

The Red-Headed Man

By
Leslie McFarlane

(Continued from Last Week)

Hazel would not have been human if she hadn't flirted with Slim now and then when I was present. I should not have been human if I had not felt the first spasms of jealousy, to be followed by the usual symptoms of moodiness, wrath, a feeling of intense injury, and more or less gingerly speculations on the efficiency of suicide. Foolish? Would you have youth otherwise? Every time I saw Hazel laughing with Slim, talking to him, treating him as an equal, I glowered like a thundercloud. And now here she was perched on a fence in the morning sunlight, watching the lanky idiot fix a gate.

As the car came to a stop, Hazel scrambled down from the fence and skipped over toward me. She was an impish little thing, brown-eyed and dark, with wavy bobbed hair and a generous mouth that could smile contagiously enough to lure a grin from the Sphinx.

"Lo, Johnnie! Gee, it's nice to see you so early in the morning!"

She leaped up on the running-board and rumbled my hair with a warm, plump hand.

Slim, the hired man, called out a cheery "Hello!" and bent to his work again.

"Got out the wrong side of the bed this morning, huh?" chirped Brown Eyes, dancing up and down on the running-board.

I maintained a portentous silence and frowned darkly.

"Where you goin', Johnnie?" She clung to the side door and rocked back and forth until the car swayed. "Take me with you?"

"I guess you're too busy," I muttered heavily, with what I felt was magnificent sarcasm. But Hazel was used to me by now. Not by word or sign would she indicate that my demeanor was noticed.

"Oh, I am—I'm awfully busy," she replied, swinging out at arm's length and back again. "Slim and I have been fixing the gate."

"So I noticed."

"Great little pair of gate fixers, Slim and me. Going into partnership soon. We'll have a great big sign, 'Hazel & Slim, Limited' Doors Repaired and Gates Fixed! Ain't we, Slim?"

The gangling one looked up and grinned lazily. "Couldn't get along without you, kid."

I suppressed an impulse to wage battle with the blasphemer. My Hazel being called "kid" by a hired man! I gazed darkly at her, but she giggled so infectiously and her brown eyes were so clear and ingenious that my expression must have softened in spite of myself, for she smiled, leaned forward, and whispered: "Silly, silly, silly!" tapped my cheek, and leaped down from the running-board.

"Well, if you won't take me with you—" she sighed in mock despair.

"I've got to go to town," I growled, remembering that I bore news of import. "There was a fellow murdered over at our place."

She looked up sharply, her eyes wide, her lips parted. For a moment there was a dead silence, broken only by the buzz of the dragon-fly that swooped overhead. Slim straightened up with more celerity than I could have believed possible and came padding over through the dust of the lane.

"What's that you say? Someone murdered?"

"But how? . . . Who was he?"

"Not at your place?" asked Hazel.

"Found his body on the shore

this morning. Just a little while ago. He was shot through the head."

The dragon-fly zoomed in circles and loops, then went winging its way over the fence and across the fields. I was conscious of a terrified expression that slowly came over Hazel's face, conscious of Slim's licking his lips in an absent-minded sort of way, and then I got my second shock of the morning.

For, instead of overwhelming me with questions, as their natural reaction might have been, they exchanged a quick, fleeting glance that was electric with mutual comprehension. It lasted only a fraction of a second, that glance, and the moment their eyes met they looked swiftly away, but to my jealous gaze it was unmistakable that some common thought had passed between them and that here was some understanding from which I was barred. So swift had it been that later I was to tell myself over and over again that I must have been wrong, torturing myself by vain attempts to reason away the conviction that was firmly set in my mind.

Slim recovered himself instantly. "Found him on the shore?" he said, his voice slipping back into its old lazy tones.

Hazel looked down at the roadway, nervously twisting her handkerchief in her fingers.

"I guess he was shot and thrown into the lake."

"What did he look like?" inquired Slim, amiably curious.

