

Weird and strange was the accident at Dead Man's Curve



THE MESSENGER

By E. MATHIEU TRUESDELL

AT FIRST I thought it was my alarm clock on the night-stand which had awakened me, but a quick glance at the luminous dial—8:35—told me I was mistaken. I forced myself out of bed and staggered sleepily toward the telephone on the office desk. Then I realized the ringing was too steady, too insistent. It must be the doorbell which was disturbing my much-needed rest.

I slid back the panel in the steel-plated

outer door. Of course it would be Ezra Shields leaning on the bell; I just slid the panel back absently for a look-see because I hadn't come fully awake as yet. No one else would be waking me up at that hour of morning.

Ezra was our most conscientious deputy sheriff, spending most of his nights nabbing out-of-state speeders who didn't even see the wide place in the road which was our town, much less the speed-limit

signs. Among my official duties was the booking of such prisoners and collecting an automatic \$22 bail. Naturally the bailed prisoners would continue on their ways and the mayor or the magistrate—according to where Ezra picked him up—would fine them ten bucks “in absentia” and Ezra and I would split up the left-over “costs.” I needed the money, so I took it; but I hated myself more every day for my part in the petty graft of the party which had taken over the local government. I had served as one of the foremost campaign speakers for the Veterans’ Reform ticket—they remembered my high school debating society awards, old “Silver Tongue” Jack Bryant—and this spot as jailer had been my repayment.

I hadn’t expected the graft when I was smearing the old office-holders. Ezra explained it to me when I was handed the job of jailer and gave me a lecture on “to the victors belong the spoils”; and I had experienced much the same feeling as that which had twisted my insides when my third-grade teacher explained to me that there was no Santa Claus. Despite that feeling of utter loss of faith in humanity and despite the occasional twinges of conscience, I needed the job. I had been behind in my rent payments ever since I went off the 52-20. This apartment attached to the jail office went with the job and meals were on the county, too, even though I lived behind steel.

That steel outer door was my pet hatred and it expressed itself in the savage way I unlatched the panel and jerked it open. The face which met my gaze through the peep-hole wasn’t that of Ezra Shields. Confronting me was a well-dressed stranger, though dirty and disheveled. He stood back from the door, against a column so that the glare of the light over the doorway was full upon him, and I could see that his features were

twisted with apparent anguish, his tousled hair and forehead covered with wet blood!

I fumbled the big key in the lock, breathing profanity as the heavy door swung open reluctantly. The stranger stumbled inside past me and I grabbed a chair and slid it toward him.

“I want to report an accident,” he began without preliminary. “On Route Twenty-three south of here there’s a curving grade—”

“Dead Man’s Curve!” I prompted. “You didn’t make it?”

He shook his head, negatively. “There’s a woman in the car—badly hurt. I didn’t know where to find a doctor; then I saw the jail here—”

I was wondering where Ezra Shields could be. He usually got them before they hit Dead Man’s if they were going at too fast a pace to negotiate it. Or even if they weren’t, sometimes, as long as they had out-of-state plates and seemed in a hurry.

I seated myself on the desk and uncradled the phone. “I’ll see if I can get Doc Peters.” Doc was the coroner. “You could use a little medical attention yourself,” I added as I dialed.

“Don’t bother about me. Get to her before—I mean—” He left it hanging, but I understood.

Doc Peters was at home. He answered almost immediately and I told him in a few words what was up. They were playing poker over at his place and he was ahead and thankful for the excuse to quit. Ezra Shields was there too and was losing. “Suppose you pin a deputy badge on your nightgown and drive me out there,” he suggested. “Most of the county’s law is over here and that way we wouldn’t have to break the game up. Your guests upstairs won’t be going any place.”

The injured man heard my agreement before I pronged the phone. “Hurry, will you,” he urged.

“Can’t I do something for you before I go?” I was pulling on pants and a heavy shirt over my pajamas.

“I’m all right,” he assured me. “Get to her before it’s too late.”

As an after-thought, I pinned on my deputy badge and belted a pistol at my hip. That’s spooky country around Dead Man’s.

I pointed out the bathroom to him. “You’d better wash up and get some rest on my bed. I’ll have the doc take a look at you when we get back.”

I slammed the heavy steel door behind me. It wasn’t until we were leaving Doc’s place that I realized that I had locked the injured man in; but it didn’t make much difference—we’d be back soon, I hoped.

We didn’t have any trouble locating the place where the car had left the road. It must have been doing seventy-plus to have smashed through the barrier and jumped the drainage ditch before plowing down several small trees on its way down to the creek. It lay on one side with its radiator jutting over muddy creek water. The upper front wheel was turning slowly as if it had only been a matter of minutes since the accident, though it was a good hour’s hike to town, even for an uninjured man, and the stranger hadn’t said anything about getting a lift.

