

The First Chapter

A GRAVE AT MIDNIGHT

The man standing at the top of the hole was little more than a darker shadow etched against the gloomful, dreary night. A sullen wind lashed the branches of the trees behind him as he rubbed his hands together, trying to work a little warmth into the ends of his fingers. "Can you not dig any faster?"

Tom leaned on his shovel and stretched his tired shoulders, sending aching pains through every weary scrap of muscle. "True it is I cannot."

The rain was in Tom's eyes and down the back of his neck. It pooled in the dirt at his feet making a mucky muddy mess of his shoes, and making each shovelful of soggy dirt heavier than the last. It dripped from the branches above and ran in little waterfalls down the sides of the hole he was digging. Standing as he was at the bottom, looking up against the dark background, the face of the man above was cast in shadow by the broad brim of his hat. Taking the haft of the shovel in his calloused hands, he tossed another spadeful of mud onto the mound he'd been erecting at the hole's side.

"Time's a-wastin'," the man said. "You've dug enough. Deep enough on a night like this. Desist."

"That's a welcome word. Welcome and long looked for it is."

"Now clamber up here and give us a hand lowering this item into the ground." The man was walking towards the horse and cart as Tom heaved his body out of the muddy hole and got himself to his feet. He walked over, still stretching his shoulders and his elbows, and looked at the long wooden box in the back of the cart they'd come in. It had a grim air about it, that box, and Tom thought once or twice he'd heard something inside it moving around, but he'd known better than to ask what it held. The man hopped in the back of the cart and made some furtive movements with his hands, twisting them now this way and then another. "Here, I'm at the front," he said. He gave a shove and the long casket slid out the back. "Can you grab ahold of that?" Tom grabbed it but he wasn't prepared for how cold it felt, bone chilling cold, more frigid than a block of ice. It sent shivers from his fingers all up his arms. "Good. Get that, and I've got this end," the man said as he hopped off onto the ground, still holding the box. He was a short man, and the end he held was lower than Tom's. At one point he asked to stop so he could adjust a certain object in his pocket, and then they went on. When they came to the hole, Tom lowered himself in holding the casket, but the top wasn't nailed shut, and it opened a little, almost as if something inside was trying to get out. In the ghostly moonlight he saw a man's face. It was a hard, chiseled face, and then the short man clapped the lid shut and the sight was gone. All the same, it was a face he thought he knew, but the back of his mind was empty as to where or how.

The man jumped into the hole still holding his end, making a muddy splash. As the box hit the bottom, with a vigorous leap and a scramble Tom was back standing on the edge of the hole, and he was aiming a pistol at the man now standing below him.

"Now I think we'll have it out and be done. I'll have that fifteen dollars of which we spoke."

"I am right disgusted with you. You never thought I'd pay?"

"A hole dug to hold one man can just as well hold two. And a sly man likes of you might bury something and want no one else the wiser. Maybe a sly man thought that way would see to it any who helped wouldn't be able to speak of what was buried. So a man must take a care, and I'm taking a care now. We'll have just what we agreed on."

“Here’s your fifteen dollars.” He held out a bag. “I said I’d pay, and I keep my word. Take it from my hand if you dare come that close.”

“Throw it here.”

He threw it with a snort that wrinkled his lips.

Tom carefully picked up the bag and opened it, making sure he kept the man well under observation. Once satisfied as to its contents, he hung the bag on his belt and said, “Take off your clothes.”

“True it is I will not be doing that. A night like this in the dismal stinking woods, I’d die two times of the rheumatism. I will not be taking off my clothes.”

“They’ve got to come off.”

“You’ve got the cart, take it and take yourself away. I’ll follow on foot. A sad night it’ll be for me, I can tell you. Walking all the way, and I’ve the corns like you wouldn’t believe. But I’m not taking off my clothes. You can shoot me dead. I’m not taking them off.”

“We’re at an impasse.”

“What I’ll do, I’ll take off my shoes. An impasse, he calls it. I’ll take off my shoes, will that satisfy you? You big bad man holding me up like you are?”

Tom stood silent, and his silence held a note of perplexity. “Go on,” he said at last. “Take off your shoes. And your pants. That’ll take us to the fair.”

“Bad enough it is I take off my shoes in the thistles as you wouldn’t believe. Thorns that’ve been waiting since the start of time just to stick into the nice toes of a man like me. Well, Lord knows, this is the night they’ve waited for. I’ll take off my shoes.” He said this undoing his laces, “but I won’t be taking off my pants.” He threw his two shoes onto the pile of mud Tom was standing beside. “Go ahead, take the cart, take my shoes, I’ll fill in the hole and come to town with my two feet torn to tatters and the blood running down my stumps that’ll be all that’s left. But I’m not taking off my pants.”

“Take off your pants.”

“I’ll not be forgetting this. You’ll have to watch your backside from this day till you die, you will. There’ll be one not going to rest till you’re regretting this night’s doings as much as he. I’ve shown I’m a man who keeps his word. There was no need for any of this. I’d have given you the second fifteen and driven you back to town like I said.”

Just then it looked as though the box tried to open again, and the man hit something inside it with his shovel. Tom decided it was time to go. He said, “You stay in that hole, mister, you stay till I’m gone. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, so just sit there and don’t think about following where I go. I’d say this is a good night’s business. And it’s hard on me but I’ll let you keep your pants.”

Tom walked back to the cart and unhooked the horse. He threw the pair of shoes in the back of the cart and then took the reins and put the horse in the way of an amble back to town. As he rode away he heard the crack of a shot, and a bullet whizzed past his right ear. He put his head down and whipped the horse to a gallop. Damn, he said to himself, I should’ve taken his pants.

He thundered past the road at the crossroads, and as he made the last turn approaching the town the rain had let up and there were first signs of light slipping craftily into the sky towards the east. He saw ahead of him Katie Jean waiting under the dripping arms of a sheltering beech. He brought the cart to a standstill and got out to sit beside her.

“Where you coming from, on such a dull and unentertaining night as this?” she asked.

“I had a bit of a queer business I signed up for. Put some money in my pocket this night before I’m shipping out.”

“And that was a better use of the night than to spend it in the arms of one who won’t be holding you for two years now. I see your point.”

“Lord knows I’ll be missing you. Thought I might want to get some practice at it. Get that running start I’ve heard about. Kiss me, Katie.”

“The whys of a woman with a sailor man are soon answered.”

“That was a kiss?”

“Reckon it was.”

“I couldn’t know if I felt it, or if it was one of those gnats I see maybe it landed on my cheek, celebrating the dizzy wonder of being a gnat.”

“I was crying in my bedroom. And you was in the pub making an address to your two best friends, whiskey and stout, and I fear they’ve settled their disagreeableness and have decided you’re the lad.”

“That they have. Those friends of mine were having their tricks. I was in a sure shmother and I didn’t know if I’d be able to get out of it. But there was this character, a Mr. X he called himself, wouldn’t go by his full name, he had me by the ear now, and he was promising he’d give me thirty silver dollars just for a little night’s work. He’d give me fifteen up front, and the other fifteen when the job was done. Well before you’d know, I was on the cart with him and driving the horse out of town to a little place in the back of beyond where he told me to dig him a hole.”

“And what was in the hole?”

“That I’d rather not be saying.”

“Mr. X, and a hole you dug, and you’d not say what’s in it. You have a way of telling a story with the story left out.”

“I’ll tell you I dug the hole and I collected my thirty dollars.”

“And where’s this leave Mr. X?”

“The last I seen he was in the way of filling the hole, but those are his shoes in the cart.”

“Funny man, Mr. X. He gives you thirty dollars and a pair of shoes to dig him a hole just so he can fill it up again. I’ve got a powerful feeling something’s been left out of this tale, and I’ve a sneaking suspicion it might be a Mrs. X what I’m not hearing of.”

“There’s no Mrs. X at all. Or if there is I saw neither hide nor whisker of her this night.”

“It’ll be an easy thing to learn who you were with. I’ll keep a look out for someone with no shoes, and when I find her I’ll be asking if her foot fits into one of those. Kind of like an old girl I heard tell of named Cinderella.”

“It’d be Cinderella on an awfully bad night. Those are a man’s shoes.”

“Never knew you to be too particular once you’d had a few.”

“I’m glad it was you said that not me; it makes a poor reflection on yourself.”

“O damn you!” Katie Jean hit him on the cheek.

“Whoa, whoa, let’s not part like this. You know I have to be going. I’ve signed on the Queen of Bel Harbor and she’s bound away on the morning tide.” He put his arms around her. “Two long years till I’ll be back, and every empty night of those long years will be filled with the thought of you.”

“Thoughts of me and whoever’s handy in those ports you’ll be landing in. I know who you are, Tom. I know you better than you know yourself. But I’m grateful I found you this morning because I’d not have you going without me having a last look at you, and I’d got ready a gift, a little token you might call it, to carry with you, to remind you who’s waiting for you here on the shore.” And with that she gave him a little box.

“Oh, Katie, you shouldn’t have.”

“Yes, I know I shouldn’t have, and now I’ve done it I’m half sorry about it, but here, take it and be gone.”

He opened the box and inside was a watch for his fob pocket. The outside bore a design of knots and tangles, and when he opened it the little second hand was ticking round, and on the inside of the lid was engraved “From your own darling Katie.” He was struck speechless.

Katie went on, “Because you’re always missing your appointments and complaining you don’t know the time, well now you’ve no excuse. I saved up for it and I –“ here she broke down for a moment. Then she continued, “And I’m a silly girl for thinking of you at all. But I was waiting to give it to you last night and you were never there and I can tell you because I checked and the watch is a good one, there was not ten minutes that passed I didn’t cry a tear for you.”

“Katie, Katie, oh girl. You’ve struck me sore. I wish you hadn’t done this. Why is it a woman’s kindness hurts so much, and what a selfish idiot I am, that you’ve got this for me and I’m standing here and my hands are empty and I’ve nothing for you. And you got it engraved. I’m feeling as worthless as a man can feel. I know you’ve no pity for me and I’ve none for my own self, but you’ve struck me sore you have. Why did you have to do it?”

“Because of the love I have for you, Tom.” She kissed him.

“I’ll cherish this, I will. You shouldn’t have done this, but I’m glad you did. I will keep this and hold it dear all my days.” He looked at the watch. “And if the time it tells is true, I’ve no time to be spending with you. I’m afraid I’ll be missed on the docks.”

“Of course the time it tells is true. You think I’d give you a gift of a watch and it not tell the right time?”

He got up, putting his hat back on his head. “This is the last one. No more voyages after this. I promise you that.” She looked at him, and tried to save it in her mind just how he was. The cut of his hair, and the little smile that tried to say more than he’d allow, and all the way he stood there in the morning sun, wincing from the water still dropping off the leaves. “This is the one that’ll make my fortune and no mistake. There’s no mistaking at all. Oh, Katie, it seems the only time I love you is when I leave you. I haven’t the words to say what’s in my heart. It’ll be just a shell of me on the ship because the best part of me will be here still with you. And if I could have your face in front of me like this all the days of my life I’d be a very blessed man.”

They kissed, and held each other for a lengthy moment, and then he got back in the cart and drove off; but before turning the next bend he looked back, and Katie Jean was still there, still looking, following with her lonely eyes, till he turned the corner and was gone.

He left the horse and cart tied in front of the saloon, figuring Mr. X would be sure to find them there. It crossed his mind to sell them – the cart wasn’t worth much but the horse might be – to get his own back for that bullet Mr. X had sent in his direction. But he was tired, and there wasn’t much time. He’d gotten what he’d bargained for and didn’t see any point in angering Mr. X more than he had already. He was chewing these thoughts over as he neared the quays, where he found there was a scene of great busyness. People were scurrying back and forth, carrying packets and parcels and bales and not noticing who they were stampeding next to in their desperate bustle to see that everything was taken care of and stored right and proper. The smell of the tar and the salt was overwhelming, and there was a multitude of ships of all sizes and rigs. Sailors were singing and going aloft, hanging to threads far over Tom’s head, and there was wonderful figureheads, some that had been all over the ocean and back, and many old sailors with whiskers and rings in their ears. Mariners from up and down the Coast and beyond could be seen. There were gnarly, hirsute natives of the Gongorran Plateau, and tall green-eyed

Jacquanauts from Terra Berra. Tom found his ship, the Queen of Bel Harbor. She was a mighty and a splendid galleon, almost a floating castle, and she loomed over the vessels docked next to her. It was plentiful goods she'd carry, and it would be a profitable voyage for certain. The boatswain was a man named Ramsey, dressed in stout blue cloth, who piped him aboard but hadn't much patience for a seaman on tired legs who had to be told twice which way his cabin was. Tom did his best to stay out of his way, and neither of his cabin mates being present, he unpacked his kit, chose a lower bunk for himself, and stretched out to get some sleep before he'd be wanted on deck.

