

Murder and intrigue as the U.S. hurtles
toward Civil War.

Irrepressible Conflict

By Chandler Tedholm

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IRREPRESSIBLE CONFLICT

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First Edition

In memory of Vance Ellis

Chapter One

She had been beautiful.

Byron Giles saw that her features were fine and regular. Her body was slender. Her taut breasts ended in twin brown peaks, and a dark thatch hid the juncture of her thighs. Milky glaze obscured her staring, motionless brown eyes. Canal water, smelling of algae, drained from the canvas tarpaulin that had wrapped her. The combination of oil lanterns, gas streetlights, and the odd glow in the night sky made her unblemished wet skin appear translucent.

One of the spectators whistled and said, "That's a real waste. I could've fetched a thousand or more for that Negress."

Byron recognized Hector Davis, proprietor of a nearby slave jail.

A young policeman responded, "Not worth much to anyone now." Turning to Byron's companion, Dr. Richard McCarr, the policeman extended his hand. "Good morning, Dr. McCarr." Nodding to Byron, he said, "Mr. Giles."

Dr. McCarr supplemented his medical practice by acting as the city coroner. He frequently attended morbid scenes at odd hours. "Good morning, Lieutenant Purcell," McCarr said, "What do we have here?"

The commotion attracted a group of crew people from the canal boats parked overnight in the boat basin where she had been found. The crews usually lived aboard their vessels, rough men or rougher families, perpetually sooty from the coal that was their primary downstream cargo.

Purcell consulted his notebook. "One of the boatmen saw her in the water and notified a patrolman about two hours ago."

"I don't suppose any of these good citizens heard anything helpful?" Byron asked, nodding toward the crowd. Accompanying McCarr, Byron often found new clients to represent as an attorney.

Purcell shook his head. "Not that they admit."

Davis tipped the brim of his hat toward Byron and his companions, "I'll bid you gents good morning." He took another look at the woman's body and shook his head. "I'd sure like to know if there are more like her where she came from."

McCarr glanced at the sodden corpse. "Better get her back to the office and take a look at her," he said.

At a nod from the policeman, the workmen wrapped the body in the tarpaulin. The wagon bed rocked on its springs as the body thumped into the back.

Dr. McCarr flicked the reins, and the wagon rattled along the gaslights on Cary Street, past a sign that identified the “James River & Kanawa Canal – Boat Basin.”

Byron stared at the shimmering red ribbons in the night sky above Richmond Virginia. “You said you’d seen this before?” he asked McCarr, gesturing to the sky.

“It’s called the Northern Lights – *aurora borealis*. I used to see it all the time when I was in Toronto. Never heard of them this far south,” McCarr said, his voice betraying a trace of his native Scotland.

The eastern sky glowed with sunrise, and the strange shimmering in the sky began to fade. The streets bustled with carriages, wagons, and horsemen. Newspaper boys cried their wares – Richmond boasted no less than four daily papers. McCarr stopped the wagon at Broad Street as an RF&P train huffed slowly down the tracks in the middle of the avenue. A black man perched on the engine’s cowcatcher, shooing people and animals out of the way.

Byron drew out his notebook and scribbled a note, balancing the pad on his knee with the heel of his hand. He gestured to a paperboy on the corner, a black boy of about ten years crying the *Examiner*. Clutching the note in his mouth, Byron pulled coins from his pocket.

“A penny for a paper,” Byron said, “Another penny if you will take this note to Six East Grace Street. Do you know how to find it?” The boy nodded. “Tell them I said you could have another penny when you deliver the note.”

The boy handed up a paper and, taking the note, dashed recklessly through the traffic.

McCarr pulled into the carriage house behind the Clay Street building where he lived and worked. “Jack!” McCarr called, jumping down as his hired black slave appeared, “Give me a hand with this, if you please.”

Together, they hauled the tarpaulin into the doctor’s studio, and lifted it onto the operating table. The doctor unwrapped the stiffening form of the young woman and held up her shoulders while Jack held up her legs so Byron could yank the damp tarp from beneath her.

“Jack, take the wagon to Griffin & Taylor’s and pick up two hundredweight of ice on my account,” said McCarr.

“Yes sir, doctor,” Jack said.

Byron examined the dark green tarpaulin. It smelled of tobacco. Stenciled on one corner were the words: Property of Anderson’s Tobacco Factory.

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McCarr hung up his hat and coat, and donned a long apron of dubious cleanliness. "Care to watch?" he said, grinning at Byron.

"No, thank you, as you well know. I'll wait for you to finish," said Byron.

Byron walked into McCarr's antechamber and took off his hat. His nose itched, and he lifted his left hand to scratch it.

After all this time, I still forget.

