

PHOTOGRAPH OF DEATH



By RAY CUMMINGS

Our customer was supposed to be dead when we arrived to take her picture at her employer's behest. But there were bizarre things happening in the old house on Breakneck Hill—grim schemes of murder and profit. And though a camera isn't much of a weapon, Dot and I had to turn into detectives, goaded as we were by . . .

DOT and I read the letter again. It was addressed to us as follows:

*Robert J. Rollins & Co.
Photographers
Lawrenceville*

I'm Robert Rollins. Dot is the & Co. We'd been married about a year, and we'd been in the photographic business about six months. Our marriage was swell, but the business wasn't any too hot so that when this letter came, with its promise of a hundred dollars for a few hours' work, we couldn't very well pass it up.

But there were complications.
The letter began:

Dear Sirs:

Will you please send a man up to my home to make a portrait of my housekeeper, Mary Parch? She will be dead, but you won't mind that . . .

She will be dead. That was what startled us. What the writer meant, of course, was that Mary Parch was dead, but our man wouldn't mind photographing a dead person. And the fee, for the two-hour train trip and the picture, was one hundred dollars.

The letter was signed *Ezra Greenleaf, Breakneck Hill & Cliff Road, Wylie Corners*. We got the letter, special delivery, on a Saturday. It told us to have our man take the 8:02 P.M. train for Wylie Corners, Saturday night. He could stay the night with them, or he could return on the 2 A.M. train Sunday morning.

Well, of course we didn't have any man to send; Dot and I are the complete Rollins & Co. I would have made the trip alone, but Dot wanted to go with me, so I took her. She said she figured it wouldn't be too awesome photographing a dead woman.

"Besides, I can arrange her hair, make her look nice," Dot said.

At 8:30 that evening we were on the pokey little train for Wylie Corners, reading the letter again. Neither of us had ever been to Wylie Corners, nor had we ever heard of this Ezra Greenleaf. Maybe it was the lonely, desolate hill country into which the train was puffing, uphill all the way; and the fact that the night was gloomy, with a glowering, stormy-looking sky—whatever it was, somehow the thing didn't look the same to me now as it had in the sunlight of the morning when the letter came. After all, what's a hundred dollars?

The answer to that was easy. It was a lot of money, especially right now to Rollins & Co.

"I suppose the funeral will be tomorrow," I said out of a long silence as the train whistled for another of the dismal crossings we had been passing lately. "So tonight is about the only time he could get a good picture of her."

"I suppose so," Dot agreed.

IT WAS about half past nine when the train pulled into Wylie Corners. It was only about twenty minutes late. I carried our big camera and its tripod; Dot lugged the case of loaded plateholders and our other paraphernalia. We were the only disembarking passengers. What we saw when the train limped away was a board platform with a single light that struggled against the gloom; a couple of scraggy roads wandering from here in opposite directions off into the blobs of distant hills; and down at the other end of the board platform a little shantylike station building, with a light in its single small window.

"There's a man down there," Dot said hopefully. "Let's ask him."

The old station agent, closing up now until 2 A.M. when the train would come back again, looked pretty vague.

"Greenleaf's place?" He waved his arm toward the darkness. "'Bout half way up Breakneck Hill—cain't miss it, young feller."

The idea of getting a conveyance evidently wasn't very practical. The station agent looked ever more vague.

"Old man Greenleaf, he's expectin' you?"

"Yes, I . . . suppose so," I said,

"He certainly is," Dot said.

"He shoulda made arrangements," the station agent said. "It could been done—Johnny's rig—"

The hamlet of Wylie Corners, we gathered, was beyond a hill in the other direction from Greenleaf's.

" 'Tain't far to Greenleaf's." The station agent cast a glance at the clouds. "If yer goin', better get goin'. 'Tain't but a mile to Breakneck Hill. Better get goin'. Could rain."

We started. The station agent had the right idea. It could rain, and it did. The rain wasn't much more than a drizzle, but we were in no mood to depend on that. We hastened our pace until we were both puffing.

"What a tough way to make a hundred dollars," I said, when we had gone what might have been half a mile or so.

"Not so bad," Dot said. Dot makes a fetish of always being cheerful.

There wasn't a light in sight. It was all a moist, gloomy darkness of hills and a few trees and rocky ground. It wasn't farming country; about all you could call it was wasteland. Breakneck Hill wasn't hard to identify; the shabby road started to go steeply up.