Sometime later a weary, disgruntled, and very footsore traveler came limping into town. Muttering an incessant string of curses under his breath, he found his way to the saloon, where he was relieved to see his horse waiting patiently, with his cart, tied to the hitching post. Seating himself on the edge of the horse trough, he put his feet in the water and massaged his toes and his instep. As he did so his eye was caught by a young man with red hair seated in a splint-bottomed chair leaned precariously against the wall behind him. His hat was slouched forward, covering the top of his face, and he was idly blowing on a harmonica, exploring a few sounds, but nothing quite approaching a melody.

"Hey, Stranger, Miss Deirdre's wondering where you been," the young man said, putting the harmonica to one side.

"Let her wonder."

"She saw your cart, couldn't understand if you was back, why you hadn't paid her a call."

"I wasn't back is why."

The only answer was a few tuneless notes from the harmonica. The traveler stood and retrieved his shoes from the cart. He rubbed off the mud and slid his feet into them. He was in no mood to bandy words. As he strode past the young man he gave a kick to his chair leg that sent him sprawling, and then throwing the saloon doors open he walked decisively to the back, where he mounted a stair and rapped on the door of Miss Deirdre's office.

"Enter."

He opened the door. Miss Deirdre was floating two feet from the ceiling. She wore a long gown that trailed between her legs, and a silver belt around her waist, and on it thirteen bells. She held her arms extended over her head as she moved gently across the room, her long raven locks hardly moving in the almost undetectable breeze. Barely turning in the direction of her visitor, she said, "A mighty burden was in your hands under cover of night. The veil of darkness is now long withdrawn, and what have you to say of it?"

"There's many a corse I've put to bed, but never before was there one that so kept wanting to sit up. It was a good piece of work getting that one underground, I'll have you know that." A devil with the head of an ostrich and the legs of a toad sat up in the corner and gave him a wicked grin.

"The Son of Light is in the grave?" Her outstretched fingertips just touched the wall, and she pushed off and started gently gliding towards the other side of the room.

"He's in the grave sure enough, and can't you come down where a man can look you in the eye? A man'd get a woeful crick in the neck talking to a body slithering about up there." For just a moment he saw the water she floated on, a sunny river filled with weeds and shimmering fish. She seemed to turn and swim down towards the level where he stood at the river's bottom and then the vision was gone and she was seated in an armchair that had appeared near to hand. She inserted a cigarette into a cigarette holder that must have been eight inches long. Then, lighting the cigarette, she inserted the other end of the cigarette holder in her mouth, and as she

inhaled a grateful puff of smoke, she gestured him to sit in a caquetoire that had shown up just behind him.

“He blocked me at every turn,” she said. “I can hardly believe he’s dead. The time has come to spread my wings . . .” She took another puff, and expelled the smoke from her mouth with evident satisfaction. “Now, for reasons that are quite compelling, but which I haven’t time to go into, Hell will be coming to the Coast. Are you ready?”

“Aren’t I just?” He sat back and produced a snuff box from his waistcoat pocket. Proceeding to take a good snort in each nostril, he continued, “The pirates of San Luno Bay are starving for a fight. And I’ve the bait for them. The emerald eye of Maddibimbo has been purloined. The ones who did it knifed the thing out of the idol’s face. They’ve left a trail for the angry priests to follow, but they have a date set to sell it in the back streets of Kashahar.”

“Whom would they be selling it to?”

“That would be a shady gentleman wouldn’t want his name recorded in this here transaction. But the point of the matter is I’ll be letting Crazy Dog and his buccaneers know where the exchange is to take place, so when the thieves arrive, they’ll find the pirates waiting on them.”

“I take it these are the same pirates that were raked by the guns of Lost Bastard Island only a fortnight ago, smuggling their rum into Cutthroat Bay.”

“They would be the ones. And I’m thinking the munitions depot on that island has been recently enlarged. Is that the case?”

“It has.” She leaned forward and made a point of capturing his eye. “General Hobsbawm has been recruiting in the Panhandle and all round the Forgotten Forest. The force he’s raised is substantial, though ill-trained and young, liable to run at the first chance. This time they’re minded to put the blasted Indians down for good. I also know that Half Moon and his braves have been smoking the holy mushroom, and while dancing round the totem of war and death they’ve called on their bitter ancestors for help, and aren’t they just that thirsty for a chance to drink some soldiers’ blood. But to get the army marching into the Forest, maybe a fire at their back will do the trick.”

