

德國大學

Alvah
Bessie
**BREAD
AND A
STONE**



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Briefly,
ABOUT THE BOOK

Death by the roadside! Police identified the body found half-submerged beneath the bridge as that of James T. Baldwin, well-to-do citizen, a man well-liked, and with no enemies. Who was guilty of his murder? Was it Edwin Sloan who pulled the trigger of the gun that fired the fatal shot? Was it Norah who loved Ed, who braved social ostracism to marry him? Was it Katey who clung to Ed as the only father she knew, the adult on whom she depended for home, security, understanding and everything a child needs to be happy and content? Was it Bill Hogan, friend of a lifetime, who taught Ed to shoot so that he might hunt in a year when food was scarce and money to buy it with even scarcer? Which one of them was the real murderer – and what of the world in which Ed and Norah and Bill and Katey lived – a world which promised death and a stone to a man who asked for bread and life? ... Alvah Bessie has given us a novel that is a literary triumph in its telling, that is poignant in its love story and unforgettable in its characters.

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Alvah Bessie: BREAD AND A STONE

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Bread and a Stone

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SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS
BERLIN



SEVEN SEAS BOOKS are published by
SEVEN SEAS PUBLISHERS BERLIN
Berlin W 8 · Glinkastrasse 13-15



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Published as a Seven Seas Book 1961
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Cover Design by Lothar Reher
Printed by Graphische Werkstätten Berlin
License Number: 306/112/64
Manufactured in the German Democratic Republic

I

Sloan closed the door to the upstairs bedroom and set the basin of hot salt water on the floor by the bed. It was a cold night, and he could hear the wind howling across the meadow and around the house. He sat on the bed and took the new white sneaker off his left foot carefully, pulled off the white woolen sock, and set his foot, bandage and all, in the steaming water. It took a moment to soak through, and then immediately it was too hot, and he lifted his foot, baring his uneven teeth in a grin. "Christ," he said under his breath, then eased the foot back in again.

Norah won't be sore, he thought, if I don't help her with the dinner. He heard Katey in the next room, calling, "Mommy, come and say good night," and he heard Norah reply from downstairs, "Go to sleep, darling, I said good night to you." He leaned back over the bed with his foot still in the water, like the doctor said, and reached for the button on the radio. It took a moment to warm up, buzzing all the time, and then the music came loud and he kept turning it and a voice said, " - at his press conference today. The President said -" and Sloan thought, That ain't what I'm looking for, and he switched the set onto the short wave.

The short wave wasn't very clear; there was always too much static, but he could sometimes hear the airplanes saying, "La Guardia tower from Stearman eight,

eight, two, eight, go ahead," or "TWA one, five Newark Tower, go ahead," and sometimes they said where they were, like, "Floyd Bennett tower I AA three, Orange three thousand, landing at FHE Bennett, go ahead." He liked to listen to the airplane signals and imagine he was flying the big airliners in port; but that was a hell of a thing to be thinking now he thought, and he turned the dial slowly until the Shoreline police wave came in.

The monotonous voice was saying, "Car number 5 proceed to 41 Maple Street, tenement fire; Car number 5, proceed to 41 Maple Street, tenement fire." What's the good of listening to that? he thought; that's Shoreline, and there ain't no station up the road in Polk or Low Hill where they'd be sending from. We're way out in the country here. But he continued to listen, feeling the heat on his injured foot through the bandages. There were long buzzing silences and then the voice came in again, saying, "Car number 2, proceed to Post Circle, street fight; Car number 2, proceed to Post Circle, street -" he stopped listening.

It ain't no good, he thought; they're not going to put that on the air, not them; they're smart enough for that. Lots of folks got radios these days, and lots of them listen to the police calls. It ain't the kind of thing they'd put on, and even if they did, they'd use a code number like they sometimes do, Car number 7, proceed to 82 Willow, signal Y, signal Y. Signal Y must mean something they don't want the folks listening in to know about, he thought.