We went down the bank with bulls-eye lights, though there was a fair moon. I was thinking erratically that when the county finished charging the injured party for services rendered, he’d wish he’d have picked any place except the jail to seek aid. By his license plate he was a Yankee and there’d probably be an additional ten or fifteen bucks hidden in the costs just for that.

We clambered up on the side of the half-overturned vehicle and I opened the rear door and dropped inside. Reaching over the seat, I felt the woman and played

my light over her a second or so before hooking it to my belt to leave my hands free. She was young, blonde and easy to look at.

Doc’s light was sweeping over her too from above and he commented. “Nice legs. Is she living?”

I felt inside her blouse for a heartbeat. “Just unconscious, but she’s bleeding at the mouth.”

“Probably internal injuries. See if you can reach her up to me. Easy now! Easy!”

We got her up and out and down to the ground. Doc began a hasty examination, suddenly interrupting his work to look up at me. “There was somebody else under her, wasn’t there, Jack?” he asked. “I thought—”

“I hadn’t noticed.” I was already climbing back atop the wreck. She had been propped up against the steering wheel and I had taken for granted she was the only occupant. I knew there wasn’t anyone in the back seat because I’d stood there to get her out.

I played my light down along the front seat and I found what Doc had glimpsed. It was a man, huddling deep along the floor boards beneath the wheel. The front door on that side had been ripped away and he was only partly in the car, his head and shoulders pinned to the ground beneath the body.

I jumped down. “I think you’ve got a corpse on your hands, Doc,” I told him. “We’ll have to push the wreck upright to make sure, though.”

“On our hands,” Doc corrected me. “Let’s get her up to the highway and make her comfortable first. She’s got to get to the hospital right away, as soon as we can make certain if there’s any hope for your friend under there.”

It was on my tongue to say: “Correction—our friend”; but the words turned sour and I didn’t voice them. I

hadn't quite got hardened to death off the battlefields as yet and I still have conscience pricks at joking at such matters.

We carried the girl up to the car and made her as comfortable as we could on the rear seat. Blood seeped from her lips and her face was deathly pale. Doc counted her pulse for the second time before we left her.

Pushing the car over was a man-sized job. We had to find a couple of pry-poles to aid us, but we finally got it upright.

I held a light while Doc straightened out the mangled figure hanging through the door opening. I frowned. The well tailored clothing was vaguely familiar; then I saw the face and I let the exclamation rush from my lips: "Good God, Doc! He—why that guy's the image—" they must be twins!"

"He's dead," Doc informed me in a casual tone. "Still warm; ain't been so long cashed in."

Then: "Who's twins?"

"Him and the fellow at the jail." I didn't know quite how to say it. Even the blood covering his hair and forehead was duplicated.

Doc turned away and started uphill. I kept staring at the dead man and by some freak of chance the watch on his left wrist caught my eye. I bent closer and looked at the shattered crystal, then blinked and took a second look at the unmoving hands.

The smashed timepiece had stopped at 3:35!

Doc Peters was at the highway and I yelled: "I'm coming, Doc!"

I was, too, at as fast a clip as I could make.

I flipped on the siren and kept the accelerator pushed to the floor all the way to the hospital. Doc said something to me a couple of times, but I didn't understand the words. I was trying to think; yet not

wanting to think. Afraid to allow myself to think the crazy thought my subconscious was urging upon me.

Somewhere, unnoticed by me, Ezra Shields had fallen in behind us and he drove up alongside as I braked the car at the emergency entrance of the hospital. He helped us to get the injured girl out of the car, then turned to me as Doc and the attendants rushed her inside, asking: "What gives?"

"Accident," I muttered. "Dead Man's Curve. Let's get over to the jail."

I CLIMBED into his car. I didn't feel like driving.

At the jail, I unclipped the keyring from my belt and tried several wrong ones in the lock, before Ezra took them from my trembling hand. "What ails you, Jack?" he wanted to know. He had the steel door open in a matter of seconds.

I brushed past him and through the office, through the apartment. I came back to the office feeling suddenly tired. I unbuckled my gunbelt and dropped it atop the desk; it had become an unbearable weight.

"What ails you?" Ezra repeated, frowning.

I let myself slump into the desk chair, staring straight ahead at the heavy steel door. The door which, once it was slammed shut and automatically locked, no one could open from either side without the proper key. I had been carrying the only key.

"I must have been dreaming," I mused aloud. .

My jitters must have been contagious for Ezra gave a nervous start as the telephone jangled. Doc Peters was calling. "That you, Jack? Our girl-friend'll pull through, we reckon. Got her here just in time, though. How's your patient making out?"

I sat staring at the door, wondering what to say. .

“Are you still there, Jack?” Doc prompted. “Hello!”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I told him. “He’s dead. . . .”

“Oh . . . I’ll ring the morgue and have the boys get the body out of your way.” His tone was callous, joking.

“It’s not in my way,” I said into the mouthpiece. “It’s out on Route Twenty-three”—and dropped the phone into its cradle.