

The RED LAMP



By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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"At the parlor organ," she said positively. "Or rather, above and behind it, where it sits across the corner. And after a while, I thought I saw something there."

"What sort of something?" "I can't tell you," she said, and shivered. "That is, it wasn't really anything. It was like a mist. I could just tell there was something there, and then Jock lifted up his head and howled at it, and—I don't even remember getting upstairs, William."

It is the remainder of Jane's story which seems worthy of consideration, in view of her previous average of hits.

She went to sleep, sinking fathoms deep into unconsciousness, but at three o'clock she awakened, suddenly and fully, and sat up in her bed. But she was not in a bed at all. She was in a boat, and Maggie Morrison also was in it, lying at her feet. After a time—she has no idea how long—the vision faded, and she was still sitting up in her bed.

Such details as I can draw from her are as follows:

"Did you see Uncle Horace in the same way?"

"Wakening out of a sleep? Yes."

"Was there the same sort of light?"

"Not a light exactly. It doesn't come from anywhere. I can't describe it exactly; the things I see are luminous."

She saw no rope on the body or in the boat, and there was no sign of injury on the girl.

"She looked very peaceful," says Jane, and sets me to shuddering.

On one point, however, she is entirely definite. She maintains that there were pieces of cloth tied around the oarlocks of the boat. "White cloth," she adds, as an afterthought. "Why cloth?"

"To keep the oars from making a noise," says my Jane, who has been in a rowboat perhaps a half dozen times in all her life!

We sat on the veranda while Halliday came in with the boat; he had been out, I daresay, on some scouting business of his own, and I confess to a sort of terror that by some unlucky chance we might find the oarlocks of this very boat, wrapped with white cloth, "to keep the oars from making a noise." But they showed no stigma of crime.

"Why," I said to Jane, as Halliday tied his boat and came with his splendid stride up the runway, "why did you come down here to look at our boats, my dear?"

She showed a faint distress. "I don't know, William. I just had a feeling that I had to come."

I have not asked her why she has suppressed this experience for so long. For she no more doubts that Maggie Morrison was killed and thrown into the sea from a boat with muffled oarlocks, than she doubts her own existence. But coupled with that certainty has been her dread of possible publicity, and that ever present feeling of hers that whatever power she has is somehow shameful.

My poor Jane.

July 27.

The blow has fallen again, and this time almost at our very door. That it is not murder is not due to any lack of intention, but to weakness in execution. I have spent a large portion of the day in urging Edith and Jane to go back to town, but without result.

"Not unless you go," Jane said firmly, and Edith and I exchanged glances.

As a matter of fact, last night's events have left me in a more precarious position than before, and I feel that any more on my part would only precipitate matters. Greenough has given out a statement to the reporters that an early arrest may be expected, and I do not for the life of me understand why he has not pounced already.

I imagine the only thing that has saved me, so far, has been the single fact that Peter Geiss knows I was on the sloop the night and hour when Halliday was attacked. That puzzles him.

To record last night's strange affair in sequence:

I could not sleep, a condition which is growing chronic with me lately, and at or about midnight I went downstairs and outside. The night was extremely dark; I paced back and forth along the drive, keeping at first close to the Lodge, but gradually extending my steps as I grew accustomed to the darkness.

After twenty minutes or so of this, and at the extreme of my swing toward the other house, I heard some sort of movement in that direction, and stopped to listen. It was a cautious disturbance of the shrubbery, and I swung in among the trees and stood listening. It was not repeated, however, and I turned to go back.

I had, however, lost my way, and for some brief time I floundered about. At last I found the sun-dial, by striking against it, and thus orienting myself, turned about and struck back toward the Lodge.

I had not gone ten feet before I heard the bell ringing.

(Note: A large bell on the kitchen porch of the main house and used in times before the telephone was installed, to summon the gardener. It is rung by pulling a rope attached to it.)

