

Unfinished Business

by Enoch Sharp

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He was only a shadow then—a shadow streaming out of the room and into the night



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FOOTSTEPS echoing hollowly down the corridor of Death Row brought the usual flurry of excitement to the inmates; the peculiar excitement that is reserved for those living on the threshold of death. And there were two sets of footsteps; to their prison-wise ears that meant an official visit, not just a routine inspection. So they pressed against the bars and waited, straining for the owners to come into view.

Vince Fadden, who had crowned a career of mistakes by killing a cop, saw them first. Warden Bain, beefy and imperturbable, and in his wake the tense, white-faced figure of Father Craig.

PAUL GENTRY knew he would die soon, but that did not worry him. He had a little business to clean up—after he was dead . . .

"Hi, Father," Fadden sang out, "any news?" His fingers relaxed their eager grip on the bars as Father Craig answered gravely, "Nothing yet, Vincent."

Farther down the line 'Li'l Artie' Calhoun was waiting, ebony black and the gleam of gold exposed in his perpetual grin.

Father Craig gave the huge negro a grave smile as he passed. No mounting panic to be soothed here. Calhoun had slashed a man to ribbons in an argument over a crap game, but when his time came he'd walk to the chair with an easy step and it would take 2000 volts to erase his grin.

Paul Gentry, the third occupant of Death Row, was sprawled on his bunk, staring at the ceiling. He alone showed no awareness of the visitors. Even when keys rattled against the lock of his door he maintained his position and it was only when the Warden spoke that he turned his head.

"The Governor has refused a stay, Gentry."

Gentry carefully swung around in his bunk and got to his feet. His voice was dry, matter-of-fact as he remarked, "They tell me that's what Governors are for." He crossed to the front of his cell and leaned his face against the bars. "And just when does the State want its pound of flesh?"

"Tomorrow, 10 p. m."

Gentry nodded and continued to stare dreamily at the dim bulb imprisoned in a wire cage on the ceiling. The Warden shuffled uncertainly for a moment and then with a glance at the motionless figure of Father Craig he let himself out. "I'll send a guard back in 10 minutes," he said, turning the key in the lock, and his ponderous footfalls lost themselves down the gloomy length of the corridor.

Paul Gentry had turned smilingly to

the priest. "Ten minutes? Does our friend think you can salvage my soul in just ten minutes?"

"My son," there was a pleading note in the priest's low, vibrant voice, "I've told you before I'm not trying to salvage your soul—I want to help you find a little peace—"

Gentry cut in harshly, "And I've told you before that I don't want that kind of peace. Save it for the others. Save it for Fadden; he'll take all the religious balm you can dish out and he'll still be rubber-legged when they come to get him."

A RED spot burned on Father Craig's pallid cheeks. It was true. Calhoun didn't need the unguents of religion but Father Craig looked forward with dread to the last moment when Fadden would collapse in grovelling fear. And Gentry—

"You speak contemptuously of death," he said, "but it's a terrible thing to see a man crying like a babe and being carried to his death. How will you meet it, my son?"

Gentry examined the question thoughtfully. "With bitterness," he said finally. "Certainly not with fear." He suddenly smiled. "You're a nice guy, Father. Don't worry, they won't have to carry me to the chair tomorrow."

"But you'll go with bitterness," the priest said softly.

Gentry nodded. "That's right. Because—do you want to know why? But of course you do; that's what you're here for." He began to pace up and down the cell. "I'm a murderer, Father. I killed a man in cold blood for the oldest and corniest of reasons; for the love of a woman. He wasn't a very good man and maybe he even deserved to die, but no man's life should be taken lightly." Gentry stopped his pacing

and faced the priest squarely. "I want you to know that I didn't take Murdock's life lightly. I killed him because it was the only way out—the only way Helen and I could be together, the only way she could escape her husband's continuous brutality."

"Helen Murdock!" Father Craig was startled—"But at the trial she testified that—"

"I know. At the trial she testified that her husband surprised me going through his safe, there was a scuffle, and I shot him." Gentry took a deep, shuddering breath and resumed his pacing. "Only Helen could be capable of that kind of double-cross. Because you see, it was her idea from the very beginning. From the moment I was first hired by Murdock as his secretary she must have had the campaign planned. First of all, make me fall in love with her. That was easy; the trick would have been *not* falling in love with her. She's that kind of a woman. Then, after I was sufficiently knocked off my pins, sell me the idea of knocking off Murdock; so we could get married, to quote Helen. That wasn't so easy, but I finally bought it. Why not? He was brutal to her, wouldn't give her a divorce—I bought it."

Father Craig became aware of the guard peering through the bars, waiting to let him out. He shook his head and the bulky figure moved off. "Go on, my son," he said.

"It was a simple plan; she was smart enough not to make it too complicated. We rehearsed it till we were letter perfect and then she gave me the go-ahead signal. It was three o'clock in the morning; all the servants were asleep. I let myself out the front door and jimmied the lock on the French window leading to Murdock's study. Then I opened the safe and scattered the contents about. I was wearing gloves, of

course; Helen thought of everything. Next I went up to my room, undressed, and then, in my dressing robe, I knocked at Murdock's door and told him the safe had been rifled. I had already called the police, I told him.

"I followed him downstairs to the study. He was straightening up from his examination of the safe when I called to him. He turned toward me and I shot him. Right between the eyes. While Helen was telephoning the police and sounding properly hysterical, I was cleaning the gun and replacing it in the cabinet where Murdock kept his collection of firearms. Another one of Helen's ideas. And when the police arrived she was ready with her brightest idea—she told them that I had killed her husband!"

Gentry laughed harshly. "How about that? Can you see the picture? I *had* killed Murdock—and there wasn't a thing I could do to implicate her—to prove that it was *her* plan!"

"Why didn't you tell all this to the court?" the priest asked, "At the trial you said nothing—"

GENTRY spoke wearily, "Because I was still in love with her, I guess. I don't know, I figured she lost her nerve at the last moment—I didn't know then what I found after sentence had been passed on me—that Helen had always been in love with another man, even while she was stringing me along. So I was just a fall guy for her. I eliminated Murdock for her, and in the process I eliminated myself. Helen gets her husband's estate and her boy friend, and I get—"

Father Craig rose and placed his hand on Gentry's shoulder. "Don't think of that, my son. Let me help you prepare yourself—"

"Don't think of it!" Gentry was staring wildly and his fingers were biting

deeply into the priest's arm. "That's all I *do* think about! Listen, do you want to know my favorite dream? I dream that I'll break out of this damned prison, that I'll make a clean get-away and I'm finally face to face with Helen—I can see the panic in her lovely eyes, I can hear the desperate lies that are on her lips, and then my hands are around her neck, that graceful white tower of a neck, and I'm squeezing, squeezing—"

At the first sound of Gentry's rising, keening voice the guard had started at a run for the cell. The pain-twisted figure of the priest in Gentry's grip spurred him on as he fumbled with the lock, and then he had flung the door open and knocked Gentry sprawling.

The guard's supporting arm was all that kept the priest from slumping to the floor. He was breathing heavily, trying to keep hold of his swimming senses. The pain of Gentry's grip on his arms had been unbearable.

"Are you okay?" the guard was repeating anxiously. "Did he hurt you?"

Father Craig's reply was a little bewildering to the guard. "No, not me," the priest said, "It was Helen he was after—"

IT WAS 9:50 p. m. and Paul Gentry was pacing his cell in the loose, felt slippers that had been issued to him. Felt slippers, a close-cropped haircut, trousers with the legs slashed a way up the sides, short sleeved shirt—he was all set. He had stripped and undergone a close examination by the prison physician and two hard-eyed guards had gone over his cell with a fine-tooth comb. If he were concealing so much as a shoe-string he might cheat the State out of its big moment and that would never do, not after all the trouble and expense it had been put to.

He stopped his pacing when he heard

the footsteps coming toward his cell, three sets of footsteps. Keys rattled against his lock and the warden, flanked by two guards, was waiting at the opened door. No word was spoken as Gentry walked out and moved down the long corridor—the warden at his right, a guard at his left, and several paces behind, the other guard. Like a well trained squad that had gone through the maneuver many times before.

'Li'l Artie' Calhoun was waiting at the bars with his golden grin, calm and composed. Gentry thought, when the lights go out you won't be calm, you'll be yelling and shaking the door like everyone else in the prison. They always do it—

"So long, big fellow," he called out.

Calhoun rumbled back, "Give 'em hell, boy."

Vince Fadden swam into Gentry's view, slack-jawed and wide-eyed. He was staring in fascination at Gentry's close-trimmed skull and a spasm of fear crossed his face as he heard Gentry say, "Like it, Fadden? You'll get one just like it."

Two barred doors swung noiselessly open at the squad's approach. *Two doors*—they must have a lot of trouble with prisoners breaking into the death chamber—

The corridor suddenly widened into a room that might have been carved out of rock—windowless, doorless, except for the passage through which they had entered, and overhead electric lights glimmering in little wire prisons.

Gentry was conscious of eyes covertly watching him as he passed by the witness section. As if it would be a breach of etiquette to watch him openly—please refrain from staring at the doomed man as he walks to the chair—

In the center of the little knot of officials clustered about the chair was

Father Craig and on a sudden impulse Gentry said to him, "I'm sorry about what happened yesterday, Father; I didn't know what I was doing—"

THE priest brushed the rush of words aside with a gesture and looked pleadingly at him. Gentry's face hardened and he shook his head. "No, I don't want any last rites, or whatever you call it." The priest bowed his head and Gentry felt a perverse pleasure in the pain he had caused him as firm hands propelled him into the chair. Two guards knelt and fastened electrodes to his ankles and then to his wrists. Stout leather straps brought his arms and ankles hard against the flat surfaces of the chair and underneath the straps Gentry was conscious of the moist sponges that assured efficient transmission of the current. A well designed set-up guaranteed to hold the body in place as it pitches and strains against the surge of 2000 volts.

Now the warden was bending over him, with sweat beading his ruddy face. "Do you want to make a statement?" he asked.

Gentry for the first time became conscious of the white, silent faces regarding him. Worthy citizens assembled to witness the State's vengeance, to note his every movement, the least tremor in his voice—No, he couldn't trust himself beyond a shake of the head.

A signal from the warden and Gentry felt the helmet being adjusted to his head. Again the wetness of the sponge electrode and then his vision was blotted out by the black mask. This was it. Trussed and blinded like a steer waiting to be pole-axed. Gentry began to pant as if the flimsy cloth mask was stifling him and visions of Helen danced before his eyes—Helen in his arms—Helen whispering the plan

in his ear—Helen with the set, cold face watching as he raised the pistol—Helen in the witness-box, sobbing wildly—pointing him out; the murderer—lovely, deadly Helen who was the real murderer—Helen who deserved to die!

The thick silence in the death chamber was suddenly shattered by the clamor that burst from Gentry's throat—yell after yell filled the room as he strained at his bonds, *straining* at the creaking leather straps with all the strength of insensate fury—

THE loose felt slippers had long since been lost in his flight and Gentry felt the flinty gravel bite deeply into his bare feet as he scrambled down the steep embankment. A rank growth of weeds bordered the highway and he plunged into its tangled security and sprawled there, panting heavily. Before him stretched the highway, glistening in the pelting downpour; the highway that would take him the last lap of his journey.

The drone of an approaching automobile drew Gentry's head from concealment; he watched eagerly as the rain-diffused headlights came toward him and then he quickly dropped back into hiding. There was another car coming from the opposite direction—

The two cars swept by and their passage agitated the weedy cover he lay in. Face down he waited and soon he heard the drone of a car again, deeper and traveling slower. A truck from the sound, and that would be a better bet than a car. He drew himself up and darted across the ditch and into the road and began waving his arms—

Whether or not to stop was a question that Gentry decided for the driver of the battered farm truck; the wildly dancing figure waving his arms and blocking the road left him no alternative and he drew to a squealing halt.



Gentry was at the cab and opening the door before the truck had ground to a stop.

"How's about a lift into town, doc?"

For one astonished moment the farmer stared at the disheveled, wild-eyed figure and then he lunged for the heavy

socket-wrench on the floor—but Gentry was quicker. One hand fastened itself on the collar of his leather jacket, the other hand braced against the opened door, and the driver was yanked from his seat and sent sprawling into the road.



The truck driver put on his brakes as the wildly dancing figure loomed ahead

"I asked you in a nice way," Gentry reminded him as he climbed into the cab and shifted the truck into motion.

With the accelerator pressed against the floor-boards and the miles ticking by Gentry felt the heavy knot in his stomach relax. Too bad he had to

rough up the driver. There would be an alarm raised, a hue and cry—but that couldn't be helped. He was on his way, and nothing would stop him.

The fiery glow in the sky deepened and the steel mills and blast furnaces of Peltonville flowed into view. Gen-

try relaxed his pressure on the throttle while he passed through the truck-thronged streets fronting the grimy factories. Company police lounged at factory entrances and Gentry kept his eyes straight ahead. When the darkness of the countryside closed in on him again he picked up speed and listened to the singing of the tires on the wet asphalt. Only five more miles to go—

He slackened speed as he neared the intersection and made the turn to the right. He was in the outskirts of the town, a darkened, sleeping town. Slowly he mounted the grade that marked the approach to the exclusive residential section. A filling-station on the corner was the last outpost before the carefully ordered jungles of the big estates. Gentry parked here and continued on foot. It was a matter of blocks and a battered farm truck might seem a little out of place here.

HE WAS fervently thankful for the rising fury of the rain as he stole along the tree-darkened streets. There'd be no one out on a night like this, no one to raise an alarm at the sight of a hatless, barefooted, bedraggled figure in gray denims with trousers slashed up the sides of the legs—

Now he was standing in front of the Murdock estate, its white-pillared facade looming through the darkness. He remembered the break in the tall privet hedge that enclosed the grounds and was moving toward it when a sudden panic shook him. The one thing he hadn't figured on—what if Helen was away? He was trembling as he wormed through the yielding shrubbery and inched his way up the slope of the terraced lawn. She *had* to be here; he had come too far to be cheated now. When he rounded the corner of the house there was a light in Murdock's study and he fought against the impulse to

break into a run. Steady, someone was home. A cautious approach to the big French windows and he flattened himself against the clumps of syringa that grew thickly against the low stone walk. By parting the bushes a little he could see into the room. And then his heart was pounding crazily as he caught sight of her.

She was seated before the big oak table where he and Murdock had always worked. It was bare, except for a sheaf of papers before her. As Gentry watched, the figure of a small, withered man came into view. Gentry recognized him immediately. Vellacott, Murdock's lawyer. He was pointing to the papers and explaining something, for Helen would nod from time to time. The provisions of the will are being explained to the bereaved widow, Gentry thought.

The conclusion of business was indicated when Vellacott began gathering up the papers in his brief-case and Helen rose to her feet. She was dressed in black, a simple Paris creation that set off her ivory pallor with smart effectiveness. Vellacott was evidently murmuring condolences as he shook hands with her for she dabbed at her eyes with a wisp of black lace as they passed out of the room.

GENTRY waited a moment and then he was at the window. He carefully pressed against the sash until he was satisfied. Locked, but a firm pressure would spring the catch, he remembered. He shrank back at the muffled roar of a car starting—that would be old Vellacott; and at that moment Helen returned. Smiling, all traces of her tears gone as she perched herself on the arm of the chair before the fireplace.

Gentry took a deep breath and pressed against the window. The catch

gave and he half stumbled into the room.

Helen whirled around and the pallor of her face was suddenly drained to chalky whiteness. "Paul!"

Without turning from her Gentry closed the windows against the rain and slowly advanced toward her. "Excuse my breaking in like this, Helen, but I had to see you just once more—"

She had sunk back into the chair and was staring at him with horror-stricken, unbelieving eyes. Her whisper was barely audible— "Paul—what are you doing here?"

Gentry gave a short, triumphant laugh. "That's it," he said, "I was waiting for you to say that! 'Paul, what are you doing here?'" He was leaning over her huddled figure, his hands on the arms of her chair. "How well I know you, my darling Helen, how well I know what goes on in that sleek, beautiful head of yours—" He was stroking her hair as one strokes a timid, frightened cat. "You're scared, aren't you, Helen? But I'm sure you can explain away what you said at the trial—"

"Listen Paul, if it's money you want—"

"Money!" His laughter was harsh—"It isn't money I want, Helen; it's something much more important, something money can't buy!"

Helen found her voice as his fingers touched her neck, "Paul, wait—!"

"A little unfinished business, Helen darling, that's why I'm here tonight." Gentry's hungry fingers were around

her neck, the graceful white tower of her neck, and he was squeezing—

* * *

A cub reporter was being noisily sick in a corner as the smell of burning flesh filled the execution chamber. The warden gave his last signal to the electrician and the body of Paul Gentry, suddenly released from the blind compulsion of 2000 volts, slumped down in the chair.

Stethoscope in hand, the prison physician approached and made his examination. "I pronounce this man dead," he said, and the formula brought the entire company to their feet, surging toward the exit.

"Brother, I had a couple of bad moments just before they slipped him the juice," a reporter was saying, "I thought sure he was going to break away!"

"Not a chance." His friend shook his head. "Once you're strapped in that chair—come on, I got a pint in the car."

Jan. 15: Tragedy has again struck at the home of Helen Murdock. Just as Paul Gentry was paying the supreme penalty in the electric chair for the murder of her husband—financier Lorimer Murdock, Helen Murdock died herself. Her body was found a short time later in the study of her Plainfield estate.

She had been strangled, police declare, and the only clues uncovered thus far are a series of wet foot-prints leading up to the study window. The foot-prints were made by bare feet and the police have not yet determined how the murderer left the house, since the servants vow they would have seen anyone leaving through the study door.

The investigation is proceeding.

WANG: BUSINESS MAN



By PETE BOGG



AFTER a bank building was finished in Shanghai in 1927, an enterprising young Chinaman, named Wang, set up a small booth in front of it, and assumed the management of a pair of lions that were on each side of the entrance. He convinced the passers-by that

the lions, because of their connection with the bank, had the power to confer wealth. So he sold the right to stroke the lions paws, and had a very good deal for the next thirteen years. The smooth shiny paws of the lions show that they did bring wealth, at least to Wang.