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JULY

MYSTERY

MAGAZINE

ALLAN
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**BROTHER, CAN YOU
SPARE A GRAVE ?**
DYNAMIC MURDER NOVEL
by **DAY KEENE**

**THE LITTLE GREEN
DOOR OF DOOM**
by **FRED'K C. DAVIS**



THE MAGAZINE OF WEIRD MYSTERY!

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MAGAZINE
NEXT ISSUE OUT JULY 5th

Volume 30

July, 1944

Number 3

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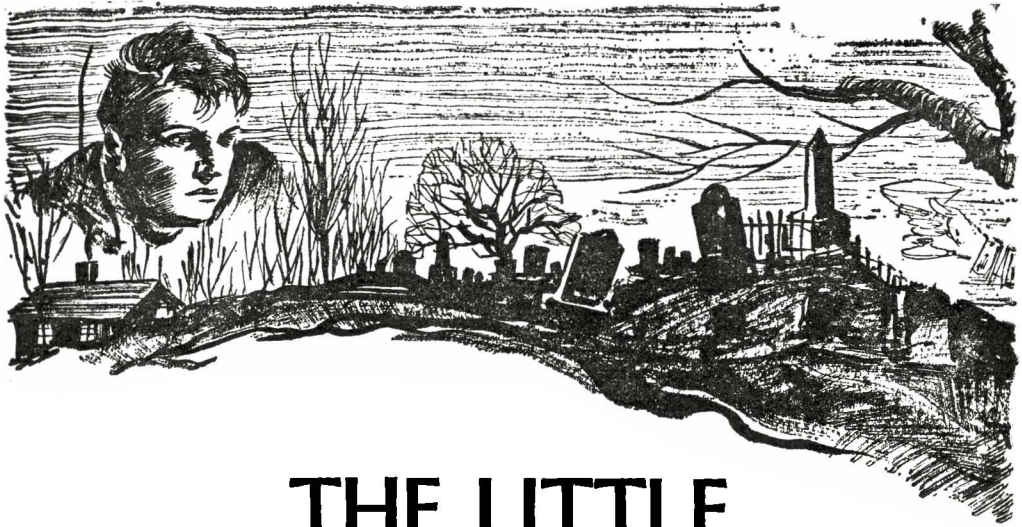
The Great Kerrigan, stage magician, had no trouble slipping out of a pair of trick handcuffs. But how could he get out of his own coffin?

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive Offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York 17, N. Y. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter March 4, 1941, at the postoffice at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1944, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 10c. Six-issue subscription in U. S. A. 60 cents. Foreign postage 38 cents additional. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of uncollected manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.



THE LITTLE GREEN DOOR OF DOOM

A Novelette of the Dead—Who Never Die!

By FREDERICK C. DAVIS

We have probed life and we have tried to probe death. But what do we know of that mysterious instant between life and death—that must be neither life nor death? Dr. Crane claimed to know, because he held his dead wife in his arms and then felt her once more return to life—as an entirely strange woman!

CHAPTER ONE

The Living Dead

I—DR. JOHN CRANE, solemnly swear that the following is a truthful record of the singular circumstances which culminated in the murder of which I have been unjustly convicted.

This is a simple, accurate statement of the fact that the murder was committed not by me, but by a being who remains—who will remain forever—far beyond the reach of the court which has wrongly condemned me to death.

Warden Burrows has kindly granted my request for paper and pencil. Tonight I'm the only prisoner confined in the death-house. I've an opportunity to write uninterrupted until the arrival of my visitors.

They will come shortly before eleven o'clock.

When they reach my door—and they'll be prompt—I'll have to stop writing; I'll know then that my last hope of a reprieve is gone. My final word will then have been written, to be read only after I've been conducted down the stone-and-steel corridor and through the green door of doom. . . .

Meanwhile, I want to tell my story simply and calmly from the bewildering beginning through to the appalling end, adding amazing fact to amazing fact, trusting that at last it will be read open-mindedly—though much too late!

I can't expect that when you come to the final line you'll feel that this is how it *must* have happened. I merely ask that you leave enough room in your mind so that you may equitably say to yourself, "Yes, that's the way it *could* have happened"—for, strange and unearthly as they may seem, these, then, are the facts:



As a physician in the small town of Bayvale, in the Eastern part of this state, I practised my profession until three months ago. During the day preceding the night when this fearful affair began, I recall, I'd been even busier than usual. I'd spent the morning calling on patients in town and on the surrounding farms, some of them living as far as twenty miles distant.

After seeing more patients in the hospital at Coylestown, the near-by county seat, I'd had about an hour to myself. I'd spent it doing chores around my home—carrying ashes out and firewood in, and so on. There were always a dozen such tasks to be done, and today, in addition, I'd noticed that one of the tires of Iris's car had gone flat. The shortage of wartime auto repairmen being as severe as the shortage of doctors, I'd patched the tube myself. Then it was time for dinner and immediately afterward my evening office hours began. Just as I wearily dismissed the last of that long parade of patients, I received the telephone call from Thomas Robinson.

Speaking with the breathless brevity of a man in great pain, Robinson told me he'd fallen down the rocky bank of the creek which crossed the place he'd rented just outside of Bayvale, and had hurt himself rather badly. Apparently, he said, he'd suffered several broken ribs. I answered that I'd come right

Amazingly, the heart that had ceased to beat was beating again!

over and instructed him to lie down and keep himself quiet meanwhile.

