



Sherwood
King
If I Die Before
I Wake

MODERN CLASSICS



If I Die Before I Wake

In writing *If I Die Before I Wake*, Sherwood King left a legacy of classic suspense writing, much copied and later immortalised in film.

SHERWOOD KING

If I Die Before I Wake



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PART ONE

I

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘I would commit murder. If I had to, of course, or if it was worth my while.’

I said this as though I meant it too. I didn’t mean it. I didn’t mean it at all.

‘The way I figure it,’ I said, ‘a man’s got to die some time. All murder does is hurry it up. What more is there to it?’

You know – talk. What any young fellow might say, just to show he’s not afraid of anything.

There had been a murder out our way. On Long Island. Some society woman had shot her husband. He hadn’t been doing anything, just raiding the icebox for a midnight snack. But (she said) she’d thought he was a burglar ... five bullets’ worth. Police were holding her; some insurance angle.

Anyway, that’s what started Grisby talking about murder. I’d been driving him down to the railroad station every other day or so, whenever he’d come out to see my boss, Bannister, the lawyer. They were partners, only Bannister didn’t get down to the office much. He had a twisted leg – something he’d got in the War. It made him walk funny... you could hardly get him outside, except to appear in court, and then only when he had to. But it didn’t matter. He could work just as well at home, provided Grisby kept him in touch and came out often, and he did.

So this time driving down to the station we were talking about murder and Grisby asked me what I thought and I told him.

Afterwards I remembered he’d been building up to it from the very first. Nothing definite. Just letting me know one way and another that he thought I was too good to stay chauffeur to a man like Bannister for long. That he thought I was too smart not to have my eye on the main chance.

And there I was, taking it all in, trying to talk and act up to the role he’d given me and all the time not meaning a word of it, not a word.

It’s like when a slick salesman gets hold of you. You don’t want what he’s selling, maybe, but you take it. You take it because you’d rather do that than let him think you weren’t so smart after all.

Well, he liked it, too, my talking the way I did. He seemed to get a real kick out of it.

‘I thought you were smart, Laurence,’ he said. ‘Now I know it.’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘All that silly sentimental stuff – if you want someone out of the way, why, get him out of the way.’

‘But don’t forget,’ he said, ‘you’re smart only so long as you don’t get caught. That’s the difference between the smart man and the fool. The smart man doesn’t get caught.’

‘Oh, I didn’t mean I really was going to kill anyone,’ I said.

I stepped the car up to sixty to get some breeze and we rolled along without saying anything until we got to the station.

The station was empty as it usually was in the afternoons and there was no sign of the

train.

Grisby got out and rested his briefcase on the running board, looking up at me as though he thought I was the goods, all right. I began to feel a little embarrassed.

‘You’ll be late for dinner,’ I said.

He laughed.

‘Dinner’s a joke at my place, and I don’t mind telling you that.’

He took off his panama and his glasses – pince nez, with a black ribbon – and began running a handkerchief over his face. The heat was bad enough for me, but it was worse for him. He weighed all of two hundred pounds – not fat, because he was as tall as I, and powerful, but it was plenty enough in that heat. Still, he was cheerful about it, as he always was, a real glad hander and hail fellow well met.

‘How do you mean, a joke?’ I asked.

‘Wait till you get married, like I’ve been these last fifteen years. And the devil of it is, she won’t give me a divorce.’

‘Oh, I see. Not much you can do in a case like that, is there?’

He laughed again and fitted the glasses back on, looking up the railroad tracks. The train was coming, its whistle blowing.

‘No,’ he said, ‘except maybe catch her raiding the icebox some night.’

I don’t know whether it was the sound of the train whistle moaning over the swamp beside the tracks or something in the way Grisby talked, but all at once a shiver went up and down my spine.

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘if it’s the only way out, why not?’

He picked up his briefcase and looked at me, smiling.

‘By God,’ he said admiringly, ‘I believe you would at that!’

Every once in a while after that he’d drop a hint or say something that would draw me out, always making me feel swelled up with my own importance, and all of a sudden it was too late for me to back down, and he had me.

It got to be then that the hardest thing I had to do was drive Grisby to the station.

Worst thing about it was that there wasn't anything definite. Something was coming up, something he was counting on me for. But that's all I knew. And I wouldn't ask him; I didn't want anything to do with it. I wasn't any angel, I'd been a sailor on tramps and knocked around a lot, but I wasn't *that* tough.

The thing to do, I figured, was bluff it out. Then, if it came right down to it, I'd blow. This job was all I'd been able to get ashore in over a year, and Bannister had been plenty good to me, but I wasn't getting mixed up in any murder – not me.

I cut out all the bragging and talked as little as possible. There was a strained feeling between us, but if he noticed it he never said anything. We'd talk about the weather or who was going to win the World Series – things like that.