It rang sharply twice and then abruptly stopped, and the sudden silence seemed somehow ominous, like the stillness after a shriek.

There were no lights in the main house, and no further sounds came from it. I daresay at such times one does not think; one acts automatically. I do not recall thinking at all, but I do recall trying to feel my way through the trees, and that I ran into one and was partially stunned for an instant.

The house was still completely dark and silent. I felt my way with more caution, skirted the shrubbery, and at last found the railing leading up the steps to the kitchen. Here I was on safer ground, and I crossed the small porch to the door with increased confidence, only to stumble over something and almost fall. I knew at once what it was, and I felt suddenly ill, although my brain was as active as ever in my life. But I found some matches in my dressing-gown pocket, and striking one bent over a figure lying prone at my feet. It was young Gordon, unconscious and bleeding from a blow on the head, and securely tied with a rope. I was still stooping over him, fumbling for another match, when a flashlight shone in my face, fairly blinding me. It played on me for a moment, and then on the boy stretched on the floor and now slightly moving.

"What's happened?" said a voice from behind it, and with relief I recognized it as the doctor's.

"He's hurt," I said, rising dizzily.

"Struck on the head, I think."

"Open the door there and turn on the lights. I'll carry him in."

I did as he told me, being still somewhat unsteady, and as he laid the boy on the floor and straightened I was aware that his eyes, as they rested on me, were hostile and suspicious.

Immediately, however, he went to work on the boy, examining him first and then removing the rope.

"He's only stunned," he said, and examined the wound in the scalp carefully. After that he dressed the boy by that time moving about and groaning, but still only partially conscious. When the dressing was done the doctor disappeared and returned with a cushion. Keeping the boy supine, he slipped it under his head. Then he straightened.

"You'd better notify the old man," he said. "I'll stay here, if you don't mind."

And from the look he gave me, I gathered that he had no intention of leaving me with the boy.

I made my way upstairs to the room over the den, and knocked for some time before I was heard. Then Mr. Bethel called out, startled, and I asked if I could come in. I heard him making heavy work of getting out of bed, and finally he shot the bolt and opening the door an inch or two glared out at me.

"What the devil's the matter?"

"Nothing serious," I said. "There's been a little trouble downstairs, and we thought you'd better be told."

"A fire?"

"Not a fire," I reassured him, and gave him a brief account of what had occurred.

He was not particularly gracious; demanded to know what the boy was doing outside at that hour, and seemed to feel that, with a doctor already in the house, his responsibility was ended. As there was actually nothing he could do, I helped him back to his bed and left him sitting on the side, an unpleasant but helpless figure.

The boy was conscious when I went back to the kitchen, staring around him, and particularly concentrated on the doctor and myself. He put his hand to his head and felt the bandage.

"Where'd I get that?" he asked thickly.

After a time he tried to get up, and the doctor put him into a chair.

"Now, Gordon," he said, "what happened to you? Try and think."

"He hit me," he said finally. "The dirty devil!"

"Who hit you?"

But he was still too dazed for coherent thought. He improved rapidly after that, however, although he complained of severe headache. He became garrulous, too, as happens after concussion, but out of his maudlinings we were able to secure a fairly connected story.

He had been unable to sleep, because of certain noises in his room. He had got up, and gone down to the kitchen for something to eat. After that, reluctant to go up to his room again, he had wandered out onto the kitchen steps and sat there. It was then that he heard some one stealthily approaching the house.

He listened, and finally he heard a window of the old gun room next to the laundry being raised. He stared that way, and insists he saw a dark figure there. The next moment it was gone, and he was certain there was some one in the house.

He had, apparently, turned to enter the house and head off the intruder, but was struck down in the doorway. On the matter of ringing the bell he was rather vague at first, not remembering that he had done so, but later saying he had had his hand on the rope, when the blow came.

Halliday listened to this intently.

