

# WOMAN AT BAY

BY GEORGE HARMON COXE

## The Story:

Ordered to Havana to obtain a manuscript believed to be held by the widow of ARMAND SEVIGNY, once active Vichy collaborationist, PAUL MACKINNON stepped smack into trouble: SEVIGNY'S widow was NORMA TRAVERS, PAUL'S ex-wife whom he had not seen since their divorce; the manuscript, containing damning evidence of pro-Nazism was wanted at any price by numerous people, among them BRUCE AITCHISON, American industrialist, and his friend MARIE GERAND. Knowing he was trailed by a man known only as RODRIGUEZ, but aided by LEON VIDAL, a reporter, PAUL found NORMA, accompanied by DENNIS CLARKE, who had fought in the Spanish Civil War with PAUL, and ADRIENNE BRISSARD, a small, attractive Frenchwoman. To PAUL'S surprise, NORMA appeared badly frightened, told him she was being watched by a ship's steward, MANUEL ZAYAS, then begged PAUL to meet her in another hotel after she had transacted a secret mission. Believing she intended to pick up the manuscript, PAUL agreed, but arrived to find VICTOR MOLINA, a Central American diplomat, shot through the heart. To his further amazement, NORMA emerged from the closet, holding a gun. Wrenching it from her, PAUL determined to search her for the manuscript. . . .

## II

PAUL MACKINNON waited morosely for Norma to get dressed again. When she came out of the bathroom, buttoning her jacket, her face was aloof, arrogant, brittle and controlled.

"Have you any other bright ideas?" she asked.

He looked sourly at her. He had no feeling one way or the other about making her undress, and had in fact stopped her before she finished. With the suit and blouse off, there was nothing left but brassière and shorts, both skimpy and sheer enough to show him that not even a roll of microfilm was concealed underneath.

The manuscript was gone, as she had said, and Victor Molina was dead and Paul knew the obvious thing now was to call the police. But police meant investigation, and he did not like to think of what came next. If they told the truth, the police would surely hold Norma, at least temporarily, and his own position was neatly involved with hers.

He rose finally, his mind made up: he would not report this murder. For a little while, he and Norma were on the same side of the fence, and together they might make more progress than either could make alone.

"We better get out of here," he said. "There's just one thing I want to get straight. I don't think you killed this guy but we're going back to your room and you're going to tell me more about these papers and why they're so damned valuable."

"Am I?"

"Either that or I call the police and we have it out right now."

That rocked her a little. She blinked and MacKinnon said:

"I do you a favor—a sort of mysterious favor—and I get up to my ears in murder. I don't mind taking the rap for renting this room when the time comes, but I think I'm entitled to know why I'm sticking out my neck. And I think it's about time you started trusting me."

He made his voice reasonable, even a little disappointed, and Norma was impressed.

"Perhaps you're right," she said, and paused a moment. "All right. I will."

He took out the gun, finding it an automatic of Spanish make, and scanned the floor until he located the ejected shell.

"What about this?" he asked.

She said she didn't know. She said she'd had a gun similar to it on the boat but it had been taken from her room, probably by Manuel Zayas. When she added that she was sure it could never be traced to her, he asked her to point out the exact spot where she had found it. He wiped it carefully and put it back.

"All right," he said, and went over to open the door.

Norma was looking down at the dead man, and MacKinnon saw her lip tremble. She said something as she started past the still figure, a whisper that sounded like, "Goodby, Victor, and thank you." Then she came to MacKinnon and her eyes were wet.

"Walk down," he said, and told her where his car was parked. "The stairs are closest to the side door," he said. "Use that."

He opened the door and glanced into the hall. When he saw it was empty, he nodded and she went quickly through.

He gave himself three minutes, then walked to the fourth floor and back to the elevator and rode down.

When MacKinnon stepped from the car on the main floor, no one paid any attention to him. He turned right at the end of the alcove, and followed a service corridor that brought him to an open door that gave on an alley.

