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# Strange STORIES

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# The Sailor Quits the Sea

By EARLE DOW

Author of "Death Docks at Dawn," "Pearls of Kamboli," etc.



Everywhere he saw her before him

*George Farrell Feared His Nemesis—but Couldn't Keep His Feet from Leading Him to It!*

**S**O, Mike Geary quit the sea, did he? Well, well, well! I never would have expected Mike Geary to settle where there wouldn't be at least two docks, six ships and half an ocean in plain sight.

What? That's just what he wanted to get away from? You're nuts! You're crazy! Mike Geary loved the

sea! Mike Geary was born on a poop deck, was suckled by a mermaid and cut his teeth on an anchor chain. And you tell me he's gone and bought two acres of rocks and sage brush a thousand miles inland, and he never again wants to set eyes on anything that looks like a spar. You're expecting me to believe he never again wants to

hear anything that sounds like the scream of a gull? Or the creak of a rolling cabin, or never again wants to feel water that isn't in pipes?

And it's all on account of George Farrell, eh? Well, that explains it. What'd he say about George? Yeah? *Hmmm*. Saw him all over the ship, huh? Saw him standing watch on the fo'c'sle, swabbing down the decks, lounging on the hatch covers, eh? Till he felt like the whole damn sea was haunted as well as him, and had to get away from it if he didn't want to go balmy!

Well, can you blame him after what happened to George? You don't *know* what happened to George? Didn't Mike tell you? Huh! Still, I guess I can understand that, too. He just couldn't bear to talk about it.

Do I know what happened to George? Of course I know. I was there. Sure I'll tell you about it. As a matter of fact, it might do me good to get it out of my system and off of my mind. Sometimes I have a sneaking suspicion that I think about it too much. And it's the sort of thing you don't want to sit and brood about, if you know what's good for you.

To tell the truth, that's the reason I left Panama. I'd been there long enough, anyway. I'd been there six years that last night George Farrell came ashore, sort of a silent partner in Bill Blue's dancehall.

**B**ILL and I didn't have the only dancehall in Colon by a long shot, but we had the only one of its kind. It wasn't exactly exclusive, but we had our own little set, our own clientele, you might say, and we were not overworked by transients. When the ships docked at Cristobal, of course, everybody who wanted a drink came on over to Colon. But the officers went to the ritzy places, and the sailors went to the *cantinas*. We didn't see much of them. Once in a while fellows like George Farrell dropped in, and they usually became regular customers.

George was a regular. He'd been coming to the dancehall once every year for five years. As sure as death, we knew that when his ship, the

*Cobra King*, made her annual call at Cristobal, George would be over. That was how we knew he'd be there that night. Everybody in the place was looking for him, just waiting for him to stick his face in that door.

If we'd had the least shred of an idea that anything so downright ghastly was going to transpire, we'd have cleaned every customer out of the dancehall, doused the lights and locked the doors, and every manjack of us would have laid low in the handiest banana grove till the *Cobra King* had cleared port. But how could we know? How could we have the faintest warning?

Yet, in a way, I think I did have a kind of warning. I remember thinking that it was a night for something screwy to happen, a creepy sort of night.

The *Cobra King* had docked at Cristobal that afternoon, and I was out on the little narrow balcony, hanging around outside just waiting for George to show up. I was nervous, too, for some reason. I kept pacing the balcony, and looking over my shoulder, and listening for every sound.

The night was young, as a new-filled grave is young, and the moon was gibbous as a noseless leper. The raucous revelry along the *Calle Quatro* was laden with the horrible gibberings of the damned souls of hell and the thirteen creaking steps which led to the termite-gutted second story of Bill Blue's dancehall repeated in thirteen rasping screeches the sound of gibbet-ropes swinging a new-made corpse.

That's the kind of night it was. And that's the kind of stuff I was thinking, when I caught sight of George Farrell headed that way, and ducked inside.

I slipped across the room to a spot opposite the entrance, and told Bill that George was on his way in, and Bill grinned, but he didn't say anything. I stood there leaning against the wall, waiting, watching the door, and trying not to look as if I was watching.