Byron's left sleeve hung empty, pinned to the side of his coat. His left arm rotted in a forgotten rubbish pit in Mexico. *C'est la guerre.*

Heavy drapes covered the windows, but a few bright beams relieved the gloom. Choosing a chair within a beam of sunlight, Byron opened the paper to find out what was happening on Monday, October 10th, 1859.

OIL WELL DUG IN PENNSYLVANIA

DANGERS ON THE ROAD TO PIKE'S PEAK GOLD

SENATOR DOUGLAS AND THE SLAVERY QUESTION

Byron heard clattering and thumping in the back as Jack unloaded the ice, then a monotonous "tick – tick – tick" as Jack broke up the ice blocks with a hammer. The memory of the dead woman's milky eyes haunted him.

Jeanette...clothes torn to reveal the secret parts of her body... dark blood pooling on the floor by her head...glazed, motionless brown eyes.

Chapter Two

Byron startled to a loud knocking on the front door. He unlatched the door.

"Hello again, Mr. Giles."

"Lieutenant Purcell. Always a pleasure," Byron said. "I take it the captain wants you to investigate."

"Mr. Davis was right. Someone lost a valuable property last night," Purcell said.

"Perhaps," Byron said.

Dr. McCarr emerged, rubbing his hands on his apron, and said, "Ah, Lieutenant, good morning once again."

"I was hoping you could give me some more information about the colored girl," Purcell said.

"Information, perhaps. Answers may be another matter. Come with me." The doctor led them back to his operating room.

The young woman lay in a metal-lined table. White ice fragments covered her body like a ghastly mockery of a feather comforter, leaving only her head and hands visible.

"My guest here," Dr. McCarr said, "is a Negro woman between twenty and twenty-five years of age. She was about five feet and eleven inches tall, of notably slender build. About what she was, that is almost all I can say."

"What do you mean?" Purcell asked.

The doctor turned back to the corpse. "I can't say much more about what she was. I can make several conclusions about what she was not."

"Go on," said Purcell.

"Observe," said McCarr, lifting the body's hand. "No scars, no calluses, no signs of labor at all. Same with the feet. She was no field hand or factory worker." He turned over the hand. "Look at the nails. These are manicured. A rich lady would not be ashamed of these nails."

Turning to the head, McCarr held out a tress of hair, somewhat longer than shoulder length. While partly unraveled, it was plain that the woman's hair had originally been in an elaborate coif. "This lassie had an expensive hair-do."

Byron asked, "Was she...violated?"

McCarr nodded somberly. "Almost certainly. In fact, in my opinion until last night she was *virgo intacto*."

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Byron winced at his friend's Latin and said, "So not likely prostitute or a fancy woman."

"Did she drown?" asked Purcell.

"There again, I can say what did not happen. There was no scratching or bruising to suggest a fight. There were no knife or bullet wounds. There are no broken bones, and no sign of major blows. She was well fed, and shows no obvious symptoms of disease. I found no signs of common poisons." McCarr peeled back one of the dead woman's eyelids. "There is some indication she died from lack of air. However, there was no water in her lungs, so no, she did not drown." He closed the eye, ending the corpse's morbid wink. "There is no mark of strangulation on her neck. If she was suffocated, there was nothing in her mouth or nose. From what I can see, she should be perfectly healthy."

"Except she is dead," Byron said.

"Except for that," McCarr agreed.

"When did she die?" Purcell asked.

McCarr looked down at the inert body. "It is hard to be exact because she was in the water. My best guess is last night sometime after midnight."

There was a knock at the back door, and Granville Smith entered. Six feet tall, strongly built, Granville had the darkest skin Byron had ever seen. He was dressed like a house servant from a wealthy household.

"Granville, thank you for coming," said Byron.

"I received your note, sir," Granville spoke with a British accent.

"Please make a sketch of the unfortunate woman here," Byron said. "We may need to print up a flyer to find out who she was."

Granville replied, "Of course, sir."

Byron never ceased to be amazed by the delicacy with which Granville's powerful hands could wield a pencil. Rapidly glancing back and forth between the subject and the sketchpad, Granville coaxed an image from the paper, as if the image had been there all along and he merely scraped away a layer hiding it from view. In a matter of minutes, Granville pocketed his pencil and carefully tore the sheet from the sketchpad.

"Will this do, sir?" Granville said.

The image appeared chillingly accurate, down to the pinch of the face in death.

"Excellent as always," Byron said.

"Very good, sir," Granville said.

Byron carefully folded the sketch and put it in his coat pocket. He then picked up a corner of the tarp and showed the label to Lieutenant Purcell.

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"Hmm, Anderson's is across the boat basin from where we found the body," Purcell said. "That looks like my next stop."

