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BOOKS BY TOD ROBBINS

THE UNHOLY THREE

RED OF SURLEY

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Silent, White and Beautiful

AND OTHER STORIES

TOD ROBBINS

BONI AND LIVERIGHT
PUBLISHERS **NEW YORK**

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TO

CLARENCE H. ROBBINS

WHO SADDLED AND BRIDLED

PEGASUS

AND SUPPLIED GOLDEN SPURS

TO URGE THAT WINGED STEED

UP THE WINDING ROAD OF

IMAGINATION

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PREFACE

Boston!

I find myself on a hot August afternoon under the shade of a friendly elm beneath which Sumner and Webster and Holmes and Lowell and other great New Englanders had, in the past, I hope, taken the unprohibited refreshment of the Common.

Commerce has conquered culture; the patriots have passed to make way for the profiteers; there is a jangle of traffic in the air, an echo of money making . . . business *is* business.

Ponzi, the Cagliostro of Pi Alley, filtering the cash of his investors through their own socks, was by a new process of chemical calculus returning it more or less doubled . . . business *was* business.

* * * * * * *

An elderly man, mopping his brow with a voluminous silk handkerchief, detached himself from the throng and sat down beside me. He carried on his arm one of those green cloth bags the which, anywhere north of Springfield, is the *croix de guerre* for bravery in battle with literature. Occasionally a lawyer can be seen with one, but it is no guarantee that he is bookish beyond Blackstone.

Returning to the green bag; what did it contain? One may not ask impudent questions in Boston. I

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gazed toward Bunker Hill monument hoping for courage from that direction. How could I open the conversation, what could I . . .

He began talking to me, not as stranger speaks to stranger, but with a fine air of cordiality and obvious desire to converse. He revealed himself a dealer in rare volumes.

"I've ransacked every second-hand book store in Boston. That's my hobby," he said, opening the green bag and diving into its mysterious depths.

"First editions?" I inquired.

"By all means; commencing as far back as *Cotton Mather*. A first *Fanshawe* by Hawthorne passed through my hands; also a *New England Primer*—slightly mutilated—ever so priceless now."

"What became of those books?"

A spasm flowed across his face.

"I sold them—at the wrong time. That's the only trouble about this business; one never knows how long to hang on."

"Then you collect only——"

"To sell; that's it," said he, concluding my sentence. "Just to make a living. I've had first editions of most all the American authors: Cooper, Irving, Thoreau, Longfellow——" The hand was withdrawn from the green bag.

"Here, look at these: A copy of *Ekkoes from Kentucky* by Petroleum V. Nasby; Artemus Ward and a copy of the *Overland Monthly* containing Bret Harte's

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Luck of Roaring Camp. All in good condition."

"You have read the works of these writers?" I interrogated, gratified to be in the presence of one so well informed.

"Never!" was the astonishing admission. "I buy and sell; nothing more. My preference, when I do read, is for supernatural, weird and fantastic tales. When I get hold of a good book along these lines I keep it. Poe, Bulwer-Lytton, Fitz James O'Brien, Dante, the Poems of Baudelaire, tales of haunted houses, amazing prophecies, spiritualism, the world's unsolved mysteries, and material of that sort. I want to be entertained, thrilled, mystified. I am reading Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* for the tenth time. I first read Bulwer's *Zanoni* when I was fifteen years of age; repeatedly since. Splendid."

He returned Nasby, Ward and Harte to the green bag, pulled the puckering string as one tightens lovingly a money bag, and prepared to take his leave.

"Have you read Tod Robbins?" I hastened to inquire before he escaped me.

"No. What has he written? Who is he most like?"

"Himself! The chief charm about Robbins is that he has developed an entirely new method of treatment for the fashioning of tales which stand upon the pedestal of improbability. While taking the most incomprehensible liberties with reality—he proceeds with such boldness and imaginative courage that the reader accepts the result as logical and conclusive."

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"Does he believe in ghosts, and banshees and fairies and"—— the green bagger gripped my hand tightly—"grimness?"

