

The Scalpel of Doom

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A doctor is not supposed to use his knowledge to slay. Yet there came a time when this small-town medico had to operate with...

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LOTS of things, particularly unpleasant ones, can get crowded into an hour. I've had it happen to me often, but never quite like that hour which began at about midnight, one evening last summer. And I never thought I'd have occasion to kill a man. Every doctor worries that sometime he might make a little mistake, or even just an error of judgment; his patient would die—and the doctor would forever after blame himself. But this wasn't anything like that. I wanted to kill this fellow, and I did. I can't say I'm exactly sorry, but it gives you a queer feeling just the same.

I was alone in my office, that summer night. I live in a little stucco house near the edge of Pleasant Grove Village, with my office and reception room occupying about half its lower floor. My wife and young daughter were away for a week at the beach. I was alone on the premises, that night at midnight. I'd had quite a tough day at the hospital—two operations, one of which had turned out to be more serious than I had anticipated, and a long steady grind of routine calls that had kept me going until about eleven-thirty. I had just decided to go to bed when a car stopped outside. Hurried footsteps came up the walk; my night bell rang.

It was a slim, dark-haired young girl. She wore a black, somewhat shabby raincoat and hood. Which struck me as odd, because it was a hot summer night, with a full moon in a cloudless sky.

“You Dr. Bates?”

“Yes,” I said. “Come in.”

She shook her head. I couldn't see her face very well because of the hood. Her voice was low, agitated. “You got to come, doc,” she said. “I got a—a patient. I guess he's hurt bad.” She gestured toward the car at the curb. It was a big, black

limousine, a really handsome affair. “I’ll drive you,” she added. “It ain’t far. Hurry, doc. Please.”

“A patient?” I said.

“A patient—for you. He—he’s my brother. You’ll hurry, won’t you?”

I got my hat and bag. She stood in the doorway. She was trembling. My hall light was on her. She was young, quite pretty—a pale, drawn face framed by bobbed black hair.

“Somebody hurt?” I said. “An accident? Why didn’t you drive him to the hospital? There’s one here in Pleasant Grove.”

She backed out of the light into the dimness of my porch. “I couldn’t, doc. I’ll tell you about that. But please—you gotta hurry—he could die.”

I climbed into the front seat of the car with her and we rolled away, heading north out of Pleasant Grove. She drove swiftly but, it seemed, skillfully.

“Where is he?” I said.

“Over near Palenburg. I’ll bring you back, doc. You—do your best for him, won’t you, doc?”

“Of course,” I said. The factory town of Palenburg was about ten miles north. “There are doctors in Palenburg,” I said. “A hospital, too. Why didn’t you—?”

“I couldn’t. He’s—in the—a place in the woods.”

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AT THE crossroads, we turned west. I knew this region pretty well. The country west of Palenburg is unusually wild—wooded hills with hardly a house. The girl drove grimly, silently. The front seat was dark, with just the glow reflected from the lighted instruments of the panel. Beside me, on the inside of the right-hand door, there was a plush pouch. On impulse I reached into it.

A pair of man’s gloves—handsome chamois skin—were in it. And a few letters. I glanced at one. It was addressed: *George J. Livingston, The Oakes, Palenburg.*

I put the things back. “What’s your name?” I said.

“Jenny Dolan.”

“You work for Mr. Livingston? Is that it?”

She turned her head, flashed me a startled glance. “Mr.—who?” Then she looked frightened, sullen.

“Or maybe you just borrowed his car?” I said. “Look, Jenny, hadn’t you better tell me all about this?”

“No! No—”

“Why not?”

“I can’t! I promised him!”

“Your brother?”

“Yes. Oh doc—” I had put my hand on her shoulder. I’m forty years old, with grey hairs coming. To me, I’m still a pretty husky young fellow, but to her—well, I was old enough to be her father. She evidently felt that. At my touch and my gentle tone, she suddenly wilted out of her grimness. “Oh, doc, you wouldn’t—you wouldn’t do anything against him? I’m trustin’ you—”

She was tearful. She turned toward me. “Watch the road!” I said sharply. We had wobbled toward the ditch. She brought us back.

