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THE WHITE SCAR

By NELLIE CRAVEY GILLMORE

AM I crazy? I do not think so—but I do not know. Anyhow, I am in an asylum for the hopelessly insane. I was sent here a long time ago, weeks or months or years, I cannot say. Time has lost its meaning for me as far as calendars are concerned: the interminable days, the intolerable nights, are all merged into chaos. Out of it but one thought, one hope, comes clear: the longing for death.

Only dimly do I recall my last experience among sane men—when I was on trial for the murder of Buck Gordon, a man whom I had never known, had never even seen until the moment my hands closed about his throat. I am glad I killed him, unutterably glad; the one joy of my wretched existence is the memory of those bulging, bloodshot eyes, that rasping death-gurgle as the breath went out of Gordon's body.

I was stunned by the verdict the jury brought in, by the judge's words that followed it. I had hoped and prayed for the chair; my mission had been accomplished and I was prepared to face my Creator. I shall never forget the sick desolation that swept over me when I learned that I was not to die after all. And so I exist on and on—a thing: a living dead creature among scores of other living dead creatures, yet certain in my heart that I am absolutely sane. You, who may read this, shall decide!

This is my story. . . .

AT TWENTY-EIGHT I married Dorothy Wayne. I had adored her for years. Ours was an ideal union; we

were not only lovers; we were friends—pals. I suppose our happiness was almost too perfect to last in a hard, ruthless world. We shall find it again—in heaven; nothing can cheat me of this belief.

Just a year after our wedding day, a telegram announcing the serious illness of my wife's mother, down in Louisiana, came to me. I dreaded to convey these tidings to Dorothy in her frail condition. But I had no right to withhold such information, and so I hurried home at once with the message. She was very composed, very brave, but equally determined in her purpose to start south at once. It was impossible for me to accompany her, owing to important deals pending; and with a heavy heart I drove her to the station and kissed her good-bye, little dreaming that I was never to see her again.

For the first few weeks Dorothy wrote daily the bright, loving letters that were so much a part of her happy, radiant self. Then suddenly the letters ceased. Days passed. She had written that her mother was improving, that she would be able to start for home soon and would advise me by wire. Yet a week went by and no wire came. Restless at first, I grew anxious, and finally downright alarmed. Unable to bear the suspense, but trying to laugh at my own fears. I dispatched a message myself to the Louisiana address. An answer came late in the afternoon of the same day, announcing that Dorothy had left Gretna for New York almost a week before.

I was like a wild man. What was

the meaning of it all? Where was she? What had happened?

I threw down everything and took the first train south.

Investigations were futile. Mrs. Wayne had died suddenly while I was en route to Gretna, and the daughter with whom she was making her home (Dorothy's elder sister) could tell me only that my wife had called a taxi on Tuesday night and started for the station. There was no clue to identify the driver, and a thorough probing failed to reveal anything on which to work. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up and the whole world was a sphinx!

The wonder to me now is that in those first few days I did not go quite mad; yet I didn't. Perhaps it was the desperate necessity for clear thought, for action, that steadied my brain and my nerves. Hope buoyed me up in the beginning, but as the mystery became denser, blanker, and more baffling, I saw myself changing into the pitiful wreck of what I once had been.

I roved from place to place, unshaven, unkempt, with only one purpose in life: to find my wife, alive or dead. I had sacrificed my entire business interests for what cash I could recover, to keep me fed and clothed while I pursued my desperate quest. Police, detectives, had exhausted their ingenuity and dismissed the case. But every minute, every day, every year, as long as I breathed, my life would be devoted to digging out the truth—and to revenge. I was certain she had been murdered, for by no mere accident could such a complete disappearance have come to pass. And no evil or treacherous design could have lurked in the heart of the woman I loved, and who loved me: of that I was even surer.

Not once, nor twice; but hundreds and hundreds of times I went over the same ground, convinced that sooner or later some unguarded word or

circumstance would betray some vague hint of a clue. Apparently the world had wondered nine days, and then forgotten the tragedy of my poor little Dorothy's strange disappearance. But as time wore on, the poignancy, the ghastliness grew more and more acute in my own heart.

At thirty-five I was an old man: my hair had turned snow-white; my shoulders sagged; my hands were palsied; my voice was hollow and cracked. But inside were blazing still those deathless, consuming fires—fires that seemed to gather fresh force with every passing day.

I began to be shunned by fastidious passers-by, regarded with suspicion by all with whom I came in contact, or pitied by the few who were perhaps kinder of heart. I was now merely a vagabond, caring nothing for snubs or slights, every conspicuous feeling merged into the one imperishable purpose for which I lived.

TOWARD the end of the seventh summer of my wanderings, I found myself back once more on familiar Louisiana soil. I had traveled all the way from Memphis along the river banks, begging my way now, for my last hoarded funds were gone and there was little work I could find, or do. Weary and footsore from a whole day's uninterrupted trudge, with only a meal of wild grapes for sustenance, I felt my knees tremble and sink beneath my frail weight. I was in the heart of a wilderness. Following the torrid day, a lashing rain had set in. In a little while came night, impenetrable as ink.

A quarter hour's blind search brought me, drenched and shivering, to an old, abandoned, tumbledown shack close to the edge of the swirling Mississippi. I forced one of the rickety windows and, clambering inside, I dropped helpless to the floor. I must have lain unconscious for a long time, for the next thing I knew,

a clock somewhere was booming midnight. The sound seemed to come from a distance, and it was oddly familiar. Then I remembered: it was the town-bell—at Gretna—and this was an old-time shrimpers' haunt, deserted now for more modern equipment. My skin was parched, and it burned like flame, and my eyes seemed to be coals of fire dancing about in my head. My tongue was hot, thick, swollen; yet icy rigors shook me convulsively. I was ablaze with fever. I wondered dimly if this were to be the end of my pilgrimage. . . . a drowsy lethargy . . . and blankness. . . .

