

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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SCIENCE FICTION

Operation Peep.....	John Wyndham	2
World Within.....	Thomas A. Coffey	77

MYSTERY

Blood Will Tell.....	Nathaniel Weyl	15
The Nightmare Face.....	Walter Snow	20
Elusive Witness.....	Georges Simenon	44

ADVENTURE

Survival.....	Thomas Gilchrist	28
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CRIME

Fatal Mistake.....	John Basye Price	69
Criminal at Large.....	Larry Holden	38
Pardon My Terror.....	Irving Burstiner	91
Evil Is the Night.....	Edith Saylor Abbot	94

THE MACABRE

Black Death.....	John Krill	62
Maiden Beware.....	Richard Lewis	98
A Horseman in the Sky.....	Ambrose Bierce	123

FANTASY

Penny Wise, Fate Foolish.....	Mary Elizabeth Counselman	72
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NOVELETTE

The Perfectly Calm Murder.....	F. Hugh Herbert	106
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*Like the hurricane, she was
wickedly beautiful — and
left a trail of wreckage*

the nightmare *face*

WALTER SNOW

HE FOUND ME in the Bahama Bar. The humid air was blue with cigarette haze. When the battered street door gaped open, the tailwinds of the dying hurricane howled with louder weirdness across the shambles of the nearby Key West turtle crawls. Slapped loose the pilings in that stockyard of the sea, banged the torn tin roof of the cannery, ripped through rattling debris. The assembled turtle slaughterers, packers and fishermen shuddered, gulped at straight drinks. I was drinking rum.

Then suddenly he stood beside me, hunching forward as if still fighting off the lashing storm.

Shaking a dripping yellow slicker, he seemed a small, insignificant *conch*, a shrunken five-foot-six, a shriveled 130-odd pounds. I towered over him, a lanky beanpole, a smarter man, a respected well-known man. But Leander Jones was wiry like a hound, weather-toughened like an alligator. A scowl darkened the ruddy face which contrasted so strongly with white hair and tobacco-stained, scraggly moustache. Steel eyes glinted.

Obviously, "Judge" Leander Jones was on a scent. He was a virtual one-man homicide squad for a thousand Florida Keys—most active among

... **about the author**

Walter Snow's father, once a Connecticut sheriff, may have inspired the peace officer in this powerful story—though several persons swear to having met an actual counterpart of Judge Leander down among the Florida Keys. As for Walter, he's worked as bobbin boy, scene shifter, infantryman, and reporter for the Brooklyn Eagle and New York Post, managing in between to live in Havana, Key West and Provincetown. A director of Mystery Writers of America, his work has adorned more than 30 magazines. *The Nightmare Face* will shortly appear in *Murder by Experts* (second series) to be published by Random House.

The alluring teaser. The faithless tramp. . . .

The blue cigarette haze lifts. Again I see her for the first time, prancing around as a barefoot bartender in a Duval Street dump. I confide to my guide and fishing pal, Leander Jones, that she's a hussy destined for horse-whipping. The Judge nods grimly, "Thought so once." Carlotta flirts indiscriminately with eager sailors, pats their cheeks, blows them kisses. When they get too fresh she brandishes a baseball bat prankishly. It's an act that keeps the bar crowded when the fleet is in. Brazenly, Carlotta sasses all her customers: "You're stingy tippers. Me, I want a man with money."

the Deputy Sheriffs, Monroe County Coroner and Justice of the Peace representing law here in Key West.

"A gal friend of ours has been murdered," he said.

The raised glass of rum sloshed over, trickled down my chin like ice water.

"Want you to come to Barracuda Key," said the icy tone of command.

He didn't mention the name. Only one scarlet flower, more exotic than hibiscus, had ever bloomed on that tiny, desolate key. The thought of her had always been enough to send my pulses rocketing. Mrs. Jeff Crane. Carlotta of the silky, raven hair.

The way she swings scantily clad hips and twinkles smoky, mischievous eyes makes them like it. Intrigues even Leander and myself. She seems a poor man's *femme fatale*, a waterfront Mata Hari, a Cracker Cleopatra.