It was a nasty March night. Thin, misty rain drifted down, freezing into shells of ice on everything it touched—the branches of every tree, the telephone wires and the roads.

ALTHOUGH Robinson's place wasn't far by air-line—it could be reached by a few minutes' walk through the cemetery and woods separating it from my home—the highway wound and curved through the hills for a distance of four miles. It was a dangerous road even in fair weather, and since the driving was particularly hazardous tonight I had to take it slowly.

At Robinson's isolated house, I found he had multiple lacerations and contusions in addition to the fractures. It seemed wise not to risk moving him to the Coylestown hospital tonight. Once the fractures were joined and his chest tightly bound he'd be comfortable enough and able to take care of himself at home. However, he was certainly due to suffer a very painful half hour without anesthesia. Therefore I at once phoned my wife.

Before marrying me six years ago Iris had been the anesthetist at the Metropolitan hospital where I'd served my internship and in cases like this one she was of indispensable help.

"I'm at Tom Robinson's," I began. "He's—"

She broke in quickly, "Tom's? What's happened to him, Jack? What can I do?"

"Bring ether and a cone," I instructed her, "and extra bandages. And look, honey—don't try to chalk up any speed records. There's ice on the road."

"I'll be very careful—I'll get there all right," Iris said in a rush of breath. "Here I come!"

I did what little I could for Tom Robinson while waiting for Iris. He was my own age, darkly handsome, sun-browned and spare. I knew him rather well, but not intimately. No one did. He lived here entirely alone, which was the subject of much curious talk in town, and since coming to Bayvale and renting this place several months ago he had made no effort to cultivate friends, though he seemed likable enough, and exceptionally attractive to women. Tonight he was deeply disturbed—not merely by his physical pain, I sensed, but by something even more distressing.

He asked me abruptly, "What time is it?"

"Ten forty-five. Iris should be here any second now."

He lay back, eyes closed, but almost at once he lifted his head tensely to stare at me with a kind of suppressed horror, and he asked quickly again, "What time is it now?"

"Just a minute later than it was a minute

ago." Smiling to humor him, I noticed the motionless pendulum of the fine old grandfather's clock in the corner. "Does that clock need doctoring too?"

"I stopped it," he said tersely. "I couldn't quit looking at it—couldn't stand it." Oddly, he asked again, at once, "What time is it now?"

"See here!" I said. "What's worrying you? Is something important due to happen tonight?"

"It's nothing," he sighed, eyes again closed tightly. "Nothing."

"Something's worrying *me*, anyway," I said. "Iris should be here by now."

Taking up the telephone, I called my home. There was no answer for, of course, Iris had left. Looking out the window, I could find no faint shine of an approaching car. The misty rain had thickened; everything outside was growing a heavier crust of ice. The passing minutes became as anxious for me as they were—for a reason entirely obscure—to Roberson. At last, full of agitation when five more empty minutes had gone, I quickly put on my coat.

"Lie right where you are, Tom," I ordered my patient. "I'll be back."

Then once more, as I jerked open the door, he blurted, "Jack! What time is it now?"

I flung over my shoulder impatiently, "It's five minutes of eleven," and as I hurried on I heard his lips press on a moan.

Midway between Roberson's home and our own, at the sharpest and most dangerous curve in the road, I saw a single headlamp shooting its beam into the murky sky at a crazy angle.

I skidded my car to a reckless stop and scrambled out, calling Iris's name. There was no answer except the whisper of the rain and the creaking of ice-laden branches. The black pavement was so slippery I had to slide my feet across it, inch by inch, to the bank. Faint tire-marks indicated a car had plunged over there. Fifteen feet below it had rammed itself into wreckage against a clump of trees. I crawled down the bank as rapidly as I dared, driving my heels hard to crack the crust of ice on the sod, calling again and again.

"Iris! . . . Iris! . . ."

She'd always driven too fast. She was like that in everything she did—impulsive, eager, zestful. Tonight she'd taken one chance too many. She'd misjudged her speed. The treachery of the ice and the sharpness of the curve—Hurrying to help me—

"Iris!"

I FOUND her huddled limply at the base of the trees. There was very little blood, but she was completely inert. Bending over her, bracing myself, I pressed my fingers to her pulse and tried to realize she had no heartbeat,

no heartbeat at all. I stared at her, appalled.

My wife was dead.

But then, while my cold fingers clung to her wrist, I felt a faint throb of life! Staring incredulously into Iris's lax white face, I felt another pulsation, stronger than the first—then still another! The heart that had ceased to beat was beating again!

With a growing force that amazed me, the impulses of her flowing blood quickened until they were almost normal!

I was too joyfully dazed to wonder what sort of miracle had happened. Quickly making sure it would do no harm to move her, I gathered her into my arms and struggled up the bank, knowing only, in a stunned and unquestioning way, that my wife had been dead but was dead no longer! But my happiness, almost delirious then, was doomed to be short-lived. Within two hours even stranger things, unaccountable at first, began to happen, to pile up. . . .

It was almost one o'clock in the morning when I hurried into the Coylestown hospital to see Iris.

It seemed an eternity since I'd driven her directly into Bayvale, to the home of our friend, Dr. Martin Miller. Taking charge of her, he'd rushed her down to Coylestown, still unconscious. I hadn't followed at once, because my anxiety was a hazard to Iris—I might interfere too much with Mart's handling of her. Besides, I must not shirk my patient, Tom Robinson. Mart having assured me that Iris would probably be all right, and that he'd phone me as soon as possible, I'd returned to Robinson's home.