Of necessity we slowed down. "That fellow told us it was halfway up the hill," I said. "But he didn't say how long the hill was."

Then presently we saw a light, like a single bleary eye up ahead of us.

"There it is," Dot said.

"Must be Greenleaf's," I agreed. "There surely wouldn't be two people foolish enough to have a home out here."

IT was a big, ramshackle wooden house of three stories, one of those ornate affairs of ancient vintage. It stood pretty well back from the road, with a couple of big old trees beside it. We went up a rocky path and climbed a few steps to an old, vine-shrouded verandah.

The door had a knocker. I pounded it. Nothing happened for quite a while.

"Try again," Dot said hopefully. "He surely must expect us."

I pounded again. Then at last the door opened. A middle-aged woman stood with the lamplight of an old-fashioned living-room behind her.

"Mr. Greenleaf live here?" I asked. "He sent for me. I'm the photographer."

"Oh. Yes, of course," she said. "Come in."

We lifted up our paraphernalia and went in. Then we put our stuff down on the floor.

"Mr. Greenleaf he—he's not very well right now, but he'll see you soon," the woman said. "Sit down."

We sat down in old-fashioned faded plush chairs.

"You're the man from Rollins and Company down in Lawrenceville?" the woman said. She was looking at Dot.

"I'm Rollins," I said. "She's my wife—my assistant."

She nodded. "Oh—yes," she said vaguely. "You came to take the picture of Mary Parch. I'm Mary Parch. I'll be quite ready . . . yes, quite ready, in a few minutes. Please, just wait here!"

She turned and left us.

Dot and I didn't say anything. We just sat. The woman quietly went through a doorway that was hung with faded red plush portieres and left us alone. I couldn't think of anything to say. I saw Dot open her mouth to come forth with something cheerful, but she couldn't manage it.

"Well—" she said at last.

I pulled my attention from the nasty black shadows that hung around the corners of the big room.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," Dot said. "Nothing at all."

WE SAT some more. Things were so silent you could hear any tiny sound, except that there wasn't any. But it

was the kind of silence where you certainly expected plenty of sounds any minute. I don't know what was in Dot's mind, but I was thinking of a lot of miscellaneous sounds. Like a suicide's shot, for instance.

"Well," I said at last, "if this Greenleaf is pulling some kind of gag on us, he'd better come across with that hundred bucks. I'm not going to stand for—"

"Or at least pay our carfare," Dot said. And if she thought that was a cheerful comment, she was greatly mistaken.

More time passed. Maybe a minute or two, but it seemed like a lot. I could see Dot squirming uneasily in her chair.

"That letter said: *she will be dead*," Dot burst out suddenly. "Did it, or didn't it?"

"It did," I agreed.

"And she isn't. And where's Mr. Greenleaf? And she tells us to sit here and she'll soon be ready. 'Quite ready,' she said. Didn't she? Oh Bob, what I mean—ought we just *sit* here? Oughtn't we be *doing* something?"

"Like what?" I asked.

A faint little scraping sound somewhere around made us both stiffen. Dot's hand had been smoothing her dark bobbed hair. Her fingers tightened as though she were about to pull out a handful.

"Bob!" she whispered "Did you hear that?"

I nodded. The sound came again. Then the heavy red portieres, that shrouded the doorway where the woman had gone out, moved a little. Dot and I were both staring. Beneath the bottom of the portieres a man's shoe was visible—an oversize, dilapidated black leather shoe, with splashes of mud on it.

Dot was sitting rigid, staring. I started to get out of my chair. "Hey you," I said. "You behind that curtain, come out of

there. What *is* this?"

The faded plush drapes parted. A figure came out. It wasn't a man, despite the overlarge feet. It was a husky, overgrown boy who maybe could have been sixteen or so. His dark trousers were rumpled; his white shirt was soiled to a grey. His scraggly blond hair was unkempt. He was grinning vacuously.

"'ullo," he said. "I seen you come in. You're the man what's come to take my ma's pitcher."

"Well—" Dot's pent-up breath came out.

"Hello," I said. "And who are you?"

He stood with the end of one big shoe on top of the other. "Willie Patch," he said. "Mr. Greenleaf wants my ma to have her pitcher taken. I wanna watch."