Carlotta had drifted down from the cattle bogs of the mainland a few months before I'd come to Key West. Got her first job as waitress at the Crawfish Pot. Leander, a widower, wanted to run her out of town. Then he had taken to dining out on seafood as if he were a tourist and not the best fisherman and chef on the keys. He bought her a tiny wristwatch studded with diamonds,

a 14-karat bracelet, a string of seed pearls, but she only laughed:

"You're too poor and too tough! You'll live too long. I want a rich old man who'll kick the bucket soon."

To encounter wider opportunities, Carlotta had shifted from waitress to barefoot bartender. Had attained half her goal as Mrs. Jeff Crane.

Have you seen my pictures of her?

Not a classic beauty, just a saucy vixen of a Cracker gal. Face a bit too long, seductive figure a shade buxom; but I, Bruce Wallace, National Academy member, a Carnegie Prize winner represented in twenty museums, painted her a dozen times for posing fees that mounted with each new canvas. My Carnegie Prize portrait shows her as a ragged *conch* standing beside an overturned crawfish boat—barefooted, her dress in tatters, her face smudged but with an electric quality, an element appeal that sets a man afire. . .

The blue haze in the bar closed me in again. I wanted another tall glass of rum: the "Southernmost Hangover," but Judge Jones' dry voice made me abruptly forget thirst.

"I can't prove Carlotta was murdered. You, as an artist, might help me get a confession."

In the steel eyes glinted an unexpected friendliness, a plea for cooperation. Judge Leander Jones was still my pal. In a daze, I followed him to his car, listened to the dry voice drone on about discovering the crime while visiting fishing camps up the keys to check on possible storm casualties.

Cold rain sheeted our windshield, the tailwinds were still bending dwarf cabbage palms, when we turned into the marl side road running off the Overseas Highway.

"There's Jeff now," said Leander.

Pelting rain obscured my view. At first I saw only a low stone building, squatting beside a clump of bent mangroves on the edge of the Atlantic. The Barracuda Key Fishing Lodge seemingly stood intact. But an ancient wooden boatshed, which once nestled against the western side of the stone fortress, was a tangled mess of debris. A few leaning piles, stretching into the churning ocean, were all that remained of the dock.

Hunched on the stoop, a grizzled patriarch hid eyes and face in gnarled hands. With the rain still slanting in from the Atlantic, he was drenched to the skin. But old Jeff Crane seemed oblivious to the grinding of brakes, the skidding tires on the crushed coral road.

"Where's Doc Healy?" said Leander.

The old fisherman lowered bony hands, looked up strangely. His hatchet face was an overgrown jungle of whiskers; bushy gray hair hung over the ears and the crumpled, dirty shirt-collar. Under shaggy fog-gray brows, rheumy eyes were swelled, almost closed by huge cataracts.

"Who's that?" he asked, blinking.

"It's Leander. How's the missus?"

"She went away," said old Jeff in a sepulchral voice. "They finally drove away together. The fury of the Lord should have struck them down in their sin. But in the storm, in the

righteous anger of the Almighty, the lights went out for me forever. It was my punishment because I tolerated their sin."

The ravings of this half-cracked miser steadied my nerves. All that was needed now was to prove that old Jeff was lying about being blind. Or had he really been stricken?

Nervously, I pulled out a cigarette, struck my lighter. It was king-size, a miniature blowtorch to withstand high winds. As the wick flared, Jeff jerked his head around.

"You saw that!" I shouted. "You're bluffing."

"I heard it."

Just then the door opened. Dr. Healy, the Coroner's physician, an easy-going potbelly, stepped out of the house followed by a swarthy State highway cop, Jose Gonzales. Gonzales remained with old Jeff; the Judge and the Doc lead me down towards the waterfront. I hated to think of seeing Carlotta again.