Then, as though we'd both been thinking about it all the time but just hadn't been saying anything, he said, 'Well, Laurence, I've got it all figured out, and it's a beauty.'

'Swell,' I said. I was glad I had the wheel to handle and the road to watch.

'What do you say to five thousand dollars? Could you use it?'

'Could I!'

'I thought so... well, it's all settled, then. You'll have your money within a week.'

'Now I know you're kidding. Who's going to give me all that money, and for what?'

'Why, I'm going to give it to you. Right out of my own pocket.'

'I'll bet!'

It was funny, but all at once the strain between us was gone, and I swung the car in beside the station and cut the switch without feeling I needed to be holding the wheel any more.

There was even a smile on my lips.

I said: 'Who is it you want murdered – your wife?'

He looked at me as though he didn't get it. Then he shook his head and laughed.

'You're a tough one, all right,' he said. He sank back. 'Have a cigarette?'

I took one out of a silver case he had. My hand didn't shake, if that's what he wanted to see.

'Well?' I asked. I put it right up to him. 'Who?'

We lighted up. Then he blew out smoke, saying:

'No, Laurence, the one you're going to kill is – me.'

'You!'

We looked at each other, his hard eyes bright with real amusement.

I said: 'You're not serious—'

'Certainly I am. I told you I'd figured it all out. It's got to be me. You know, they talk about the perfect crime. There's some defect in all of them. Ours will be the perfect crime, perfectly executed. And the first essential is that I be killed, the second that you be in a position to prove you killed me.'

'I can just see myself doing that!'

He laughed.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'you'll be anxious enough to prove it when the time comes. You just leave everything to me and do as I say and within a week you'll have your five thousand and

everything will be fine.'

'Oh, then that was just a gag about me killing you? But that's what I said—'

'Sure it's what you said. And you know what I said, too – that I was serious. I am. You're going to fire a bullet into me and throw my body in the Sound. We'll have witnesses—'

'What the hell,' I said.

'That's just what the police will say, just what we want them to say, "what the hell!"'

'But I don't get it. What good is that going to do us, letting them know I killed you?'

'I thought you were smart.'

'Sure, but—'

'You're going to kill me, and yet you aren't. Now does it begin to make sense?'

'It's too deep for me.'

'Perfect!'

His yellow green eyes were telling me things, but I wasn't getting them. I was looking at the knot of his tie. It was a black one with yellow specks.

'Listen!' he said. 'They've got to produce a body, haven't they?'

I wasn't sure I liked all this. I kept looking at the tie. The yellow specks were tiny daggers.

'They've got to produce a body, and they can do all the shouting they want, but they can't do a single, blessed thing unless they can find the body. Isn't that right?'

'Yes, I guess it is.'

'And the body, Laurence, will be on a ship bound for the South Seas, where I've always wanted to go anyway. Now is it clear to you?'

I began to see a light.

'You want to cut loose from your wife, you mean, and you're taking this way of doing it?'

'Partly that – sure, say we put it that way. It will certainly do the trick, won't it?'

'But are you sure they can't do anything?'

'I'm a criminal lawyer, I ought to be sure, oughtn't I?'

'Yes, but—'

'But what?'

'Well, they might keep me in jail until the body turned up – and it never would. Not if you'd be cruising around down in the South Seas.'

He snorted.

'Suppose they did put you in jail for a while, or even in the psychopathic ward, if they thought you were nuts, what of it? Let 'em. Any dumb lawyer could get you out, if they didn't even have a body – and they won't have. I'll see to that. Besides, what's a little while in jail compared to five thousand waiting for you when you get out?'

'Yes, but—'

'Don't be a sap with all your "yes, buts." You get five thousand dollars for saying you killed me and proving it. And you're absolutely safe. You haven't a thing to worry about.'

'But supposing they find you? You've got insurance, haven't you? The insurance people will want to be certain you're dead. They may check the steamship companies. It might not be as easy as it looks.'

'You just leave everything to me. I'll be dead, all right. They won't pay the insurance without a death certificate, but it doesn't matter, either. My wife's got money in her own name – enough to keep her the rest of her life. So don't let the insurance part of it worry you.'

How about it, is it a deal?’

I took a deep draw on my cigarette.

‘I’ll think it over,’ I said.

His eyebrows shot up.

‘You mean you want to think over whether you could use that five thousand?’

‘Oh, I could use that, all right.’

‘You just don’t know how you’d spend it – that’s what’s worrying you? You want to think over?’

‘I don’t want to rush into anything, that’s all.’

He slapped me on the knee.

‘Perfect!’ he said. ‘That’s just the way I’d hoped you’d be. It’s what I mean about your being smart. Why, I wouldn’t even put it past you if you’d already decided. Now what do you think about that?’