"He was just a young fellow. About twenty-five, I guess. He was red-headed—"

Hazel looked up swiftly. "Red-headed!" she gasped. Then, "Not that there's any more reason—he might—" She forced a little laugh that broke in the middle—"he might be fair or dark or anything else for that matter, but— but, Johnnie—a murder! Right near here . . . The poor lad! I'm all upset." She was evidently trying to cover up her confusion, for she added: "I'm trembling all over. It's dreadful." She cast a terrified look at Slim, but that youth, after his first involuntary betrayal, was indolently calm, although I thought I detected a faint twitching at the corners of his lips.

"Just a young fellow, eh? . . . Gosh, that's bad! . . . Go in to get the police?"

I nodded. The strange reaction of the pair had left me bewildered. I was dazed with vague and incredible suspicions. There was something! But what? What could there be? What could they know of this red-headed youth who now lay lifeless on the beach? Did they know anything? Why that swift glance between them? Had there been such a glance at all? Did this all lie in my imagination?

"Guess I'll be getting along," I muttered.

"Want me to go with you?" asked Slim.

"I'll manage all right," I said gruffly, for I was angry and puzzled and disturbed. "You and Hazel can go over to our place if you like. Mother hates to be left alone."

"Sure! Sure! That's a good idea. We'll do that."

The engine roared as the car jumped forward. Before I turned the bend in the road I looked back. They were standing there just as I had left them, quite motionless, in the settling haze of dust.

And so I drove to town, scarcely seeing the gray highway before me, utterly shaken, complet-

ely bewildered, and trying to thrust from my mind the host of nebulous suspicions that swirled in an evil cloud.

Chapter II

Lights in the Night

Chief Weiberg, of Moberly, was a man who had never been particularly noted for his intellectual attainments, but he was thorough enough in a stodgy, plodding way, and when I told him of my discovery, his first move was to notify Yates, the coroner, and Dulmage, the local prohibition agent. They both agreed to come out to the farm at once, and in a few minutes we started out, Weiberg and the coroner in the police car, Dulmage and I leading the way in my ramshackle flivver.

"Migh be one of your men," I suggested to the prohibition agent.

Dulmage, a short, scrawny fellow with a nondescript mustache and an unconscionable fondness for the sound of his own voice, did not think so. "No agents operatin' up there unless I know it," he drawled, blinking his mild blue eyes. "I'm in sole charge of this here territory and if I need help I send for it. Ain't needed any so far, and I don't expect to, neither."

When we reached the farm I found that Hazel was with my mother in the house. Slim was sitting on the front steps, whittling lazily at a small stick and talking with old Peter Kent, who had come over from his farm. A mild-mannered, likable old chap was Peter Kent, with an expression of perpetual anxiety on his seamed and bearded face—an expression that had been stamped there by years of deadly conflict with an unproductive farm and a mortgage that hung over him with the dark menace of a Domoclean sword. He nodded to us brightly and piped: "How do?" Slim untangled himself and remarked that it hadn't taken us long.

We made our way down the beach. The coroner, a precise little man with eye-glasses and a clipped mustache, trotted by my side. Chief Weiberg, assuming command, paced stolidly in advance, and Slim and Peter Kent brought up the rear with Dulmage, who intoned a dreary narrative to which no one paid the slightest attention. When we came within sight of that dark form sprawled on the beach, however, he lapsed into silence, and in silence we came up to the body.

"Just a minute, just a minute, gentlemen," said Weiberg importantly, when we were still a few yards away. "I see footprints here in the sand. There might be a clue. I'll ask you to stand back until I look 'em over."

We remained obediently where we were, and Weiberg stalked ahead, gravely inspecting the marks in the sand.

"They're mine," I told him. "I didn't see any other footprints when I found him."

"Oh, they're yours, are they?" he said, plainly disappointed. "I hadn't thought of that." He bent over and scrutinized the footprints more closely, then straightened up with an expression of triumph on his usually stolid countenance. "Have you got one foot bigger than the other?"

"Certainly not," I snapped.

"Well," declared Chief Weiberg shaking his head gravely, "there are two separate and distinct footprints here."

(To be continued)

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