Then he turned to me. "And you were where, Porter?" "By the sun-dial. On the other side of it. I had started toward home." "Do you mean to say that, after that bell rang, this man Gordon speaks of had time to tie him and escape, before you got here?"

"I've told you the facts. It isn't a simple matter to get here from the sun-dial, in the dark."

In spite of the doctor's attitude and my own fears, I cannot see today that a dispassionate examination of the evidence would really involve me.

Gordon saw a man enter the gun-room window, and was attacked from the kitchen by that man. It must be perfectly evident to Greenough, on hearing the doctor's story, that had I for any reason desired to make some nefarious entrance into the house, I need not have resorted to a window. I have keys to every door, and can produce them.

Thomas, however, who seems to have his own methods of acquiring information, today tells a fact which, in my ignorance of such matters, I had not noticed last night. He states that the doctor reports the boy as having been tied in the same manner as poor Carroway; in two half-hitches around the wrists, a turn or two about the body and arms, and ending in two half-hitches at the ankle.

The rope, it appears, was not brought for the purpose, but had been left lying on the top of Annie Cochran's laundry basket in the kitchen, when she went home last night.

Later: Greenough and Doctor Hayward have driven past, on their way to the main house. I have telephoned to Halliday, and he is on his way here. I may need him.

July 28.

After all, things passed off yesterday better than I had hoped. The detective concedes that, while in daylight it is a simple matter to reach the main house from the sun-dial, it is not an easy one at night. And I think he was puzzled when I said:

"After all, the real mystery to me is how Doctor Hayward, who says he was passing on the main road in his car, could reach the house so soon after I did."

"He had his car."

"But he didn't drive in. You left it outside the Lodge gates, doctor, didn't you?"

"I don't know just where the bell was ringing."

"But you know there was such a bell on the main house. Every one around here knows it. Even at that you made very good time. I had only had time to light one match and see the boy, when you turned your flashlight on me."

I imagine, and Halliday agrees with me, that whatever Greenough had in mind when he came, the new element thus introduced caused him to hesitate. And to add to his hesitation, the doctor, from the breezy attentiveness of his entrance, took to twitching and gnawing his finger tips.

"I don't suppose you are intimating that I knocked the boy down, Porter," he said, "but it sounds like it. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know him; never saw him, to my knowledge, until last night."

"I'm not intimating anything. I'm in a peculiar position; that's all. And you have been considerably more than intimating that I was where I had no business to be last night. I had, you see, exactly as much reason to be there as you had. Rather more, I imagine."

I was perhaps a trifle excited, but heaven knows I had a right to be.

"I know what you have in your mind, Mr. Greenough, and I'm glad to have this chance to lay my cards on the table. Ask my wife why I was on the float, the night Carroway was killed in the bay. 'She'll tell you I was in bed, until she roused me and sent me down to the beach. Ask Peter Geiss where I was at the hour when Halliday was attacked; he can tell you. Ask the newspaper reporter who told me, right here, about that culvert under the road where Halliday's car overturned; and ask Halliday himself about our excursion to examine it, and my losing my fountain pen there. And then ask yourself if I would open the gun-room window of the main house to make an entrance when I have in this desk a key to every door in the place."

Greenough smiled dryly.

"That's a pretty strong defense, considering that you haven't been accused," he said. "As a matter of fact, we hadn't found your fountain pen, Mr. Porter. I'm afraid we overlooked something there!"

Since they have gone, I feel, although he has not said so, that Halliday believes I have made a tactical error. Nevertheless, I feel a great sense of relief. I have at least made a hole in that web of circumstantial evidence which has seemed to be closing around me, and sent the detective scurrying back to the center of it again, to spin such new threads as he is able.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

Jews Fight For Cemetery

The Jews of Prague, Czechoslovakia, are putting up the fight of their lives to save their cemetery in the heart of that city—a cemetery 1,000 years old. It is one of the most ancient of all Jewish cemeteries, and it holds ashes of many rabbis and savants of the past. The city has grown around the place until the graveyard is now almost in the center. Modern buildings have arisen on the edges of this sacred square of the Jews, and it is with difficulty that the tide of expansion can be held back. The Jews are receiving aid from abroad in their defensive fight.—The Pathfinder.