Robinson seemed no longer mentally dis-

tressed. Instead, his mood had become one of morose resignation. He hadn't asked me again that queerly repeated question as to what time it was. Necessarily lacking anesthesia after all, he'd submitted without complaint. It had taken quite a long time to bind his chest properly. I'd just finished when the telephone rang.

Mart Miller had reported to me, "The x-rays don't show a thing, Jack. Except for a few bruises and minor cuts Iris isn't hurt. It was mostly shock and she's coming out of it nicely now."

"Thank God for that!"

He would wait for me, there, he'd said. Robinson had asked many worried questions about Iris, and this report had relieved him. Instructing him to remain quiet, and telling him he'd be going to the hospital himself in the morning for a thorough check-up, I'd hurried down to Coylestown as fast as the icy road would permit.

As I strode down the corridor, Nurse Browne sent me a reassuring smile, then turned to say through the door of Iris's room, "Your husband is here, Mrs. Crane."

I heard Iris's faint voice answer, "My husband!"—and her tone was exactly what she would have used if she had meant to add, "But what do you mean? I have no husband!"

Eager as I was to see her, I gave no thought then to the strange inflection of her voice. I hurried in with scarcely a glance at Mart Miller, who was seated in a corner, watching her with an intent frown. Iris lay in the bed, seeming remarkably unshaken now; but I was shocked to find that she had no welcome for me. She gazed at me as if at a stranger. Bend-

ing to kiss her, I felt her resisting me. To my astonishment, she pushed herself up on her elbows, indignantly.

"There—there's some mistake here," she said.

It was Iris's voice again, and yet it was not. Her words, startling in themselves, were spoken in a manner not at all like her. I couldn't understand it, for her throat wasn't injured and her lips weren't swollen—yet she spoke with a queer sort of accent.

She gazed past me, and a sharp, startled look sprang into her eyes—a look of utter bafflement mingled with wariness. I saw that she was peering at her reflection in the mirror.

She blurted, with that same faint accent, "Who is that!"

Concealing the consternation I felt, I said quietly, "Iris, you remember how—"

Suddenly she fell back to the pillow, overwhelmed with speechless confusion, her eyes tightly closed. Mart tapped my shoulder and I stepped back. I watched anxiously as he gave her sedation by injection.

"She'll be all right, Jack." He smiled at me. "Her confusion is perfectly natural, considering the shock she had."

I wasn't reassured and after he'd gone I sat beside the bed, watching Iris. Her pulse was still strong, her color good. The sedative, however, seemed to have little effect on her. Although she slept, she was restive. She clenched her hands into small white fists and squirmed. Then she spoke those names—the strange names.

"Timothy!" she murmured, again with that peculiar accent. "Timothy!"

I racked my memory, but I could recall no Timothy whom Iris had ever mentioned before. And the tenderness of her voice startled me—the softness of it, as if she were a woman speaking to the man she deeply loved.

Next she spoke another name, and this time her voice was totally changed. It became sharply impatient. "Alma!" I couldn't remember that either Iris or I knew anyone named Alma, but she repeated it with bitter contempt: "That precious Alma!"

Something had happened to Iris—something deep inside her—and this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dead Can Kill!

SHE was well enough to be taken home two days later—well enough physically, that is—although she had not recovered otherwise—she wasn't the Iris I'd always known.

My wife had been an eager-minded young woman, almost childlike in her playfulness. She wasn't at all like that now. Her friendli-

ness, so spontaneous before, seemed forced now, and I felt that she was constantly feeling me out without appearing to do so.

You know how it is when you encounter by chance someone whom you can't quite remember. You realize you've met him before, but you can't recall where, or when, or what his name is. You talk with him, avoiding the embarrassment of your forgetfulness, pretending to remember him clearly. During the course of the conversation you look for little hints—something that will place him in your mind. He might mention a name or an incident which suddenly brings it all back. Unless this happens, you part from him still wondering, "Now who the devil was he, anyway?" It was actually like that with Iris now—in everything I said she was secretly seeking a mental association, trying to clarify me in her mind, to adjust herself to some forgotten relationship. And she hadn't succeeded! This, I knew, is how Iris now felt toward me—this young woman who had been married to me for six years!

As we were leaving the hospital we met Tom Robinson in the foyer. A thorough examination having revealed no deeper injuries, he was being discharged at the same time. He was profusely solicitous about Iris. Her reaction bewildered me. Outwardly she was casual, but my hand on her arm felt it trembling. An almost fierce glow filled her eyes. Although she attempted to conceal it, his galvanic effect upon her continued as I helped her into the car.

She asked me then, "That man—what is he to us?"

"A patient of mine, darling, and a friend of ours. Of course you remember—"

"Yes, I know, but—" I sensed doubt in her voice. "Will he be staying long near here?"

"I believe he intends to live at Plum Hill Farm indefinitely."

She was thoughtfully silent until she said cryptically, while we were driving homeward, "Jack, I think you know I'm still not entirely myself, but I am quite content now—quite content."

Then she laughed. It was a sound such as I had never before heard rise from Iris's throat—a burst of shrill, selfish, gloating, triumphant laughter! . . .

When I could stand it no longer—these baffling changes in Iris—I went to Mart Miller's office.

"There's something devilish wrong!" I said earnestly. "A hundred little things show it. Iris rarely used perfume before, but now she douses herself—reeks with it. In all the years I've known her, the only cosmetic she ever used was a lipstick, but now her dresser's crowded with stuff—rouge, eye-shadow, face

creams. . . . a whole drug store full of stuff.