"Yes," I assured him, "and writes about them with such conviction that others agree with him. I would suggest that you read the tale, *Silent, White and Beautiful,* from which his latest book takes its title. That story surely is grim enough for any man. Do you play billiards?"

"I did when I was young. A waste of time," he replied with his mind searching the past.

"Then I refer you to *Wild Wullie the Waster.* A capital ghost story full of shadows and dust and hatreds that cannot die, to say nothing of remarkable billiards. One may hear the balls click and carom, shot from cues held in the fingers of the shades." I had made up my mind to Paul Revere his hobby, and so I rode with resounding hoofs.

"Or better still, *Who Wants a Green Bottle?*" I continued, lifting a hand to invoke silence. "Have you an uncle?"

"One," he answered, "very well to do—and aged."

"Exactly! The green bottle story will give you much to reflect upon. There is a real banshee—Scotch extraction—in its pages; and philosophy and humor and reasoning, to say nothing of hints to prospective heirs—especially nephews."

"You entertain me greatly," he said with real Boston warmth.

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I permitted that observation to pass without comment, knowing that he would be the more indebted after the book had come into his hands.

"Sir, you have stimulated my appetite. Where can a copy of *Silent, White and Beautiful* be had? If your estimate is correct I shall not only read it, but I may perhaps lay in a few copies and . . . why not be modern? Algernon Blackwood is being collected."

He made a significant gesture—the palms of his hands floating outward and upward.

I informed him that the volume was to be issued in September, that I had read all of the stories in manuscript and in my capacity as an editor accepted and published most of Tod Robbins' fiction in magazines. Also, that I approved of him mightily and found much pleasure in recommending his works to those who select their reading with discrimination, and seek originality in thought and expression. Originality, united with a graceful style and power of delineation, endows a book with immortality.

* * * * * * *

This volume I do commend to the public with the same fervor that I sang its praises to the old Boston book-buyer, who, occupied only with profits, seldom stopped to examine the contents of the treasures he sold. To collectors, however, I beg to point out the fact that *Silent, White and Beautiful* is valuable two-fold: First, because it is at once worth reading, and second, in the to-morrow of Americana it will be much

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sought after as a source of historical light, serving to illuminate the life of a writer who is destined to take his place among the uncommons of Grubb Street.

Thus comes to an end these observations which are destined to be, as is not infrequently the case with utterances made in the environs of New England, more or less prognostications.

This attempt at prefacy has become prophecy. Let it stand!

ROBERT H. DAVIS.

Boston Common,
August 7th, 1920.

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SILENT, WHITE AND BEAUTIFUL

I

TOMORROW at this time I shall be dead! I have repeated this phrase over and over since breakfast with the utmost calmness, with the utmost resignation. In no way have I attempted to blind myself to the truth. He who does that is lost. The philosopher alone is wise. Before the clear calm eyes of reason, the imaginary terrors of dissolution become infinitesimal specks of dust. I breathe upon them and they are gone.

And yet I cannot visualize my death. I have tried to many times, but have failed. Sitting down on the left hand corner of my cot, I attempt to picture the execution. My imagination has always been supernaturally acute. I can see the room and the chair—the chair dreaded by so many. And the witnesses? Yes, I can see them—all those sensation-mongers. There is one fat old gentleman in a striped flannel waistcoat—an old gentleman who keeps on smiling and smiling. One would think he were at a wedding, his smile is so

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forced and unreal. And the others are like statues, grouped together to represent something.

Yes, I can see them all. But they are not looking at me. No, they are looking at another man—a man who has seated himself in the chair. But this man is not I. No, though he sits in my place, wears the new suit which was given me, bears my dishonored name, he is not I. And although I attempt to analyze this man's emotions, read the secret workings of that brain, understand the feelings of one in the shadow, the blade of imagination bends in my mind, becoming useless and dull.

