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THE LEADING LADY

GERALDINE BONNER

THE STORY

PROLOGUE—While dependent on the enforced hiding of her fiancé, Jim Dallas, slayer in self-defense of Homer Parkinson, member of a influential family, Sybil Saunders, popular actress, is engaged to play Viola in a charity performance of "Twenty-Night" on Gull Island, on the Maine coast. In the company are Sybil's bosom friend, Anne Tracy, Tracy's brother Joe, young wasterel and Aleck Stokes, an actor infatuated with Sybil.

CHAPTER I—After the play, which is a big hit, Wally Shine, director of the play, and Anne Tracy, who is a big hit, learns something of the jealousy, professional and otherwise, existing in the company.

CHAPTER II—Hugh Bassett, director of the play, and Anne Tracy, who is a big hit, learns something of the jealousy, professional and otherwise, existing in the company.

CHAPTER III—Joe Tracy is arranging for a vacation trip to Gull Island. He has news of Jim Dallas, and to secure the necessary funds they arrange to meet in a small summer house near the main building.

CHAPTER IV—The sound of a pistol shot starts the assembly. Investigation shows a revolver has been taken from a desk in the library. Flora Stokes, who is in with the announcement that Sybil has been shot and her body carried off by the swift tide that races by the island.

CHAPTER V—Flora Stokes tells Bassett she saw Sybil shot but did not see the murderer. Bassett notices the sheriff, Abel Williams. He arrives with Rawson, district attorney, and a man called Patrick. All the company is accounted for with the exception of Joe Tracy, presumably on his trip. Flora gives her evidence, and the authorities arrange so that no one can leave the island.

CHAPTER VI—Discussing the tragedy with Rawson and the opinion that Flora Stokes is the guilty person, the deed being actuated by jealousy. While they are talking, the sound of a crash in the living room makes them hasten there.

CHAPTER VII—Anne Tracy, shocked at her friend's death, is also uneasy about Joe. Remembering his rage against Sybil, and realizing she is not sure he left the island, her imagination pictures him as Sybil's murderer, and hiding in the room of the upper story, which is unoccupied. Seeking to inform him of the close watch kept on the island, she goes to the living room, and in the doorway she sees a man who she identifies as Sybil's murderer.

CHAPTER VIII—In the summer house the investigators find evidence that Sybil has been there, and know of Stokes' infatuation. Rawson and Williams at once suspect him of the murder.

CHAPTER IX—Stokes denies all knowledge of the crime and deftly throws suspicion on Joe. Rawson, somewhat impressed by the story put forward by Stokes, tells to the main band to investigate Joe's movements.

CHAPTER X—To the outside eye Anne had presented no more dolorous and dejected an aspect than any of the others. No one, not even Bassett, noticed that her demeanor was in any way other than what might have been expected.

CHAPTER XI—That they had been able to see into her mind the group at Gull Island would have received its second staggering shock.

CHAPTER XII—She kept as much to herself as she could without rousing curiosity. She had to think and to be alone where she could focus her thoughts, hold them trained on what she knew and what might develop. She wanted to keep her mind on the main issue, inhibit any fruitless speculation, wait and be ready. Joe was on the island, and with the guarded caseway would stay on the island till after they had gone. Her hope, giving her strength to go through the automatic actions of behavior, was that suspicion not being directed to him, he could lie hidden till they left and then make his getaway.

CHAPTER XIII—She knew that Gabriel had gone to White Beach for a week's duty, sea fishing, and Gabriel was the only person besides herself who knew that Joe had not crossed to the mainland. They surely would be moved away before a week and if, during that time, the belief that he had gone remained unshaken, he was safe.

CHAPTER XIV—So far she was confident that no suspicion had touched him. She did not see how it could. They were all satisfied that he had left, accepted in good faith. There would be no investigation of his movements, for there would be no reason for doing it. He had passed outside the circle of the tragedy, was eliminated as the actor, and if they didn't find him!

CHAPTER XV—Where was he? He had entered the living room by the door that led to the kitchen wing and rear stairs. That would look as if he was in the house. But she knew that no doors were locked on Gull Island, and that he might have come from outside, choosing the passage through the darkened building rather than expose himself to the moonlight. If he was in the house he must be in the vacant top story, and she was certain—every sound of heavy footsteps had been noted by her listening ears—that the men had not been there yet. That would argue that they felt no need of hurry. What

bered space, no stealthy body detached itself from the shadows. "Oh, answer me if you're there!" Her voice rose the shade of a tone. It came from the raftered roof in smothered supplication; the silence it had severed closed again, deep and secretive.