I won't listen to the damn thing, he thought, and switched the set back onto the broadcasting waves, tuned in a station that was playing music, and turned it up loud. He sat on the edge of the bed and looked at his foot soaking in the water, and he could see the dark stain on the bandage. Wonder how long it will take to cure up; shouldn't be very long, it ain't a bad

one. He thought he heard her calling, and he turned the radio down and standing up with one foot in the basin, he leaned forward and opened the door. Dinner must be ready, he thought.

"Ed," she was calling, and he said, "Yes, Mom?"

"Ed, there're some men here to see you."

He straightened and took his foot out of the water. He sat down on the bed and carefully pulled the dry sock over the wet bandage, and he put the sneaker on his foot. He had to lean against the door going out of the room, for the foot was mighty sore and he couldn't help but favor it. Well, he thought, here it is, brother; this is the business.

He leaned on the wall going down the stairs, and when he came into the room he saw the men. One of them was short and thin and the other was tall and heavy, and the short one said, "Ed Sloan?"

"That's right," he said.

2

Her face was red from the heat of the oil range; she could feel the redness of her face, and the heat. The child Katey called from upstairs, saying, "Mommy, come and say good night," and she called back, "Go to sleep, darling; I said good night to you." She could faintly hear the sound of the radio upstairs in the bedroom and knew that Ed was lying there, listening to it as he had listened so intently during the past week since he came back from New York with the new Chrysler his brother had loaned him. She felt a slight resentment that he was not there to help her with the dinner, to lay the table as he always had since they were married almost a year before.

For the week since he had come back with the new

car and the injured foot, he had been worrying her. He wanted to be on the move all the time; he wanted to take them riding in the new car, saying, "Ain' it a beaut? Listen to it hum. Wish it was mine." They had been riding all that week, to no apparent purpose. He took them north into Massachusetts and down to New York; they drove into Rhode Island and once even into southern Vermont, leaving early in the morning and getting back after dark, and there was a new restlessness about him that she had not seen before. He has something on his mind, Norah thought; if he wants to tell me, then he'll tell me.

She turned to call him to come down for dinner, when she saw the car drive into the dooryard. Her heart suddenly leaped into her throat, and she put her hand to her breast, thinking, What's the *matter* with you? but there was something about the determined faces of the two men that said to her, as loud as any words, *Now it has come*; now it's really come! They were a comical pair to look at, coming across the yard to the door, a tall heavy man and a short thin man, and they knew that she saw them and stopped at the door as she approached, wiping her hands on the apron.

"Yes?" she said.

"This where Ed Sloan lives?" one said.

"Yes," she said.

"You Mrs. Sloan?"

"That's right, won't you come in?"

They said, "Thank you," and they walked right through the kitchen into the dining room and looked around them. The tall man stood holding his hat in his hand, and the short thin man with the soft brown eyes and the more determined face looked at her and said, "We'd like to talk to him, if you don't mind."

"Certainly," she said, and went into the living room, calling toward the head of the stairs. "Ed," she called, and then she had to call again, louder, for the radio

must have drowned out the sound of her voice. She heard the radio turned down and knew the door was open and heard him say, "Yes, Mom?"

"Ed," she said, "there're some men here to see you," and the radio snapped off and she finally heard his limping footsteps coming slowly down the stairs. She turned to look at the men, but they avoided her eyes until they saw Sloan enter the room, when the short one said, "Ed Sloan?"

"That's right."

"We want to talk to you," the short man said. He turned to Norah, whose hands were still gripped tightly in the folds of her apron, and said, "A child was run over in Shoreline." He gripped Sloan by the arm, and Ed turned to look at his wife and smiled at her.

"Don' worry none, Mom," he said.

"A child!" she said, with a sick feeling, and then she thought. But that's impossible; I was in Shoreline with him yesterday, we were both in Shoreline; he said he wanted to look at some tools, and he paid the bill for the lumber we got this fall, and he got a haircut and we sat in the car and waited.