A truck was unloading on the left but he squeezed past this and continued to the street. Across from him there was a bookstore, flanked on one side by the ground-floor windows of an office building and on the other an open-front grocery store. The half-dozen pedestrians who passed as he stood there gave him no more than a glance so he turned right and started briskly down the street.

THE clock in the lobby of the Habana Hotel said five o'clock when MacKinnon came in with Norma and stopped at the desk while she asked for her key. He was relieved to see that neither Denny Clarke nor Adrienne Brissard was around, but not until he had closed the door of Norma's room could he start to relax.

"Is there any more of that Scotch?" he said.

Norma nodded and opened a drawer. She put the bottle on the bureau and said there were glasses in the bathroom. Then she slipped off the jacket of her suit. "I have to wash," she said. "If you want some water—"

"Do you want a drink?" When she said no, he poured his own and got some water from the bath; then he sat down by the window and drank gratefully.

He had a cigarette going when Norma came out and she looked a lot better. She had no make-up on now but her lips were red and her face was alive and glowing from the scrubbing she had given it.

"There," she said and sat down on the love seat.

MacKinnon drank some more and gave her a cigarette. When he sat down again she leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, staring past him out the window. It was quiet for a little while, and finally she shook herself and looked at him.

"Where shall I start?" she asked.

MacKinnon was a little surprised at her attitude and tone of voice. She seemed now to harbor no bitterness, but had apparently decided to bury her personal animosity before the greater importance of a mutual understanding.

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They found Norma sitting all alone in the gathering dusk. She sat on a stone bench smoking a cigarette and looking off across the garden



Young  
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OLD May Lothrop had always loved the sun. These hot summer mornings her old bones clanked as she rolled out of bed, but she moved quietly and left Phinney well covered in his muttering sleep. She pulled on shoes—they might have been Phinney's for there were long years of sharing between them, and they had no great differences in size. Then she dragged an old coat over her strong shoulders and went out to the kitchen.

A hay smell, a dew smell poured through the open kitchen window. Old May sat down to wait for the coffee to boil. She wanted to be outdoors as soon as the sky turned pink.

Through the large window, across the table, she could see the woodhouse, now a chicken coop, the smokehouse and privy they didn't use any more, and behind was the thirty-year-old orchard, every twig of which she had watched grow. Starting briskly at the back door was the immense garden.

The morning light was thin and weak. The sun, quivering in haze, became an orange ball, then a yellow one, and May could hold herself in the house no longer.

Her cotton nightgown trailing, she tasted the wet air in her lungs, down deep in her stomach.

The garden couldn't be touched. Too wet. But she feasted on it, said "Good morning" to it. To have a garden and an orchard like this, she had argued Phinney into moving out from the city long ago. She had raised two sons on green corn and lettuce and carrots, had poured milk into them from the neighbor's cows—hustled two city-frail, active little boys into the big, solemn men who lived with their wives and drove out, solemnly, to visit them, an odd Sunday afternoon a month.

On every inch of that garden were drops of May's sweat. How she worked! How she loved and believed in sweating! Suddenly she dived into the saw-edged tent of squash leaves and yelled her husband's name.

"Phinney! Will you look! Look!"

He heard her. She knew he couldn't help hearing. But she kept on yelling.

Phinney leaned his face out from the bedroom window with a look both amused and sour, his bush of gray hair shoved across his narrow, clerkish brow. May spoon-fed him doses of her life's excitement, and he took them calmly, albeit resignedly, as a man who had spent most of his years behind a counter and now was eager for little more than his newspaper, ball games on the radio—all a Chinese wall built against the hundred and one odd jobs May thought up to plague him between breakfast and bedtime.

Over her head May waved a yellow-warted club.

"This squash you missed when you picked last night. Such a big one!"

A stream of smoke from his first cigarette blanketed Phinney's head. He was sixty-two, looked older, felt younger. If allowed, his sleep was endless as a child's.

"And what're you going to do with it?" he asked her. "A bushel basket full under the porch—"

"None whoppers like this one. I'll give it

to Earnie or Willie, whichever one comes first next Sunday."