Into the rear basement of the stone lodge jutted a garage-type boathouse. The massive storm door, now partly open, showed a gaping knot-hole. Inside, two skiffs stretched secure on racks; a twenty-foot powerboat rested in a few inches of water. The circumference of the knot-hole was rough with hacked marks, circled by dozens of irregular indentations.

"An auto jack or heavy wrench knocked in that knot," said the Judge, grimly. "The hurricane couldn't make those marks. Two people, locked out in the storm, tried desperately to get into this secure boathouse. Look at them!"

Enough debris had been cleared away to bare the bloated remains of two storm-battered bodies—more horrible than I had dreamed. They lay huddling against the stone foundation of the lodge. Carlotta didn't seem mutilated in front; her head was bashed in from the rear. With raven hair clotted by blood and a corpse's pallor on the once mischievous face. With dead, glassy eyes, she no longer looked desirable. She looked ruthless and hard.

The other victim I recognized as Bill Adams, a curly-headed ne'er-do-well, hired last winter to pilot the sports fishermen who had been coming for years to this camp and had made it a gold mine. Bill's skull was smashed. His once handsome Roman nose had been pounded flat. Carlotta had gone crazy over this good-looking rascal, flaunted him everywhere, dropped her other men. All Key West half-expected that some day old Jeff might have a fatal accident and that Bill Adams would marry the heiress. Now the picture was reversed. I shuddered and turned away.

"How can you prove," asked Dr. Healy, "that this wasn't accidental homicide from the hurricane? Maybe the old codger didn't get potted on Stock Island, didn't leave his car there and get somebody else to drive him home. Or maybe he deliberately left his car there to bar escape. But can you prove that Jeff locked Carlotta and Bill outside during the fury of the storm? Can you prove that Carlotta and Bill pounded on the door, pleaded? Old Jeff insists he

heard nothing. The hurricane could drown out even a sledge-hammer. For four infernal hours the winds raged up to 165 miles an hour. Here, on this exposed beach, how could anything live through that?"

"He's bluffing blindness," protested Leander Jones.

"Carlotta drove him to town just this week to see me about his eyes," said the Doc. "Of course he might have been acting cagey but he was at least three-quarters blind. Cataracts are a delicate operation. I recommended a good ophthalmologist in Miami."

"This week, huh. When?"

"Monday, I think. I can look it up."

"That was one day before the hurricane. When it was raining torrents. When he knew the big storm was coming."

"By the blankety-blank, Leander! Are you implying that he used me as an alibi?"

The Judge turned away with a contemptuous snort, told me to relieve Gonzales as Jeff's guard, send the highway cop to him.

Jeff was clumping around the big lodge like a clumsy grizzly bear. He knocked over a straight chair, almost went headlong into the empty fireplace. I made him sit down on a couch, walked over to the mantel-piece and looked around. As an artist, I was peeved at the absence of pictures in this huge room. The knotty pine walls were virtually bare. Above the fireplace, an ideal spot for a huge painting, dangled a tiny calendar with a "September Morn"

nude. Irritated, I snatched down the mildly salacious calendar, held it to my lighter and tossed it into the cold hearth. Jeff didn't move or blink. Was he being "cagey?" In a few moments, Judge Jones' dry voice called out.

"Hey, Bruce! Bring Jeff here!"

Stretched out on the sand was the storm-battered body of Carlotta, her wet tresses looking like writhing, black snakes. Just below her feet lay Bill Adams' corpse. The Doc, the Judge and Gonzales were lined up in back of this weird barrier.

"Come here, Bruce," commanded the Doc, sweeping his arm down across Carlotta's corpse.

With a queasy sensation in the pit of my stomach, I walked in a straight line, carefully stepped over the mangled body to reach the three other witnesses. Felt relieved only when I closed my eyes.

"You too, Jeff. Come here a minute."

"Well. . . somebody give me a hand!"

"Help him, Bruce," said the Doc.

"I'm right here, Jeff. Here you go," I said, without moving.

Jeff paused a moment, reached out bony arms, felt nothing. Then he started staggering forward. He edged up towards the high ground, in the direction just above Carlotta's head.