“Take it easy,” I said. “If you’ve promised him not to explain to me—that’s okay. How far is it from here?”

“Not far.” She was slowing us down. Then she turned from the highway into a little side road that wound up into the forested foothills of Black Mountain. So far as I could judge we were about three miles from Palenburg. The car bumped over the little rocky road. Then it was so steep we had to go into low gear.

“You know, don’t you,” I said, “if he’s got a gunshot wound or been stabbed or anything, I have to report it to the police?”

“No, no! That’s what he said you’d do! Oh doc—”

“Don’t get excited,” I said. Which sounded inane. She was pretty pathetic, in a panic of terror, trying to drive the car with one hand and grabbing appealingly at me with the other.

“Doc, he’s only a kid. Only eighteen—my twin. You—you won’t let him die, will you? Doc, I *had* to come and get you—”

“Of course. If he’s that bad, we’ll have to get him to the hospital—”

“That’s what I told him! But you can’t! Oh please—”

She suddenly stopped the car. “What’s the idea?” I said.

“We’re here. It’s—he’s right near here—”

The little road had petered out into almost nothing. I climbed out. Around us there was only black, somber woods, with the moonlight vaguely filtering down through the tree branches....

“This way, doc.”

I followed after her as she led me into the woods. Now I’m certainly not versed in woodcraft, but I guess my nerves were on edge, my senses sharpened. At all events, it suddenly seemed that I heard a crackling in the underbrush off to one side, behind us. I reached forward, gripped the girl’s shoulder.

“Wait!” I murmured. “Quiet!”

We stood silent. It was so quiet I could seem to hear my heart thumping against my ribs.

“What is it?” Jenny whispered.

“I thought I heard something, off there.” I vaguely gestured. But there was obviously nothing to hear now. “Go ahead,” I said. “It wasn’t anything. Or maybe an animal—”

We were in a little patch of moonlight. On the girl’s face there was a new terror.

“You heard somebody—”

“Somebody?” I murmured. My hand was still on her shoulder. I shook her. “Look here, do you figure somebody’s around here following us?”

“No! No, of course not!” She pulled away from me. “Why would there be? There’s only Tom—and he’s hurt—”

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I LET it go, and followed her as she plunged deeper into the woods. We had only gone a hundred yards or so from where we left the car until I saw that a little tumbledown shack was ahead of us. Once it may have stood in a small clearing, but the thickets and underbrush were close around it now—a small, deserted, practically uninhabitable building with half its roof gone. We were almost on it before I could see a faint gleam of yellow glow through one of its broken windows which was blocked on the inside with newspapers.

“Come in, doc.”

The broken door creaked as she pulled at it. Instantly from inside came a voice. “Who’s there? Keep out of here! I warn you, I got a gun!” It was a weak, shaky voice with a frenzy of desperation in it.

“It’s me, Tom,” the girl said softly. “It’s all right, I’ve brought the doc.”

The boy lay on an old blanket on the bare wooden floor of an empty room. He was dressed in trousers and shirt, a shirt with one shoulder torn and a crude, bloody bandage there. Beside him there was an empty, broken wooden box, with a lighted candle, a pitcher and glass of water. Nearby, another blanket was spread. On the floor, in a corner, there were a few articles of food, tinned goods and a loaf of bread.

“Oh, hello, doc, I guess I’m glad Jenny got you.” He was a slim, masculine version of the girl—a good-looking boy, with black hair clipped close to his head.

His face was pale and drawn; his lips bloodless. His dark eyes, fixed on me as I knelt down on the blanket beside him, were glistening with fever.

“I’m all right, doc.” He tried to smile. “I cut myself. Just an accident, doc.”

He was far from all right. He had been stabbed in the shoulder, just missing the lung. He’d lost a lot of blood; but for a healthy young fellow, it didn’t seem a dangerous wound, if infection was kept out of it. But he couldn’t have stayed here very long, neglecting it.

“Not too bad,” I said cheerfully. “But you were right in getting me, Jenny. Have you any fresh water?”