As if both didn't arrive like dice from a box, on the dot. And scooted home together, Earnie first saying, "Well, time we're moving along." Then Willie, then Edith and Josephine, the two wives. "Yes, time we got home." There were no grandchildren. Wouldn't be any.

"Cut it up and throw it to the chickens," was Phinney's advice for the squash, and he licked his few upper teeth with his tongue. Half so much garden, he reasoned, and May'd have half so much planting and hoeing and weeding. But he'd argued with her thirty years; all that time, the hoe in her hands, like the scythe in Father Time's. And it was her weapon against him, for May hated rest like a preacher hated sin. But the chickens got fat, and the Petrowski's hogs got fatter. Only May kept her leanness, like a crow; she worked that garden, sprayed the orchard, worked at canning and cooking and preserving as if preparing for famine.

PRESENTLY Phinney heard May rattling into the kitchen. Breakfast was their cornerstone for the day. Besides a platter of eggs and sausage or bacon, May fixed French toast or waffles, and then cooked enough along with it to piece out Phinney's hunger until midnight. A custard or a pie, a meat loaf or a stew pot of chicken. Except at breakfast, Phinney ate when he liked, dipping into the oven or icebox.

The breakfast dishes usually waltzed on the table all day unless Phinney, smote by conscience, heated up water and gave them a douse. He was a better housewife than May; he liked sweeping, didn't despise dusting. He even liked filling a vase with flowers. . . .

"There's that funeral I have to go to this morning," May announced.

The sun warmed the dining room and she peeled off her coat.

Phinney was eating a second dish of stewed plums.

"What funeral? Not me. I'm not going to nobody's burying but mine—or maybe yours."

"It's that Mee man. You've heard me mention him."

"Mee man? What kind of talk is that?" asked Phinney.

"Mee's their name. You know. Down there on the Clarenceville road. They've lived in that garage-house they never got farther with. Two kids and a wife cooped up like rabbits all the time. He had bad lungs, but he didn't get better and didn't get better—and now he's dead."

May hunted for her glasses, then hunted upstairs in her closet for what she called her Sunday dress. She hadn't worn this dress for months. There were rip holes under the arms, but May was impatient with mending and she would keep her arms to her sides, quiet and dignified, like at a really sad funeral, like at a funeral of someone she deeply loved.

Mrs. Petrowski, her nearest neighbor, was going with her. May slithered through fence wire and cut across the field where the lady-

like Petrowski cows, tied to stakes, ate round velvet islands in the weeds.

"You look nice," was Mrs. Petrowski's judgment of May, not too sure of herself in her eyeleted white, which was too tight in the bust. A great, ugly woman with a kind face, Mrs. Petrowski spoke with a Polish accent and a lisp.

May's thin white hair was bun-tight under her hat. At the last moment she had fancied white button earrings. She looked gay.

They rolled along to Farmington church in the Petrowski jalopy. The car sneezed and chugged, the road chattered with gravel.

Mrs. Petrowski announced she was fresh with a new "scandal." But May found it hard to listen although she learned very little about the square mile of country neighbors unless Mrs. Petrowski told her. It was because the Petrowskis sold milk, had dealings with everybody, rich and poor.

It seemed that the Mees were a young couple. Mee had been in a sanitarium—for "years," some people said—and had come home, finally, discouraged, resigned to his end. But the young wife, vividly pretty, was of different stamp. And, secretly, she had a lover. She had been decent, had kept her secret until Mee coughed his last. Now all was known, for, with shocking haste, she had escaped that pitiful rabbit hutch of a home, gone off to an unknown place.

"It's dreadful," May said. "Her not waiting for the funeral—that's shameful." She seldom was judge or censor, and all human action, not easily accountable, made her truculent, not against morals, but men. "But what about the children?" May asked, trembling. Mrs. Petrowski had told her of the small boy and the girl, about nine.

"That's what's so awful," Mrs. Petrowski said; "she's deserted them. She couldn't