"You there?" asked Jeff.

"Right here!" I called from Carlotta's feet.

Jeff shifted direction, suddenly kicked into Carlotta's shoulder. Tripping, he plunged sideways, falling directly on top of the cold, stiff body.

Now he was on his knees, rubbing the lifeless hands.

"Are you hurt, Carlotta? Speak, Carlotta. I forgive you everything."

"Bet you'd hate to testify to this scene in court," said Dr. Healy, lowering his voice and leading us out of range of Jeff's hearing. "Jeff's blindness would win any jury's sympathy. All local jurors know that weird terrors happen in a hurricane. Besides believing in the unwritten law, they'd think Jeff has only a year or two to live, anyway."

"But he locked 'em outside!"

"The question is can you prove it?"

"That's where Bruce comes in," said Leander Jones. "How long d'you think a killer can stare at the faces of his murder victims?"

An icicle started crawling up my spine. Biting my lower lip, I silenced chattering teeth. With the will power of an aggressive man, the will power that had made me persist while a thousand would-be artists fell by the wayside of rejections, I controlled trembling hands.

"We'll take Jeff down to the courthouse for questioning," explained the Judge relentlessly. "We'll give Bruce time to paint death portraits of Carlotta and Bill Adams over the mantel-piece. If Jeff is faking blindness, he won't dare to cover them up. We'll drop around every other day to inspect the pictures. If he lives with the dead faces long enough, if he's haunted by them. . .well. . ."

I awoke still seeing staring eyes; glassy dead eyes. Hearing thunder.

Had the new hurricane struck? Groggily I reached for the chain of the bedside reading lamp. There was a dull click; the room remained in inky blackness. I hunched forward on one elbow, gasped.

Remembered flopping on the bed fully dressed after taking a sleeping pill.

Outside the rains whipped down, the winds howled and something banged furiously. It could not be a storm shutter: all had been double-hooked from the inside, everything had been battened down. But the racket continued—pound, bang, crash—each a blow against my aching head. I listened. Not yet were the winds whistling, frantically straining the hurricane cables attached to the four cornerposts of the roof.

"Hey, Bruce, open up!"

That nasal, too familiar voice set my teeth chattering. So it was the Judge banging! Biting my upper lip, I wondered if I could pretend absence. For months Leander Jones had been a genial old salt, a good crony who had shown me the wizardry of tarpon fishing. On rainy days I had often dropped in at the Monroe County Courthouse, near the President's winter white house, for a friendly poker session. Now he was the last man I wanted to see.

Slowly I arose on rubbery legs, lurched to the door, unlocked it. A gust of wind, a sheet of cold rain and the wiry *conch* blew in.

"Damn it, Bruce, I'm soaked. Gotta candle? The power went off twenty minutes ago. It seems like midnight but it's 9 a. m."

Fumbling with a match, I noticed the steely glint in the Judge's deep sunken eyes. The flicker of the candle illuminated a large studio with a rumpled bed and in one corner a heavy easel. The Judge squinted at the work in progress, the big canvas on the easel. It was to be a vivid scene of uprooted palms and a wrecked crawfish boat on the beach. Curiously the Judge stepped over to a stack of canvases turned to the wall. He took out a portrait of Carlotta as a laughing vixen, placed it on the easel, studied it. Then he lifted out another, stared . . .

"We gotta go on a trip before the big blow strikes."

"I'm sorry, Leander. I'm staying here. Maybe it's this new hurricane roaring across Cuba now, headed straight for us. Maybe I'm like your average juror, who believes in the unwritten law. It hit me like a thunderbolt yesterday. I was having a quick one in the Bahama Bar when I saw old Jeff Crane. He was in town, stacking up groceries to last through the new storm."

"And you thought him innocent?"

"He's an old, broken man."

"Bruce, I'm on the verge of cracking this case. Come out with me this one more time. You need rain in the face, a drive to sober up."