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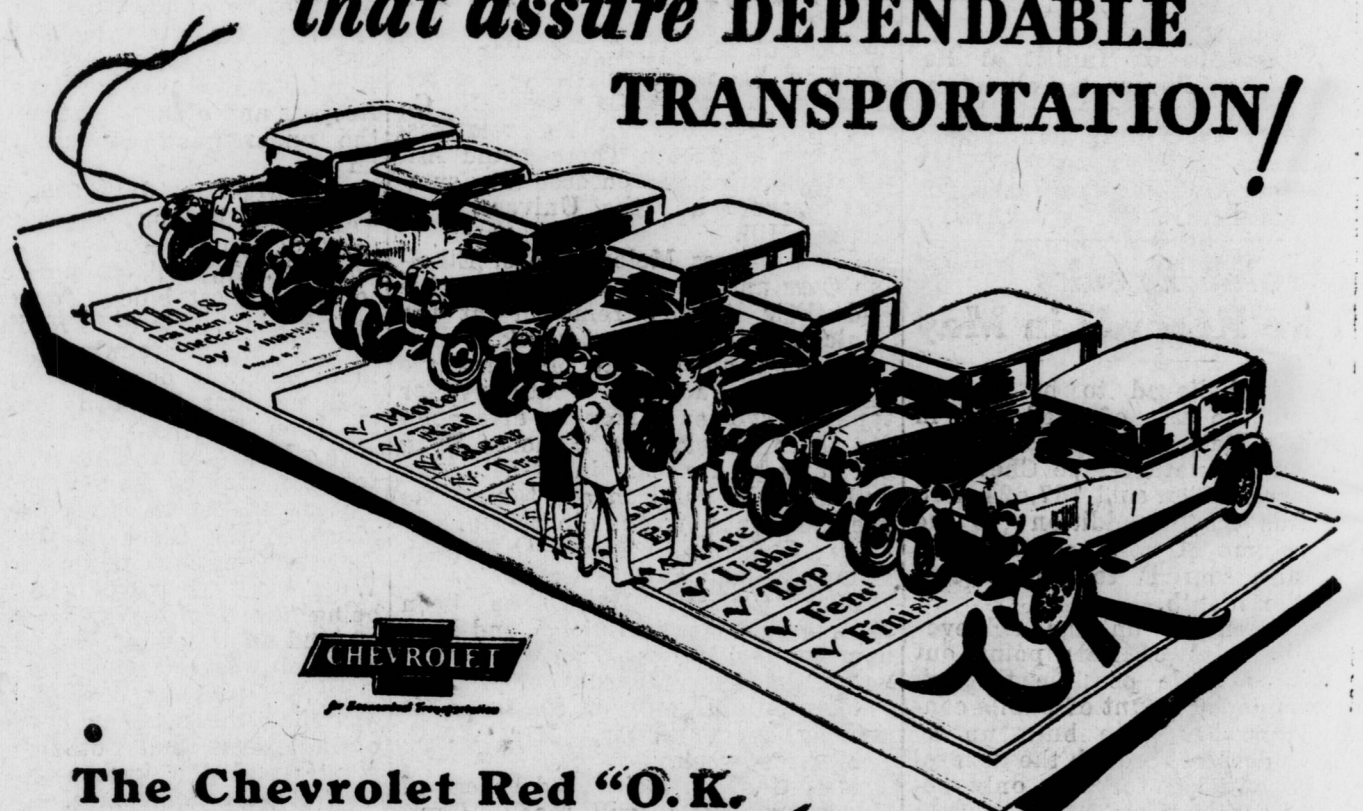
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