I exchanged a glance with Dot. "You certainly shall," I agreed. "Where *is* your ma? And where's Mr. Greenleaf? Is he sick?"

His gangly arm seemed to gesture vaguely toward the ceiling. "Sick?" he asked. "They're upstairs."

I nodded. "Your ma said he wasn't very well right now."

"Oh," the boy said. "I wanna watch you take my ma's pitcher. When you gonna take it?"

"That," Dot said, "we wish you'd find out for us. Now listen, boy—"

He looked so vacuous that Dot's voice trailed away.

"How old are you, Willie?" I asked.

"Me? I'm sixteen."

That's about what his body looked like. But his expression didn't; and the way he talked—ten or less would have been more like it.

"I'm gonna be a farmer," he added. "My ma, she's gonna buy a farm for me, some day. I like farms. I kin plow good. I tried it onct."

"That's fine," I said.

HIS mother had been housekeeper here for fifteen years, he told us. So about all he knew was this place on Breakneck Hill. But he had been on a farm once, and he liked it.

“She’s gonna get me a farm, she’s promised,” he said again. “Only Mr. Greenleaf don’t like me much. He wants to send me away. Like to school, only I weren’t no good in school so ma took me out ‘cause I like to plow. I wanna be a farmer.”

His voice seemed to go on and on. I wasn’t paying much attention. I seemed to be listening to that silence in the rest of the house. And I could see Dot getting tense again.

“You’re gonna take the pitcher in ma’s room,” Willie was saying.

That snapped me to attention.

“Are we?” I asked.

He gestured to a small door across the room. It stood ajar. “In there. Everything’s all ready.”

“Is it?” I flashed Dot a warning glance. “Come on, Willie. Show us.”

He clumped in advance of us. The door opened into a small wooden hallway. This seemed to be the region of kitchen and pantry, with a dining-room down a cross hall.

“In here,” Willie said. He shoved a door open. It was a fairly large, neat bedroom.

“My ma said she guessed you’d take her pitcher in here,” Willie said.

There wasn’t anything peculiar about the bedroom. It held just a washstand, an old rocker and a small wooden chair; a table with a lamp and a book and newspaper on it. And the small iron bedstead.

“Look here,” Dot said, “what you mean, everything’s ready? Now about this photograph . . . we got a letter from Mr. Greenleaf—”

She didn’t need my warning glance to stop her. She let her voice trail off again, with a hopeless gesture. You couldn’t talk to a ten-year-old mentality like that. It didn’t mean anything, despite that the hulking Willie was a lot bigger than Dot. He stood looking down at her vacuously.

“So Mr. Greenleaf wants to send you away?” I said.

The implication of that was plain enough. An asylum school for defectives, was quite Greenleaf’s idea.

Willie nodded. “My ma, she’s promised me a farm. They been fightin’ about it lots; I heerd ‘em often.”

I seemed to have some glimmers of thoughts, and I didn’t like them. And Dot’s comment came back to me. Oughtn’t we *do* something, Bob? Whatever this was—any possibility of its being a joke that Greenleaf’s letter had played on us seemed gone. There was something deadly serious about this old house; the silence; this strange youth. And the housekeeper who had received us. She was a middle-aged, motherly-looking woman with iron-grey hair. But there had been a queer look to her, an intense, frightened look. Shouldn’t I be doing something about that silence upstairs, instead of just standing around here waiting?

What I might have done I have no idea, for suddenly on a shelf behind the little table I noticed a glass standing. It was about half full of what looked like water. A square of paper rested on top of the glass for a cover, held down by a teaspoon. On impulse I moved toward it. Then in a further corner of the shelf I saw a little torn square of paper. I picked it up. A torn label. It had a portion of the conventional skull-and-crossed-bones designs which labels for poison carry. And a portion of a word: ARSEN—

ARSENIC. I stuffed the little torn fragment into my pocket. From across the room Dot was watching me, puzzled.

“What is it, Bob?”

And Willie saw me. He was obviously frightened. “Don’t you touch that,” he said. “My ma, she said not to touch it. She said if anybody asked me I could tell them . . . I could tell them—”

“Tell them what?” I demanded sharply.

“She, my ma, she found that in Mr. Greenleaf’s bathroom. She said leave it here, don’t touch it an’ don’t say nothin’ ‘bout it.”

