nine-thirty the previous night. In my sleep, while sitting at the table, I had written a lot of trash on a piece of wrapping paper. Though this rot was written in my own hand, the name at the bottom was Cyrus Crutchfield.

"I gathered from what Crutch says that he is dead and that he wants me to write for him. He said something about your magazine, something that I cannot make out, as the writing is very irregular and indistinct, and he mentioned other magazines.

"I am not superstitious and I do not even attempt home brew, but, believe me or not, that very evening I felt like writing something and I did. I just sat there and turned my

hand loose and it wrote a story. I had no idea what I was writing until it was finished and I read it.

"Am sending you the story just as it came off the pencil point and as I wrote it on the kitchen table. I have no typewriter and wouldn't know how to use it if I did have one. If the story is any good it is for sale; if you don't care for it, burn it up.

"Yours truly,

"Ansel B. Heckler.

"P. S.—Since writing the above I read in a newspaper in town something about your offer of ten thousand dollars to any one who can write the best concluding instalment of a serial left unfinished by Crutch. Our weekly paper, *The Herald*, only mentioned it briefly. Will you kindly send me the magazine in which the story—what there is of it—is printed? I want to read it; and if Crutch really means business, perhaps he will come across with the finish of the story. I can use ten thousand dollars very nicely, as I want to make many improvements on my ranch."

I was on the point of consigning the letter to the waste paper basket when Holden, my associate, rushed into the office.

"Love o' Mike!" Holden gasped. "It's come, chief, it's come! Listen to this yarn!" He continued to gurggle incoherently as he waved the handwritten manuscript about before my face and dropped into a chair.

"NIGHT WINGS," he read the title breathlessly, 'by Ansel B. Heckler. Dictated by the spirit of Cyrus Crutchfield.' Gosh, chief, it's all here; story, plot, Crutchfield style, all but typewritten copy!"

As befits a practical and unsuperstitious editor, I grunted and ordered Holden to read.

Was it there? As Holden read, my scalp tingled unpleasantly, little Arctic shivers chased up and down my spine, I mopped my forehead with my coat sleeve, and I actually expected to hear Cyrus Crutchfield's low, grating chuckle of triumph coming from out of nowhere. It was there!

A hundred little Crutchfield tricks of expression were there; tricks that I and thousands of others would recognize instantly, but could not imitate in a thousand years. Not a single break in the true Crutchfield form in the story's six thousand words. It was there, a short story masterpiece and written with a

lead pencil on both sides of foolscap paper!

Gad! Was Crutchfield right, after all? It was positively uncanny, depressing!

We dispatched a check post-haste to Ansel B. Heckler of Silver Center, Wyoming. Also, we sent by registered mail full particulars of the "Crutchfield Unfinished Story Contest," and the story as it had appeared in the magazine and as Crutchfield left it. I wrote a very pleading letter to Farmer Ansel Heckler in which I implored him to write his version of the incomplete story as soon as possible.

It was thought best to say nothing of Heckler or "Night Wings" until we had made our decision in the unfinished story contest. Therefore, I swore Holden to secrecy and locked the handwritten manuscript in the office safe.

I did not sleep well that night. I felt very much as the small boy feels when he walks near a graveyard at night. I carefully avoided reference to Heckler or his letter or story while in the presence of Mariam. When I thought of her I was sorry Heckler had written. What if that Wyoming farmer did actually convince us and the public that he was Crutchfield's earthly medium? What would the effect be on Mariam? She wanted to forget Crutchfield and his works. I found myself secretly hoping that Heckler's "Night Wings" was merely a strange coincidence; that he would fail miserably in any further attempts to imitate—if it was imitation—the dead author's work.

Through it all and while we waited for another outburst from Silver Center, Wyoming, I frequently caught myself in the act of rehearsing a little plea that I intended some day to make to Mariam. Even then, only three months after Crutchfield's death, I was on the point several times of asking her to try matrimony as an eradicator of the past.

Her brave but vain efforts to appear cheerful invited my advances. The droop of her mouth as she gazed moodily out at a window or caressed a flower in mother's garden seemed to be a mute appeal for masculine protection. Those faint sighs that were not intended to be heard, but which I always managed to hear, spoke eloquently of a dark, mysterious struggle in her mind and heart; a silently fought conflict of which she cared not or dared not speak.