Then the door swung open and Farrell came in. He paused just inside

for a few seconds, darting a look around the room—and I knew what he was looking for, or at least what I hoped he was looking for. His cold blue eyes, accustomed to tracing smoke smudges on distant horizons, or spotting ship traps of uncharted lurking reefs by the portent of faint necklaces of breaking waves, blinked at the simultaneous assault of tropical tobacco smoke, of furtive male scrutiny and ogling female glances, and the blatant tin-can music of the untrained Negro band.

He couldn't come through the doorway without bending, and when he straightened up he'd struck the back of his head against the top of the doorframe. He stood there blinking, and rubbing the bump on his scalp for nearly a minute.

Then he stepped to one side and leaned lightly against the unpainted wall boards. I knew he wasn't exerting any pressure, because if he'd leaned hard with that big hulk of his, he'd have ripped the wall from its nails and thrown himself downstairs into the black maw of the unlighted alley which ran alongside the building.

**I** GRINNED to myself, because I had an idea what was in his mind, and it should have occurred to him that it would be foolish to try, even for the sixtieth part of a minute, to hide himself or conceal his identity by hugging the corners of Bill Blue's dancehall. He must already have made out through the stagnant smoke screen several familiar faces, and he had to realize that the owners of those faces had recognized him.

Farrell had been around. Nobody had to tell him that the type of clientele frequenting a dancehall like ours, from the cool and wary fellows behind the bar to the bold-eyed dancing *senoritas*, possessed memories that were vivid, calculating, and long. I wasn't the only one who was watching him. Practically everyone in the hall was keeping a weather eye peeled to see what he was going to do.

And they all knew as well as I did that George Farrell was standing there, almost afraid to take another

step, remembering the riotous evening he had spent there a year ago to the dot. He probably was remembering the evenings he had spent there two years ago, three, four, five.

Suddenly he swung his head and looked across the hall. He looked straight at me, and I tell you I could read on his face exactly what he was thinking. In spite of the fetid closeness of the dancehall and the enervating tropical heat from outside, a dagger of terror was zigzagging through Farrell from the back of his neck down to the base of his spine. He was chilled as if he stood in ice water up to his ears. Even from where I stood I could see the cold sweat break on his forehead.

I had an idea it had suddenly occurred to him to wonder what they did to you under the Panama law. Did they hang a man for murder, or did they own an electric chair over in Panama City, at the other end of the Canal? Or did they have a gas chamber? He wouldn't know. The hall might have reminded him of a gas chamber, with its stagnant and nauseating pool of cigarette smoke.

And then he saw—her. Three people, who had been concealing a table from his vision, moved aside. And he saw her there, sitting at the table, staring straight at him. *La Golondrina*. The Swallow.

If she had any other name, I had never heard it. When she came there to the hall to sing, that was the name she gave. Nobody ever called her anything else—just that, The Swallow. I guess swallows don't sing. I never heard one. But if a swallow did sing, I think it would sing like she did.

She sort of looked like a swallow, little, and bright and quick. Always dressed in something that shimmered, with glittering jewels stuck here and there, and her black eyes shining as if they were polished. By tears, maybe. That night she looked the same to him as she had always looked.

Instantly, his common sense, the kind of sense he could use when his feet were spread wide on the fo'c'sle planks after he was a safe distance out to sea, warned him that his imagination was running amuck. She

wasn't there. She couldn't be there. He shut his eyes, kept them squeezed tight for a long minute, opened them, and looked again.

She was there! She smiled at him. He started violently, reeled back, and flung out a groping hand to grip the door casing and steady himself. But he kept looking at her. He couldn't take his gaze off her. If she wasn't really there she'd have to fade away in a minute. Only she didn't fade away. She raised a hand and beckoned to him.

**I** COULD fairly see him pull himself together, call on his sanity and exert his reason. He yanked up his head, set his brows fiercely, squared his shoulders and started forward, straight toward the table; as straight as he could walk with that rolling gait of his. And she sat waiting, her black head erect, her beautiful face pale and calm, her curved lips like two carmine hibiscus petals.

