

The Red-Headed Man :: By Leslie McFarlane

The Haileyburian's New Serial Story



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Chapter I

The Corpse on the Shore

When I think of the red-headed man I often wonder what sort of fellow he was in life: whether he was affable or morose, good-natured or surly, dependable or erratic. I imagine, as one builds up impressions of one he has never known, that he must have been a cheerful, reckless young madcap without an ounce of fear or timidity in his make-up; quick tempered, perhaps, and maybe a bit too ready with his fists, as ready to accept a challenge from life itself as from another man.

I imagine, too, that he had a bubbling effervescence of spirit, a cheerful insouciance even in misfortune, and a ready smile under all circumstances. Didn't he meet death with a grin?

Somehow, I can never think of that grin, frozen on his dead, handsome face, without being convinced of the immortality of the soul. They could kill his body but they could not kill that defiant flame that burned within him.

Dead though he was, he brought into my life the only pulsing episode of wild adventure that I have ever known. Adventure comes seldom, if ever, to a country boy on a lonely farm, and it is quite possible that I shall spend the rest of my days in placid peace; but, at any rate, I can look back upon a day and a night of swift events, of mystery, and of threatening death. Some people, such as the red-headed man, have a destiny of violence, and others are fated for the ruts of serenity. I like to believe that when the red-headed man came into my life he tossed me a fragment of his own destiny, a few hours of the sort he would have enjoyed.

I live on a farm on the coast of Lake Huron, so far to the south that on clear days one can see the Ontario shore. My father is dead, and after his passing I remained at the farm with my mother. When the raging waves of a stormy night cast the red-headed man into my life I was twenty-three years of age, and in that time I had known nothing more exciting than the novelty of an occasional trip to the city. Then I was plunged abruptly into a stimulating bath of melodrama.

It was a crisp fall morning, with the sun shining and the lake sparkling with a thousand little smiles, when I found the body on the shore.

I have seen few dead people in my time, and until then none who had died by violence. This man lay sprawled on the shingle, his arms flung wide and his rigid face upturned to the sky, while the little waves broke about his inert legs. He was a young man, lean of face, and his strong white teeth were bared in a grin of defiance that even death could not

erase. He seemed to have met his fate with a sardonic scorn that persisted even beyond the supremacy of defeat. The water had plastered his red hair to his skull, but a limp strand had fallen back to disclose a neat blue hole in the centre of the forehead.

It seemed strange, unbelievable that this young man should be dead. Even the flight of his soul had not robbed his young body of an impression of virility and strength. I stood there and gaped, as though in momentary expectation that he would struggle to his feet and stand erect.

But he lay there on the desolate beach under the immensity of the sky, and the water lap-lapped about his legs. The waves chopped against the rocks.

At last I bent down, gingerly grasped the shoulders of the blue pea-jacket and dragged the dead man farther up on the beach. He was incredibly heavy. When I relinquished my hold he slumped back on the pebbles, and his head turned slowly until his cheek rested on the shore, as though he had stirred in slumber.

The blue hole in his white forehead fascinated me. This man had not been drowned; no capricious accident had contrived his death. He had been murdered and his body had been cast to the waves. I looked over the restless blue waters, far across the haze that masked the Ontario shore, and I stood motionless under the golden sun. The fair lake seemed to mock me in the smiling innocence of its beauty. The dead man seemed to mock me in the terrific wisdom of that sardonic grin. Their common secret was wrapped in silence.

I turned and slowly moved away in the direction of the farmhouse. After a few paces I looked back, impelled by all the fascination of the horrible and the

macabre. The dead man lay as I had left him, his arms flung back in that defiant gesture of resignation; but he seemed very lonely and small on that great expanse of beach, by the wide acres of water, beneath the empty enormity of the sky. I turned again and hurried toward home.

My mother was washing dishes in the kitchen, for it was but a little after breakfast, and she looked up, humming softly to herself, as I came in. For a few minutes I didn't know just what to say. I took a drink of water, shuffled about, looked out the window, got up again, wondering how to break the news. At last, abruptly:

"I think I'll go into town."
"To town?" The dish-rag was suspended in mid-air, dripping water over the floor. "At this hour of day? What on earth would you be going to town for, lad?"

"I—I just found something down on the beach."

Mother returned the dish-rag to the pan and dried her hands on her apron with great deliberation.

"What have you found?" she asked quietly.

"A man."
Mother sat down in the nearest chair and dried her hands all over again. Then she rubbed her spectacles mechanically.

"Dead?" she interrogated faintly.

I nodded.

"For Heaven's sake! How? Where?"

"He was shot," I explained. "I guess his body was washed ashore in the night."

"Yes, it was rough last night," she observed, as though that were the important thing. "Mercy me! A dead man! Are you sure?" She looked at me quite severely, as though suspecting I might have been mistaken.

"He was shot through the head—"

"Don't! Don't tell me. I don't want to hear about it. It's those rum-runners, I'll be bound, and no one can tell me different. We'll never know a minute's peace in these parts until they're driven off the lake and I've always said so. I've known all along something like this would happen. I predicted it from the start." This was true enough, and she looked at me so challengingly that I nodded in agreement. "You know I predicted it, John. Just two nights ago I dreamed of a wedding, and now a man up and gets himself murdered right at our front door. Where is he?"

"Down the beach a little way. I guess I'd better go to town and tell the police."

"The police! Lord bless us! They'll be prowling around all over the farm, asking questions and bothering everyone. And us that's always been so law-abiding! But, then, we can't let the poor man lie there. What does he look like?"

"Just a young lad."

"Mercy me! I knew when I dreamed of that wedding something would happen. Just a young lad, is he? . . . Yes, I suppose you'd better get the police. A murder! Get the police, John!"

I went out and cranked the car, my mother following with a running fire of exclamations and interrogations. As I drove away she was calling out to me that I mustn't be long, because she couldn't bear to stay alone on the farm with a dead man so close by.

I turned out of the lane onto the State road, reflecting that my mother was right in her intuitive assumption that the crime was the work of rum-runners.

For some time past there had been a busy traffic in liquor between Ontario and the Michigan side, and it had continued in spite of all the activities of customs authorities and prohibition forces. Night after night I had heard the drumming of launches out in the lake. Often I had seen moving lights offshore, the lights of liquor-laden craft or of revenue boats. Smugglers down on Lake St. Clair and the Detroit River had found things too hot for them and had transferred their activities farther north. According to one tale, this whole territory was under the domination of one man, who seemed to have an uncanny faculty for guessing or learning in advance the plans of the forces of the law.

It was said that Moberly, the little town three miles to the south of us, was a favorite point of entry, but the rum-runners had heretofore evaded all traps set to catch them there. Other rumors were that the smugglers landed in the coves and bays to the north, transferring their car-

goes to trucks that hastened south by the main road.

These were lawless men, and it was not surprising that violence and death should arise from their activities. Recollection of the dead man as he lay on the beach in the morning sunlight brought home the whole ugly business to me more emphatically than all the vague rumors in the world. Who was he? A smuggler? A prohibition agent? The red-headed youth had not looked like a criminal type, but I was aware that rum-running had attracted

to its ranks many young men to whom the illegal occupation was a game rather than a crime.

Well, whoever he was, the game had earned him a bullet, and the fascination of adventure had beckoned with the finger of death. He was beyond helping now. It remained for the police to wrest the story of his end from the mystery that shrouded his fate.

I was approaching the lane that led from the South Road down to the Kent farm, adjoining ours. My heart gave one of those queer

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