

THE GRAVE MARKER

It was one hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, or so the thermometer claimed. Cassidy stared at it, incredulously, mopping his brow with a sweat and oil-stained handkerchief. It had been exceptionally hot before, out there in their isolation, but he had not recorded a reading as high as this one before. He stared blankly at the smudged record of his recent readings entered on the Oil Company's form. There had been a steady build-up as the summer days had gradually lengthened, as the ice cold nights had shortened and, judging by the records of previous years, it had not reached its peak yet.

He wiped his brow again. From the nearby bungalow, above the whine of the pumps, came the sound of his wife throwing the dishes about in the sink, disposing the remnants of the lunch which now burdened his stomach. The heat was getting at him, no doubt of that. Perhaps it had not been such a good idea to take the job and go out there, isolated in the middle of the desert, yet it was only a six month contract and, apart from the good pay, it well suited his other plans.

He crossed to the pumping station and continued his routine of gauge reading and recording. Basically, that was all the job entailed, reading and recording. If there was a burst somewhere out in the wilderness, he would be there to shut down the pumps and close the valves, but the pipes did not burst. The money was to compensate for the heat and the isolation. He had heard talk of men going crazy within days of their arrival at such a post; of their disappearance into the desert, never to be seen again. To overcome the isolation he had brought his wife, but there was still the heat and, worst of all, the flies.

One of the bearings on number three pump was overheating again. That was a nuisance because he would have to report it to the Base and that would result in someone having to come out, strip the bearing, perhaps taking parts away and then returning later to fix it. Cassidy tugged at his sweat drenched shirt which had become stuck to his back. Two visits, over a couple of weeks or more? Could he last out that long?

The pump stopped rotating and he isolated it as quickly as the heat would allow, starting up one of the reserve pumps. The activity brought a fresh burst of sweat and produced a fierce burning sensation in his legs which ached as never before. No, he would not be able to endure this for a further three or four weeks! There was no alternative. He would have to bring his plan forward. He opened the delivery valve on the reserve pump. The pressure on the gauge was sound. Now, if he was not to have to report in, he would have to move fast. What on earth was the day? The form in front of him revealed that it should be Tuesday unless he had missed a day which was easy to do out there. Today the helicopter would set out for Ras-Ahabat. It would not return until tomorrow afternoon which meant no-one could come up to the station before Thursday morning, no matter what the reason. So, he had about thirty-six hours at the very least. He could not rely on more. He would bring his plans forward. He would have to act now, that afternoon,

His watch read a quarter-to-two. He entered the bearing fault in the log book and timed it at seven o'clock, just in case Base came through on the radio before he had time to act. A wall of heat struck him as he walked out into the open. He looked around. It looked so picturesque and tranquil, the oasis, the palm trees, the colonial styled bungalow with its wide, sweeping verandah. It should have been a heavenly paradise. It should have been.

Cassidy scanned the horizon as he lit a cigarette, but all appeared still. No sign of any nomadic Arabs, no mysterious caravans, no amorous or warring sheiks complete with harems. No stragglers from the Foreign Legion. No one. That was just how he wanted it! Treading the half-smoked butt into the sand, he plodded towards the bungalow. Indoors his wife was singing, a harsh, toneless voice which irritated even Cassidy's banal musical ear. He trampled over the

verandah and headed for the lounge. "Did you wipe your feet?" That sound was still ringing in his ears when he reached the radio.

"Where's my toolbox?" he yelled.

"Put away, where it belongs. Why do I always have to go around clearing up after you? Anyone would think that I had nothing better to do all day! It is just as my mother said. Father was the same, thoughtless, inconsiderate, working her into the grave. That's what you would do to me if I gave you half the chance! Well, won't let you! I should have listened to her, because she did warn me! I should have listened to her, but I thought I knew better!"

Cassidy cursed silently and went to fetch the toolbox. She was still talking when he returned to the radio, but he was no longer listening. Intently he examined the set and carefully removed the back. Inside he found a number of valves and he took out two and examined them closely. Suddenly they slipped from his hands and fell to the floor, shattering. The noise did not escape his wife's acute hearing. "What's that?" she cried sharply. "What have you broken now? I don't know"

"Could you bring the dustpan and a brush?" he called, as calmly as he could, trying to suppress the mounting excitement. She swept in and saw the radio.

"Good God, what are you doing? You don't know the first thing about radios, do you? Why must you mess about with things that you don't understand? What were you doing anyway?"

"It wasn't working right so I thought I'd have a look," murmured Cassidy. "I've only dropped a couple of valves."

"Have a look?" she cried. "They want to come and have a look at your head! There's something that isn't working properly! All I do is follow you around and clear up the mess after you, trying to keep this place clean. Get out of my way and let me sweep it up. Come on!"

He stepped back and let her kneel and lean forward, brush and pan extended. She was still prattling on when he deeply embedded a heavy spanner in the back of her skull. "Must keep the place clean," thought Cassidy as he slipped several newspapers under her lifeless head to soak up the blood. "Now, to work!" In the pumping station he found a shovel. After a brief survey he selected a spot not far from the oasis and about fifty yards from the bungalow. He started to dig.

The sand was dry at first and difficult to remove. As fast as he dug it out, it ran back into the hole, but gradually he won the battle and some way down he struck, as he had expected to strike, a moister layer. This was much easier to dig and by late afternoon he had extracted a sizeable and deep hole. It was large enough.