The three men went out of the house and she saw Ed and the tall one get into the car, and the short thin man came back.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sloan," he said. He showed her a badge. "I'm from the state police." He handed her a card that she did not look at but held stupidly in her hand.

"There was a fight upstate, and a man was killed. We'd like to ask your husband some questions. We'll be back." He turned then and left her, and she saw the car drive away. Then she looked at the card in her hand. It said, *Corp. Gordon Slattery, Troop B, State Motor Police, Low Hill Barracks*. She heard the car skid on the gravel as it turned into the road from the driveway. Now you're alone again, she thought. Now you've lost your

second – nonsense! she thought. Stop it! But they told you so; Bill Hogan said; Ella Horton said; you said yourself – stop it! she thought, and said it aloud, “Stop it,” then heard Katey calling from upstairs.

“Yes, dear,” she said, “I’m coming.” She hurried up the stairs into the bedroom across from her own, and the child was sitting up in bed.

“Who came in a car?” the little girl said, and she answered, “Some men to see Ed.”

“Why do they want to see him?”

“I don’t know, dear. Go to sleep,” she said. “Ed will be back.”

“Were they soldiers?”

“No, dear; I want you to go to sleep now.” She tucked the covers in around the child; it was cold in the room, and she felt herself shivering and went quickly downstairs again into the kitchen. She looked out the kitchen door into the dark yard, switched on the outdoor light for a moment, turned it off. When the light was on, she had seen nothing but the bare, frost-hardened earth and the winter-stripped trees near the barn and the low stone wall around the apple orchard. The darkness had been dissolved for a short radius around the house, but the night beyond was much darker.

She sat on the kitchen stool by the oil range and unconsciously stretched her hands toward the warmth. What shall I do now? she thought, and the voice spoke in her, saying, You *must* have known it, even though you didn’t want to know it. Why do you suppose Ella Horton? and Bill Hogan? But you *knew* that instinctively yourself. She went into the living room, and on the bookcase near the window she saw the picture of Ben in his French Air Force uniform, and she could hear Ed speaking again.

“That’s a nice photo,” he said. “I think you ought t’ have it out where the little girl c’n see it. He was her dad.”

"Yes," she had said, "you're right; I don't know why I ever put it away." How little Bill Hogan knew, or Ella Horton, or anyone else for that matter.

She picked up the telephone and said, "Long distance." No, she thought, no, you shouldn't call him, but then the operator said, "Long distance," and she said, "I want New York. Chelsea 6-4201, Mr. Hogan." She heard the operator say, "Through Shoreline," then, "New York, Chelsea 6-4201." The New York operator repeated the number, and she heard the bell ringing, and Alice answered it. The New York operator asked for Bill, and Alice said, "Just a moment," and then Bill was there.

"Bill," she said, "this is Norah Gilbert."

He laughed, "Sloan, don't you mean, Norah?" and she said, "That's right."

"Bill," she said, "if it should be necessary, could you come out here and get me and Katey and bring us into town tonight?"

"Has something happened?" she heard the voice say, with an inflection that meant, *I know it has*, and she said, "Yes."

"Anything you can tell me?"

"No."

"When do you want me to come?"

"It may not be necessary," she said. "But if it is – it's a lot to ask – could you?"

"Why – yes," she heard him say. "I'll start now."

"No," she said. "I'll call you. If you don't hear from me, you'll know it's all right."

"All right," he said.

"Don't worry. I can't say anything now. But I'm all right, Katey's all right."

"O.K., I'll wait to hear from you."

"Thanks, Bill," she said.

She hung up the receiver, weariness suddenly spreading through her back and limbs like a hot flood. She

sank exhausted into a chair, whispering, "I can't stay here whatever, I can't stay." She must have sat there a long time, staring at the photograph of Ben Gilbert in his wartime uniform. She thought of him, of the splintered propeller in the closet that he had brought back from France, of the bitterness of his face when he spoke of the war, and how he had gone, a romantic youngster, to help save the world for democracy.