I was roused from my coma by a woman's shrill, terrified scream. The scream was followed immediately by a succession of short, choking, gurgling sounds, then a man's fiendish, exultant laugh, almost a snarl; and gloating, savage words:

"Mine at last, my pretty Dot! Scorned me, did you, for the fine New Yorker who stole you from me? I promised you I'd pay—remember? Stop that squealing, damn you—the river sharks are playing around tonight—they'll manage so's *he'll* not get you again—and in an hour's time I'll be hauling passengers just the same as usual."

I tried to move. I was paralyzed. I attempted to cry out but no sound left my stiff lips. And then, of a sudden, before I could free my limbs from that deadly atrophy, before even thought might be framed, there came more cries, even more terrible than those that had gone before—frightened, almost unrecognizable—but unmistakably belonging to—*her*.

Great God! Dorothy—my wife—murdered before my very eyes and I helpless—moveless—dumb!

There was the sickening bump of a body against the floor, and a man's maniacal laughter. Then suddenly the heavens parted in a lurid flash and I saw, not the woman's face, nor the man's, but a pair of huge, hairy

arms, folded triumphantly over a bulging, naked and equally hairy chest. On the left forearm was a large jagged scar in the shape of a cross, clearly visible against the hirsute blackness of the rest of the limb.

A simultaneous crash of thunder shook the battered old structure and split it like an eggshell. I sat up, cold with perspiration, straining my eyes through the blackness, straining my ears in a tense horror of expectancy. But all I could see now was the dense blackness of the night; and all I could hear was the weird shrieking of the wind in the trees.

My delirium had passed, but still rigid in the grip of that horrible nightmare, I huddled in a corner of the wrecked shanty and waited for dawn. Eternities passed, then slowly, after the storm, a soft, pink glow in the east heralded daylight.

IT WAS little more than an hour's walk to the outskirts of Gretna; but horror lent speed to my trembling limbs, and despite my physical weakness, I made it in much less time. I needed food, sorely. If I could not earn it, or beg it, then I should have to steal it.

Suddenly I came upon a group of laborers gathered about a corner grocery, waiting for the factory whistle to summon them to work.

I approached timidly; perhaps in the crowd someone would be kind enough to give me the price of a meal!

"Hey, Old Timer! Kinder need a shave, don't you?"

Their jeers affected me little. I replied as kindly as I could:

"Perhaps, but right now I need something else more: I am hungry. I have had no food for forty-eight hours."

A pleasant-faced young fellow instantly produced his dinner-pail.

"Help yourself, mister. You're welcome to it all."

After I had eaten, I sat down among them to rest.

"Looks like you've had a night of it, Colonel; which way 'd you come?" asked one of the men.

"I spent the night at an old shack down by the river side, about three miles away, I reckon."

Instantly eight pairs of bulging eyes were riveted on me.

"Good Lord, man; you ain't tellin' us you stayed all night at the haunted house, are you?"

"Why do you call it that?" I asked, recalling with a shiver my frightful nightmare.

"Well," the speaker went on; "all the folks who useter live in that direction have moved away. Ain't a soul stayed near it since that night when Miss Polly Simms told she heard a woman screamin'—years ago. . . ."

"Shut up, Bill. Polly Simms was an old fool. You ain't gettin' superstitious, are you?"

I put my hand to my head.

"A woman screaming." . . . there was something queer . . . my thoughts muddled. . . .

Then the factory whistle sounded and there was a scuffling to be off. I, too, rose, not knowing what else to do.

One of the men, a big, burly ruffian, turned to me with a leer.

"Come on down and we'll get you a job as water-boy, Old Top."

Guffawing at his own wit, the speaker flourished a brawny arm and finished his laugh with a grin of derision.

For a second I stood petrified, the blood freezing about my heart.

"Come along, Buck. Ain't you got no sense? Let the gentleman be."

BEFORE Buck Gordon could speak, could move, I was upon him with the savage ferocity and strength of a wild beast, notwithstanding my weakened and broken condition. My hands were on his throat; my clawlike fingers sank into the thick red flesh.

For on that bare and hairy arm, clearly visible against the hirsute blackness, was a jagged white scar in the shape of a cross!

"Damn you . . . damn you . . . I've got you at last . . . Thank God! Dorothy Wayne is—avenged. . . ."

Buck Gordon was quite dead when they finally loosened my fingers from his throat. He lay in an inert heap on the sun-seared grass, his tongue hanging in a purple lump from the swollen lips. His terror-glazed eyes popped from their sockets.

For one tense, triumphant, never to be forgotten second I stood there looking down at my handiwork. For the first time in long years I knew relief—and joy. I cared very little what happened now; for my mission was accomplished.

Then the world swam round; everything went black and my knees gave under me. Rough hands laid hold of me . . . and utter blankness.

THOSE endless days in my narrow prison cell, waiting, hoping, praying for the trial and the sentence that would bring death and reunion with my beloved—my cruelly murdered little Dorothy—waiting for me—up there. . . .

"Paranoia," they call it. And instead of the longed-for chair to set me free, I must spend the remainder of my wretched days in a padded cell. How many of them have come and gone, I do not know; how many are still to come and go, who shall say?

I am writing this purely as an outlet to feelings that sooner or later must drive me mad if I held them in any longer. If my poor narrative, my pitiful story, should ever find its way into print, it may be there is someone who will understand.

Am I crazy? I do not think so; but I do not know.