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Strange STORIES


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The Four Who Came Back

By TALLY MASON

Author of "The Room in the Annex," "Lord of Evil," etc.



Redding arranged the bodies so it would look like a fight.

When They Put Don Mason Off the Train, He Landed Where the Dead Return for Vengeance!

IF THE brakeman had not found me just before we got to Milwaukee, and if he had not kicked me off the train, this story might never have been told. As it was, I landed in unknown country just before midnight.

Far away, against the sky, I could see the glow of lights, and knew that Milwaukee lay there. But how far, I could not judge, and much as I would have liked to finish my free ride into

the city that night, I didn't want to try finding my way across strange country in the darkness.

Rather than go exploring for a village, I turned toward the first light that came out of the darkness. At the outset, I knew that I would have to tell exactly what happened to me, because I was much too tired to make up a story.

The house was far back from the main road, set in a little grove of

trees, pressing close upon it. There was a strangely repellant atmosphere about the place that made me hesitate for a moment. Then I went up and knocked on the door.

A pretty, dark woman answered my knock. She had come silently along the passage beyond the door, and stood before me suddenly, holding the lamp high in her hand.

"Good evening," I said. "Can you put me up for the night?"

Without answering, she stepped aside and motioned me to enter. I stepped past her. Perhaps it would not be necessary to tell my story after all, I thought.

BESIDES the woman, there were two men in the house. Both seemed younger than the woman at first.

But as she came forward into the light, and bent between the men to return the lamp to the table, I saw that she was considerably older than I had at first taken her to be. At that moment she looked forty at least. The men were certainly not more than thirty.

The men looked at me curiously. One of them turned to the woman.

"Who's this, Amy?" he asked.

Amy shrugged her shoulders.

"He hasn't told me. Asked if we could put him up, and I supposed we could."

"The name is Don Mason," I said. "Frankly, I've just been kicked off the train to Milwaukee for taking a free ride in a box car."

The men smiled vaguely. The woman did not appear to be interested. The three of them began talking to themselves, ignoring me utterly. The two men were called Con and Al. Having done me the honor of noticing me, they seemed to have forgotten me. I spied a cot in one corner of the long room, and motioned toward it.

"Could I sleep there?" I asked.

The men merely nodded. The woman said nothing. Somewhat disconcerted, I went over to the cot and lay down. I was dead tired. Yet I was destined to get little sleep that night.

I had hardly closed my eyes, when

my ears caught ominous and suggestive words. Opening one eye warily, I looked toward the table. The three were sitting close around it, their heads together. The man, called Con, was talking.

"It's either Redding or us, now! There's no other way out. The minute we hijacked his load, we let ourselves in for it. When he comes, there'll not be much parley, if I know Redding."

I had not grasped the full import of what had been said before the man himself appeared. He had let himself in silently, and the first intimation of his presence was his abrupt, sharp voice from the threshold.

"Brought the boys, eh, Amy?"

At the sound of his voice, the three in the room whirled about, facing him, their hands going instinctively to concealed weapons. But Redding's hands were in his coat pockets, and both pockets bulged with hidden weapons.

"Didn't think I'd come so early, did you?" Redding went on, chuckling evilly.

I DIDN'T like the sound of his voice. It was ominous, menacing. The three at the table seemed to feel this, too, for their faces gave them away. They stood in mortal terror of the man who had crept upon them so silently.

Redding went on talking.

"You bunch of lousy hijackers! How'd you ever expect to get away with that? You could have picked on someone else, but not Redding."

What happened then came almost too swiftly for my sight. Two shots rang out, and the two men at the table pitched forward and crumpled to the floor. One of them shuddered a little, that was all. Both were dead almost instantly.

The woman had acted almost as quickly. She had drawn her gun, and sent a shot at Redding. Almost at the same moment he had fired again, and Amy went down. For a moment Redding stood there. Then, he strode forward and began to move the bodies about. I lay still as death, fearing that any moment Redding might see me in the dark corner where the cot

was, might send me to join the three he had so ruthlessly shot.

Redding completed his evil job, at last. When he stood up, I saw that the woman's shot had hit him in the arm. Blood was spotting the cloth of his coat. Still he had not noticed me. I hardly dared breathe. He looked carefully around the room, before he bent to pocket the two revolvers the dead men had never had a chance to draw, and left his own in their place.

Then he turned abruptly and went out as silently as he had come. For a moment I waited. Then, I jumped lightly to the floor, now wide awake, still shuddering in fear that the man might come back, and went swiftly to the still bodies on the floor. Redding had arranged the bodies in such a way that it looked as if a battle had taken place between the men and the woman!

Somehow I found my way out of that sinister house. I remember racing wildly down the first road that offered itself, and coming at last into a village there. The first person I ran into directed me to the sheriff's home.

Incoherent as my story was, my earnestness must have impressed the sheriff, for as soon as he had dressed himself, we were making our way back down the road I had traversed so wildly only a short time before. The sheriff's car brought us to the house in the trees in short order.

The light was out. For a moment I was afraid that Redding had come back. Then I noticed that the sheriff was staring at me curiously.

"Say," he said at last, "what is this? You telling me that there's been another murder in this place."

"I saw it," I said. "As plain as I see you."

The sheriff went on ahead, but I was

close behind. The house was empty! There was no scrap of furniture anywhere about save in the room I had occupied. There, a rickety bed and a broken table were pushed over against one wall. The ancient coverings on the bed were rumpled. I had lain there!

The sheriff was angry.

"Tell me that story again, brother," he said.

The shock of finding the place empty calmed me considerably, and I told what I had seen a good deal more coherently than I had first blurted it out.

After I had finished the sheriff said:

"I don't know where you got that story, or what you've been drinking, but Con Albrite and Al Paxton shot it out with Amy Pearson here about three months ago. It was a clear case. And Redding had nothing to do with it, though those three crooks had hijacked his liquor."

Before the sheriff was through talking, I knew that he had looked on the whole story as a fabrication and the imagination of a drunken mind. He thought I had read the story in the newspapers and had dreamed about it.

The up-shot of it all was, that I got a berth in the town jail for the remainder of the night.

But the next morning, when he let me out, the sheriff looked plenty puzzled himself—and a little apologetic. He couldn't explain just how it was that the gangster, Redding, had died during the night of an infection from a bullet wound in the arm. He couldn't explain how the bullet they found in that wound had come from a police revolver that Amy Pearson had stolen from a drunken deputy a long time ago.