"She used to keep the house spick and span, but now it gets more untidy by the hour. She used to bounce out of bed bright and early but now she sleeps late every day. She used to love to cook, but now she hates it and her meals are a mess, and I have to get half of them myself. Instead of spoiling me with a thousand little attentions, as she used to love to do, she expects me to wait on her hand and foot. And the wine. Iris never had any taste for it, but now the pantry's full of bottles—she has wine with every meal, and brandy afterward. All these unnatural things—"

"Jack," Mart said thoughtfully, "you know that an operation, or a long sickness, or severe fever or shock, will sometimes cause an alteration in psyche or personality. This sort of thing is very difficult to account for. Perhaps it stirs up dormant endocrine glands, or affects their interadjustment. We know that the seeming imminence of death can powerfully change one's perspective—and Iris, you realize, had a very narrow escape."

"This is something much stranger than that, Mart," I insisted. "Explain this if you can. Today she brought home a book. It's a paper-backed novel—written in French. But Iris can't read French! Yet that cheap French novel of hers has been devoured from start to finish. It's impossible, Mart! Yet—"

"I'd like to see the book," Mart said quietly. "In any case there's no cause for alarm."

"Her nerves—she's all nerves now. And her mind seems to be always strangely preoccupied—secretly busy, as if she's constantly scheming and planning. Sometimes I see such a fierce, bitter look in her eyes—"

"**L**OOK here!" Mart interrupted. "I'll speak frankly. You're concerned with things that don't exist—or if they do exist, you're exaggerating their importance and misreading their meaning. You know, you've never fully recovered from that old siege of cerebral fever, and there's no question that you've been working much too hard. Really, Jack, you should worry less about Iris's condition and more about your own. Get yourself some rest, old man, and free your mind—"

I broke in sharply. "I came to you for help—to tell you that something frightful has happened to Iris, and you answer that I'm probably not quite right in my head. Thanks for nothing, Mart. And goodbye."

Offended by his lack of understanding, still full of baffled concern for Iris, I hurried home. There were lights behind the drawn blinds of the living room. I went in quietly, so as not to startle Iris. Seated at the desk, she heard my step and instantly she moved with feline quickness. She'd been writing a note, and swiftly it was whisked away—hidden.

To whom had she written so covertly, and why? Puzzled, I looked for the note after she'd gone to bed. I couldn't find it. I did find an impression on the blotter—a fresh blotter, clean except for one short scrawl, the signature.

Gazing at the reflection of the signature in the mirror I saw, with a stunned chill, that the bold scrawl didn't in any way resemble Iris's neat handwriting, and that it wasn't her own name she had signed, but another. It was a name completely strange to me—*Thyra*.

Thyra! It echoed in my mind. Very faintly I felt I'd seen or heard this name somewhere, so remotely that I couldn't trace it.

I spent a sleepless, bewildered night. I must not question Iris about it, I decided. If there was something really horribly wrong with her, to grill her would only aggravate her condition. The name was a riddle I must solve as best I could, alone. *Thyra . . . Thyra . . .*

All the next day that meaningless name kept repeating itself in my ears. Late in the evening I sat gazing from my office window, my thoughts still groping through nothingness. The moon was full in the cold spring sky. The familiar scene outside was a clear-cut etching in black and silver—the yard behind the house, the cemetery beyond. Many bad jokes had been cracked as to how convenient the cemetery must be for me. In summer, fortunately, it was screened from view by shrubbery, and in winter I preferred to keep the curtains drawn across this particular window simply because it wasn't pleasant for an ailing patient to see the gravediggers at work nearby. Privately I felt no qualms about it; it was a peaceful view. Tonight the cemetery lay serene in the cold, moonlit darkness as my mind continued to search for the elusive meaning of the name of *Thyra*.

Then I strained forward, gripping the arms of my chair. There was a flicker of movement among the headstones. Something or someone—a spectral shape—was hurrying along a path, deeper into the night. In a moment, while I still stared, it was gone.

Quickly I went upstairs. Very quietly I opened the door of Iris's room. This was another change that had disturbed me since the accident—Iris's insistence upon having a separate room.

Gazing at her bed now, I was not startled. I think I had expected to find it empty.

Outside the air was crisp. The moonlight guided me along the path through the cemetery. It led me into the woods beyond, then across a field. Against the sky ahead stood Tom Robinson's place. No light shone from it. More slowly and quietly now I continued.

There was a dark figure standing at the door—Iris—barefooted, wearing only a sheer

nightgown. She opened the door, moved silently inside.

Advancing, I came to a window, also open. Robinson, I knew, used a bedroom on the ground floor—the room just inside the window. I stood beside it, listening. A sound reached me—a sleepy mutter in Robinson's voice.

"Who—who is it? Who's there?"

A murmur answered: "Do you not *feel* who it is? Have you so soon forgotten Thyra?"

A moment of silence followed, electrically tense. Then Robinson choked out, "Thyra! No, no. . . it's impossible. It can't be Thyra!"

The murmur said: "I have come back."

Suddenly Robinson's voice rose to a crazy pitch. "Go away! Go away!"

Then again I heard that shrill burst of laughter—mocking, bitter, vindictive laughter!

In the darkness Robinson roared out an unintelligible sound of panic. A movement at the door caught me by surprise. The figure reappeared in the moonlight—Iris, running. She passed me swiftly, an echo of her evil laughter still lingering on her lips. She sprang past the house and was quickly gone through the hedge. Inside the bedroom there was a frantic thumping and threshing, and a light flashed on.