When Farrell reached the table, he stopped short and stood staring down at her sharply. By now he had completely forgotten that the stares of all the other occupants of the dance-hall were fixed upon him. He was oblivious to everything but the Swallow.

At first he didn't say a word to her. He reached an arm across the table, and with one finger he touched the back of her hand, as if to convince himself that it was really there. She turned the hand over, and gripped his, palm to palm, then drew her hand back and dropped it in her lap.

George Farrell expended a gusty breath of relief, pulled out a chair from the table, and sat down in it with a thud. He dragged a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped the sweat from his forehead.

I wasn't ten feet from that table, but he didn't see me. From that time on, he didn't see or want to see anything but the Swallow.

He leaned across the table toward her, and his voice was hoarse when he spoke to her. It even shook a little.

"For a minute I thought you was a ghost," he said. "I've been thinkin' it for a year. I've been run near out of

my mind, rememberin' what I did to you a year ago tonight just because I was so crazy jealous. Looks like the knife didn't go so deep as I thought it did. God, that sure takes a load off of my mind!"

The Swallow smiled again, the way they say the Sphinx smiles.

"I have wait for you, Georg-a. Ever since the ship is in, I have watch, and wait, for you to come."

Farrell gulped, and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Yeah. The ship's in. The old *Cobra King* is tied up at the Cristobal docks takin' on coal tonight, and I'm here for the night. And you're here. That's the important thing. You're here, when I'd have bet my life you was under six feet of dirt."

The Swallow made a reproachful grimace.

"But, Georg-a! You did not wait to see if I was killed. When I tol' you I did not love you any more, that I was in love with Francisco Santos and you must not come to see me any more, you was get so crazy mad! You just stab the knife in me and run as if all the devils were after you. *Por Dios*. I think I would wait to see whether I have kill somebody or not! It's a wonder you would come here tonight, Georg-a. I was not sure you would come. I watch and I wait. But I was not sure."

Farrell gulped again, and managed a grin, but it was a pretty ghastly grin.

"I couldn't stay away," he kind of mumbled. "You had me by the throat, dragging me here. I couldn't have stayed away from here tonight to save my soul from hell. Even though I fully expected Francisco to be stowed away in a corner, ready to take a swipe at me the minute my back was turned."

"Oh, Francisco?" The Swallow shrugged. "He does not mind. He is understand."

"Where is he?"

"Oh, around, somewhere." The Swallow dismissed Francisco with a wave of her hand. "Do not think of Francisco. Think of me."

Farrell laughed in relief.

"Good idea! I don't know anybody

else I'd rather think of. Come on, kid! All we got is one lousy night to crowd a year's fun into. Let's dance."

**T**HEY both got up from the table, and he led her out onto the dance floor. She walked a little stiffly, and he noticed that she favored her left side. That was where the knife had driven in. She caught his look on her, and smiled.

"It still hurt a little when I move too quick. But when I dance with you, Georg-a, it no make any difference."

They danced once around the hall, then at her request stopped a minute to rest. She lifted her pale face to meet his gaze, and her straight black hair glimmered and trailed off like the wake of a ship into the smoke-filled atmosphere behind her.

The carmined petals of her lips quivered briefly.

They were at the edge of the dance floor now, and I shifted a step to keep them in line. I didn't want to miss a move they made. I saw Farrell close his eyes and shudder, and I knew he was trying to shut out the awful picture of his own hand driving a knife into the Swallow's side, of the Swallow swaying and falling at his feet.

The Negro band reached the end of the number, and the cessation of the music, the sudden babble of talk, brought him back to himself with a start. He shook himself, opened his eyes—and stood there, with his feet planted wide, with his bushy blond eyebrows contracted, and stared, and stared.

And he kept on staring, while all around him the dancing *senoritas* and their satin-faced partners scattered, keeping a good distance from him as they vacated the floor. He just kept staring at blank space, where an instant before the beautiful vision of the Swallow had been.

