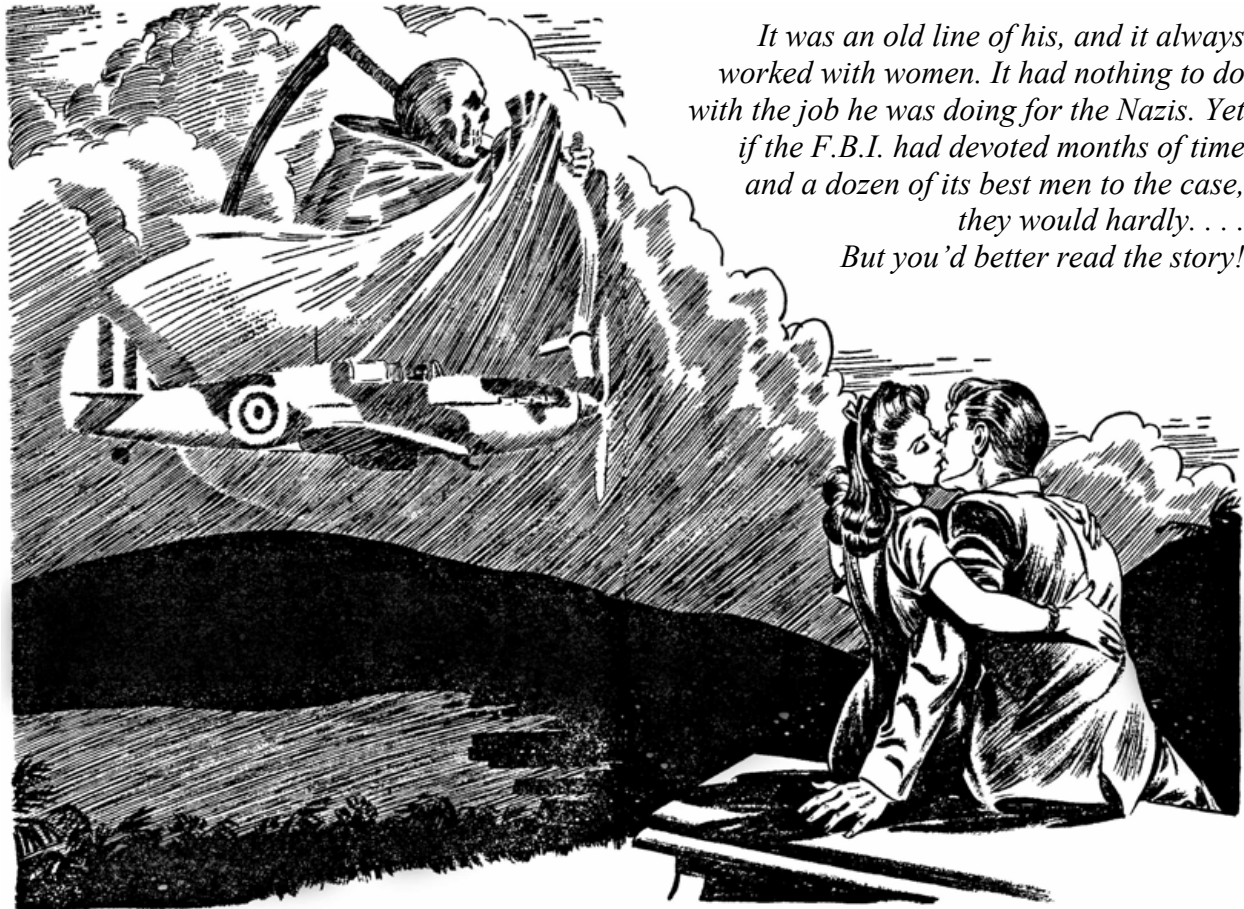


By W. B.
Rainey

PALLID MISTRESS



It was an old line of his, and it always worked with women. It had nothing to do with the job he was doing for the Nazis. Yet if the F.B.I. had devoted months of time and a dozen of its best men to the case, they would hardly. . . . But you'd better read the story!

"You mean you'll be dead in a little while," she said, and she held back no longer.

HE HAD met the German agent at the very edge of the city, and after that, just to be careful, he had taken a roundabout way home. Now, where the road topped a high hill, he stopped.

Beneath him, it was like a city of the dead. Not a light showing in the massed, dark houses, the serrated skyline black against a black sky. These Americans, he thought, were taking their war seriously—with practice blackouts, and their plants running twenty-four hours a day, and men standing in line to join the army and go and get shot—for twenty-one dollars a month. He patted the fat roll of money in his pocket and chuckled.

No need of going down now and stumbling along through the dark. The practice blackout would be over soon. To his right, the ground was tree-covered and grassy, as well as he could make out. Probably some kind of private park. He left the

road and beneath one of the trees he found a bench, and sat down.

It was very dark here, but he had a good view of the blacked-out city. A whole dark city, and teeming with damned fools, he thought, and again he patted the money in his pocket. If a man had sense enough to care for nothing except his own welfare, he could make a fine thing for himself out of those idiots. They paid him splendid wages to work in a defense plant—and the Germans paid him not to work as hard as he might, and to furnish them bits of information that came his way. If the Germans won, they would reward him. If the Americans won, he still had his well-paying job, and nobody the wiser.

The setup was foolproof. All he had to do was make the most of it—and the whole temperament of the nation helped him with that. Take that good

looking girl he'd picked up two nights before, and the way she'd swallowed his story about being a soldier on leave with only a little while before he had to go back, go to the real fighting, be killed maybe. . . . They all fell for that. They all wanted to do their bit to make the boys happy.

HE WAS still thinking of her, grinning to himself, when he heard steps coming across the grass, and a moment later a girl, barely visible because of the darkness, sat down on the bench beside him. The odor of perfume, exotic and nerve-tingling, touched his nostrils.

The grin widened on his lips. A girl in the flesh was always better than one in the memory.

"Hello," he said.

She made a startled cry and leaped to her feet. "Who—? I—I didn't see you. Excuse me. I—"

She was backing swiftly away from him, turning, about to go, and he said, "Wait! Please don't go!"

"I must! I didn't know there was anyone here. There never is at night, and . . ." She was still backing away. Through the inky shadows he could scarcely see her.

"Please," he said hurriedly. "I was so lonely sitting here. I don't know anyone down there in the city." She had stopped, but he could sense that she was still poised, still about to run away. "And this is my last night before I have to go back," he said.

"Back!" She was leaning a little toward him, and it was so quiet here that it seemed he could almost hear her breathing. "Back where?"

"I'm in the air corps." He always said he was in the air corps rather than another branch of the service, because that seemed to him more romantic and because he could make it sound so dangerous—while actually any real threat of physical danger made his bowels turn cold.

She was still hesitant and he said, "Please sit down and talk to me. After tomorrow there won't be any chance to talk to pretty girls."

"How do you know I'm pretty?"

"You have to be. You have such a pretty voice. And when you sat down a moment ago, I could smell the perfume you use. Only a beautiful girl would use that perfume. Besides, it would be against all the rules for anybody except a beautiful girl to turn up out of the darkness when a soldier's so damn' lonely on his last night of leave. Now wouldn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "It would be against all the rules."

She had a young voice, a golden voice, and the sound of it stirred him. This was going to be swell, he thought. And he said, "You are pretty, aren't you!"

"What is a girl to say to that?"

"The truth. Because you are, aren't you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Come on and sit down."

She came back slowly and sat on one end of the bench.

When he went to sit beside her, she said, quickly, "No! Over there."

"All right," he said, laughing. This slow approach to romance was something he liked, and he liked for it to last awhile. And he was sure of how it would end—the way it nearly always did. He had heard the tremor in her voice and he was a connoisseur of such matters. This girl was a passionate little thing.

He sat down at the end of the bench. He could see the outline of her figure. A damn' fine figure, too. She was wearing some dark-colored dress and against this he could see her hands, looking pale and almost luminous. He could see the pallid outline of her face, the soft chin, the full high forehead.

"I was walking because I was lonely," he said. "When I saw the bench, I came over and sat down. I've never been out this way before and I don't even know where I am."

"It's a park," she said. "A private park. I walk here almost every night. I like to walk at night. But this is the first time I ever met anyone."

"If I'd known you were here, you'd have been meeting somebody every night."

"You say very nice things."

"I want to." He'd practiced most of these lines often enough. "It's strange how, without having ever really seen you, I want to say nice things to you. But time is so short—" And as if to make up for that he moved toward her end of the bench.

SHE jumped up and ran three quick steps away from him. "No!" Her voice was a husky, trembling whisper. "You—you mustn't touch me!"

"I want to." He had just the right restraint in his voice so that it was a promise and a plea, rather than a threat.

And she said in that same deep whisper, "I want

you, too. But you mustn't." When he did not answer for a moment, she said, "I won't sit down again unless you promise to stay at your end of the bench."