Through the window I saw Tom Robinson standing hunch-shouldered beside his bed, white-faced, a man stricken with terror.

I strode into the house, and as I entered his bedroom he stiffened.

"I don't understand this," I said. "I can't explain it except by saying that the accident must have affected Iris's mind."

"Iris?" he said thickly.

"She was here. I know—"

"You're mistaken!" he cut in. "Iris here? Why should she come? What're you talking about?"

"I don't really know what I'm talking about," I admitted. "It's beginning to drive me mad. If you know what it means, for God's sake tell me! Who is Thyra?"

He swallowed, his eyes a glare. "Thyra?"

"You must know the name," I insisted. "It meant something to you. You shouted at her to go away."

Robinson sank back on the couch. "I must have been dreaming—saying things in my sleep."

He brought a bottle from a cupboard and poured himself a stiff drink. Then he stared at me, his jaw clenched. Was he as deeply at a loss as I was, or was he determined to evade my questions? In either case he was a man on whom a strange sort of horror had taken hold. I saw clearly that it would be futile to press him now. He was pouring another pow-

erful jolt of whiskey when I turned and left.

Midway across the cemetery I paused, just in time to see a light blink out behind the windows of Iris's room. Iris had returned to her bed. But no—no, I told myself, it was not Iris who was up there. God only knew what she had become, this woman who lived in my home and *looked* like the girl I'd married—but it couldn't be Iris—couldn't really be my wife.

THYRA. . . . Thyra. . . . The mystery of that unusual name had become an obsession. The next afternoon, I sat alone in my closed office, full of a sense of frustration and dread. I sat staring out the window, scarcely seeing the two men digging a new grave in the cemetery beyond. Twilight was settling when suddenly a faint light glimmered in my memory.

I sprang up. On the knob of my office entrance, I hung a card reading, *Doctor is Out*. I drove rapidly into Coylestown through a light rain—the weather had turned warm—and in the *Herald* building I pored over their files.

And I found it!

In the *Herald's* issues of four months ago there was a series of brief items at which I'd scarcely glanced at the time. In the New York papers of those same dates the startling story was complete. I reread again and again, chilled by one astounding point of significance after another.

It concerned a woman named Thyra Armond—a divorcée who, at the outbreak of the war, had fled to this country from France.

Also it involved a broker named Timothy Robbins and his wife Alma. Timothy and Alma—the names Iris had muttered in her tortured sleep!

Although I can now set down these facts with calm understanding, they struck me then with such a terrific impact that I could scarcely grasp them—but there they were in black and white, true in every detail, throwing a ghastly light upon the mystery that possessed my mind.

This woman, Thyra Armond, had been the mistress of Timothy Robbins, and it was brought out that she had grown jealously eager to become his wife. He had promised Thyra that they would be married as soon as he'd divorced Alma Robbins, yet he couldn't bring himself to the point of discarding his devoted wife. Thyra would not be denied; evilly possessive of her lover, she saw his wife as an obstacle she must destroy.

Thyra had the means close at hand—strong poison. It had been prescribed as a medicine for her—fluid extract of veratrum, a derivative of hellebore, a powerful cardiac depressant. Thyra's physician had warned her never

to take more than the maximum dose, three drops. Well knowing its deadly potentialities, Thyra had carried the bottle in her purse that afternoon when she'd gone to the Robbins home as a friend, for tea with her lover's wife.

All this was proved at the trial by unquestionable evidence. Most damning of all was the fact that Alma Robbins, taken suddenly and violently ill while Thyra was still present in the house, had died within an hour of Thyra's departure.

Thyra Armond's conviction was a certainty. The jury had seen no reason to recommend clemency for this woman. The court had sentenced her to death. In due time the penalty had been executed upon her—only a week ago.

A week ago!

Thyra Armond had died in the electric chair in Sing Sing Prison on the very night, and at the very hour—the traditional hour of eleven o'clock—even at the very minute when, several hundred miles away, Iris's car had gone careening and crashing off that treacherous, icy road! . . .

It was late when I strode into my office. If any patients had waited for me to return, they'd given up and gone. The whole house was full of the silence of emptiness—a silence that persisted as I ran up the stairs to the living quarters on the second floor.

"Iris!"

Even as I called out the name I felt it was abominably wrong—that I shouldn't call her Iris any longer, but Thyra. Whichever she was, and whatever she was, no answer came. She had gone.

Gone! Gone where?

A cold fear sent me rushing back down the stairs and into the little room where the shelves were loaded with supplies of drugs. In accordance with the practice of all country doctors, I wrote prescriptions less often than I dispensed the required medicines. With fumbling fingers I searched for it—the small bottle which I knew should be there, which I knew somehow was actually there no longer. The small bottle labelled *Veratrum, Fluidextractum*—it too was gone!

I ran out into the rain. The sod was soggy under my feet, the path through the graveyard a lane of mud, as I flung myself along, and through the woods beyond. There were lights

in Thomas Robinson's house. I was breathless when I reached the door—and there I stopped, staring into the living room at the figure of Robinson slumped in a chair beside the waning embers in the fireplace.

Even before my fingers touched his drooping wrist I knew his heart was stilled.

An empty highball glass lay on the rug beside him. A second glass sat on the coffee table, still half full. I saw a glitter behind the chair and my hand closed tightly on the small bottle. It was almost empty now—I realized that Thomas Robinson had unwittingly been made to swallow such a powerful dose of veratrum that his heart had been lulled to a standstill within seconds.