Gonzales was outside in a car, drove it to Barracuda Key. The Judge fingered lips for silence as we entered the isolated lodge.

Leaning against the mantelpiece, old Jeff Crane was staring up at the nightmarish portraits I had painted. Fascinated, hypnotized by the grue-

some corpse-like faces, the accusing dead eyes. Gonzales took out handcuffs, clanked them together.

"Look!" I cried. "The old codger can see."

"Yes," said Leander Jones. "Old Jeff finally admitted this morning that he had pretended blindness—for fear he'd be accused."

The Judge's voice came from behind me. Bony hands seized my wrists. Gonzales stepped up. Steel clinked. The two yanked me down into a straight-backed chair, tied me facing the death portraits.

"Is this a joke?" I asked, shaking. "Are you crazy?"

They lit two hurricane lamps, placed one on each side of the mantelpiece. Left me there, tied and handcuffed, as the wind whistled eerily that the new storm was striking. Left me staring at the mutilated man and the hussy with long raven hair and dead, glassy eyes. "How long," the Judge had asked, "d'you think a killer can stare at the faces of his murder victims?"

With the wild winds whining, with gigantic billows savagely sloshing against the stone lodge, my mounting panic almost developed into hysteria as I yelled that I was innocent, that I was a famous artist.

Then reason returned, launched a counter-attack, argued that if this third-degree stunt were mere bluff, I could win out.

Methodically I checked details for a possible slip-up. How could they prove that I, Bruce Wallace, N.A., had gone mad from loneliness and

jealousy because a tramp like Carlotta would no longer come to my studio, would only see the worthless Bill Adams? The fact that they expected my own pictures to break me down demonstrated that there was no proof. Was there a hint, a tiny blunder? Let's see. On the afternoon before the first storm I had found old Jeff in the Stock Island Bar, just north of Key West. He was already so drunk that he didn't see me. I had sleeping tablets in my pocket, slipped three or four into his liquor. Old Jeff thought he was sick, staggered outside, collapsed. He didn't know I drove him home unconscious.

I'm not a murderer. I had no premeditated plan then, just hoped for an opportunity to see Carlotta alone. Probably I hoped just as much for a chance to encounter Bill Adams alone, wanted to beat him up. But the two lovers were in the shed just outside the basement boathouse. They were embracing, cooing . . . It seemed so perfect—murder with a blunt instrument on the eve of the hurricane. A few clues arranged to point at the old man who wouldn't be convicted.

It *was* perfect. I used a club of palmetto on them, a wrench on the knot-hole. Yet now I was tied to a chair, facing those accusing eyes while the storm reached its maniacal climax. Did they think I would flinch from horror?

Suddenly the winds ceased abruptly, as if a celestial electric current had been switched off. An ominous silence descended as the dead center, the hole in the hurricane doughnut,

passed over. The unknown, the mystery of a possible mistake, was a scalpel probing my brain. My mind raced around in an endless zigzag. Faster and faster. The eerie silence was maddening. Once more it was the ghastly moment after murder. Utter loneliness, barren desolation. Suddenly a voice punctured the stillness like pistol shots.

"Open your eyes," commanded Leander Jones. "The proof is there. Your own painting of that nightmare face!"

In the deathly silence I stared with widened eyes, understood that my friend, my fishing pal, wasn't bluffing. He would keep me, if necessary, tied up for endless hours until the portrait over the mantel, the sounds or silences of the storm, something, broke me.

"Take me away," I begged. "But when did you suspect?"

"I didn't for two weeks," said a hoarse, strained voice. "Old Jeff unknowingly gave me the idea this morning. Remarked that your death portrait didn't show Carlotta as 'purty' as she was. It struck me like lightning that I was the half-blind one. I rushed to look at your earlier alluring Carlottas. In your final painting here, is she a woman desired, loved even in death? Look at those hard lines, the mouth of a vicious trollop. It proclaims that you hated enough to kill her!"

He lowered his tired head, trembled at the new winds sobbing through the lonely palms and palmettoes. My friend had performed his duty.