‘I don’t know. What do you think?’

‘There you go again, answering a question with a question. That’s another sure sign. But about thinking it over – of course you should. Why, do you know what I do when a client asks me a question or wants my advice? I might even have the answer on the tip of my tongue – but do I give it? Oh, no. I wait for the ball to bounce. I walk up and down the room. I look out the window. If there’s a pretty girl down on the street, I take just that much longer to reach a decision. Then when I give it, it carries some weight. It’s worth more. But I don’t need to tell you all these things. You know all the angles already.’

Sure I felt good – who wouldn’t?

‘Tell you the truth,’ Grisby went on, ‘if you hadn’t said you’d think it over, you might never have heard another thing about it. I distrust a man who is too quick to reach decisions. You go right ahead and think it over. Take your time.’

He looked at his watch as though he were going to time me from that minute.

‘The train isn’t due for three and a half minutes,’ he said. ‘Tell me: you’ve been down in the South Seas, haven’t you?’

‘Sure – just about every other place, too. Why?’

‘I’m just wondering where’s the best place to go. How about Tahiti? Is it really all they say it is?’

‘You go down there and you’ll never want to leave. It’s got everything.’

‘You’ve certainly been around, haven’t you? A man of the world, eh?’

‘I don’t know about that. I went on tramp steamers, first as an ordinary seaman and then as an A.B. But I’ll tell you one thing – you sure learn a lot more that way than going around as a passenger on one of those ritzy liners. When you’re on a tramp steamer, you go to all sorts of out-of-the-way places where the liners never stop, and you’re treated like a king. I used to dress up at a port and go ashore to the best hotel and never go back to the ship until it was ready to sail. They’d dock me two days’ pay for every day I stayed ashore, but what the hell – you might never get there again, so what of it? I’d get invited to all the best places, just because I was young and an American, and because most of the people from the States were bored to death living away from their friends. They’d want me to stay and load me down with gifts when I left – the girls particularly. You know, daughters of army officers and men down from the States on business.’

‘How come you didn’t marry any of them?’

‘Oh, I could have, all right.’

‘Some of them with money, too, I’ll bet.’

‘That’s right. I just didn’t want to get my money that way.’

‘Well, it’s just as easy to fall in love with a girl with money as one without – a lot easier, I’d say.’

‘Maybe so. I just wasn’t interested.’

‘I should think they wouldn’t have let you go, a good-looking fellow like you, and smart, too. But I suppose you weren’t ready to settle down – you wanted to see the whole world first, eh?’

‘I guess so.’

‘No family waiting for their wandering boy to come home?’

‘No. I never knew my parents. I lived on my uncle’s farm in North Dakota. When he died I went to sea. I still have the farm, but the land’s all shot up there and I can’t even sell it. I’d always wanted to go to sea, but I never meant to make it my life. Not that I haven’t done other things ashore, but none of them lasted very long, for one reason or another.’

‘How’d you ever get with Bannister?’

‘That just happened. It was getting harder and harder to get on a ship and I was pretty tired of it, anyway. I wanted to do things, amount to something. But I couldn’t get a job on land, either. You know how things were. Finally I drifted out here on Long Island, thinking this is where all the rich people were and that I might get a job here. I was out here swimming when Bannister saw me.’

‘He saw you come out of the water?’

‘Yes. I came up on his beach. He called to me. He didn’t mind me using his beach, but he was lying there in the sand and asked me about myself and I told him. Then he gave me the job. That’s all.’

‘Yes, I know,’ Grisby said. ‘But it’s not why he hired you – just because he needed someone, I mean.’

‘No?’

‘No. He could have got dozens from the city, just by raising a finger. He took you because you were young and good-looking and had such a marvelous physique.’

‘That’s silly,’ I said. ‘What difference would that make?’

He laughed.

‘Just all the difference in the world,’ he said. ‘You mean he’s never told you about his leg? It was in the War that it happened. This was before he was in the intelligence service. He was a lieutenant and was having a mess kitchen drawn up. A shell struck it. When he woke up in the hospital they told him his leg would have to come off.’

He waited so long I asked, ‘Well, did they take it off?’

‘No, they didn’t. He wouldn’t let them amputate. Said he’d rather die if that’s the way it was. They did what they could, and managed to save his life, but the leg was twisted all out of shape and never could heal right. It made him bitter and a little screwy.’

‘How do you mean – screwy?’

‘Oh, he’s got a quirk in his brain about youth shuffling along. Says they’re wasting the most precious moments of life and don’t know it. Thinks they ought to be doing something – you

know, grasping the fruits while they're offered. All that rot. It's his idea that they might be crippled in the next hour themselves, like he is – how do they know they won't be? – and then the fruits would be denied them like they are him. Screwy? He's absolutely batty when he gets on the subject!

