

THE LOCKED WARD

by

George Vukelich

813 Garfield Street
Madison 5, Wisconsin

THE LOCKED WARD

by

george vukelich

It was winter before they found out where he was and he had any visitors. The Sunday before Christmas he was sitting in the Dayroom playing checkers with the little Jewish boy and his favorite attendant, the one called Brooks, came over and said there was a woman waiting to see him.

He went down the hall and Brooks unlocked the door and after they stepped out Brooks locked the door and they walked into the wide hall in front of the two selflocking elevators. It was his sister.

"I'll wait here," Brooks said. "Take your time."

His sister was on her feet now and waiting for him.

"I could use a cigaret," he said.

Brooks took a pack from his whitecoat and gave him one and a light and then put the pack back.

"Just relax," Brooks said. "It wont be so bad."

He felt foolish in the blue uniform when he saw all the visitors for the other patients sitting in wellfitting dress suits with topcoats draped over their laps. What the hell he thought.

His sister moved toward him and he put out his arms.

"Hello honey," he smiled.

She was looking right at his head and the shaved temples.

"Theyre trying out a new barber," he said just to be saying something. "The old one got away."

He took her hands and they sat down on the wooden chairs.

"I didnt know what happened to you," she said. "I thought you were still in Canada. Do you mind if I smoke too?"

He told her he didnt mind but he did wish he had cigarets to offer her.

She took a pack of Pall Malls from her purse and lighted one and asked him to take the pack.

"Its not that. They give us plenty of cigarets but they dont trust us with matches."

She looked at him sharply and replaced the pack.

"The doctor says youre doing fine."

"Which doctor?"

"Doctor Erps."

"Yes," he said. "Im doing allright."

He looked down the hall at Brooks and the big Negro was standing with the other attendants who had brought out patients. She followed his eyes.

"Dont you want to talk," she asked. "Do you feel bad?"

"No, I feel good. Lets talk. Lets have a nice long tal

"I dont want you to feel bad because of me. I didnt know what to think when the Hospital called me. They dont tell you anything on the phone and I had to come and see Doctor Erps."

"Youre a good girl," he said.

"I want you to come and spend Christmas with us," she said quickly. "Doctor Erps said it was allright."

He filled his lungs with the cigaret.

"Im not much for Christmas you know. I get drunk and give everybody a badtime."

"Its allright with Mel too," she went on. "He wanted to come and see you today but he had to work at the Plant overtime. Theyre going day and night and everything on Army stuff but he wants to come."

The patients and their visitors at the end off the hall with the barred windows were laughing about something and he settled forward and stared at the elevator doors.

"Shirley is coming too," she said. "I called her in Canada."

He looked at his sister in disbelief.

"You didnt tell the Hospital about Shirley," she scolded. "They didnt know you were married at all."

"Shirley is a whore," he said quietly.

"Thats a terrible thing to say about your wife."

"Shirley is a whore," he repeated. "How the hell do you think I woundup in a Psycho Ward?"

"Now you are talking crazy."

"Its a long story and I cant remember all of it. Thats all done with now."

"I think you should see her and talk it over."

The laughter from the end of the hall began to irritate him.

"Thats done with," he said. "Now you dont know a godda thing about it so let it alone."

"Dont you care what happens to you at all?"

He told her that he cared plenty and thats why he was going back to sea again when the VA discharged him from the Hospital.

"Well you better forget that," she told him sternly.

"You jumped the ship in Vancouver."

"The hell I did!"

"You must have. Its on your record and Doctor Erps got a letter from the Maritime people all about it."

It was possible. Anything was possible. Christ, he just didnt remember that.

"Mel talked to Shirley too. He thinks your biggest trouble is the bottle."

"That Mel is always thinking," he said. He was resigned now and he was agreeing just to fight down the tightness around his head.

"Its not right for a man to leave his wife up in the air like that. Mel thinks you should stop trying to write those books and stories for awhile and get settled down first. He can get you in at the Plant and theyre working three shifts now."

"Mel is a good man and youre a good woman and Shirley is a good one too. Only Im a bitch."

"Why do you have to be like that? You dont have to say things like that."

"Dont mind me," he said. "Im off my rocker."

"Doctor Erps doesnt think youre crazy at all. He thinks youre only babying yourself."

"Thats exactly right. I have found a home."

He dropped the hot cigaretbutt and asked for one of her Pall Malls.

"I can tell you how it is now," he said. "I like being locked up in the psycho ward. Someday I will put it all down on paper."

"That's foolish talk."

"Let me tell you how it is now. I eat well and I sleep well and the shock treatments are almost over. What the hell."

"Well you can't stay here forever and hide."

"I'm finding myself," he said. "What the hell does Mel know about electroshock?" He looked over at Brooks again and she halfturned.

"I'm learning a new language. Brooks there knows it already. Would you believe it Brooks was a patient in this same ward once."

She looked earnestly this time.

"Which one is Brooks?"

"The one that brought me out. The Negro. Isn't that a nice story?"

"Is the honest truth?"

"You goddam know it," he said.

She turned back from Brooks.

"What about Christmas? I can't go home and tell Mel what you told me about Shirley."

"Why not? He can get her a job at the Plant."

"Now that's crazy talk. Do you want people to think you're crazy?"

"It doesn't make any difference. But she is a plain normal whore."

She dropped her cigaret on the tile floor and crushed it with her boot.

"Come with us for Christmas. Please."

The tightness in his head was making him sweat.

"I hate her guts," he said. "Is that plain enough?"

She kept trying to persuade him until it was time to go and the elevators came up to the third floor.

"I can bring Mel tomorrow," she said. "We can work out something for Christmas. I know we can." She stood up as the elevator doors opened and she kissed him on the cheek and pressed the pack of Pall Malls into his hand. "Mel doesn't know about the other thing at all," she said quickly.

The other thing? Startled, he looked into her face. It was there all right. She knew. Shirley must have told her on the phone or perhaps she knew because now there was no hiding it.

"Mel doesn't know at all. You know how he feels about men like that." She smiled quickly and touched his hand. "We will see you tomorrow." Then she walked straightway into the elevator and the door closed and Brooks was waiting for him.

"Now that wasn't so bad was it, man?"

Brooks, I talked down to her all during our conversation and she sat there with her innocent stare and took it all in and yet she knew about me all the time. The one person in the world I didn't want to know about that and she knew about me all the time. Brooks, I couldn't fool her at all!"

They were at the Ward door and Brooks unlocked it and slowly put his arm around the thin blueclad shoulders.

"You cheer up now," Brooks said. "There's other people. There surely are other people."

The strong hand was warm on his back for a moment and then the heavy door clicked shut behind him and he stood staring down the wide green corridor, listening to the dull hollow roaring sounds from the Dayroom that rose and fell like the sea.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX