

THE LONG NIGHT



By
**PHILIP
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"You wouldn't have found a thing, Joe"

There was evidence, there was a witness, but Joe's faith in Mary Lambert's innocence made him blind to the facts!

JOE PULASKI'S mother died when he was twenty-seven. Her death left a void in Joe's life which he was sure he could never fill. He had idolized his mother, had delighted in doing things for her, and had always laughed when she suggested that he find some nice girl who would appreciate him. He didn't want any other girl. No one could take his mother's place.

Then suddenly she was gone and without her, Joe was lost, and bewildered, and frightened. She had been his haven, his source of comfort and encouragement. She had been the person to whom he had taken his problems, and who had always listened sympathetically, and who knew how to say the right things. Now, he had no one to go to, or no one with whom to spend his evenings. No one who understood him.

Other than his mother, he had never had any close friends.

For a time, then, Joe's life was difficult. His work suffered and he lost weight and grew irritable. What might have happened, eventually, he didn't know, but as things worked out, he grew interested in Mary Lambert. This interest, at first a very casual thing, developed swiftly to the point where Mary almost completely filled the space in his life which had formerly been his mother's.

Mary was a thin, frail, rather quiet girl who worked in the same office with Joe. She wasn't particularly pretty but she was neat and competent. There was always a clean, fresh look about her and she had friendly blue eyes. She didn't seem to be a happy girl, for she almost never laughed, but then Joe was a sober and serious person himself.

Mary seemed close to no one in the office. Like Joe, she lunched alone, and this apparent similarity in their habits may possibly have had something to do with drawing them together. One noon, quite by accident, Joe sat next to Mary at the lunch counter in the building and afterwards came back to the office with her. Two nights later, he walked with her to the rooming house where she lived. Within another week, this became a regular routine. He enjoyed it.

Joe didn't know he was falling in love. Mary would listen to him, just as his mother had. She made the same encouraging answers. And Joe discovered, suddenly, that she had a nice smile and that when she smiled she was pretty. In another week, they were spending their evenings together, sometimes taking long walks, sometimes sitting in the parlor at the rooming house, sometimes going to a show.

GRADUALLY Joe learned a great deal about Mary Lambert. She had come to New York from a small town in Ohio, immediately following the tragic experience which had certainly colored her life. Her mother, an invalid, had committed suicide, but an ambitious county attorney had tried to pin the crime on Mary, intimating that she had grown tired of caring for her mother and was greedy to inherit her mother's estate. At the trial, Mary had been acquitted. With the memory of his own mother still strong in his mind, Joe could appreciate what Mary had had to endure. This story made him feel more tenderly toward her.

"I loved her, Joe," Mary told him. "I felt lost when she was gone. I still miss her."

From the sound of her voice and the look in her eyes, Joe knew she was telling the truth. He put his arm around her and held her tightly. He said, "Mary, we need each other. We've both been lost."

They decided to get married the next week, but they didn't. Three days later, at ten o'clock in the morning, two men came into the office, talked to the boss, and then to Mary. They took her away with them and within another hour, Joe heard the story of what had happened. Mrs. Selma Connors, who operated the rooming house where Mary lived, had been found in her bedroom, her head crushed by some blunt instrument. Mary had been charged with the murder. An hour later, Joe was down at police headquarters, talking to Detective Dan Hogan.

Hogan was a big man, square shouldered, tall. He had iron gray hair and a stern, rugged, scowling face. His eyes were sharp and hard.

"I'm sorry, Joe, but that's the way it is," he said flatly. "Mary Lambert killed the woman. I'd stake my reputation on it. We've more evidence than we need to

prove the case. In the lining of Mary's pocketbook, which she had at the office, we found the money which was missing from the strong box in Selma Conners' room. Hidden in Mary Lambert's mattress we found the jewels which had been taken. Another roomer, Mrs. Helen Taylor, actually saw the crime committed, through the back porch window, though at the time she didn't realize what she was seeing. We found blood stains on Mary's blouse, a blouse which had been wrapped in newspaper and dropped in a waste paper receiver on the corner. What can you say to that?"

Joe shook his head, stubbornly. "I don't believe it."

"But what I've told you is true."

"I still don't believe Mary is guilty."

"But how can you believe anything else, Joe?"

"I know Mary Lambert," Joe answered. "I know she wouldn't have done a thing like that."

His voice was shaky. He was perspiring and he was frightened. Frightened for Mary and for himself, for without Mary he would be lost again.

"Can I talk to her?" he asked.

Dan Hogan pulled in a deep breath. After a moment, he nodded. .

Joe Pulaski talked to Mary that afternoon, while three police officers listened. She told him just what he expected. She hadn't killed Selma Conners. She had gone to Selma's room this morning to tell her she would be leaving in another week. There had been no trouble between them. How the money found in the lining of her purse had gotten there she didn't know. Nor did she know about the jewels found in her mattress, or the blood stained blouse.

MARY'S eyes didn't waver as she talked to Joe. She was telling the

truth. Joe was convinced of it more than ever when they told him he must leave.

"It was someone else," he said to Dan Hogan. "Someone hid the money in Mary's purse, and the jewels in her mattress. Someone else stained her blouse with blood and dropped it where it would be found."

"But we have a witness to the murder," said Hogan.

Joe shook his head. "Your witness is lying."

"But why?"

"To protect the murderer."

"And who do you think killed Selma Conners?"

"I don't know," said Joe. "I don't know, right now. But I'll find out."

Joe hired an attorney for Mary Lambert that same day, and that evening, started on a course which he was to follow for months. He didn't guess it then. He didn't know what lay ahead, but the chances are if he had known, he would have acted in no other way. Dan Hogan, time and time again would say to some man at headquarters, "I just don't get it. What is there that gives a man such faith in a woman that he's blind to facts. I've seen some funny things in my time, but nothing quite like this."

He was referring, of course, to Joe's stubborn insistence that Mary was innocent, and to Joe's belief in Mary which wasn't shaken, even during the trial. It was a conclusive trial. A bitter argument between Mary Lambert and Selma Conners was recalled by several other roomers. Though it shouldn't have been a part of the case against her, the shadow in Mary's past was brought to light by the newspapers. Once before, Mary had been charged with murder. She had been acquitted, but the acquittal was made to seem wrong. This time, at the end, it was a different story. This time, Mary Lambert was found guilty and the jury did not recommend leniency.

She was sentenced to die.

"But she didn't kill Selma Conners," Joe said to Dan Hogan. "I tell you she didn't."

This was a week after the trial, and a month after Joe had quit his job. He looked seedy, though he probably didn't realize it. And he looked tired. He was thinner. There were shadows under his eyes and the skin across his face was bone tight.

"It's all over, Joe," said Dan Hogan, and he tried to make his voice kind. "You've done what you could for Mary, all any man could be expected to do for her. Why don't you go away somewhere, start all over again."

"But she's innocent," said Joe. "I can't go away. I've got to prove it."

Dan Hogan's scowl came back. He realized, suddenly, that he had put up with a lot so far as Joe was concerned. Joe had questioned all the roomers at the rooming house where Mary had lived. Several had complained to Hogan. He had warned Joe to leave them alone and had been sure Joe would, now that the trial was over. But he wondered about that.

"What are you going to do, Joe?" he asked bluntly.

"I'm going to find the guilty party," Joe answered.

"But the case is closed."

"Not to me," said Joe. "It will never be closed to me so long as Mary is in jail."

"If you start bothering people again," Hogan promised, "you'll be in jail yourself."

Joe shrugged his shoulders. He turned and marched toward the door.

IT DIDN'T seem to Joe Pulaski that he was doing anything unusual. To him, the problem he faced could be stated quite simply. Mary Lambert had been accused and convicted of a crime of which she was innocent. Somewhere was the truth, and it

was up to him to find it. Up to him because he loved Mary, and because there was no one else to continue the search for the truth.

Joe was an accountant, or rather, had been an accountant before he had quit his job. He had the trained and mathematical mind of an accountant. It was a mind which worked this way: A true column of figures added up to an exact result. If the column of figures wasn't true, the result, even though mathematically exact, couldn't be true. The conviction of Mary Lambert wasn't true because the facts which added up to her conviction ignored the kind and gentle nature of the girl, as he knew her, and as he was convinced she was. And so in his own mind, Joe threw out the conviction of the court.

But Selma Conners had been murdered. That was a fact. Someone other than Mary Lambert had killed her. That was a fact. And if those two facts were true, so were these: The person who had killed Selma Conners had stained a blouse with blood, had hidden the money in Mary's purse, and the jewels in her mattress. What he had to do was find that person.

At a far stretch of the imagination, a stranger could have committed the crime, but it seemed to Joe that the guilty person was more likely one of the three other roomers living in the rooming house, or Bill Conners, Selma's husband. So there were four on Joe's list of suspects: Bill Conners; Helen Taylor, who had testified to seeing the murder committed; Ed Morris, a photographer; and Frank McBride, who had some independent source of income and was unemployed. Joe had talked to all four of his suspects many times. He had learned considerable about them, but nothing conclusive.

One evening a week after his conversation with Hogan, Joe stood in the shelter of a tree across the street from the rooming house. The rain was coming down

steadily. It had soaked through the light coat Joe was wearing. He was chilled to the bone, but hardly conscious of it. His eyes watched the shadows occasionally visible on a curtained window of the rooming house.

A man, hurrying down the street, saw him and stopped. The man said, "Joe? Joe Pulaski?"

Joe glanced around. He nodded. "Hello, Morris."

"Still at it, huh," said Morris. "Who is it tonight?"

Joe made no answer, but Morris apparently guessed the answer. "Helen Taylor, huh?" he said aloud. "And maybe she's not alone in her room. Maybe Bill Connors is with her, but what does that prove? Bill's wife is dead and if Bill's the kind of man who can go for a faded blonde, he's got one handy. It's a cold, wet night, Joe. Give it up and go home."

"I'll never give up," said Joe sharply.

Morris shrugged. He stared at Joe for a moment, then moved on across the street and entered the rooming house. He was a man of about forty, neither tall nor short. He didn't go to work until late in the morning and sometimes worked late at night. On the morning of Selma Connors' death he had still been in bed when the police arrived, summoned by Helen Taylor. Or at least, that was the story.

Joe watched Morris disappear from sight, then glanced up at the window. It was Bill Connors who was in Helen Taylor's room, and maybe it didn't prove anything, but maybe it did. If Bill Connors had been tired of his wife and had been in love with Helen Taylor—

The light in the room Joe was watching finally went out. Joe glanced at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. He turned and hurried up the street to a tavern which he had visited on many other occasions. As he had half expected, Frank McBride was

there at the bar, sipping a beer and talking to two other men. Joe took a seat in a vacant booth. He gave his order and after he had been served he sat there, watching McBride. McBride, a thin man, was stoop shouldered, and had gray hair at his temples. He was a nervous, high strung man, quick tempered—a gambling man, for Joe had overheard him telephoning bookies. He also was a man who drank too much, which Joe had witnessed.

McBride suddenly turned, as though conscious he was being watched. Anger colored his face. He left the bar and marched to where Joe was sitting.

"What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"Having a beer," said Joe mildly.

"You're lying," thundered McBride. "I won't have it, I tell you. I won't have any more of your snooping. Get out."

Joe shook his head, not quite sure what would happen next. For a moment he thought McBride might try to throw him out, but the moment passed. McBride jerked away and crossed to a phone booth. He was grinning when he walked back to the bar.

THE reason for this was apparent half an hour later when Dan Hogan came in, glanced around the room, then came immediately to the booth where Joe was sitting. The detective's scowl was heavier than usual.

"I won't permit this, Joe," said Hogan, grimly. "I can't let you go on annoying people."

"I'm only having a beer," said Joe.

"Then after tonight, buy your beer somewhere else. Quit following McBride. We checked his alibi for the morning of the murder. He's in the clear."

Joe leaned forward. "Would it interest you, Hogan, to know that Bill Connors and Helen Taylor are—"

“No it wouldn’t,” interrupted the detective. “Leave them alone, too, Joe. This is your last warning. Now get started for home.”

A few days later Joe and Mary Lambert were staring at each other through the wire grill in the visitors’ room. Mary was twisting her hands together in her lap, Joe was clenching and unclenching his fists. Then after almost a minute of silence, they spoke.

“Hello, Mary.”

“Hello, Joe.”

“They’re treating you all right?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t found out yet who killed Selma, but I will.”

“You mustn’t worry about it, Joe.”

“Of course I must.”

“But it’s so hopeless.”

“It’s not hopeless. Don’t say things like that.”

Joe was suddenly smiling and after a moment a smile came to Mary’s lips. “All right,” she nodded. “I won’t, Joe.”

“I’m going to Oklahoma,” said Joe, “so I won’t get to see you until I come back.”

“Oklahoma?”

“Yes. Selma Connors came from Oklahoma. That was mentioned at the trial. Don’t you remember?”

Mary shook her head. “What about your job?”

“I’m taking time off,” Joe lied.

“You mustn’t take too much time off, Joe.”

“I’ll be thinking of you every night.”

“Every night,” said Mary.

FOR three months Dan Hogan didn’t have a report on Joe Pulaski, and didn’t know what had happened to him. Then one morning, a thin, haggard looking man in clothing which was almost ragged showed up at headquarters, insisted on seeing him,

and was shown into his office. And at first, Hogan didn’t recognize the man.

“I’ve got it,” said Joe. “I’ve found it. Found what I’ve been looking for.”

There was a high note of excitement in his voice. Hogan scowled. He glanced at the calendar. It lacked ten days of the morning set for the execution of Mary Lambert. “What is it, Joe?” he asked bluntly.

“I’ve been to Oklahoma,” said Joe.

“Yeah?”

“Selma Connors came from there, from a town called Langsdale.”

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

“But her name wasn’t Selma Connors,” Joe continued. “Her name was Selma Dennison. She was married to a man named Frank Dennison.”

Hogan waited. He wondered what wild story would follow and what he should do about it. And he studied Joe Pulaski. There was an almost wild look in Joe’s eyes, a crazy look. “I’ll have to lock him up,” Hogan told himself. “I’ll have to vag him until after the execution.”

“There was a bank hold-up, ten years ago,” Joe was saying. “The bank hold-up was in Moreland, Kansas. The robbers got away with thirty thousand dollars. That is, the man who was carrying the money got away. The other two were killed. The man who got away for a time, was Frank Dennison. He was later caught and sentenced to prison for life. Two years ago, he escaped.”

Hogan was sitting up straighter now. He had placed the name, Dennison. Such a man had escaped from prison about two years ago. The exact details he didn’t recall.

“What else, Joe?” he demanded.

“The money taken in the hold-up was never recovered,” said Joe. “Frank Dennison gave it to his wife. She brought it

here. And he found her and killed her after making her tell him where the money was.”

“You’re guessing, now, Joe.”

“But it was what happened. I know it’s what happened.”

“Selma Connors was really Selma Dennison?”

“That’s right.”

“And how do you know Dennison followed her here?”

Joe reached into his pocket. He drew out a picture. He was breathing fast as he leaned over and placed it on the detective’s desk. “There they are, Hogan,” he cried. “Frank and Selma Dennison. Look at the man closely.”

Hogan did so. He came to his feet. “Frank McBride!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, Frank McBride.”

Here was something pretty real. Here were facts which hadn’t come out at the trial. If it was true that McBride was Dennison, and that Selma Connors had been his wife, and that she had had the money stolen from the bank, the entire case might have to be opened again. At least, after his facts were checked, the whole problem should be put up to the governor, who at least might delay the execution.

“Joe,” he said, “you stay here. Let me carry the ball for a while.”

He hurried into the next room to bark out orders, then looked back into his office. Joe Pulaski’s head was buried in his arms. His shoulders heaved as though he were crying. And Dan Hogan, who was a tough and hard-boiled guy, felt a sudden mist in his eyes which he quickly blinked away.

THAT was on Tuesday, and the following Tuesday, late in the afternoon, Dan Hogan faced one of the toughest interviews of his life. But Joe didn’t know that as he stood at the detective’s desk. He had had no warning of what to expect.

“We’ve got Frank Dennison,” said Hogan. “We finally ran him to earth.”

He had moved, dropped from sight, but each day Hogan had been promising he would be found. Joe’s face lit up at the news.

“We found him and he’s locked up,” Hogan continued. “He’ll be sent back to Kansas. It’s true, Joe, that he was Selma’s husband. He admitted she knew where he had hidden the bank loot, that when he looked for it, it was gone. He thinks she took it. He might, eventually, have killed her in trying to make her tell where it was. But he didn’t kill her, Joe. We are positive of that. His alibi is air-tight.”

“You mean—”

“I mean just that, Joe.”

“Then Mary—”

“I don’t know what the Governor will do. We can’t assure him that the discovery of Selma’s true identity has anything to do with her death. And the case against Mary—if it hadn’t been that Helen Taylor saw the murder through the window, this might give us a chance. But in view of the Taylor woman’s testimony—”

“There was a curtain over the window,” said Joe thickly.

“I know. I tested that. You could see figures in the room through the curtain, Joe. You could see well enough to distinguish a man from a woman.”

“But what about the bank money—the money that disappeared?”

“Perhaps Selma spent it or lost it, or more likely, hid it away somewhere. The secret of what happened to it may never be known.”

“But—”

“I’m sorry, Joe,”

Haggard Joe Pulaski sucked in a breath. He stared at the window without seeing it. There was a ringing sound in his ears. He tried to whip his thoughts into some kind of order, but couldn’t. Words struggled

through his throat, croaking out into the room.

"She didn't do it, I tell you, Mary didn't kill that woman. They've got to set her free. How much time do I have?"

"Three days, Joe," said Hogan. "But maybe the Governor—let me buy you a drink."

The telephone on Hogan's desk started ringing and Hogan turned to answer it, glad of the interruption. When he looked up once more, Joe Pulaski was gone.

IT WAS a dark night. Joe stood in the shadows of the trees across from the boarding house where Mary had lived. He watched the curtained window of Helen Taylor's room. Helen, who had lied about what she had seen through the back porch window. He was back to the beginning again. Helen had lied and now Helen and the man who had been Selma's husband—

The door to the house across the street opened and a man came out. He crossed the street toward a parked car, caught sight of Joe, hesitated, then moved in Joe's direction.

"You again, Joe?" he asked curiously.

The man was Ed Morris. Joe shrugged his shoulders.

"And watching Helen's window again?" said Morris. He sounded faintly amused. "They're going to get married, you know. Helen and Bill Conners."

"She didn't do it," said Joe. "Mary did not kill Selma Conners."

"You might be right at that," said Ed Morris slowly, "Maybe Frankie will break down and talk. That detective, Hogan, told me about what you dug up for him in Oklahoma. I've got to hand it to you, Joe. You're probably one of the most stubborn men in the country. How about running up town with me. I've got to see a man, then we'll grab a bite to eat and do a little talking."

"I want to stay here," Joe answered.

Morris turned back to his car, hesitated momentarily, then climbed into it and drove off.

Joe stood under the shadows of the tree, watching the curtained window across the street, but he was not thinking about the window or the woman beyond. Something kept nagging at his mind, something he couldn't identify for a time. But finally it came to him—stabbing through him like a knife. Ed Morris had said to him, "Maybe Frankie will break down and talk." Frankie! Morris had referred to Frank Dennison as "Frankie." No one here had ever called him by that name. Hogan had referred to him as Frank. But in Oklahoma, a sheriff Joe had talked to had used the name Frankie, and so had others.