"Mind if we come along?" McCarr said.

The policeman smiled. "Not at all. Pleased to have company."

"Splendid," said McCarr. "Let me get washed up a bit."

Byron, Granville and Purcell retired to the waiting room. Granville opened the curtains, and the room became bright.

"Excuse me, sir, if I may," Granville asked Byron, "Who is the young lady in there?"

"We don't know yet," Byron said. "She was found in the canal."

"Was she murdered?" Granville asked.

"That appears likely," Purcell said.

Granville said, "If she was a slave, could someone be charged with her murder?"

"No," Byron said, "although if she was killed by a Negro the killer would likely be hanged. If she was killed by a white man other than her owner, he might be charged with trespass, and possibly theft."

"And if she was killed by her owner?" the policeman asked.

"Well, he would be guilty of stupidity, for destroying a valuable property, but he could not be charged with a crime," Byron said.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Granville asked, "what if she was a free black person?"

Purcell wrinkled his forehead. "That would technically be murder, but I have never personally been involved in a case of that nature. Mr. Giles?"

"Again, it would depend somewhat on who did it and what the evidence was," Byron said. "If she was killed by a white man, a white person would have to testify against the killer."

Dr. McCarr returned, tall gray hat in hand, saying, "Shall we go?"

Granville bundled the tarpaulin under his arm.

Chapter Three

Byron, McCarr, and Purcell sat jammed together in the policeman's light carriage, lurching through the crowded streets. Granville trotted behind.

They passed the boat basin; most of the boats were gone. Across the basin, a three-story brick building displayed 'Anderson Tobacco' in large painted white letters. They walked into the factory office and asked for the manager. Singing could be heard faintly from the factory beyond the office door.

A tall, dark haired man in his late forties emerged from an office, and shook Purcell's hand. "I'm John Anderson. How may I help you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Purcell of the city police department," the policemen said, "this is Doctor McCarr, the city coroner, and Mr. Giles, his associate." They shook hands in turn.

Byron nodded in the direction of his companion, "Granville here is my left-hand man."

Anderson chuckled. "Again, what can I do for you?"

Granville had been carrying the tarpaulin in which the woman had been found. He showed its label to Anderson.

"Well, I appreciate the return of my property, but this is quite a turn-out for a fifty-cent piece of canvas," Anderson said.

"A Negro woman was found dead in this tarp this morning, in the boat basin," Purcell said. "Probably murdered."

Anderson nodded. "Well, we can't have that, can we?" he said. "Who was she?"

"That's one of the things we're trying to find out," Purcell said.

Byron pulled the sketch from his pocket, working it around so he could unfold it one-handed.

Anderson whistled, taking the paper for closer examination. "I can see why you're interested. I've never seen her, but we can ask my people."

He quickly showed the drawing to the office staff; none claimed recognition.

"Follow me," Anderson said, opening the door between the office and the factory. They entered the factory.

The factory floor vibrated with sound and motion. The air smelled of tobacco, wood smoke and sweat. Skylights and windows lit the room. Black women sat at long rows of benches processing leaves. Each worker took two

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or three green leaves from a large heap beside them on a tarpaulin on the floor, expertly selecting a like amount of leaf each time. They rolled the leaves into a cylinder about a foot and a half long, whipped the cylinder over a wooden spindle, twisted the ends together, tied the end with twine, and quickly grabbed more leaves to repeat the process.

The sounds of hundreds of workers mingled with mechanical noises from farther back in the building and the rumbling of carts and hand trucks. The workers on the benches sang as their hands flew over the tobacco.

*God made it rain, chillun,
Forty days gonna 'stroy this world,
Now didn't it rain, chillum,
God made it rain, rain, rain.*

As Byron sorted out the activity, he could see that other slaves, mostly older children, ran back and forth, taking up spindles full of twisted tobacco and replacing them with empty rods.

Anderson picked up one of the green loops of tobacco, "This is called a twist. Twist is our main product. It can be broken up to smoke in a pipe or chewed." Pulling a whistle from a cord around his neck, he blew a loud blast. The activity on the benches stopped, and all the workers looked at him expectantly.

"Good morning, everyone!" Anderson boomed.

"Good morning, Mr. Anderson!" the workers chorused back.

"Now listen here," Anderson said, "a colored girl was found dead near here this morning. I'm going to show y'all a picture, and I want you to tell me if you know her." He strode rapidly down the rows of benches showing the picture with his outstretched hand. Each black head shook negatively.

"Very well, carry on!" Anderson shouted, blowing his whistle again.

As they walked to another section of the plant, Byron asked, "Are all your workers slaves?"

Anderson nodded. "Yes," he said. "Some of my best people I'll manumit near the end of their working lives."