To-morrow at this time I shall be dead! This phrase no longer conjures up anything. Like a child who has repeated the Lord's Prayer over and over, so have I repeated, "To-morrow at this time I shall be dead," till the words have become meaningless, sinking back into the black unexplored caverns of sound. And that this hand which guides the pencil—this live human hand—will in so short a space be motionless and powerless, cold and senseless, seems as impossible as the wildest dream. The voice of reason pounds dully against my ear-drums, but cannot gain admittance. Perhaps it is better so.

Am I afraid of death? No. Then why have I taken up the pencil? Because, although I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of something which lurks on the invisible frontier—something which is quite apart from both life and death—something which reads my words, my looks, my gestures. And because of this silent

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sentinel in my cell, I have become a stranger to myself—an uncouth awkward stranger. The egoist has fled, the artist who crushed conventionality beneath his heel; and in his place stands an unknown, terrible fellow—a fellow who needs watching. I could have pleaded insanity at my trial and escaped the chair. It is so easy for me to act. But now— Why could not the judge and jury see me now?

But I must not peer too long into my soul. Introspection looks down the shaft, and soon sees the grinning face of Madness floating on the black water. The austere countenance of the philosopher casts back a reflection which he recognizes with a shudder. The moon may be—. But I must not wander.

One source of solace has been with me constantly during my days of imprisonment. To a man such as I—a man condemned to death—the daily newspapers are of great value. It is comforting to realize that there are thousands, nay millions, of human beings who are cognizant of my existence, perhaps intimately interested in the outcome of my career. During these last few weeks, as never before, I have felt myself to be an important link in the human chain—a link which daily holds the attention of a multitude of minds. I, the unknown sculptor, the young man of limited means and limited reputation, am now something of a celebrity. What an enduring hold has egotism! I caught myself smiling a self-satisfied smile when I wrote, "something of a celebrity." Avaunt, False Pride! You are in the presence of the shadow. Back, back

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to the highway of life, where the multitude sit in the sunlight. I have no need of you here.

I realize perfectly what a storm of curiosity my actions have aroused and it is not my purpose to leave this planet without a satisfying answer to the question which I myself have raised. You, who have so often studied my striking portrait in the papers, you, who have so puzzled over my whimsical acts during the ill-fated month of March, you, my friends and admirers, shall learn of everything which prompted me to a series of crimes destined to set the world of sensation agog. And you, my fair readers, you, whose soft cheeks so quickly change from rose to lily, you, who shudder and turn away, look again into the face which you have covertly abstracted from the newspaper—the face of René Galien, your humble servant; René Galien who created that group "The Happy Family." Respect is akin to fear, is it not? You shall respect me.

II

I come of an old French family. There is the blood of kings in my veins. You smile; but it is a fact, I assure you. Have you not noted in my many portraits, the finely chiseled features, the aristocratic curl to the lips, the small shell-like ears? But my hands! They are what tell the story. The long tapering fingers, the delicacy of wrist and palm—yes, these are the hands of one refined by the gradual process of centuries. Why

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do my eyes hold your attention then, when I have such hands as these?

After the Revolution, my great grandfather emigrated to America. Since then the Galiens have been bobbing up and down like corks. You know how it is—one year a mansion, servants, horses, dogs; another year a boarding house, genteel respectability, a single suit shiny at the elbows and knees. That comes from an excess of aristocratic blood in a plebeian age. The male members of my family have never been saving with their money. My father cried out on his death-bed:

"It is glorious to die in debt. One has succeeded in cheating one's enemy, the world."

A strange man was he, with a laugh like the cackling of a frightened hen and dry, shriveled hands which rustled in the empty pockets of his frock-coat like bank-notes.

My mother died before I can remember. At an early age I was sent to a school in Paris. Once a year I was allowed to cross the sea and visit my father in New York. He would meet me each time at the pier, looking very somber in his frock-coat. I remember that towards the last his face seemed as yellow as the pale bloodless oranges one buys.

He resided at a small boarding-house in Thirty-third street—a French boarding-house where one encountered all manner of odd characters. Madame Fabien, the landlady, was a woman well on in middle life. At the time of which I speak, she attempted to maintain a

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