Only three days remained before the closing of the Unfinished Story Contest. At this time we had selected the work of three writers as containing enough Crutchfield style to merit consideration

in our decision. They were poor imitations, but the prize must be awarded to somebody. Would Heckler's version come? I sincerely hoped not.

But it came, and my worst fears were realized. Crutchfield himself could not have done better. Why, it was Crutchfield's work! Heckler said so, and I was forced to confess that the Crutchfield style was there in all its inimitable peculiarities.

That Wyoming farmer had handled the concluding instalment in an entirely different manner from any of the thousands of other contestants. The characters, the situations, the apparently impossible solutions had been handled like so many checkers, righting themselves in a wholly consistent manner. The intricate situations led logically to the final paragraph, then dissolved in an entirely unexpected, though perfectly probable, *denouement*.

While my staff was wildly excited and enthusiastic, I was strangely depressed.

THE result of the contest, together with the publication of Heckler's "Night Wings" and his numerous subsequent stories, is obvious. In a short time Heckler had literally jumped into a dead man's shoes, into the fame left by the eccentric Crutchfield. His likeness appeared in a dozen magazines and scores of newspapers. Newspaper representatives besieged him on his quiet little Wyoming farm. Psychologists and spiritualists alighted from the branch-line train at Silver Center almost daily.

Heckler's many visitors found a quiet-mannered man of perhaps thirty years who loved his farm, his horses, his cows and the windswept Wyoming prairies. "Heck," as he was familiarly known to his old friends down Silver Center way, had a sense of humor and seemed inclined to take it all as a joke. But, too, it was noted that at times a look akin to fear came into his eyes when questioned closely regarding his communications with the spirit of Cyrus Crutchfield.

"I can't account for it," he was repeatedly quoted as saying. "I never attempted to write until that queer request came. I cannot say that I like all this. I was happy and contented here with my ranch work, and, really, I am sorry old Crutch selected me for the job. It—it—well, it isn't natural, it isn't right."

Nevertheless, the stories continued to come. Without a single exception, they were bought by the greedy editors, not because of their peculiar and uncanny origin, but because they were undeniably Crutchfield stories.

Heckler had no objection to being watched while at work. The men of science had watched him repeatedly. There he would sit, his eyes half closed and looking anywhere but at the paper on which he wrote. Any conversation, any trivial interruption, seemed to break the spell and necessitate a wait of hours, days perhaps, before the so-called urge gripped him again.

Months passed. Mother had apparently adopted Mariam. I was now daily on the point of asking Mariam to marry me. But that old inexplicable dependency was still with her. Only once I spoke. Floundering helplessly about in a maze of meaningless words that I had not planned at all to say, I was surprised when she suddenly burst into tears and ran away from me. Then I began to plot with mother. Trip out West, new scenes, new pleasures, climbing mountains, moonlight on the Western ocean, sunsets on the snow-covered Sierras, then the question. It had been done a thousand times in the stories I had bought. Why not again in real life?

We stopped at Silver Center. Everybody went out of his way to see Ansel Heckler. Even Mariam evinced curiosity, though she exacted a promise from me that we would not tarry long near "that queer farmer."

Over the rolling hills in our touring car we sped toward the Ansel Heckler ranch. In the afternoon we drew up before the old frame structure. A dapper young man, evidently Heckler's typist, met us at the door.

"Mr. Heckler is out in the garden, I believe," the officious young man replied to my query. "Appointment?"

I passed him my card and his manner underwent an immediate change. "I am sure Mr. Heckler will be delighted to see you, Mr. Hillworth. Please come in and I will go after him."

"Could we be allowed the privilege of—er—smacking up on him in the garden?" I requested.

"Why, certainly, sir. He is not easily startled."

He escorted us around the house and pointed to a vegetable garden some distance away.

We found Heckler busily engaged in pulling weeds. "Good afternoon," he greeted cheerily as we came upon him. "Don't happen to be looking for work? Weeds are getting—" but there he stopped and the smile faded from his tanned face. His eyes had rested on Mariam.

Sensing a tenseness in the situation, I looked about at Mariam who had fol-

lowed with mother. She was clinging to mother's arms for support and her face was deathly pale, her eyes wide and staring at the man before her.

