

PASSAGE TO HELL

GARY BARTON

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He remembered things like the boat leaving St. George Pier and watching the lights fade away in the distance; the black native boys paddling alongside in their little boats, ringing "Nassau By The Sea"; and the ship's band playing.

And he remembered the other side of it, too. The hell! The bitter with the sweet.

The man who had stood against the rail beside him last night, as the boat pulled out of the Tongue. The movie version of a killer. Tall, broad-shouldered, with close-cut blond hair: his face heavy-jowled and cold, showing no emotion; his eyes piercing, hard, dangerous.

He was Hans Wagner. And Jimmy Vale recalled that he'd been up on illegal-entry charges a few years ago. Even recently, there'd been talk of deporting him for subversive activities; but the case had been lost somehow, and the charges had been dropped.

And Wagner was on this boat, sailing from Nassau, though Vale hadn't known he was aboard till he heard his deep, guttural voice beside him, in the darkness against the rail on the top deck. But he knew why he was here; he knew Wagner hadn't come along for the ride.

Hans Wagner had come to make sure that Jimmy Vale never reached New York.

A week before, two men had beached on Eleuthera Island in the Bahamas, lone survivors of an American freighter lost twelve days before. The American freighter, Betsy Black, had been bound for Trinidad, loaded with supplies for the United States army bases under construction there, when she went down four hundred miles at sea, a torpedo through her hull, her superstructure splintered by a submarine deck gun.

The sea had given up a single lifeboat, one of eight, bearing two men. Only they weren't men any more, but things that draw line between life and death: their bodies emaciated from days of starvation; their flesh burned by the relentless tropic sun and rain that was like steam, and torn by rain that was like ice; their throats scorched and their tongues shriveled—half-dead men who had fought a battle few men have ever won, a battle against the sea.

But they had lived long enough to tell their story: The torpedoing of the neutral Betsy Black by a treacherous submarine of war.

And Jimmy Vale, government investigator attached to the state department, was returning with that story. A sealed case containing evidence would determine the United States' action against a criminal power.

But Vale remembered Wagner's words, now; there'd been a chilling menace even in his whisper as he said:

"You're not getting off this boat at New York, Vale!"

Vale hadn't had to ask questions; he knew what Wagner meant. He knew that Wagner did mean it! But suddenly he was thinking of those seamen in the hospital in Nassau, and those fifty-four he had not seen, whose graves were the bottom of the Atlantic.

"The hell you say!" he snarled.

"You're in no position to be tough, Vale," Wagner said smoothly. "Tonight, maybe tomorrow night; far at sea; the sky will be dark; no one on deck—"

"It would take a bigger man than you—" Vale started to say.

"Oh, no, Vale; you don't got what I mean. I'm not a murderer. But there are ways."

"Listen, Wagner. You're wasting your time. Do you think you can play the United States government for a sucker? I know what you want; they're in the ship's vault. And whether I leave this boat or not, they'll be turned over to the state department,"

"Your opinion of my resourcefulness is very unjust, Vale. My plans cover those papers being in the vault—and also their removal. Now, what is your answer?"

"This—" Vale said. He stepped away from the rail, his face white in the pale-yellow glow of the deck lights. His fist smashed into Wagner's mouth, and the foreigner fell back into the deck chairs. He lay there, stunned.

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"How do your plans cover that?" Vale snapped.

Wagner pushed himself to a chair, but he didn't get to his feet. He was wiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. His eyes were dull, like the eyes of an animal: and his voice, never more than a whisper, was coolly vicious.

"You have a very attractive young wife, I understand. Her name is Alice, isn't it? And also a baby girl named Barbara. They'll be at the pier to meet you. And there will be two men behind them: Two men and two guns, Vale!" Wagner climbed to his feet and there was a satanic, lustful smile on his thin lips, a mirthless smile, because it wasn't funny; not even to him. "You have your choice, Vale. If you leave this boat alive—well, it's up to you."

He turned and slowly walked down the deck and disappeared through a midship companionway.

And that was the hell!

The second night, now. But Jimmy Vale had lived ten thousand nights. He hadn't slept: he couldn't eat. His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes were like sunken pits in a skull. He was waiting to die.

Wagner had given him a choice: but there was no choice. There was only one way. Suicide, they'd call it. But it would be murder, too.

He stood in the darkness of the top observation deck and watched the water foam and swirl in the ship's wake: the little red blinker buoys, one on each side. as the boat went between them: the lights along the coast, far to port: the stardust on the purple sea.

Watching all this: but not really seeing it. He lighted a cigarette, and his hand trembled. And he was thinking, over and over again, of those men, living corpses, in Nassau.

And more often, he was thinking of Alice and the baby. That was hardest; the hell; the pain. Seeing Alice when he tried to close his eyes, or when he looked at the palm of his hand, or her face mirrored on the dark water of the sea. She was always there, glowing and alive— her dark hair catching the stardust, her brown eyes, lustrous and sparkling, her lips parted just a little.

He wondered if she'd get along all right. There'd be the insurance for a while. But there'd be no pension, of course; not for suicide.