There was a rusty old pump in a corner of the room, but it worked. That kid was stoical. I guess I hurt him plenty. But in fifteen minutes or so, I’d done all I could with emergency cleaning and a fresh bandage.

“Okay,” I said. “Now we’ll talk. You two kids have got to—”

I didn’t get any further than that. I was too startled. There was a lumpy place under the blanket. I chanced to notice a little end of fabric sticking out. I reached, pulled at it. It was prison garb.

“Oh,” I murmured. “I see. That’s—”

Again I stopped. I was looking into the shaking muzzle of a little black gun which the boy had drawn from under the blanket up by his head. I was certainly dumb not to have gotten that gun away from him when I first came in.

“Now, now,” I said, “don’t be silly. I won’t do you any harm, Tom.”

“You’re damn right, you won’t!” he snarled. “You get out of here! Oh, I’ll pay you all right! Jenny’ll drive you home! But you ain’t goin’ to turn me in, because I won’t be here by the time you can get the cops!”

“Tom! Tom!”

That girl could have cost me my life. It was nip and tuck whether that kid’s shaking, feverish finger pulled the trigger or didn’t. It didn’t. The girl shoved away his arm so that I reached, grabbed the gun and twisted it from him. I tossed it, sliding, across the floor. That was another fool trick of mine. I should have dropped it into my pocket.

“Now,” I said, “you listen to me, you two. You’re okay, Tom, if you get the right treatment. A transfusion, maybe. That wound’s got to be fixed up properly. I’m not asking you how you got it; I’m taking you to the Pleasant Grove hospital—”

“No! You’re crazy! You know damn well that I broke out of jail! I won’t go back! I got things to do! You can’t—”

I let him rage. “You’ll die if you don’t go,” I said. “Infection will get in that shoulder. It’s there now, very likely. Suit yourself, if you want to sit here and die —”

That got the girl. She flung herself down by her brother. “Tom, you listen to him! I ain’t goin’ to let you die! You listen to him!” Then she turned to me, clung to me. “Doc, he’s a good boy. They put him in jail for killin’ a man in a robbery! But he didn’t do it—”

“Jenny, you shut up!” the boy growled.

“I won’t! He’s right, Tom! You gotta go back! You can’t jus’ keep runnin’ from the law—not when you’re hurt! Doc, if you knew all about it, you’d stand by him! They had no right to send him up! It was my husband did it—”

“Jenny, you shut up, I tell you!”

But he couldn’t shut her up now, and she babbled it out. She was married to a fellow named Greer, Jim Greer. A man about thirty, a seasoned criminal.

“He’s got a record under some other name,” the girl was saying. “I know it damn well, by a lot of little things he said. Anyway, he got Tom into this robbery thing. Jim killed the man. It wasn’t Tom, he never even had a gun.”

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THE thing had happened only a year ago. Nothing very novel; you read about things like that often. They’d broken into a rich man’s home, made away with jewelry and cash. But the victim caught them at it, got killed. In the getaway, Tom had been able to hide some of the loot in the garden. Jim Greer had gotten away; but Tom was seen by the gardener, who had taken a shot at him, brought him down with his leg full of buckshot.

“An’ Tom took the rap for the whole thing. Second degree murder,” the girl said. “He could have squealed on Jim—Jim was the killer!”

“He would have lied out of it,” Tom said. “Anyway, Jenny had a baby coming. I couldn’t very well drag—”

“I see,” I said. “So you went up for the killing too. And this Jim Greer—”

“I thought he loved her,” the boy said. “I thought he’d treat her right.”

“My baby died,” Jenny said. “He died when he was born, an’ Jim—he wasn’t there—he was drunk. He never did come back to me. He’s got a girl somewhere else, over in Mechanicsville, I think. Anyway, I’m through with him.”

And she had told her brother, in the jail, about it. “I had to get out,” Tom said. “See? I just had to!”

“To get revenge on him?” I suggested.

“No, no!” Jenny gasped. “Tom didn’t want to hurt him!”