"If we meet later, you'll understand why I lied," she said.

"All right," he said. He thought this was carrying coyness a little too far and it would have annoyed him; but her voice held such a promise of controlled passion. It excited him. It made the muscles in his stomach harden and tremble a little.

She sat down at the far end of the bench again. She said, "I—I don't want to be like this. But I have to. I'm afraid not to."

For answer he lit a cigarette, holding the cupped match so that the flame glowed upward on his face. He was a handsome man and it wouldn't hurt to let her see that, since she was going to play so hard to get. When he was sure she'd had a good look at him, he moved the match toward her. His breath came sharply then. She was more than pretty. She was beautiful. About the pale oval of her face her hair was red gold. Her mouth was full and sensuous and scarlet.

"You're gorgeous!" he said.

He made another move toward her end of the bench. And again she stood up. "Really, I'll have to go. . . ."

He couldn't figure why she was stalling. It wasn't because she wanted to. If he'd ever seen passion in a girl's face, ever heard a voice tremble with desire, it was the face and voice of this girl with him. That glimpse of her had stimulated him like liquor. It made his blood run hot in his veins. And he couldn't even get to the same end of the bench with her!

Below them, the practice blackout had come to an end. The lights of the city made a pale haze upon the sky; the streetlights were winking crosses. "I like it better that way," he said. "When it's blacked out, it reminds me of things I'd rather forget. Manila . . ."

She said quickly, breathlessly, "You were at Manila?"

"I was shot down there," he said. "The day the city fell. About the last plane we had."

"Oh-h. I'm so sorry. Were you—hurt?"

"That's why I'm back on leave. I didn't want to, but they sent me."

She was leaning toward him and again he could see the pale, beautiful oval of her face. "I'm so glad you got well!" she said.

All right, he thought. She's going to be so damn' hard to get, I'll give her the works. He said, "Well enough."

"What do you mean?" She was all sympathy.

"Well enough to fly again—for awhile. But there's a lung punctured and scar tissue. I've got about six months. Which is some five months longer than is needed."

She was staring at him and he could hear her husky breathing. They all fell for that story. They were all overjoyed to make a hero's last days pleasant. "What do you mean, longer than necessary?" she whispered.

He made his laugh a little harsh. "You'll read about it in the papers a few weeks from now—or before. You'll know then what I mean, but I can't tell you now. They've picked a half-dozen pilots who don't have long to live anyway."

"You mean that—within a month, a few weeks, you'll be dead?"

He shrugged.

IT WORKED all right. She was close beside him on the bench, her arms around him, her face

turned up to his. In that first embrace he noticed the coolness of her skin. After that he forgot everything except the desire pounding like pumped molten lead through his veins. He could feel her breasts pushed hard against him, round, smooth breasts, cool as the feel of apples, and trembling. Her body tight against his.

He pushed her backward upon the bench.

"No . . ." she whispered. "I have a house. It's close . . ."

They walked under the dark trees across the smooth lawn. His arm was tight around her. He could feel her breasts trembling with her movements. He was conscious of the smooth, vibrant flow of her legs. His own knees were watery and ached at the weight of his body. He turned once to kiss her, crushing her against him. Her mouth was eager on his. If the feel of the skin was cool he no longer noticed it.

It was a small cottage, wrapped in vines, with no lights burning. She led him through the front room into the one beyond. . . .

THE sky was gray and it would be morning soon, but inside the cottage it was still dark. They went together to the door. Outside a mockingbird was beginning to sing. She kissed him. The feel of her lips was a little coarse now.

But that, he thought, was because all the rouge was long since gone. "If I've lied to you," she said, "it does not really matter now. And if we meet, later, you will understand why I lied."

"Don't worry about it, baby," he said.

He was out of the park and half down the hill toward the city, the sun clear in the sky, before he thought of what she had said. "Hell," he said aloud, "I'm supposed to be dead in a month, according to that story I told her. How does she figure ever to meet me again?"

He kept thinking about it. He tried to forget it and couldn't. That was why he said to one of his fellow workers that afternoon, "There's a big private place on the hill south of the city. Who lives there?"

"Belongs to a guy named Barndale," the man told him. "A guy worth two million bucks. With a damn' good-looking daughter, too, judging by the pictures I've seen of her. At least she used to be. But it didn't do her any good."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the old man was able to fix a place up here for her to stay, so he didn't have to send her off to a colony somewhere to die. They say she caught it about a year ago on a trip to Asia, or somewhere. Good-looking as she is, and with leprosy. It's a hell of a note."