She was standing there behind the open door, gazing at me with a fierce, triumphant shine in her eyes—this woman who appeared to be Iris.

"You killed him!" I said. "This is how you planned it! Your affair with him ended so wretchedly and you'd grown to hate him so terribly that you had to strike back at him in revenge. Nothing in Heaven or Hell could keep you from returning to destroy him!"

I moved toward her, my hands outstretched to implore her repentance. She shifted to the open doorway, defiant, fearless of me, diabolically glad of the frightful thing she'd done, and even as I stared at her she seemed to fade into the night that was black and limitless behind her.

"Come back!" I cried.

Suddenly she was no longer there.

"Come back, come back!"

I flung the little bottle aside and sprang out the door. There was no hint of her in the damp darkness. I ran across the field and into the woods. In the midst of the cemetery I stumbled to a dazed, breathless stop.

"Iris! Thyra! Come back!"

Nothing answered but the whispering rain. She was nowhere. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Could It Have Happened?

I WAITED the whole night and she didn't come. Somehow I got through the next day. I was alone in the house that night when

District Attorney Frank Forbes called on me, accompanied by two state troopers.

Forbes asked, "Dr. Crane, you know that Thomas Robinson is dead?"

"Thomas Robinson wasn't his real name," I said. "He was Timothy Robbins. He came here to get away from the scandal of that murder trial in New York State. But he couldn't really get away from it—not in his own mind. A week ago tonight he kept asking me, 'What time is it, what time is it?' It was nearing eleven o'clock, the hour set for the execution of the woman who'd murdered his wife, you see—the woman he'd once thought he loved—His name—"

Forbes interrupted gently. "His name doesn't matter. You know he's been murdered?"

"I—I don't have to answer your questions."

"No, you don't have to; but I've a search warrant here." Forbes showed it to me. "Please sit quietly while these officers go through this house."

The two smartly uniformed young men went quietly up the stairs, and Forbes inquired, "Where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead."

Forbes' voice was very quiet. "When did she die, Dr. Crane?"

"A week ago," I said, "on the night of the ice storm, when her car crashed off the road."

Still more quietly, Forbes said, "She was seen here as late as yesterday."

"The woman who was seen was not my wife," I explained. "It's not my wife you're asking about. It was a—a different being. She merely looked like Iris. She was another woman who somehow moved and breathed in the fleshy shell that had been my wife's lovely body."

"I see, I see," Forbes said softly, but I knew he didn't see at all. "And where is she now, Dr. Crane?"

"She's gone. I don't know where. Only God—or Satan himself—knows that. No one will ever see her again. She's gone forever."

Studying me for a moment, he produced a small slip of paper, muddy and spotted with dampness.

"This is one of your prescription blanks, Dr. Crane. It was found on the cemetery path, probably blown by the wind, and the rain has made it rather hard to read—but is this your handwriting? It says, 'June tenth, 3:45 to 5:15 p. m.' You made that note? What does it mean?"

"I don't remember."

"No doubt you have a can of non-inflammable cleaning fluid in the house, Dr. Crane?"

He watched me closely.

"Cleaning fluid! I suppose so, but what connection would it have with all this?"

He didn't answer. The two troopers came

back down the stairs carrying one of my suits and a pair of my shoes. Forbes examined them. From his pocket he produced a box which contained the small bottle of veratrum—black-smudged now with developed fingerprints. They peered at me, these three men.

"Thomas Robinson, or Timothy Robbins, died at ten o'clock last night, Dr. Crane," Forbes said. "Where were you then? How do you account for the mud on your shoes and clothing? Does this bottle belong with your medical supplies? Have you nothing to say, Dr. Crane?"

Hopelessly I answered, "Nothing that you will understand."

"Then," Forbes said, rising, "I must place you under arrest for the first-degree murder of the man known as Thomas Robinson."

I felt fortunate to have obtained the legal services of Spencer Brandon. He was a highly successful trial lawyer. Still, I sensed that he regretted having taken my case. For all his brilliance he was a mundane-minded, cynical, hard-skulled man.

He sat in my cell, hand at his chin, his rugged face impassive, interrupting me with interminable questions while I attempted to make my story clear to him, and when I finished he regarded me in wry silence.

"Dr. Crane," he said at last, "I advise you to allow me to plead insanity."

"Insanity!" I blurted. "I'm not insane! I haven't imagined all this. It all happened, exactly as I've told you. I didn't kill Robbins. And it wasn't Iris who killed him. It was—"

"Dr. Crane," he interrupted again, "the prosecution's evidence is very strong. We won't stand a chance with a fantastic defense of this sort."

"**FANTASTIC!**" I flung back at him. "Listen to me. Is there such a thing as a life after death? Most of us believe so. We never think of that conception as fantastic. Yet the belief in the transmigration of souls is as well-founded and as ancient. It was part of the religion of the Egyptians, part of the teaching of Pythagoras and Buddha. Plato believed that birth is the transmigration of a soul from one body to another. Even today this same belief exists around the whole world. You see, I happen to have studied this subject. Modern theosophy has taken metempsychosis—this same idea of the transmigration of souls—as a cardinal tenet; it's considered by highly intelligent men to be the master-key to modern problems, among them the problem of heredity. Why—there are so many great truths veiled from us, you can't categorically deny this; that the black soul of Thyra Armond took possession of my wife's body at the instant Iris died and used it as a weapon of vengeance—"

Brandon rose with a sigh. At the door of my cell he paused to look back. "Dr. Crane," he asked again—it seemed this was the hundredth time I'd heard the question—"where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead," I answered wearily. "She died in the auto accident on the night of the ice storm. . . ."

