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3 WIVES

By RALPH MATTHEWS

PART VIII

Tramp, tramp, tramp! It seemed as if those plodding footsteps of the jurymen would never cease as they filed into their places after being closeted for two hours in their room—hours that drag out like years to the man whose fate they were to decide.

"Is Leslie Kayne guilty in the matter whereof he stands indicted or not guilty?" asked the bailiff after they had been seated.

A deathly silence settled over the court room as the foreman rose. "The verdict is guilty," he said slowly.

"Are you ready for the sentence?" asked the judge in a voice that tried to be stern, but quavered.

"I am, your honor," said Kayne standing. "Then I demand that your body be delivered to the warden of the Maryland Penitentiary in whose custody you shall remain until such time as His Excellency, the Governor, shall set a date for your execution when you shall hang by your neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul." The words fell from his lips coldly and deliberately.

Kayne looked about the courtroom fran-

tically. All faces were so worn, tears appeared in the eyes of women, men turned their eyes from him quickly. A little child in its mother's lap, knowing not the meaning of it all, smiled and waved at him. Kayne smiled back, then turned and followed his guard from the room.

Alone in the death house he had time to think. In another part of the penitentiary—in the work shop—men were whistling and singing. Where Leslie was, there was only the clanking of his own cell door or the stealthy footsteps of the guard to break the monotony.

He thought about, first of all, Owen. Where was she? Did she know that he was a condemned man? He prayed she never would. If he had stayed in New York with her and had continued to write songs he would not be in the fix he was in now. But now their dreams of success—of Broadway—would never be realized. He was a miserable failure as a lawyer, yes; but then success in any line did not depend so much on mental capacity as on mental attitude. He had the capacity to be anything he wanted to be, but the desire was not there.

Three wives, he meditated, had played an important part in his life, but now when he needed them most none came to his aid. He cursed them at first, cursed them with a virulence and bitterness he could command; but then he changed, "God forgive them," he prayed.

All women are fickle, he thought. Joyce might have saved him—money can do almost anything. Cleo could have saved him. Why did she die? Owen? Of course, she knew nothing of his predicament and if she did, she, too, had probably forgotten him by now. If he could only hear her voice again.

"The Governor has set a date for your execution," said the warden. "You will die on Friday, the 13th."

"Well that's good news," replied Kayne. "So His Excellency finally found a few minutes from his politics to sign my death warrant? You couldn't manage to send me a package of cigarettes and a magazine or two, could you, warden? It's awful trying on the nerves up here. I'd give a couple of days off my life to run my fingers over a piano again."

He bore up well until the warden left the cell, then he fell on his cot and buried his head in his pillow.

Three wives, strangely alike in many respects and yet vastly different. Three wives that had meant nothing but disillusionment, misgivings, regret,—now, death—the death of shame, the death of murderers, cut-throats, traitors and men who were a menace to society. He had but one consolation and that was the fact that he was innocent.

"What was that bit Shakespearean verse he used to quote in school? Oh, yes, he recalled it now: "Towards die many times



They stood looking at the twinkling lights of Broadway.

before their deaths, the valiant die but once." He, too, would die but once.

Three wives, one his own—Joyce, cultured, petted, pampered Joyce. Pride and ambition was with her more a fault than a virtue—pride that she could not even get aside to save him, even were there no doubt about his guilt.

He could see her position plainly; embarrassing and uncertain it was. Surely if he had risked all on another woman before the tragedy, what assurance had she that he would be true to her if she did get him out? He could hear the wagging tongues of gossipers making her an object of public pity. He could not blame her.

Then there was Cleo, the wife of the murdered man—frivolous, lustful Cleo. He knew that she had bartered her soul to an old man for the good things that his money would afford, but he thought she had learned the lesson of the error of her ways. Could it be possible that she had changed her testimony simply for the sake of her husband's insurance money? Was she sending him to the gallows, sacrificing his life for gold? No, he could not think that was the sole motive, there was something deeper. Could she have loved him, too? No, he decided, love does not work like that.

Then there was Gwen—Gwen, the woman that Rupert had stolen from him and tricked into becoming his wife. Since the early days at college, Rupert had been his arch enemy and even now he detected his devilish hand somewhere at the bottom of this affair, but just what part he had played in bringing about his conviction he was unable to say.

Owen, the one woman in the world that he had ever loved—the one woman for whom he was willing to sacrifice his all—the woman of his day thoughts and his night dreams, the inspiration of all his songs, songs that would never be sung. Owen, too, had gone.

Three wives had each written an indelible chapter in his life. But as fate, the great author, was dipping his pen in the ink of destiny, preparatory to writing the word "Amis," he found himself alone.

Days passed swiftly to those without but to the condemned man they dragged with intolerable slowness. The ticking minutes seemed like as many centuries as sleep, which might have brought contentment, refused to be courted. Cigarettes lost their flavor, the food they brought him had no appeal, not—but monotony.

Magazines and papers held no interest for him. One article did catch his attention. He read it through several times. Someone had accomplished the thing which had been his lifetime ambition. A young so-called writer in New York had made good.

New York was agog over a new musical comedy, scheduled to make its debut on Broadway with an all-colored cast, next week. The star of the production had risen from utter obscurity. The name of the writer of the music was a dark secret. There was something uncanny about that show, yet big financial interests, never before known to take a gamble, were backing it.

Members of the cast were mute. They merely intimated that the scores had a different twang to anything ever heard on Broadway. There was soul in that music. No, they had not met the star. She, too, was a mystery. Most of her numbers were to be sung alone, but she was to meet them tonight at the Savoy.

At twelve o'clock Rupert Clifford was in New York on a spree trying to escape his conscience. He left his room at the Hotel Olga, and, hailing a taxi, was conveyed to the Savoy. He was not an unknown figure around Harlem after midnight, and was greeted with acclaim by a host of gold diggers. He was waved to a seat. They were whispering all about.

"Who is this 'She' everybody is talking about?" he demanded between drinks with his "high yaller" companion.

"Why, the star of the 'Southern Moon,' the new show. It's supposed to be greater than 'Shuffle Along,'" he was informed.

There was a sudden commotion as a girl dressed in an ermine wrap strolled majestically into the hall and was presented to the assembly by the door manager as the star of the "Southern Moon."

"Ye Gods," cried Clifford, leaping to his feet. "Why, that's my wife." He caught her by the arm as she passed his table. She uttered a scream of surprise as she recognized him. "You?" she cried.

"Yes, it's me, and don't go putting on any of your damned airs. Act like you are glad to see me." He pulled her forcibly into a chair at his table. "If you knew that the man you threw me over for will hang like the dog he is tomorrow night, you wouldn't be so ritzzy."

There was a look of horror as she stared at him. "Not Leslie?" she faltered. "Tell me, it can't be." She was almost hysterical.

"Can't, eh? Read that," he said, with a sneering smile, tossing her a clipping from a Baltimore paper. "We framed him all right."

She forced a laugh. "Well, old dear," she said, "it's nothing to me now that you are here. Let us forget him, but just tell me how you framed him. Here, take another drink." Her hand shook nervously as she poured him a brimming glass.

Rupert encouraged by her merry laughter, told the story of the tragedy, told how he planted the pistol on the doctor, told

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