His eyes narrowed, and he lifted his right hand, slowly, as if it weighed a ton, and swabbed at the cold perspiration that had started again on his forehead. He was probably as superstitious as most of the *Cobra King's* crew. He had been too long at sea to deride strange phenomena, to deny the

inexplicable working of Nature or the supernatural.

While he stood there, dumbfounded, like a man who didn't know which way to turn, Bill Blue glided out from the paneled-off corner he called his office, and projected his fat greasy figure into Farrell's line of vision. He threaded his way between the tables, walked right up to Farrell and looked him in the eye.

"Better you get to hell out, George," he said curtly.

"Why?" Farrell grated. "You renegade tropical lizard! Just why had I better get out?"

Bill eyed him narrowly for a second, then shrugged.

"All right, sailor. All right. Only—I thought you was drunk. I see now you ain't. But cripes! Any time I see a sailor dancin' around the floor all by hisself! . . . All right!"

Bill backed away, with a scared look on his face, as if the farther he could get from Farrell the better he'd like it. And he was muttering to himself, loud enough for everybody on the floor to hear him.

"He's crazy! That's what it is!"

Farrell doubled his hands into fists and expanded his big chest. He planted one foot down and started after Bill—then he saw her again. In a matter of seconds he had plowed through the knot of dancers, ignoring the frightened, awed glances turned toward him as the others made haste to clear out of his way. He caught her arm, and she settled against him, as though his abrupt arrival were the most natural thing in the world. And he noticed again how she walked stiffly, favoring her left side as he led her back to her table.

**H**E SAT down across from her and gave her a rather sheepish grin.

"Gawd, kid, for a minute I thought I'd gone nuts, or somethin'. I guess I musta just lost you. I'm not batty, am I? You and me *did* dance that last number, didn't we?"

He reached across the table and gripped her slender white hand. It was cool, yielding. Much too cool in that humid Panama night, and too

soft, and too clean to be clasped in the fingers that had driven that knife a year ago.

He drew back his own hand as if he'd been stung.

She didn't seem to notice it. She shook her head at him.

"What's-a matter, Georg-a? How many drink you take tonight? I think you make big *fiesta*. *Si!* You an' me dance. When dance finish, I come back to the table. You don' come with me. You stand there on the floor. You looking too funny! I think you a drunk."

"Drunk!" Farrell exploded. "I ain't had a drink tonight! Gawd, kid! For the past year I been spendin' too much time alone under the stars on the fore deck of the *Cobra King*, thinkin', lettin' the awful memory of the last time I was with you haunt me. The picture of the—of the— You know! Gawd, kid! All this time I been sailin' around the world thinkin' I'd kilt you!"

The Swallow nodded understanding.

"The ship, she go. Georg-a, he's go on the ship. How he going to know *La Golondrina* no die? How he going to know the wound heal?"

"Kid!" Farrell didn't know how loud he was talking, didn't realize that at the sudden relief he felt, the cork had popped right off of the container where he kept his emotions. "Kid, come on and let's you and me crowd it. Let's you and me crowd every second. There's only this one lousy night. Hey! Waiter! *C'ballero!*"

Dinny, the nearest waiter, a little cross-eyed guy as skinny as a bamboo pole, sidled up to the table as though he'd been anticipating Farrell's order, and slid a large glass of beer directly in front of George. Practically everybody drank beer in Bill Blue's dance-hall, and anyhow, Dinny's memory was long enough to know that beer was Farrell's annual order. Dinny started away, but Farrell glared at him and waved him back to the table.

"Hey, there! Just another sec, or I'm li'ble to brain you! What's it for you, kid?" He turned to the Swallow.

"I drink a planter's punch, Georg-a."

Farrell turned back to Dinny, and

nodded. Dinny didn't budge. Farrell glared again.

"Move along, fish pole! You heard her!"

Dinny raised his eyebrows. "I hear nothing, senor."

Farrell started to get out of his chair, then sank back with a disgusted scowl.