This is how it always starts, he was thinking, and a satisfied glint came to his eye. Mankind is that blood-thirsty an animal. His instinct is always to make sure there are no survivors. The devil in the corner had produced a tarnished trumpet and was tooting away. “So I’ll be off to Kashahar,” he said. “But on my way, there’s a new lot of slaves coming to the markets of Indradoon, and there’s rumors of rebellion I’ll be whispering into some willing ears. I suspect there’s many won’t go docile into that sweating hellhole of misery and subjugation.”

Little whirlpools appeared where the top of the water would have been and started dancing round the room, casting ripples from the light that came through the windows. Miss Deirdre stood, and spreading her arms invoked the obscene deity she worshipped and cast her wicked spell. “A new age is come. We’re in the Devil’s workshop now. Send me demons, send me the dangerous, the resolute, those fierce to upset the continuity of earth. Send me gremlins to undermine and rabid beasts to overwhelm the great convexity of this globe! Send me those who would destroy, dismantle, and demolish!” Tiny horned demons appeared in little explosions of light throughout the room, some floating in the air, others perched on the furniture. They howled icy shrieks of glee, turning somersaults in the air.

A sound as of wings muted by great distance seemed to happen just at the top of the traveler’s skull. He could hear it there, like a monstrous bird flapping incredibly high in the sky but somehow still inside his head. The flapping horror hovered lower, seeming to settle now somewhere behind and just above his right shoulder. He looked behind, jumped up and started

to run. He was running through the whirlpools of light and in between the demons dancing round his head, and when he looked behind he saw ferocious talons taking shape in the gloom above him. Just at that moment with one impassioned scream Miss Deirdre vanished in a startling fizzing burst of crimson motes that scattered through the air and disappeared before they'd hit the floor, leaving only her cigarette holder hovering tentatively in mid-air with the cigarette still lit. The whirlpools and the demons that had been tripping round the room were gone like smoke. The devil in the corner hid his trumpet somewhere in his posterior and went out with a pop. Suddenly the room was empty save for himself. Where there had been chairs there were now piles of rotten sticks. Miss Deirdre reappeared for just a moment to catch her cigarette before it hit the floor, and then was gone again. He looked about himself, muttered something under his breath, and strode out the door. He descended the stair and cast his eyes round the unfriendly saloon. A few of the faces at the bar went so far as to look up from the bottles they held before them.

"I need a man who'll ride with me to that fly-infested blister on the land they call Indradoon. I have business in the slave markets there. Fifteen silver dollars in your pocket now and another fifteen when the job is done. A man can't be fairer than that. Who'll ride with me?"

There was a general resurgence of interest in the contents of the drinks. The traveling man cursed and walked out onto the boardwalk outside. The young man with the harmonica was still there. In fact he'd acquired a banjo as well, and was picking at it in a desultory fashion, as much as to say I know I can't play this very well but neither can you.

"Fergus," said the traveling man. "You're mine."

"Not me. Nossir."

"Come off that nonsense. Have you fed my horse?"

"No."

"Why not? What have you been doing all the time I've been dallying with Miss Deirdre?"

"Haven't been doin' nothin'."

"No, I see. Well look sharp. Get Dobbin a good feed of oats, and unhitch him from this cart. We won't be needing that. Have you a horse of your own?"

"No."

"Of course you do."

"Said I don't."

"What did you do with your horse?"

"I never –"

"Did you sell him for that banjo?"

"A horse'd be worth a lot more than a banjo."

"I've seen them that weren't. So what you're telling me is, I've got to get you a horse, is that the long and the short of it?"

"No, don't get no horse. I'm not goin' nowhere."

At just that moment, a black stallion no one could recall having seen before ambled up and whinnied in a companionable manner. Fergus kicked the side of the building and said, "Gol darn it, Miss Deirdre, I hears you."

The traveling man added, "Now all you need's a saddle."

Fergus went off mumbling, "That Miss Deirdre's in my head and all, it's like she's squeezed my thoughts down till they're not much more than a little oil that spills out my ears. And she's taken up the rest of my head for herself."

"I wouldn't fret. It's not as if you're losing much. That banjo's got more brains than you do."

Now come on.” He unhitched the horse.

That afternoon the two of them were out of town, on the road to Indradoon.