Dot was gripping me. “What is it?” she demanded.

I shook her off. “Wait. Take it easy . . . Listen, Willie—did she mean: don’t tell Mr. Greenleaf she found it?”

“Yeah, guess so. Don’t tell nobody. An’ I didn’t. I didn’t tell you, did I? I didn’t say nothin’—”

I pointed to the glass with the spoon on it. “What’s that, Willie?”

“That? Oh, that’s ma’s medicine. She ain’t been well, she’s got stomach aches lately. That’s her medicine. Mr. Greenleaf fixes it for her, every night.”

“She’s supposed to take that tonight?” I said. “But she didn’t—”

“That was last night’s medicine,” Willie said. “He ain’t fixed tonight’s yet. My ma, she didn’t take it last night—she tol’ me it tasted funny. An’ then she found that little piece of paper up in his bathroom an’ she tol’ me not to say nothin’—”

You can think a lot of disjointed things in a hurry, such as old Greenleaf writing that letter to Rollins & Co., and then mixing up this big dose of arsenic last night . . .

But they were things pretty disjointed, and there were other things that didn’t fit

into them at all. Dot had the general idea now; she was gripping me by the arm and looking pretty scared.

“Bob,” she murmured. “Bob, oughtn’t we do something?”

There might have been the faintest blur of voices here in the room right along, but we hadn’t noticed it. In the silence now, Dot and I heard it, just an almost inaudible, blurred murmur. Then I spotted where it seemed to be coming from. In the wall, here under the shelf, there was an old-fashioned hot-air radiator. It was closed now in summer. I reached down and opened it. At once the blur grew louder, and separated into two voices—the housekeeper’s voice, and the racked, querulous voice of an angry old man.

Dot and I stood tense, listening. Willie stood beside me, leaning forward, with his big dangling hands clutched together in front of him as he listened. He looked both interested and frightened.

“They’re fightin’ again,” he murmured. “Hear ‘em? They’re in his room upstairs.”

I clutched his shoulder with a grip that made him whimper. “You shut up now, Willie,” I hissed into his ear. “You keep quiet.”

The woman’s voice: “An’ for fifteen years I been your housekeeper, Ezra. It’s my life. Waiting on you, taking care of you. I need it, Ezra, I’m used to it. You can understand how that would be? People get to need each other, so I don’t want to . . . I don’t want to—”

“Quit me?” he snapped. “Then stop threatening me, Mary. You need me—I need you—I don’t want you to quit.”

“I don’t want to, I’m telling you that. And I don’t want to . . . to do anything else.”

“Then shut up about it, Mary. We get along good enough, it’s just that damn brat of yours.”

“Don’t you dare call him that again!” Her voice rose, quavered. “An’ so you want to put him away. An insane asylum, that’s all it really is, no matter what you say. My Willie, put away in a—”

“I can’t stand him,” the old man’s voice said. “He gives me the creeps. I’ve had him around fifteen years—”

“We’ll get a farm, Ezra. You’re a rich man, you could buy a little farm. It would be good for you too. An’ it’s . . . it’s all Willie wants, an’ needs.” She was pleading, but there was something else in her voice now, a sort of desperation. “He’d be good around a farm, Ezra. He could do lots of useful work around a farm.”

His answer was a snort.

“You won’t do that, Ezra?”

“No I won’t,” he retorted. “Why should I move to a farm! I like it here.”

“You—you won’t—do it!” She sounded as though all the world hung on her question. “An’ you won’t let Willie stay here any longer?”

“Do I have to keep on telling you that?” he demanded. “Go ahead, quit me. I can get along without you in spite of all my rheumatism that makes me pretty near helpless. I can get along, see if I can’t. An’ get this straight, Mary, you get no legacy from me when I die. Not if you quit me.”

“You won’t let poor Willie stay here.” She said it slowly, softly, as though she still couldn’t bring herself to believe it. “An’ you won’t move to a farm. On a farm we’d have more room. I’d tell him to keep out of your way, Ezra. I’d—”

The old man’s anger burst loose. “Will you please shut your damn’ mouth, Mary? Do I have to keep wrangling the same damned thing over an’ over all the time! Shut up. Go to bed. An’ get that damn’ brat of yours out of here. I’ve told you where I can send him—”

“Ezra, listen, for the last time—”

“Go ahead an’ buy your farm, why

don’t you?” he demanded caustically.