"And do the slaves belong to you?" Byron asked.

"About half do. Well, they belong to the corporation," Anderson said. "The rest are hire labor from various owners. Some of those we'll purchase if they develop useful skills."

They repeated the process of showing the sketch in each section of the factory.

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A large, adjacent barn contained a long fire pit down the centerline. Workers strung tobacco twists on cords across the barn, as a foreman recorded the date and time on a chalkboard. Other workers added wood to the fire, and kept it smoldering at a low, smoky level. In another part of the barn, loose leaves hung for curing. Workers who had delivered green twists carried brown cured product back to the main building.

In another shop, older workers, mostly men, cut thin wooden boards into predetermined sizes, while another team glued them into boxes. The boxes were painted, and when dry, stenciled with the company's logo.

In one corner, a small steam engine powered a mysterious contraption, smelling of oil and cleaning fluid. "Watch this. This is my new toy," Anderson said.

Workers piled cured leaf carefully into some sort of hopper. A foreman blew a whistle and the men jumped back. Ka-whump! Ka-whump! The workers returned to the machine and removed the leaves, now compressed into a rectangular bale bound with wire.

"The bales are mostly for export," Anderson said, "Five hundred pounds each." He again stopped work long enough to show the picture around.

In a relatively quiet room, black women took empty boxes from stacks and filled them with cured twists, twelve to a box.

"Where do your workers live?" Lieutenant Purcell asked.

"I have a barracks a few blocks from here on Overton Road where most of them stay," Anderson said. "A few live here upstairs – I'll show you in a moment."

The final stop on the ground floor was the busy loading dock. Canal boats and wagons brought a steady stream of firewood, lumber, and green tobacco, all of which slaves carried, winched, or carted into the factory. In return, crates of tobacco products were loaded carefully into the conveyances for delivery elsewhere. Tarpaulins covered many of the loads.

Again, Anderson whistled a brief stop. Again, no one recognized the picture.

"One more group to talk to," Anderson said, vaulting up a flight of stairs.

A pleasantly lighted room on the second floor contained a series of desks.

"This is my cigar shop," Anderson said. "The ladies over here are stripping the stems out of the wrapper leaves and sorting them by quality. Women are always better at judging quality. The men over here roll up the cores, clamp them in these presses, and then finish them up in the wrapper leaves."

A number of children scurried about, carrying supplies and filling boxes. One young teenage girl sat at a small grindstone, honing the sharp, half-moon shaped knives used for cutting and trimming.

"Good morning, Junie," Anderson said to the girl at the grindstone.

She paused and flashed a dazzling smile. "Good morning, Mr. Anderson."

"These are some of my most skilled workers," Anderson explained, "They are mostly families, and they live up on the third floor."

A bulky black man, hair and beard liberally sprinkled with gray, approached them. "Good morning, Mr. Anderson," he said cheerfully.

"Good morning, Adam," Anderson replied.

Anderson introduced him to the group, "This is Adam, one of my best men. He's in charge of the cigar shop. He's been with us since my father's time."

"Yes sir," Adam said. "I started out chopping wood for the curing barn."

Anderson explained the situation and handed Adam the sketch. The older black man showed it to the men and women, who one after another looked up briefly from their work and shook their heads.

"Afraid not," Adam reported. "Nobody knows this girl."

"Thank you, Adam," Anderson turned to the group. "We're giving Adam his freedom come the first of the year."

The black man held up his hands. His fingers were twisted. "Hands all crippled up from the arthritis," he said.

They followed Anderson back down the stairs, across the factory floor, and back to the comparative peace of the office.

"Well, gentlemen, I'm sorry, but we seem to have drawn a blank. As you must have noticed, we have quite a few of those tarps, and we use them for various purposes. They do go astray from time to time," Anderson said, "so there's no reason to believe that one of my people has to be involved."

Lieutenant Purcell said, "Thank you, sir, you have been most cooperative."

"Not at all," Anderson said, "happy to help. We all need to work together to protect our property."

They shook hands all around. Byron followed the others out the front door.

Purcell returned his uniform hat to his head. "Thank you, gentlemen. Do you need a ride back?"

A young black man ran up to them. "Doctor McCarr, Jack told me you were here," he said between breaths, "The Mayor wants to see you right away. He said to bring Mr. Giles too if he was with you."

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McCarr addressed the policeman, "It seems my next appointment has been booked." Turning to the black man, he said, "Thank you. Tell the mayor we will be there directly."

Byron bade the policeman farewell. He whispered instructions to Granville, who strode off in the direction of Six East Grace Street.

"I wonder what the mayor wants with us," Byron said.

McCarr laughed. "He probably wants to criticize my latest expense voucher."

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