"All right! So you're dumb, then. Go run your hollow legs to the bar and tell the 'keep to rush a planter's punch for the lady."

Dinny's face twitched and his eyes flicked over the table. His jaw dropped like an anchor.

"Senor!" he gasped. "W-wh-what lady?"

"Why, you damn' insultin' beer pusher!"

Farrell hoisted his huge body out of the chair, and started around the table after Dinny. Dinny darted back, holding up both hands, expostulating volubly.

"But, senor! I no make the insult! I ask you what lady! Look for yourself, senor! Please, senor! There is no lady!"

**F**ARRELL stopped as if somebody had slugged him over the heart. His eyes dilated, his glare turned to an appalled glazed stare. He sort of turned around by jerks, as if he didn't want to, but had to, as if something was making him turn around against his will. His gaze plunged to the table—and to the chair where the Swallow had been sitting only an instant before.

The Swallow was not there. Nothing was there. Farrell's gaze seemed to go crazy, charging around the hall, searching, looking, demanding. There was not a sign of anybody who even resembled the Swallow.

Bill Blue moved around the end of the bar and snapped at Dinny.

"Say, what the devil's goin' on down there?"

Dinny's answer was a perfect babble of incoherent protest.

"Boss, the sailor's crazy! At first, I thought he was drunk. Any time I sees a sailor roll in all by himself, and make the talk to himself as if he enjoy his own company, and make the

dance by himself, he mus' be drunk! But when he order up drinks by the pair for a lady which don't even exist!" Dinny spread his hands helplessly. "I tell you, senor, he is crazy!"

Bill snorted. "All right! All right! So he's crazy, then! Go on and tend to your business and don't go pickin' rows with the customers. If he wants to order a drink for a lady that ain't there, give it to him and let him drink it himself. Good gosh! What a life!"

Dinny backed away, and Farrell just stood there. The Negro band began to play the next number, and the dancers started to circulate on the floor, ignoring Dinny, but giving George Farrell a wide berth. Farrell didn't move. He looked as if he couldn't move. He was as white as a day-old corpse, and his face didn't have much more expression on it than you'd see on a corpse. What expression he did have was sheer terror. His eyes were like the eyes of a blind man, or a man on the verge of going mad. If it hadn't been for what he'd done to her, I could have almost pitied him.

Then he realized suddenly what the band was playing. Her song. The song she'd always loved better than any other. The song everybody loved to hear her sing. *La Golondrina*. Slowly George began to turn, as if some power were inexorably twisting him around in spite of all his efforts to prevent it.

He continued to turn till he faced the stage, and his protruding eyes glued fixedly on the center of the small platform.

*La Golondrina* stood there! The Swallow! Her scarlet dress shimmered in the smoke-filmed light. The bright jewels glittered on her fingers, in her hair, on her throat. Her black head was lifted and, as George watched, her hibiscus-petal lips parted, and her pure voice lifted, soaring, following the threnodic melody.

*La Golondrina*! It was a ritual in Bill Blue's dancehall. When the Swallow sang *La Golondrina* not a foot moved, not a tongue profaned that rendition by so much as a whisper. The clientele of Bill Blue's dancehall not only loved the Swallow, they respected her. And if you know

the waterfront cafés of Colon, that's a mouthful!

But something was wrong this time, and Farrell was not too dumb to get it, quick. Because nobody looked toward the stage with adoring, reverent eyes. Nobody hesitated for an instant to go right on dancing, chattering and laughing and ordering drinks. Nobody paid the slightest attention to what George Farrell was so sure that he saw and heard.

AND Farrell was transfixed there, staring at her with a dread, ghastly stare, staring at the square little box of a stage which *La Golondrina* had all to herself. Farrell didn't exactly stand there. He hung there, like a man suspended in air, while the black band worked itself up through a series of shattering explosions to a banging crescendo that seemed to shake down the roof.

Panic jarred George loose from his mesmeric state. He whirled, plowed his way through the dancers, flung himself against the bar and began pounding on it with his fist. He began shouting at the top of his bull-throated roar.