"Mariam!" I exclaimed, stepping to her side. "Are you ill, Mariam?" But she eluded me and the next moment she was sobbing brokenly on Ansel Heckler's shoulder while he patted her shoulder soothingly and said, "There, there, Mariam." Mother and I composed a mystified audience and merely looked on in wordless perplexity.

"Oh, Will!" Mariam sobbed, looking up in Heckler's face. "Will, please tell me you did not do it! I—I cannot endure this suspense another day. It will drive me mad, Will! Tell me, Will, did you do it? Did you kill—"

"Why, Mariam!" the man interrupted brokenly, drawing her closer to him. "Who told you that? You know I didn't kill—yes, I did kill him. I—no—Mariam, are these your friends?" indicating mother and me.

"Yes, yes, Will, they are my dearest friends," Mariam answered a bit hysterically. "We can trust them, Will. Let's tell them all and have this terrible nightmare over with for once and all. Please tell me Crutchfield lied; that you did not do it."

A grim smile appeared on Heckler's lips. "I am beginning to understand now. And you, you poor, loyal little woman! You have suffered for five years to protect me! Come, Mariam; introduce your friends and we will do as you say, explain all for better or for worse."

I was painfully aware during the introductions that I had lost Mariam. How and why, I did not know; but the conviction was there that Mariam was not for me. Nevertheless, though my heart was heavy as lead, I was determined to stand by her to the very last in this mysterious business—whatever the denice it was.

Heckler—the man Mariam called Will—silently escorted us to the house. In the modest living-room he dismissed the typist. He insisted that Mariam, who was yet very pale and shaken, lie down on the old-fashioned davenport. Next, he opened a small box safe and drew forth some letters. One of these he passed to me. "Read it aloud, Mr. Hillworth," he requested. "You will probably recognize the handwriting."

I did recognize that peculiar script immediately. It was Cyrus Crutchfield's.

*"Dear long suffering William:
You will undoubtedly be overjoyed
to learn that I am about to launch*

myself in the great adventure. Yes, I am tired of life. But don't smile yet, because my death will not mean your freedom—unless, of course, you elect to see a person who is very dear to you arrested and charged with the murder of my friend, Arthur Baldwin.

"Carry the work on, William, for Dan Hopwood has not forgotten what he saw on Moonstone Beach that night five years ago. Am inclosing full instructions, William, as to how you must carry on the work for the several millions of fools who have been reading 'Cyrus Crutchfield's' stories for five years. Remember, too, that Dan Hopwood is keeping tabs on you and Mariam constantly. The minute you grow weary of your task Hopwood will spill the beans as per instructions from me, then your dear Mariam will face a murder charge.

*"Good-bye, old wise boy,
"CRUTCHFIELD."*

Mariam had struggled to a sitting position on the davenport. Heckler—or William—was quickly at her side.

"He—he said I killed Arthur Baldwin!" she queried in a dazed way.

"Exactly," answered Heckler. "And I could not help but believe it after the way Baldwin insulted and compromised you. I—I was afraid, Mariam, to say anything. In my mind, you would have been justified in killing Baldwin, and I was determined to remain silent to protect you, believing as I did that the beach patrolman, Hopwood, had seen Baldwin killed. I—"

"But," Mariam interrupted. "Crutchfield told me that it was you who killed Baldwin; that you killed him because he had insulted me. I—I married Crutchfield to protect you, Will. And you have been writing all this time? Crutchfield never wrote those stories?"

"Yes, Mariam, I have written everything that Crutchfield ever sold. I had to, dear; don't you see? Crutchfield wrote me letters regularly in which he threatened to turn you over to the police if I did not continue to write and send the rough draft stories to him. I—"

"Just a moment," I interrupted. "Is your name Ansel Heckler or—"

"My name is William Middlerow."

"Ah!" I ejaculated. "Pen name, Jellieco. You are the writer who disappeared so mysteriously about five years ago. It was believed you were drowned at sea."

"The same." Middlerow smiled ruefully. Then: "You will recall, too, that

you wrote me several letters which Crutchfield enclosed with his letters, you not knowing where I was. In those letters you begged me to remain silent for 'your sake.' I inferred from your brief letters that you really had killed Baldwin. I understand now that you believed I had killed him and that you feared I would be arrested and sent to prison or hung."

"That was it, Will." Mariam began to weep again. "I wanted you so! I always lived in hope of finding you someday."