Some of the first witnesses produced by the prosecution were close neighbors of mine—people I'd considered my friends. Something had turned them against me. There in that crowded, tense courtroom they avoided my eyes while making absurd answers to the district attorney's soft-spoken questions.

Gripping the arms of my chair I tried my utmost to keep from crying out, "Lies! Lies!" to such testimony as:

"I saw her with Timothy Robbins one day. . . . The first time was just a week or so after he moved here. . . . I even began to look for her, because the minute the doctor left to call on his patients, she'd sneak out the back door and across the cemetery. . . . Talk was going around—seemed like everybody knew it—so much talk I thought sure the doctor must have heard. . . ."

False, all of this!

There were only two witnesses for the defense. The first was Dr. Martin Miller. He spoke guardedly, as if trying to be eminently fair, but I realized that he, too, felt an aversion to me.

In substance he said, "Yes, Iris Crane seemed slightly changed following the accident, but only in minor, unimportant ways."

I was the other witness.

This was the moment for which the crowded, expectant courtroom had been waiting. I told my story calmly despite skeptical titters from the spectators and dubious frowns from the jury. All the while I was bracing myself for the ordeal to come—cross-examination by the gentle-voiced but relentless district attorney.

"Dr. Crane, you've heard the testimony of your neighbors. They've made statements clearly indicating an illicit relationship flourishing between your wife and Timothy Robbins. Were you also aware of this?"

"How could I be aware of it? It didn't exist. It's not true."

"It was your motive for killing Timothy Robbins, wasn't it, Dr. Crane?"

"I didn't kill Robbins. You've heard me testify that Robbins was murdered by Thyra Armond."

"But Thyra Armond was put to death in the electric chair in Sing Sing prison a full week prior to the murder of Robbins, Dr. Crane."

"I've already explained all this!" I insisted. "The murder wasn't done by Thyra Armond's

corporeal self. The crime was committed by her inner being—her spirit, her soul—using my wife's physical body as her tool."

"And you really believe this, Dr. Crane?"

"Believe it? I can't help believing it! I saw it happen!"

"You actually believe your wife died in the automobile accident and that a moment later a sort of evil spirit took possession of her body—the spirit of a condemned murderess who had at that same moment died in a prison several hundred miles away? That's what you tell this court?"

"That's the truth!"

"Then let us try to understand it a little better, Dr. Crane. I show you here a newspaper account concerning Thyra Armond. It states she was under a doctor's care for a heart ailment. Now, did your wife, following the accident, exhibit a need for treatment of this same ailment?"

"OF course not!" I protested. "You wouldn't ask that question if you really grasped what I've been saying. I keep telling you, it was Iris's body—Iris's body just as it had always been, healthy and sound—yet it was not Iris herself. Her soul was gone. The evil soul of the Armond woman had taken its place. Do you understand now?"

"I believe I do, Dr. Crane," the district attorney said. "But tell me this, then. What became of this being—this creature composed of your wife's body and another woman's soul?"

"Her devilish work was done," I said. "She disappeared. I saw her dissolve into the night."

"But you say, Dr. Crane—in fact, you insist—it *was* your wife's body. No matter whose soul occupied it, it was still a solid, real thing of flesh and blood and bone. I ask you again, then, Dr. Crane, what became of your wife's body?"

Hopeless, all of it! No one could or would understand. This was supposed to be a court of justice, yet every eye was blind to the truth. The judge, the jury—blind, all of them!

There's no need here to recount my attorney's restless closing discourse to the jury, or the district attorney's gentle but scathing expressions of doubt and contempt. The outcome of my trial is already too well known, even though it is nowhere recognized as a gross miscarriage of justice:

"We, the jury find the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree, as charged."

Judge Dawson said, "Even though counsel has not requested it, the court directs that this defendant be subjected to a thorough examination by the State Psychiatric Commission. When the Commission's report has been sub-

mitted, the court will thereupon pass sentence."

I remember well the wording of that weighty but tragically mistaken document: "We find that at the time of committing the murder the defendant was sane. His present condition is one marked by high excitability of the imagination, which is no doubt the result of two causes—first the severe attack of cerebral fever suffered by him several years ago; and second, the emotional repercussions of the situation which provoked him to kill. It should be clearly understood that this condition, *pseudologia phantastica*, did not impell him to murder. Rather, his fantasms as presented to the court are an attempt to account for and escape punishment for his crime. In short, the commission finds that the slight mental derangement from which the defendant now suffers is a condition developed subsequent to and as a result of the murder, and therefore it is not to be considered a mitigating circumstance."

Judge Dawson declared, "It is the mandatory duty of this court to sentence the defendant to be put to death in the electric chair at Rockton State Prison during the week of September twelfth next."

This is the week of September twelfth.

This is the last day of that week. Today is September eighteenth.

Even after I was brought here to this cell in the death-house, with the whole world still scornfully doubting me, they kept drumming that eternal question at me:

"Where is your wife? Where is your wife? Where is your wife?"

"My wife is dead," I told them repeatedly. "She died when her car smashed up on the night of the ice-storm. She was driving too fast. Her car skidded off that sharp, slippery curve. It was a frightful crash. It killed her. I felt her heart stop beating. I was with her when she died. It was eleven o'clock on the night of the ice storm. . . ."