She feared to stay longer and slipped, wraithlike, down the stairs, in her room she sat down, and sighed. He must have been there. Where else could he be unless in one of the unoccupied apartments in the lower floors? But he hardly would have dared that with people coming and going. He had always done, or possibly found a hiding place too shut away for her whisper to penetrate. Tonight she would have to get food to him, take it up when the men were in the library and the others safe in their rooms.

She could do nothing more, and went downstairs in the hope of seeing Bassett. Since morning she had longed for a word with him. Not that she had any idea of telling him, the dretful secret was hers alone, to be confessed later, some awful day of reckoning and retribution. But she wanted to see him, get courage from his presence, feel the solace of his arms about her. She was lonely with her intolerable burden.

The living room was empty, but listening at the hall door she heard the murmur of men's voices in the library. They were in conference again and might be long. She sat across the flat land between the house and the ocean. She sat crouched, watching with set jaw. Presently they dropped over the edge of the cliffs, then inarticulate surges of prayer rose in the air, and her hands clasped against her breast, she rocked back and forth as if in unassuageable pain. But they always reappeared without him. When they returned to the house she fell back in the chair, her eyes closed, whispering broken words of thanksgiving.

When the search of the island started she went up to the side of the gallery that skirted the line of windows. The group of men came into her line of vision, moving across the flat land between the house and the ocean. She sat crouched, watching with set jaw. Presently they dropped over the edge of the cliffs, then inarticulate surges of prayer rose in the air, and her hands clasped against her breast, she rocked back and forth as if in unassuageable pain. But they always reappeared without him. When they returned to the house she fell back in the chair, her eyes closed, whispering broken words of thanksgiving.

After lunch she drifted out on the balcony with the others, and from there saw Bassett and the two officers of the law go down the path to the pine grove. Following Sybil's movements on the Point—that would take them some time. Mrs. Cornell said she was going to the kitchen to help Miss Pinkney (if it wasn't for that work she thought she'd go crazy), and she advised Anne to go upstairs and lie down.

"You look like the wrath of God, honey," she said, looking her hand through Anne's arm and drawing her with her. "You can't sleep, no one expects that of you. But stretch out on the bed and relax—you get some sort of rest that way."

Anne went with her, Mrs. Cornell's step drooping to a crawling pace as they crossed the living room, her arm drawing Anne closer, her hearty voice dwindling to a whisper.

"Do you know anything?" "No, how should I? Do you think they have any one in mind?" "They have two, dearie, as we all have. They've reached the door and she opened it, warily, and she thought I'm thinking it's the other and the third moment I'm thinking it's neither of them."

They passed through the doorway and went down the hall, stopping at the foot of the stairs. Mrs. Cornell offered a last consoling word: "You can be thankful for one thing, Anne, Joe's not being here."

"Joe?" "Oh, I'm not saying he had anything to do with it. But these cases—you read about them in the papers. Every little thing traced up. And she and Joe having been at loggerheads they'd be pouncing on that—not telling you anything, sending up your blood pressure with their questions. You're spared that, and it's worth keeping your mind on. Nothing is bad but what it might be worse."

She went on down the hall. Anne, on the stairs, waited till she heard the sound of the opening door and Miss Pinkney's welcoming voice, then she stole upward very softly. She did not go to her room, as Mrs. Cornell had advised, but tiptoed to the end of the hall where the staircase led to the top story. She ascended with delicate care, letting her weight come gradually on each step. Despite her precautions the boards creaked. The sounds seemed portentously entered in the deep quiet and she stopped for the silence to absorb them, and then, with chary foot, went on. At the top she stood, subduing her deep-drawn breaths, looking, listening. The middle of the floor was occupied by a spacious central hall furnished as a parlor and lit by a skylight. Giving on it were numerous small bedrooms, the doors open. The strings of the curtains, billowing out and drooping, were the only movements in the place. She moved to the middle of the room and sent her voice out in a whisper:

"Joe, Joe—are you here? It's Anne!" Her ears were strained for an answering whisper, her eyes swept about for a shape creeping into view, but the silence was unbroken, the emptiness undisturbed. She entered the rooms, peered about, opened cupboards, looked for signs of occupation. Again nothing—vacancy, dust in film on the bureau tops, beds untouched in meticulous smoothness.

One door was closed, near the starboard. Opening this, she looked into a storeroom, a large, dark interior lit by two small windows. They were dust-grimed, and the light came in dimly, showing up the turned trunks and boxes, pieces of furniture, lines of clothes hanging on the walls.

"Here," she thought, and with her heart leaping in her throat crossed the threshold.

"Joe, it's Anne. I've come to help you."