'He's never said anything to me.'

'Well, he will, he will! He's been pretty busy, that's all. But it's why he hired you, you can bet on that. He likes to have people around who are young and straight, the way he'd like to be himself, so he can see them doing all the things he'd like to do, but can't because of his leg.'

'But he doesn't seem to be denied anything,' I said. 'He's got plenty of money, a swell big house, a beautiful young wife—'

'Yes, a beautiful young wife who hates him, who married him when she was eighteen, before she knew what it was all about, and has regretted it ever since.'

'Is that so? They seem to get along pretty well to me.'

'Why, figure it out! What would a girl like that, who's no older than you are, have in common with a man like Bannister? Always brooding about his bum leg. He's all washed up and doesn't know it.'

The train whistle sounded eerily along the swamp.

'Well, you think over our proposition,' he said, getting out.

I kept turning it over and over in my mind like a hot pancake.

Five thousand dollars!

That was a hell of a lot of dough. Not too much for getting myself in a jam on a murder rap, even if it was all set for me to go free. Something might always happen.

But it *was* too much for Grisby to pay just to make it look like he was dead. There'd have to be a better reason than wanting to leave his wife. If that was all there was to it, he could just pick up and go.

Another thing: the police would want to know why I'd killed him. They'd sweat it out of me. What could I tell them – robbery? They'd grab the five thousand, sure as shooting. What else? I checked them off, all the motives I could think of:

—Hate?

—Anger?

—Jealousy?

—Revenge?

It couldn't be any, as far as I could see. Robbery, yes. But that was out; it *had* to be out. Yet what other reason could there be for his partner's chauffeur to murder him and throw his body in the Sound?

Well, that was Grisby's problem, not mine. Only I wasn't rushing into the thing blindly. I'd have to know plenty first. Right now it looked fishy – fishy as hell.

Still – five thousand dollars! What I couldn't do with that! I thought of all the things I could do, sitting up in my room that night.

The room was over the garage. Mrs Bannister had done a swell job fixing it up. Bright drapes on the windows. A good clean bed. Bookshelves. A writing desk. A fireplace that would be great in the winter. All mine! The job was pretty soft, too. But the whole layout couldn't compare with five thousand dollars.

The phone rang. It was about nine o'clock. Mrs Bannister's husky low voice. Would I bring the car around? They were going down to the beach.

Bannister came out first, walking in that comic, jerky way his leg made him walk. He was wearing a long white robe with a cowl hanging loose and looked very handsome with his sleek black hair. Close up his features were too sharp, his cheeks too pinched for him to be really good-looking. Deep-set black eyes under dark brows gave him a brooding and defiant look.

'Good evening,' I said. 'Nice night for a swim.'

'Yes, isn't it?' His voice was cold.

I kicked myself, remembering he couldn't swim.

He had a blanket and towels and put them in the back of the car while I switched on the light.

'Where's your suit?' he asked.

'My suit?'

'Didn't you bring it?'

'Why, no. I—'

'Oh, you needn't stand on ceremony here. Glad to have you. If it's hot for us, it's hot for

you, too. Besides, Mrs Bannister always swims out too far. That's dangerous at night. You can keep an eye on her. But hurry it up. On the run!

I went up and grabbed the suit. When I came down again Mrs Bannister was there. She was standing beside the car in the light from the house. Just to look at her took my breath away. She had on a one-piece white suit without any back and her dark red hair hung loose and wild.

There was a bathhouse on the beach. I put on the trunks and came out and sat in the sand near Bannister. He was hunched up on the blanket smoking his pipe. I looked around for Mrs Bannister. She wasn't there.

The moon was up over the water and as far up and down the beach as you could see were little fires. Down a way a man was playing a guitar and a girl was singing.

We sat and listened. After a while a speedboat shot past in the water ahead of us and started cutting capers in the moonlight. It leaped and splashed over the water, its motor making a racket as the throttle was pushed to top speed.

Suddenly it cut in toward shore and charged straight for the landing on Bannister's beach. Bannister started to jump up, then sank back as the motor was cut and the boat slid in to a stop.

Mrs Bannister jumped out, laughing and waving at Bannister. Bannister bit his lip. She'd given him a scare – on purpose, it looked like. 'Better come in,' he called. 'We'll build a fire.'

She shook her head, ran up onto the diving board and dove in. Bannister sighed.

'The water looks fine,' he said. I looked at him; he was taking me in. 'Man, but you've got a build,' he said.

What could I say? 'It just looks that way,' I told him. 'A sailor not half my size beat the tar out of me once.' 'That's right, you were a sailor, weren't you?' 'Most of the time. I did other things, too. Sold house-to-house, drove a truck, worked on a newspaper—'

'You did!'
'Sure.'

I told him how I'd read every good book I could get my hands on while at sea, and how I'd been trying to write ever since a kid, even though I'd never got past the eighth grade out there at Goodrich, North Dakota.

'I thought I was getting somewhere when I got into newspaper work,' I said, 'and I even started going to City College nights. But when times got tough I found out, like a lot of other people, that my hands could get me three squares a day a lot better than my head could. So after I got laid off the paper, I got one of those real man-killing jobs driving a ten-ton truck around the country eighteen hours a day. That didn't last, either, so I dug out the old A.B. ticket again and went back to sea.'

He wasn't listening. He was watching his wife's arms going up and down in the path cut by the moonlight.

'Better go out and watch her,' he said.

His voice said a lot more than that. It said that she was precious to him... that he couldn't have anything happening to her.

I went out on the long pier and dove in.

It was deep here – a good place to say I'd dumped Grisby. I'd heard, too, that few bodies were ever recovered from the Sound. There was something about it that kept the body down or carried it out to sea. That would work in good – if I went through with it.

The water was cold at first, but by the time I'd reached her it was fine.

She turned her head, smiling, and went right on. It was easy to keep up with her. Then she started to race me. The way she was going, I got the idea she didn't want me watching her, that she'd just as soon drown as not. I let her get ahead a little way and when she tired I came up fresh. She turned on her back and floated.

'The sky!' she said.

It seemed to be tumbling down on us a million miles a minute. You could almost hear it roar.

I kept still and watched. She hadn't been talking to me, I knew, but to herself.

Going back, she cut over toward a raft that was rolling in the water about fifty feet off shore. We held on to it out of breath, gasping. It had been a good swim.

'Help me up, please.'

I climbed onto the raft and reached down for her. She put one hand on my wrist and the other on my shoulder and came up easily, laughing. At the top she slipped and held on close. A shiver went through her. I put my hand on her back to steady her and felt her hair like dark seaweed in my face. My heart started pounding.

The raft bobbed in the water with a crazy motion, throwing us still closer. Her body pressed.

I looked over toward the beach. The fires were like fireflies. I couldn't see Bannister, everything looked blurred. I wondered if he could see us, in case anything happened.

Then the raft steadied and she sank down putting her hands behind her head, lying looking at the stars.

I felt pretty shaky. I had seen her now really for the first time not as a married woman I drove the car for but as someone very beautiful and near my own age.

I sat down next to her on the edge of the raft and tried to catch my breath in earnest now.

She was so near I could have leaned over and kissed her. I didn't. It would have to be her doing. I wasn't taking any chances losing my job.

After a while she raised herself on one elbow, looking at me and then up at the stars again.

'You can get me that big red one,' she said.

I didn't know what she meant. Then I saw it, too late. Mars. I guess she thought I was pretty dense.

She smiled and settled back.

'Hadn't you better go in and build a fire?' she asked.

Class dismissed.

I dove in and swam back slowly. I had a lot of thinking to do.

Bannister was still puffing away on his pipe, the robe over his knees. He was wearing a blue and white striped jersey and looked very thin.

I said: 'Mrs Bannister would like a towel and her comb.'

'Oh, yes.'

'And her cigarettes.'

He fished them out of her bag, hesitating a little.

'Did she say she intended to stay out there? Tell her I'd rather she came in, won't you?

We'll build a little fire. How was the water?'

I didn't want him to think he'd missed anything.

'A little too cold,' I said. 'I'll tell her.'

Now maybe there'd be a different story. At least, I'd give it another try. But I still wasn't going to start it myself.

She said: 'Oh, thank you. That was nice of you to think to bring my things.'

'Mr Bannister said—'

'Yes, I know. It's always the same. Tell him when I finish this cigarette. I want to lie here and watch the sky awhile. It's so glorious tonight.'

She began drying herself with the towel, humming the song they were playing down the beach. She didn't pay any more attention to me.

I left her on the raft and went back and found some wood and built a fire. I felt pretty small. Of course she wouldn't have anything to do with her chauffeur. She wasn't that sort.

We sat and watched the fire, Bannister scowling over his pipe and not saying a word. Now and then a couple would go past on the way from one party to another. They all seemed to fit in with the music; we didn't.

Suddenly a girl came running. She stumbled in the sand and got up laughing, looking over her shoulder. She had on a suit with a brassiere top tied in the back and her lips were very red in a brown face. A nice looking young fellow my age was right behind. He caught up to her in front of us and brought her to the sand with a shout. The laughing stopped. Her arms went around him and they lay still. After a while he lifted her up and carried her down the beach. Neither had even looked at us.

Bannister took out his pipe and stared at me.

'Good God, man,' he said, huskily. 'How can you sit there and not want to be a part of all that? How old are you?'

'Twenty-six.'

'Do you know how old I am?'

'Why, I'd say about – about forty.' I wished I'd said thirty-five.

'Well, I'm forty-three. Forty-three! Do you know what I'd give to be twenty-six again, with a build like yours?'

I said: 'You don't look forty-three.'

He laughed far down in his throat.

'No, but at forty-three how heavily my thousands of years of nothingness weigh upon me.'

I guessed it must be the night and the singing and the waves going up the shore. I smelled whiskey, though, and remembered he was strong for his Scotch and soda. Why, at his age he

was still a young man. I wasn't too young to know that; I'd seen sailors tough as marlinspike at sixty and seventy even, but then, there was that leg of his. That was really what was behind it, probably.

'And the pity of it is,' he said, 'when you're young you can't imagine yourself being old and wanting the chance to be young again. If you could, you would regulate everything differently, I assure you. Wasn't it Voltaire who suggested that we make love in our youth, and in old age attend to salvation?'

What did he think, I should be out making love? That was a good one.

'There's a poem I like to recite,' he said. 'Would you care to hear it?'

'Sure.' I was getting paid for it.

'It goes like this.' He leaned forward, his face at once dark and bright in the firelight, his voice at once eager and old:

*'A Moment's Halt – a momentary taste
Of Being from the Well amid the Waste—
And Lo! – the phantom Caravan has reach'd
The Nothing it set out from – Oh, make haste!'*

'That's swell,' I said.

He looked at me with the left eyebrow raised for a minute, and then shrugged. I thought he was going to drop the whole thing and give me up as a total loss. I started to poke the fire and go look for more wood, but he stopped me.

'Listen!' he snapped.

He was tighter than I'd thought. Then I spotted the bottle on the blanket and knew he'd been hitting it all the time we were out swimming. I sat down and let him talk, without listening very hard... all about the things that were denied him because of his leg, so he couldn't 'make haste' if he wanted to. But what made him boil most was that those who *could* weren't doing anything about it, like me. They were asleep and maybe never would wake up. Maybe never until they were about to die. And then it was too late to wake.

What the hell, I thought.

'Myself, in the War... going on leave, knowing that the next moment might be the last – seeing how cheap life could be, even my own—'

Mrs Bannister, coming into the firelight suddenly, gave me a scare. I guessed she'd been listening.

'Marco, for heaven's sake,' she said. 'Again?'

'Yes, Elsa,' he mimicked her. 'Again!'

She seemed surprised and not quite sure that she had heard right.

'Don't you ever get tired of the same—' She stopped, looking at him with her lips still parted.

His eyes blazed yellow in the firelight. Veins stood out on his neck and forehead. If I hadn't known he'd been drinking, I'd have been surprised, too.

'I get tired of the attitude you adopt, that I am a child to be humored—'

She hadn't been trying to humor him, just to be nice.

'Oh, it isn't that; you know it isn't. It's only—'

'What? Only what? We might as well face this thing, Elsa, now as any other time. I needn't tell you how strangely you've been acting lately. I think I have the right—'

For a minute they just stared at each other, Mrs Bannister getting more and more burned up each second.

I guessed the fuse had been burning quite a while, that they'd been over and over this time and again before and were only taking the argument up where they'd left off.

And there I was, watching the whole thing like a play. I wanted to get up and leave, but couldn't.

'You!' she said. Her lips twitched. 'Always thinking of yourself! What about me – what about *my* youth?'

She was dripping wet and the white suit clung to her and her smooth brown skin glistened with drops of water. There didn't seem to be anything the matter with *her* youth. Anger just made her more beautiful.

With neither of them paying any attention to me, I took her all in... the full, pointed breasts, quivering now with her breathing; the slim brown legs and smooth bare back and shoulders; the small straight nose, brown eyes and large red lips, that made me want to crush them – hard.

'Your youth!' said Bannister. 'If it hadn't been for me, you'd still be wasting your youth in the chorus, three shows a day until you dropped. And before that, what were you? Nothing – you didn't have a cent.'

So that was it – she'd been a chorus girl. I saw it now.

'Oh!' she said. She could hardly talk. 'You're so bitter, your mind is all warped and distorted.'

Bannister snapped a twig with a noise like a pistol shot.

'Bitter!' he said. 'They wonder why I am bitter.'

He laughed, but his face froze the same instant. His jaw jutted out. He began talking to the waves.

'Because, knowing that each moment might be the last, I was eager to grasp the fruits before it was too late. And reaching out for them—' Here he did reach out, a long, bony hand – 'What happened?'

He wasn't asking us, but the waves.

'A shell, a burst of red – the whole sky whirling red – blackness – a twisted leg – the fruits denied.'

He snatched back his hand.

'Bitter!' he said.