* * *

I can write no longer. They're coming now—my visitors, as promptly as I'd expected. Their footfalls ring in the corridor as they approach my cell—Warden Burrows and the chaplain.

And so I've told my story for the final time. In a moment they'll lead me down the steel-and-stone corridor to that little green door of doom by which the execution chamber is entered. When the moment comes I will know that there is still nothing in all the world for me except doubt—doubt and death.

They are here now, and the lock is opened. I must stop. . . .

*Statement by William Burrows,
Warden of the State Prison at Rockton:*

The foregoing manuscript was found in Cell

A of the Execution Block of this prison where it had been left by Convict No. 734-65, Dr. John Crane.

Having read and reread it with a sinking heart, I was left with exactly the impression Dr. Crane had hoped to create: "Yes, it *could* have happened this way."

It was not a pleasant sensation.

As you may well imagine, the office of warden of a large state prison is one to try the toughest of men—and I'm not particularly tough. In fact, I've often spent restless nights wondering how many *innocent* men this prison confines. Realizing, as everyone does, that our system of administering justice is not perfect, and therefore not infallible, I'm often deeply distressed when I must witness, as the law requires, the execution of a sentence of death.

AT such times my mind is numbed with questions. "For God's sake, is there no doubt at all that this man deserves this awful punishment? Is there some slight possibility that he's actually guiltless? Am I helping a misguided system of law to kill an innocent fellow human?"

Since I had just seen Dr. Crane die in the electric chair, my reading of his written statement struck me a shaking blow. Anxious to make sure, even though a terrible act of injustice had been committed upon Crane, I took it personally to the District Attorney.

"Amazing," he said, "the way Crane interweaved truth and falsehood."

"He was a man facing certain death," I pointed out, "and he swears that every word is true."

"He does. But all the same, this is a remarkable ingenious misconception of the facts. He's cleverly glossed over some and twisted others. I'm quite sure of it—quite certain of what actually happened. For example, that French novel. I traced it. Iris Crane didn't buy it. John Crane did."

"What?"

"You see, Burrows, we didn't present all our evidence at the trial. It would have been irrelevant for the simple legal reason that Crane wasn't charged with having murdered his wife."

"His wife?"

"His first attempt failed," the district attorney said. "Notice this line where Crane writes that he found a flat tire on his wife's car and patched the tube himself. He omits to say that he secretly put a pint or so of cleaning fluid inside that tube."

"Cleaning fluid!"

"Carbon tetrachloride. It's a rubber solvent. That car sat there for several hours, the pool of tetrachloride inside the tube causing the rubber to swell and soften and become greatly

weakened. It was sure to blow out the next time Iris Crane used it. The ice-storm suited perfectly Crane's purposes—it would account for the inevitable accident doubly. Crane didn't really need to call his wife over to Robbins' place then. It's obvious that Robbins required no anesthetic, and several doctors have reassured me as to that. Actually Crane was deliberately calling his wife to what he hoped would be her death."

Startled, I asked, "But why did he try to kill her then? He says he knew nothing about any affair going on between his wife and Robbins—"

"There was, and he knew it. How could he help hearing rumors of it in a town as small as Bayvale? How could he help noticing little hints of it around his home? Even in this manuscript there are indications that he was well aware of it—for example, Iris's anxiety when Crane told her Robbins was hurt, and her haste to go to him; and again her emotional reaction when encountering him in the hospital. Crane was half mad with indignation and jealousy because it was only too plain to him. We have proof of that too."

"What possible proof?"

"We've found her body."

"Her body!"

"Only today, after searching for two months, and then at a spot where we should have looked at once. Notice this page where Crane writes of the beginning of that last night. He says, 'I stared out the window, scarcely seeing the two men digging a new grave in the cemetery.' He saw them clearly enough and planned to make quick use of it. That's where he hid her—under the bottom of that grave in which someone else's casket was to be placed the next day. That's what really accounted for the mud on his shoes and his suit."

"Good Lord! Did he poison her too?"

Forbes shook his head. "First he went to Robbins' place while Robbins was there alone.

In some way—perhaps through a newspaper picture—he'd learned who Robbins actually was, and now he knew too that his wife had become Robbins' new mistress. His fever-warped mind had already concocted the fantastic story he mean to tell when he'd accomplished his purpose. Robbins, however, thought Crane was ignorant of the affair. He downed that highball without suspecting that Crane had laced it with the same poison Thyra Armond had used to kill Robbins' wife. Then, once Robbins was dead, Crane waited for Iris to come—and she did come to her own death.

"**H**ERE, Burrows, is another shrewdly twisted line he wrote: 'I moved toward her, my hands out-stretched—' He really did—with his hands stretching out to her throat. He choked her to death. He believed she would never be found—actually believed his story would be credited, including the angle that this unearthly being has disappeared into the space between the worlds. Otherwise he wouldn't have thrown that pad of prescription blanks into the muddy hollow he dug for her dead body in the bottom of the open grave.

"Prescription blanks?"

"One of them blew away, and was found. In the grave we found dozens of others. On each of them a date and time was noted down, indicating a rendezvous between Crane's wife and Robbins. He'd been watching them for weeks. His patients have told me how he neglected them more and more, and this was because he'd hidden himself in the woods near his home in order to spy. Why he made these notes I'm not quite sure. Perhaps he meant to confront Robbins and Iris with documentary proof."

I stared at the amazing document. "Then it couldn't have happened the way Crane says?"

"I won't say it couldn't," Forbes smiled. "I do say it didn't."

THE END