“You know why I don’t. I . . . I haven’t the money, Ezra. I’m just asking you, for the last time—”

AT the radiator grill Dot and I were tensely listening with Willie beside us. And now came something that electrified us.

“All right then.” It was the woman’s low, intense voice. “For the last time, Ezra—”

“You said that plenty,” he roared. “Last time? Dammit, I hope so.”

“Your last chance, Ezra.” Her voice broke into hysteria. “Tryin’ to take my poor Willie away from me. My boy—you can’t do it, Ezra! Hear me? I got it all planned, but I didn’t want to have to do it. I got a witness downstairs. I sent for him, a witness, see? You—tryin’ to poison me! Tryin’ to kill me, an’—”

“Mary! You crazy? What you mean, me tryin’ to—?”

“So I got to do it! I got to do it—!” Her voice was a, wild desperate cry. We could hear what sounded like a chair being knocked over; and the woman’s babbling, hysterical voice; and then the old man’s shrill cry:

“Mary, put that down! Get out of here! You—you—”

Dot was gripping my arm. “Bob! Bob—”

I came to life, and about time too. I grabbed Willie, shoving him before me.

We crossed the living-room with Dot after us. When I spotted the stairs, Willie and Dot were too slow. I went up the flight two steps at a time. It wasn’t any trouble to locate the room. The old man’s squealing voice, frightened now, and the sounds of a struggle, made it obvious. The door was ajar; I burst it open. Old man Greenleaf, his thin body wrapped in a faded dressing gown, was cowering back

in his chair. And Mary Parch had at last summoned her desperate courage. A big kitchen knife was in her hand. She had evidently backed away from him, knocking over a chair; and now she was rushing at him. That knife would have gone past his flailing, futile hands and into his throat or chest. But my jump and blow against her wrist knocked the knife clattering away. And then she sank to the floor, babbling, sobbing. . .

She was hysterically willing to tell us how she had planned it. She sat huddled on the floor with the big lump of her boy Willie drawn down beside her. He was frightened, confused, whimpering; and even with her own sobbing, she was trying to comfort him . . . It was a woman's strange plan to kill. She had written that note which Greenleaf had supposedly sent me. She figured it would be thought the act of an irrational old man, and its wording would help to prove that he had tried to kill his housekeeper. She had planted the poison in her room, with the idea that when it was found, she would claim the old man had tried to kill her with it, but she discovered it in time. Then, with me in the house as a witness, she would claim there had been a struggle when the old man suddenly tried to stab her—a struggle while she was acting only in self-defense, and somehow the knife had stabbed into him.

"I didn't want to do it unless he made me," she was babbling. "That legacy money, it would buy the little farm . . . Willie dear, don't cry, Willie. Everything's all right. You'll get to live on a farm some day, ma promises."

Life has strange little things in it. The old man in his chair was presently over his fright. He said quite a lot of things to his

housekeeper that you couldn't possibly print. And then he decided he wanted his pipe and tobacco, and whiskey and soda from downstairs. And the habit of fifteen years in Mary Parch responded. She checked her sobbing, pushed Willie away and stood up.

"Yes, Ezra," she said. "You jus' sit still, I'll get them right away."

THERE could have been a charge of assault with attempt to kill lodged against Mary Parch. But there wasn't. The old man guessed he wouldn't bother with it. So the whole thing was heard privately in the judge's chambers. The judge listened to what we all had to say. Then he talked for quite a while, very seriously, to Mary Parch while she sobbed. And then he talked to Ezra Greenleaf, just some quiet words of advice, but they were certainly very forcefully put. . . .

It was just last Sunday that Dot and I went to visit the Greenleaf farm. It isn't very big, the acreage or the house. But I will say it's quite some improvement over that gloomy old place on Breakneck Hill. We watched Willie plow. He does it fine.

There must be quite a bit more work for Mary Parch, but she doesn't seem to mind. I should think it was much better there for old Greenleaf, too. Dot made the mistake of saying that to him, in her best cheery manner. It was obviously a mistake. He pretends to be very mad at the judge who talked him into it.

People are strange. We often think of that, looking back on the Greenleaf affair. And we tell it to each other as though we had discovered some great Truth, important, fundamental. Which I guess maybe it is, at that.