Nothing stirred in the enclosure, no stealthy body detached itself from the shadows.

ation, trying to hide what you think, trying to state only what you know, fairly, without personal feeling or prejudice. But it's up to me to do it till we round up something. I don't want to get anybody in wrong, but—good Lord, if I knew any one was—didn't guess, was sure of it—I'd give the information up just as quick as I could get across to that library."

Her hope was over and she saw now how wild it had been. Suddenly the doorway of the living room sprang into the dimness, an illumined square, and Miss Pinkney was visible moving about lighting the lamps.

"No moon tonight," said Bassett, and, getting up, drew her to her feet. "Come, let's go in. It's too chilly for you out here."

It was not till they had gathered round the supper table that Rawson's absence was revealed. Miss Pinkney, coming in with the teapot, saw the empty chair and frowned.

"Is Mr. Rawson coming to his supper?" she remarked with an acid note.

"Mr. Rawson's away on business," Williams answered. "You can keep something for him."

No more was said, and the meal proceeded on its dismal way. After supper Bassett and Williams retired to the library. They were surprised and intrigued by the length of Rawson's absence. Williams wondered if he could have come on anything about Joe Tracy; but Bassett shook the suggestion off with a shrug. He could check up on Joe in half an hour; besides, there was nothing to be looked for in that line. His confidence was not assumed, his mind was untroubled by any fears about Joe. This, something had turned up which might lead the chase in a new direction was so encouraging a thought that, by contrast to his sensations for the last twenty-four hours, he felt almost cheerful.

In the relaxation of the strain on it would be dark tonight—no moon—but there was the man at the causeway.

She sat with drooped head, immersed in thought, her hands thrust into the pockets of her sweater. It was the evening that Bassett found her. Life leaped into his face at his voice and she stretched a hand toward him.

"Oh, I've been hoping to see you," she breathed, already trained to a low whinniness of tone in roughened words.

The words the gesture, pierced his heart. She looked so disconsolate, so wan, her face the pallor of ivory, her black hair, always shining and smooth, pushed back from her brow in a rouged and unbecoming way.

He had charged himself to keep from her any knowledge of the interest in Joe, but had he been of the loose-tongued sort that unburdened itself, the sight of her devastated beauty would have sent his mind reeling.

"I thought I was never going to get a word with you," he said. "This is the first moment I've had. How are you?"

She asserted her well-being, and he studied her face with anxious eyes.

"Dear Anne," he murmured, lifting her hand, pressed it to his lips. The two hands remained together, the woman's upturned, the man's enveloping grasp.

"That faint feeling last night, I suppose that will bleach you out for a while!"

"Oh, I'm all over that. It was a crazy thing for me to do, going down and then knocking the lamp over. They didn't think anything of it, did they?"

"Anything of it? Why, no, what would they think? You explained it to them and they were satisfied with what you said. And afterward, when I told Williams that he could absolutely trust your word."

"I gave a great deal of trouble and—" Her voice was husky and she cleared her throat. After a moment she went on: "I suppose you can't tell me anything—anything of what they're doing?"

"No. It's all a mess so far—feeling about in the dark—nothing sure."

"But they must be feeling about after some one?" "Darling, what's the good of talking about it? We don't get many minutes together and we don't want to spoil them. Let's try to forget just what we're here for."

"Nothing would make me do that but being dead myself."

She leaned her head on his shoulder and drew her hand from his to clasp it round his arm. He said nothing for a moment, perturbed by her words and tone. He had thought of getting her away, having felt he must do it at once, the shadow of the tragedy was too dark on her spirit.

"I've got to get her out here if I go to jail for it," he said to himself. "She can't stand much more of this."

She, too, was silent for a space, stilled by the attack of a sudden temptation. She wanted to be close to him again, break down the barriers and extend her arms to him for succor and support. The desire to tell him gripped her undimmed. She did not dare to broach it suddenly, sense enough remained in her to go carefully step by step.

"I wonder if any one here does know something and is keeping it back?"

"It may be—too frightened to speak." He gave her an uneasy side glance. "Are you imagining that you know something you ought to tell?"

"No, oh, no. But I keep thinking of it all kinds of possibilities. Now you, if you had suspicions of some one?"

He looked at the grass at his feet in harassed-survey of his obligation.

"I'm the only person here they care to trust. It's a devilish position, trying to hide what you think, trying to state only what you know, fairly, without personal feeling or prejudice. But it's up to me to do it till we round up something. I don't want to get anybody in wrong, but—good Lord, if I knew any one was—didn't guess, was sure of it—I'd give the information up just as quick as I could get across to that library."

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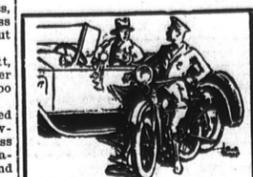
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