"That isn't the way it turned out," he used to say. "And I can understand this son of a bitch Hitler for that matter." He didn't want to talk about it, and he never flew again.

Four years ago, she thought; is it that long? In the three years of their marriage she had developed a slight resentment against his bitterness. He had never been able to surmount it; he had never put it in its place.

My God, she thought, what're you thinking about? She rose from the chair, her hands at her sides, and stood in the middle of the room. What shall I do? she thought; I must do some – then she heard the car coming into the driveway again and walked slowly toward the kitchen, seeing the men coming, the tall, heavy man and the short, thin one, again.

"What is it?" she said.

The short man licked his lips and said, "Your husband's being held for murder, Mrs. Sloan. I'm sorry. It's got nothing to do with you. Do you mind if we take a look around?"

"No," she said, "of course not. My daughter's asleep upstairs."

The tall man went upstairs, and the thin man sat on the kitchen stool and looked at Norah. "Sit down," he said. She drew up the kitchen chair and sat facing him.

"What can I do?" she said.

"Has he been away from home recently?" the short man said.

"Why, yes," she said. "He was away the week before this last."

The man was writing in a notebook, and she thought, Isn't he supposed to say, Anything you say may be used against you? But he didn't. Instead, he said, "How long was he away?"

"He must have been away four days."

"Did he say where he was?"

"He went to New York State to try to raise some money on a mortgage."

"Did he raise the money?"

"Yes," she said.

"How much?"

"About two hundred dollars, I think. He paid most of the bills with it, the grocer in Coney, the butcher, the telephone, the lumber in Shoreline, the milk, the coal man in Stiles."

"You didn't use to have a car, Mrs. Sloan."

"It's his brother's car," she said.

"I see."

The tall man came down, said, "Should I go in the kid's bedroom?"

"No," said the short man, "leave it alone." He rose, putting his notebook in his back pocket, and Norah followed the two men up the stairs into her bedroom. The tall man started to rummage in the bedclothes, and his companion said, "Leave the lady's bed alone, Joe." Instead, the man called Joe looked through all the drawers, through the closet where Ed's few cheap worn clothes were hanging, even at the shoes in the closet. He picked up one shoe and put it in his overcoat pocket. There were two boxes on the dresser, and he opened one.

"Leave the lady's things alone," the short man said, and he asked Norah if she would please come downstairs.

In the living room he sat on the couch and offered her a cigarette. "I'm sorry this had to happen, M'am," he said. She didn't take the cigarette.



"A friend of mine's coming tonight," she said absently, her hands clasped tightly together. "Would it be all right if I took the little girl and went to New York? She goes to school down the road. I wouldn't want her to find out what happened when she goes to school on Monday."

"That's all right," Slattery said. "Did Sloan have a pistol?"

"A pistol?" she said. Something in the back of her mind was trying to claim her attention, but she could not grasp it. "I think I saw something that looked like a pistol," she said. "I never touched it." She heard the other man coming down the stairs. He had a pistol in his hand, and he was grinning. He held the pistol out to Slattery.

"Where'd you find that, Joe?"

"In his coat pocket in the closet," said the tall man. He held it out to Slattery, who took it. Joe grinned. Slattery looked up at his colleague and said, "This ain't no pistol, Joe." He hefted it.

"It's a toy," said Jo, "but I'd hate t' have anybody poke it in my ribs at night. I'd sure reach."

"Ever see this, Mrs. Sloan?" the corporal said.

"I think so."

"Ever see another one?"

"No," she said. She was still sitting on the other end of the worn sofa in the living room, and she noticed that the man called Slattery was looking at her hands. She looked down, saw that the knuckles were white. She looked up at him; he smiled.

"You don't have anything t' worry about, Mrs. Sloan," he said. "If you leave tonight, let me know where you'll be. I gave you my card."

"Certainly," she said. "Of course."

"How long have you been married?"

"Since last March."

"You were married before, weren't you?"