Mrs Bannister's face was darker even than his.

'If you're so bitter,' she ground out, taking her time. 'I wonder you go on living at all.'

That seemed to bring him out of the liquor a little.

'What, exactly, do you mean?' he demanded.

She picked up her things and started toward the car. I thought for a moment that maybe she was crying, and jumped up to help her.

Bannister half rose and then sank back, looking after her. You could tell his leg was paining him.

'Elsa, for God's sake!' he called. 'You don't mean—'

She turned very slowly and came back to look down at him. She wasn't crying.

'Has it honestly never occurred to you,' she said quietly, almost sadly, 'that you might be

better – off – dead?’

It all seemed crazy, somehow – Grisby wanting to be ‘killed,’ offering me five thousand for the job – Bannister brooding about his twisted leg, bitter and defiant – his wife, years younger, who hated him, I knew now, and who made me suck in my breath each time I thought of us out on the raft—

I couldn’t help wondering what I was letting myself in for. And almost at once I knew.

‘Well, did you think it over?’ Grisby asked. He was absolutely overflowing with enthusiasm and good cheer.

I told him yes. Yes, I said, except that I couldn’t think of any motive I’d have for killing him.

‘Motive!’ he said. ‘Is that all that’s worrying you!’

He laughed. He patted me on the back. He was feeling good about something, all right.

It was dark – he’d stayed for dinner with the Bannisters. We were parked on a little hill just off the road leading to the station. Below was the swamp that ran beside the tracks and over the swamp was a purple haze, damp and sticky.

I’d heard that the place was a breeding ground for rats, as bad as Rats Island off the Harbor. No one lived out at this end; Bannister’s was one of the last houses before you hit the swamp, and it was some way back. A few skeletons of buildings out on the dry places of the swamp showed where people had tried to make a go of it from time to time – small factories that had come out because the rent was cheap and the railroad near. They’d done everything to get rid of the rats and the ruins told who had won. It was some place.

I said: ‘It’s a cinch we can’t use robbery. And what else is there? I’ll have to tell them something, won’t I?’

‘The police? Sure. But who said anything about robbery?’ His heavy brows worked up and down. ‘You just leave everything to me, didn’t I tell you? Good old Lee Grisby – an answer for everything. And the answer here? Accident, my boy, accident.’

‘Accident!’

‘Sure. Why not?’

I did some fast thinking.

‘Well’, I said, ‘it might be an accident, my plugging you, but what would I be doing throwing your body in the Sound?’

‘That’s simple. You’ve heard of hit-and-run drivers, haven’t you?’

I blinked.

I said: ‘Now I suppose I’m to run over you, too. And then put a bullet through you. And then throw you in the Sound. Boy, you sure would be dead!’

He laughed again, really pleased. He said no, that wasn’t the idea at all.

‘The idea,’ he said, ‘is that you kill me accidentally. Then you get scared. You think maybe they won’t believe you, or that there’ll be hell to pay, or that even if you get off, you’ll lose your job because of it. It’s the same way driving, if you hit someone. Well, so you run. But in this case, you’re going to take the precaution of disposing of the body.’

‘So I throw you in the Sound?’

‘Right. You’re thinking this way, “If I don’t, the police will ask why I took him to that lonely spot, and not to the station, as ordered. They’ll say I tried to rob him, he fought and I killed him. No, better to get the body out of the way. Then no one will be the wiser.”’

I was beginning to get scared all over again.

‘What lonely spot?’ I asked.

‘The beach – Bannister’s beach. Here’s what happens. I come out to see Bannister. When I leave, you drive me to the station, just as usual. It’s night, and we miss the train – we’ll time

it so we do.'

'So far so good. But I still don't see how I happen to shoot you.'

'I'm coming to that... Well, when we miss the train, we decide it's too hot to wait for the next one there at the station, so we go down to the beach to cool off. While we're waiting, we hear a sound. We think it might be a stick-up. You take the gun out of the side-pocket of the car – Bannister gave you one to carry, didn't he? That was my idea; I got him to do that. That just shows how careful I've been.

'All right. You start to get out of the car, to investigate, with the gun in your hand. The gun goes off, accidentally. It will, too, we'll see to that. Then you find I'm hit, get scared, and dump the body off the pier.'

'But not really,' I said.

He drew back and looked at me.

'It better *not* be really,' he said.

I had him there.

'But you said we'd have witnesses,' I reminded him.

'Sure we will. We've got to have. Otherwise how could we make it look like I was dead? Without a body, that takes a bit of proving. People have to see us go down to the beach together. We'll make sure they do. Then people have to see *you* go back from the beach *alone*. That will be easy. There are always people around a beach on a hot night.'

I couldn't think of anything to say.

I said: 'How do you know it will be hot?'

'We'll pick a night that is... All right. They'll hear the shot. When they come running, you'll be alone. Why? Because enough time will elapse supposedly, for you to have disposed of the body. If not, if they come too soon, you can claim that you covered me over in the car and then disposed of the body after they left.'

'And what was I supposed to be shooting at?'

'The moon – a tin can – what do you care? You won't be trying to prove anything at this time except that you're alone. Later on, when the police start investigating, you'll break down and confess the accident. They'll check that. The witnesses will tell about us going down to the beach together and you going back alone. They'll tell about the shot. And everything will be just dandy.'

'And supposing they don't believe it was an accident?'

'Supposing they don't? We went over that. They've got to produce the body... Well, does that answer the burning question of the hour? Or is there something else? Ask me if there is. There can't be any slip up. This has got to go off like clockwork.'

I felt pretty miserable.

I said: 'Well, they might send me to jail just to make sure I didn't go around killing anyone else.'

'Don't be silly. I told you they couldn't hold you. Any dumb lawyer could get you out. But we covered all that, too. What else is there?'

'One big question is: When?'

Grisby took off his glasses and began wiping them with a crisp white handkerchief.

'When?' he said. 'Soon. Very soon. Maybe tomorrow night.'

He looked out where the moonlight ripped the haze over the swamp, thinking.

‘You mean it?’ I asked.

‘Why not?’

‘I hadn’t figured—’

‘Why wait? Once I hit on a plan and see that it’s air-tight, I go ahead. Yes, sir,’ he said, ‘I think tomorrow night!’

‘But why tomorrow night, especially?’

‘The papers say it’s going to be hot tomorrow night. We’ve got to be sure of our witnesses. I didn’t trust him. Something was wrong somewhere.’

‘As far as that goes,’ I said, ‘it’s plenty hot tonight. Why not tonight?’

He squirmed around to look at me in the light from the dash. Something in the way he looked chilled me. Gooseflesh stood out on my arms.

‘Something’s itching you,’ he said. ‘What is it?’

His voice was as raw as the mist that crawled beside the car.

I said: ‘Nothing at all. Why?’

‘You aren’t still worrying about the motive?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Then what is it?’

‘Why—’

‘Come on, out with it!’

I had to say it then: ‘It just doesn’t seem that you’ve told me everything.’

He kept on looking at me for a minute and then sank back. That gave me a chance to light a cigarette and pull myself together. I’d been scared for a minute there, I’ll admit it. Now I felt all right again, and he seemed just like he always did. I might have imagined that he’d been different.

He stroked his big full jaw, holding his eyeglasses in the other hand and tapping them on his knee, thinking. He was pretty good-looking with his glasses off. His short, wiry gold hair, actor’s profile and powerful build probably had made him a devil with the women when he was young. Maybe still, for all I knew.

‘I can’t think of anything I’ve left out,’ he said. ‘Unless – yes, of course. The five thousand. Don’t blame you! Well, let’s see. Bannister and his wife are going into town tomorrow. She’s going shopping – you can drop her somewhere, leave him at the office and then run over to the bank with me. You can see me draw the money out. In fact, I’ll give you some in advance. That’s fair enough, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, that part of it is all right. I didn’t mean that.’

‘No? Then—’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘it’s the reason for all this. You said it was to get rid of your wife. You want her to think you’re dead. That’s all right; she won’t give you a divorce, and if you want to get away from everything, anyway, like you said, why not?’

‘That’s your answer, isn’t it? I tell you, Laurence, a man can stand only so much. Some jump off buildings, some join the Foreign Legion, but I have more imagination. I adopt a new and exciting identity and come up in the South Seas!’

‘I know, and I’m all for it. I just don’t see why you should go to all this trouble, and give me five thousand dollars, just to do that. What’s to stop you from just going, I mean? She couldn’t stop you, that’s a cinch. And there’s no law against it, that I know of.’

He smiled.

'I said you were smart. You are. But do you suppose she'd let me desert her without a struggle? She'd follow me to the ends of the earth, just to make life miserable for me, if nothing else. No, better to make it final. Let her think I'm dead. Let everyone think I'm dead. Do the job up right.'

It still seemed fishy to me, somehow, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

He went on: 'Don't you suppose I've thought it all over, nights lying awake when I couldn't sleep for worry? Don't you see that it's worth something to me in peace of mind to know that my whole past is finished? You're young; maybe you don't see. Let's hope you never do!'

'Well—'

He couldn't figure me out. I couldn't either, but there was a red light flashing in front of me that said, 'Stop!'

'I guess you don't want that five thousand very badly,' he said. 'I guess you get offers like that every day.'

I said: 'No, I don't. I want the money, all right, who wouldn't, but I think you better count me out.'

'What!'

'I don't think I want to go through with it,' I said.

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