"Why did Crutchfield wreak this terrible vengeance on you, Mr. Middlerow?" I queried.

"For several reasons. First, because Mariam had consented to marry me. Second, because he got the insane idea in his head that I had stolen a story plot from his apartment at the Beach Hotel. You will probably recall the story. It was my first book-length novel, 'Blood Red.' Crutchfield had placed his whole future as a writer on this novel. It was merely a coincidence that I conceived a plot almost identical with his. His third reason was because, when he accused me of the theft, I gave him an unmerciful beating."

"Have you seen this beach patrolman, Hopwood, since Baldwin was killed?" I asked.

"Twice. I made two trips to Florida—Moonstone Beach—with the express purpose of getting at the bottom of the matter. I could get nothing from Hopwood except that he had seen Baldwin killed, knew who killed him and that if I wanted to know who did it to just start something. This attitude of Hopwood's only strengthened my belief that Mariam had shot Baldwin in a fit of desperation. Understand, Mr. Hillworth, that Baldwin and Crutchfield were both madly in love with Mariam and had repeated' been rejected by her. Baldwin had a concession on the pleasure pier and was a gambler on the side. There was nothing left for me to do after the murder but come back here to my father's ranch where I was known as Ansel Heckler, that being my father's name. I was an adopted son."

We talked it over for an hour, during which time I found myself liking Middlerow more every minute. He had absolutely none of the characteristics of a man who would kill. True, I had lost all hope now of making Mariam my wife; but already I could see that a great burden had been lifted from her mind and heart, and I was glad.

The result of our talk was that I telegraphed to my detective friend, Hen-

drick Hennessy, requesting him to come to Silver Center immediately.

Hennessy lost no time on the road. All was explained to him. Then, leaving mother and Mariam on the ranch with Middlerow, Hennessy and I proceeded to Moonstone Beach, Florida.

After a conference with the beach authorities at the pleasure resort, Hopwood was brought before us.

"Why have you remained silent about the Baldwin murder mystery, Hopwood?" was Hennessy's incisive query.

The heavy-jowled Hopwood smiled. "Because I know nothing about it", was his prompt answer.

"Read this, Hopwood." Hennessy passed a worn slip of paper to the apparently unmoved patrolman. The paper looked like part of a page torn from a note-book or diary. One corner of it was burned as if it had been raked from a fire. "Found it in Crutchfield's fireplace about a week ago," said Hennessy. "Part of a page from a diary, I presume. Crutchfield had burned a number of letters and papers just before committing suicide, but the fire evi-

dently overlooked this one very incriminating little slip of paper."

I noted that Hopwood's hands shook slightly as he read:

"Since the night I killed Baldwin. Though I have no fear of Hopwood talking, I know that some day the truth will be known. Losing game any way I look at it. Dan Hopwood—"

Here the writing had terminated on the charred edge of the paper.

"And, too," Hennessy went on calmly, "Crutchfield very foolishly wrote a number of letters to William Midd'row; letters in which he frequently mentioned your name. It's an open and shut case, Hopwood. Why did you protect Crutchfield?"

The big man wet his lips and attempted to smile. It was a dismal failure, that smile.

"Of course, you understand," Hennessy went on mercilessly, calmly, "we believe that it was you, not Crutchfield, that really did the killing. We have evidence enough to—"

"That's a damn lie!" the shaken patrolman blurted. "Crutchfield killed Baldwin because Baldwin threatened to tell that girl Mariam Willows who stole the Countess DeMurrae's jewels from her apartments at the Beach Hotel. They—they fought on the beach. Crutchfield killed him. It was Crutchfield who stole the jewels and he and Baldwin started a swell gambling joint with the money they got for them from a fence in Jacksonville. I saw the killin.' I needed money. Crutchfield gave me ten thousand dollars to keep my trap shut. I've been bleedin' him ever since. I—"

Well, he to'd it all in a frantic effort to save his own neck.

As I have said, I lost Mariam. She is Mrs. William Middlerow now. But I still have mother, and that Crutchfield Unfinished Story Contest did wonders for my magazine.

About that half burned slip of paper? It was very carefully prepared by Middlerow and Hennessy on the ranch. Middlerow can write so near like Crutchfield that old Crutch himself would think it was his own handwriting.

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