It was a little thing, just a diminutive ending to a name, and perhaps nothing more. It was a little thing but it was still something to grasp. There was nothing else Joe could turn to. "Frankie," he said under his breath. "Frankie." He started across the street.

He knew the rooming house quite well. He knew the location of Ed Morris' room, on the lower floor. He got in through an unlocked window, drew the curtain over the window, and clicked on the lights, and stood there for a time, glancing from side to side, and suddenly excited.

"Could it have been Morris?" he was asking himself. "Could Morris have learned about the bank loot and killed Selma in an effort to make her talk? And if it had been Morris and he had found the money, couldn't it be hidden here?" There was only a thin chance that the money might be here, but Joe didn't have the time to miss any chance at all. Three days were left. Only three. He started searching the room. He started searching and he didn't hear the noise at the door or hear the door open, but he heard it close and he jerked

around to see Morris leaning against it, watching him. Joe saw the gun in Morris's hand. The gun was pointed straight at him.

"Maybe it was a good hunch that brought me back," said Morris. "But you wouldn't have found a thing, Joe. Not a thing."

"Not the money?" asked Joe.

"No."

Joe Pulaski's shoulders straightened. He knew, suddenly, that he had come to the end of his search. He knew it because of the gun in Morris's hand, and because Morris had come back to his room, and because Morris had used the name "Frankie" in referring to Frank Dennison. Here, facing him, was the man who had killed Selma Connors, and who had placed the guilt on Mary Lambert. Helen Taylor had been deceived in what she had seen through the thick curtains of the window.

"Some day," said Joe slowly, "I'll find the money. Some day you'll start spending it. I'll be right there to ask where you got it. I'll find where you came from and why you called Frank, Frankie. I'll discover the connection. I'll never stop, Morris. Never."

There was an ugly look on the face of the man who stood at the door, but he nodded his head as though in agreement. "I suppose that's true," he muttered. "I don't suppose, if you lived, that you ever would stop. But death will stop you, Joe. A man can shoot an intruder whom he surprises in the darkness of his room. The police will understand."

The gun in Morris's hand seemed to steady. There was a sudden explosion and the gun jumped and Morris reeled sideways and grabbed at his shoulder. Joe, curiously, didn't feel a thing. Then he understood why. The shot he had heard had come from the window and had struck Morris in the shoulder and Dan Hogan was now climbing through the window. There was almost a grin on his face.

"Sure, Morris," he said grimly. "The police understand. You bet they understand."

LATER Hogan explained the developments to the Chief over the telephone.

"I guessed he had gone to the rooming house, Chief," said Hogan. "I followed him when he crossed the street and broke into Morris's room. I didn't stop him. The guy had used his head in what he dug up in Oklahoma. I thought he might be using it again, tonight. Anyhow, I wanted him to have any break he could get. He deserved it. I was right outside the window when Morris did his talking, and since we got Morris back here, he's done more talking. He knew the Dennisons in Oklahoma, saw the woman on the street here, recognized her, moved to her rooming house and went after the money. Got it too. I'll give you all the details when I get back."

"Get back from where?" asked the chief, his eyebrows raised.

"From up state. I'm taking Joe up state. I want to be there when he breaks the news to Mary Lambert. I've talked to the warden. It's all arranged. Not her release, for that's got to be done formally, but the warden's going to let us see her."

Joe Pulaski, sitting in a chair near Hogan's desk, was smiling. In his own mind he was already there with Mary, telling her that now everything would be all right.

"And another thing, Chief," said Hogan. "There's going to be a wedding and the whole damned Department is going to chip in for a gift. As fine a gift as we can buy. That's an order and if you don't issue it, I will, and I'm not getting soft, either."

Hogan sniffed and rubbed at his eyes. He looked at Joe and scowled. He said, "Come on, Joe. The car's waiting."