"Hey, there! Barkeep! You!"

The barkeeper hurried toward him, voluble with pacifying obsequious apologies.

"*Si*, senor! Sorry! I being very busy. What you want, senor?"

"Who's that dame?" George demanded furiously. "That dame singin' up there on the stage? Who is she?"

"Senor!" The barkeep looked blank, stared at George, then at the stage, then back at George. "You have make the mistake, senor. We have no singer now. We don't have any singer since—since *La Golondrina* was kill by some low down dog of a gringo, just a year ago tonight. That was very terrible thing, senor. Never was there any senorita like the Swallow, never will there be anybody like the Swallow ever again. That's why the orchestra never play *La Golondrina* any more."

Farrell gulped, and swallowed, and tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come out of his throat. The full force of his terror was on him. He clawed



at the bar before him, reeling backward, mouthing unintelligible curses in Spanish and English.

Then he whirled. He let out one gosh-awful scream, and charged for the side door like a berserk bull. Everybody got out of his way. Nobody wanted to follow him.

All we hoped was that he'd never come back.

Nobody would have followed him if Bill Blue's curiosity hadn't been bigger than his fat, greasy body. The instant the Negro boys started to play again, and the dancers began to circulate and jabber, Bill sneaked out the side door to see where George was headed. The only light there was in the alley came through the two big side windows of the dancehall, so Bill left the door wide open in order to see better.

He went out—and in another minute he came racing back, panting, his eyes bulging, and grabbed me by the arm and dragged me toward the door. His teeth were chattering so I could hardly hear what he was saying.

"Francisco! Come quick! He have kill himself! With the knife stuck in his filthy heart. He is out in the alley, dead as a porpoise! *La Golondrina* is avenged!"

I didn't waste any time getting out there with him. One look at George was enough. He couldn't be any deader. I started to tell Bill we'd have to get the body out of sight, when I heard voices at the door. Both Bill and I whirled back, and stepped up to the door, and ordered everybody to stay in there and mind their own business, assuring them that there was nothing to be disturbed about.

To emphasize the fact that I meant it, I shut the door. Bill and I swung about then, and started to go pick up George's body. And we both stopped, and I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

**T**HE body was not there. The light from the nearest window revealed the spot clearly enough, but the body was gone. The Swallow was standing not two feet from where George had

been lying, and Mike Geary, the best friend George ever had in the world, his shipmate for more years than I ever knew, had just come to a halt at sight of her. The window light outlined her plainly enough for anybody's eyes.

Mike Geary looked at me, and I thought he seemed pretty white. The Swallow gave me a wan smile.

"Poor Georg-a," she said slowly. "Almost I am sorry for him. He did not know you, Francisco. Without the mustache you look so different."

I laughed shortly. "Well, I'm not sorry for him, not even now, after what he tried to do to you! I didn't want him to recognize me." I turned to Geary. "What did you do with the body, Mike? Nobody touched him, you know. The fool killed himself."

Geary stood like a stone, and his eyes held on my face, intent, with an almighty queer expression in them.

"Just what happened here tonight, Francisco?"

I shrugged. "What happened a year ago tonight is the important thing. George tried to kill the Swallow. We were laying for him tonight. We had everybody set, to pretend not to see her, not to hear her, and to try to make George think he didn't really see her. All we wanted to do was scare the living daylights out of him with a fake ghost, so he wouldn't ever show up here again. Well—it worked. Too well. He thought he was haunted, and he killed himself."

Geary sighed like a man at the end of a long rope.

"Yes, He thought he was haunted. All through this last year, the poor devil nearly drove himself mad, seeing her everywhere he looked. I came up here tonight, because I wanted to see you, to get you aside and tell you that it had got to be more than he could stand. He was afraid of what he would see if he came here to the dancehall, and he knew just as surely as we docked at Cristobal he couldn't keep his feet from bringing him here. He couldn't face it. Two days ago, he stabbed himself to death. We buried him at sea."