Halfway across the verandah he stopped. Above the whine of the pumps he could distinctly hear an unfamiliar noise, a low buzzing. It could not be the radio. Cautiously he went inside. At the sight of his wife's body he turned and vomited uncontrollably. She was lying there, just where he had left her, but she was covered with thousand upon thousand of large, creeping, flies with a large, moving, black mass formed the main concentration over her head and face. Cassidy watched them with a hypnotic horror as they crawled over one another, up her nose, in her gaping mouth, in and out of the dark red, sticky, chasm in her skull. Retching violently, he ran from the room.

He returned some minutes later with a large white sheet and threw it over the corpse. Swiftly, with shaking hands, he rolled her over until the sheet was wrapped securely. Trembling, he tied the sheet at her ankles, around her waist and above her head. With a resurgence of confidence he lifted the bundle and carried it outside. She was lighter than he thought, even so he found he had to stop to rest several times on his way to the hole. Every time that he did so, his eyes were fixed anxiously on the horizon, but no-one came. All was still.

Cassidy was calmer when he returned to the bungalow. Leaving the shovel on the verandah, he took several deep breaths of the cool, evening, air. He burnt the newspaper and swept up the broken pieces of the valves which, with a grim smile, he placed inside the radio.

Diligently he replaced the cover then dropped the set unceremoniously on the floor. "That's done," he said to himself. "When they come, I'll tell them I was out, looking at the bearing of number three pump. When I came if, why, the radio was smashed and there was no sign of Louise. She has not come back. It must have been the heat!"

Sleep came easily to Cassidy that night. It was not undisturbed, however. There, as ghoulish as she had been in life, was his wife, frantically trying to make him do something, to warn him. "The storm, Cassidy!" she cried. "Cassidy! Wake up, it's a sand storm, the worst you've ever seen! Can't you hear the wind?: Listen to the shutters, they're loose! Are you going to go and fix them, or must I? Come on, Cassidy!"

He awoke, his heart pounding. For a while he lay still, listening. All was quiet, but he sensed that all was not right. He was alone, but his senses told him that someone else was there, at the station, outside. Could the helicopter have come down there, at night, and he not heard it? Perhaps that was what he was dreaming about? Stealthily he crept from the bed across to the unshuttered window and looked out. There, plain in the bright moonlight, fifty yards from where he was, lay the familiar, still white-shrouded figure of his wife.

Next morning Cassidy thought he could vaguely remember going out in the night, digging a fresh hole and reburying the body. Or had it all been a nightmare? He was confused and agitated throughout the day as he tried to undertake his normal routine. Frequently his eyes would stray to the spot where he had dug the hole. She was deep, but was she deep enough? Could a sand storm actually expose her body?

That night the nightmare returned with more intensity and reality. Again there was a storm and again he was regaled with his wife's protestations. "The sand storm, Cassidy," she cried. "The shutters! Can't you see that the sand's coming in. Don't you realise that unless you fix them everything will be buried. We'll both be buried alive!" Again he woke up and when he went to the window he could see her shrouded body lying on top of the sand, completely exposed. And, again, in a trance he re-interred her only this time the nightmare seemed endless. Despite all his efforts, when he reached the house and looked back, Louise, or what remained of her, was still there, prominently in view.

Sanity and lucidity came with the rays of dawn. Cassidy woke at six o'clock, jumped from his bed and rushed to the window. There was the oasis and the position where he had buried her, but where was her body. Unless he had succeeded in burying her again, there was only one feasible explanation. She had been covered by the sand during the night. Which was it - he had to know! He gripped the sill tightly. There was no alternative, now. He was certain of what he must do. Before the helicopter arrived, he would exhume the corpse and bury it farther away, over the bluff, out of sight. He had at least six hours, possibly longer.

The sun had started its ascent into the sky when Cassidy started to dig. At first he dug a shallow hole, hoping to locate the body just below the surface, but again the dry sand ran in as fast as he removed it. Feverishly he increased his activity and threw the sand further away, but still he did not find her. Gradually the hole grew deeper and deeper, but all the digging was in vain. As the sun climbed even higher and its burning rays probed deeper into the excavation, Cassidy began to panic. Shovelful after shovelful of sand was thrown from the rapidly enlarging hole. He tried tunnelling outwards in the damper sand, hoping that he might strike an edge of the sheet. He tried digging deeper. It was all to no avail. In spite of his confidence, there was no trace of his wife's body.

With the sun directly overhead he stopped digging and drowsily sat down in the bottom of the hole to think. Any minute now he expected to hear the helicopter, but providentially it did not come. Perhaps the best thing to do was backfill the hole as quickly as possible and hope that everything would appear normal. With the sand drying out, that should not take long. There was still a good chance he would get away with it. A sudden chill struck him. He looked up to see that the sun had been obscured by thin, racing, clouds. With a disgusted sigh he threw the spade

up, high into the air and out of the hole. With heavy eyelids, he sat down to rest, just for a minute.....

The two men walked towards the helicopter. The blades were now still, drooping in imitation of the nearby palms. "It's a shame that we could not have got up here earlier," said the pilot, "but I reckon that was one of the worst sandstorms I've seen since I've been out here. There was absolutely no chance of flying through it. We'd better radio in that the station is deserted and that they better get a search underway, though I don't reckon anyone's chances of survival out there. We've got something of a Marie Celeste on our hands!" They paused some distance from the house.

"What do you make of that?" said the co-pilot, pointing at the shovel which was standing upright in the sand.

"I don't know," said the pilot. "I noticed its shadow like a cross on the ground as we were coming in. It gave me a funny feeling and made me think of a graveyard."

"Should we take it in?"

"No!" laughed the pilot. "Leave it where it is. You never know. It might be a grave marker!"

THE END

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