“The hell I didn’t,” Tom muttered. “I got out of the jail. Never mind how, it was one of those lucky breaks, me and another guy, but they caught him right away. That was last night—”

“He wanted to get hold of Jim, an’ maybe make him confess an’ take the murder rap,” Jenny put in. “Anyway, I live in a little house in Palenburg—me an’ another girl, an’ she’s away for a week. I’m workin’ in a factory there.”

She had phoned her husband, persuaded him to come to her cottage. Then Tom had jumped him.

“He hadn’t treated Jenny right, that was the main thing,” Tom was saying. “So I asked him what the hell he expected to do about it.”

And this fellow Greer had retorted that what he wanted was his share of the loot Tom had hidden after the robbery.

“Can you beat that?” the boy demanded. “To hell with the murder rap I took for him, to hell with my sister, all he wants is some money!”

In the fight, Tom had been stabbed. Greer had fled, fearing that the neighbors had been aroused by the noise. But they hadn't been. Tom and Jenny had come here, where she had hidden him, bringing him food; hoping he'd get well so they'd be able to get away....

"I've got the money," Tom was saying. "Doc, give us a chance. She stole that car in Palenburg tonight. That's okay, we won't hurt it. We'll just beat it somewhere, Jenny and me, and we'll leave the car where it'll get found. I swear it, doc, give us a chance!"

Just a couple of kids, all mixed up. You read about lots of them like that.

"This fellow Greer," I said. "You don't think by any chance—"

I didn't finish. Somehow a sudden uneasiness had jumped me. My mind went back to that noise in the woods as the girl and I came here. Thinking back to it now, it did seem that I could remember there had been a car behind us on the way here. Then I had forgotten it.

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I MET Jenny's eyes. "I thought he was around my house today," she murmured suddenly. "I thought I saw him, but I wasn't sure."

Had Greer trailed us here? I felt suddenly trapped—the three of us here in this lonely little shack, and a killer outside.

It was no idle, crazy hunch! I had no time to get up from the floor. The door creaked. A figure loomed in the doorway, a big burly man with a gun in his hand, leveled at us.

"So here we are again!" he said. "Nice little family party, and the doc to fix you up! Ain't that sweet?"

Tom lay stiffened on his blanket, with his fevered, burning eyes on the advancing figure. I sat numbed beside him. Jenny was sitting on the other side of Tom, staring with a hand upflung to her mouth.

"Okay," Greer said. "Now, let's have that money, Tom!"

“You—you damned—”

Across the room, on the floor, I could see Tom’s little revolver where I had flung it. It could have been a million miles away, for all the chance I had of getting it.

“Come on, where is it?” Greer demanded. Then he saw an impulsive gesture of Tom’s hand toward the head of the blanket. “Okay,” he said. “So that’s where it is—”

He stooped, reached for it. As it happened, his gun was pointed at me. Tom didn’t think of that; I doubt if he thought of much at anything. Wild, fevered, with a rush of frenzied strength he rose up on the blanket, grabbing for Greer’s throat. The gun went off. By good luck, the bullet didn’t go into my chest. It went into my left arm with a stab like a white-hot poker. Greer straightened and staggered back.

“So that’s the idea, is it?” he roared. “Okay, you asked for it—the whole damned three of you! His gun spat again, at Tom, this time, but it missed his head, the bullet hitting the floor with a thud.

I guess one acts without conscious thought in a thing like that. My instrument bag was beside me;

it was open. I reached in, found a scalpel and clung to it. Greer was near me. I rose up in time to knock his arm as he fired again. And then I slashed with the scalpel—ripped it across his throat.

I better not go into details. That slash, with all the wild strength I could put into it, wasn’t anything like a surgeon’s delicate incision. Greer went down. I don’t think he lived more than a minute or two....

A little later, I had Tom down in the big limousine, lying on the back seat, with Jenny sitting beside him. They’d get Greer’s fingerprints from the body. His true identity would be established. His old prison record would be pinned to him.

Silently, with my left arm hanging limp, I drove the stolen car out of the woods, heading for the Pleasant Grove hospital. Doctors often have tough days. But I sure didn’t want any more like this.