He thought of the baby and followed her through the years; to the time when she'd start to walk, and into school. And maybe she'd be able, somehow, to go to college—Vassar, maybe, or Wellesley. And he prayed that some day she'd be as happy as he and Alice had been.

And then he could see Alice, the baby in her arms, standing at the pier, two men standing behind them. Two men with guns, ready to blast their lives the moment he stepped off the boat. And he knew they'd do it, too; they'd do what they had been told. To them, life was cheap. Men without souls.

Jimmy Vale covered his face with his hands, trying to wipe away the picture in his mind. But it didn't do any good. It haunted him till he wanted to scream; to throw himself over the rail and be lost in the wake of the boat. But he was doing neither of these. He was just standing there, holding desperately to a life that was measured in hours, now. Waiting to die!

The night crept on.

In the morning, Jimmy Vale went down to his cabin on C Deck. The boat was easing along the Jersey coast and would dock in two hours. There wasn't much time left. He'd have to get it over.

There was nothing he could do, now; he'd figured all the angles. Wagner couldn't take the chance of stealing the sealed evidence and letting Jimmy go free. Jimmy could talk, papers or no papers.

Fleeting, Vale reflected on warning Alice; cabling her or phoning ship to shore, and keeping her away from the pier when the boat docked. But he knew that Wagner was watching him almost constantly. It seemed that each time Vale started to make a move, Wagner was there. And a false move would make death for Alice and the baby more certain.

There was no other way.

The cabin was hot as Jimmy stepped inside and closed the door. He turned on the fan and moved across the small room to the porthole. And instantly he knew how he'd do it. It would be a horrible death; but it might look accidental, and maybe there would be a pension for Alice.

He worked feverishly, locking tight the iron shield on the porthole and breaking off the lugs on the handles. He fixed the lock on the door so that, once closed, it couldn't be opened from the inside. He didn't want to be able

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to get out if he should feel that he couldn't go through with it. He turned off the ventilators and closed the louvres in the door.

As he finished, something else came to his mind. He turned and went out of the cabin, leaving the door slightly off latch so that he could get back in.

He went to the purser's office and had the sealed leather case taken from the vault. Then he returned to his cabin, the case seemingly furtive beneath his coat. He saw Wagner as he turned into his passageway, but he appeared not to notice. Then he placed the case in his cabin and left, again not locking the door.

As he turned from the el, he ran into Wagner.

The foreigner's face was inscrutable, but his eyes were cold and slitted.

"You know what you have to do," he said sharply.

"I know."

"When?"

"You didn't set any time," Vale said. "Before the boat docks."

"Before the boat docks," Wagner repeated. His eyes strayed to Vale's coat. "You better not cross me, Vale. Your wife and kid—"

"I won't cross you," Jimmy said dully. Then his voice raised shrilly: "Leave me alone, will you?"

He turned and ran down the corridor, stumbling, his hands brushing the walls.

Jimmy Vale was still standing on the top deck as the tugs nudged the big cruise ship into her berth. His face was shiny with sweat, and the palms of his hands were red and sore, where his fingernails had dug into them. His stomach muscles were a hard, aching knot, and his throat was dry.

His blue eyes were feverish as they moved restlessly over the crowd that pressed against the pickets at the far end of the pier. Then he saw Alice, the baby in her arms; and the sweat on his face was a cold sweat, now—a sweat that bathed his whole body and made his clothes cling to his skin.

There were two men standing inches behind Alice, moving as she moved, always close. Even from where he stood, Vale could tell that their hands were in their pockets. And he knew why.

Slowly, he turned and made his way down to C Deck, along the corridor to his cabin, moving like a man already dead—dead inside, his spirit gone and life with it.

The play was over! He put his hand on the doorknob; it was locked. And suddenly he whirled and dashed back through the passageway, running madly, seemingly insane.

As he raced down the gangway, he pulled the collar of his coat high about his face. It was a desperate chance. But he was alive, and alive, he had a chance. He dared not think of the danger he was subjecting Alice and the baby to, for fear he'd turn back. For, somehow, he felt that he could not win.

But he kept going, past the customs and crossing to the adjoining pier, then down the other side of the partition till he reached the visitors' area. As he cut through the crowd, he prayed that Alice wouldn't see him; recognize him. He knew that the killers on the dock were waiting for some signal from Wagner. But if Alice should tip them off, they wouldn't bother waiting. They'd blast!

He nudged his shoulder sling with his elbow, moving it out from beneath his armpit. He could use a gun, now. He couldn't before. If he had killed Wagner on the boat, the grapevine would have worked fast; and men would have been here at the pier to get him anyway, men on the kill, men he wouldn't know. But as long as he knew the one he had to beat—Wagner—he had a chance.

Then he was standing behind the two gunmen, his automatic out of his shoulder holster and steady in his hand, the gun shoved between the two men, even with their faces, pointing up. Vale's finger was white on the trigger.

"Reach, boys!" he snarled. The words gritted through his teeth, and his lips didn't move.

One of the men pulled his right hand from his coat pocket, then raised both shoulder high.

The other, on Vale's left, whirled, his gun spitting raw flame through his coat. Jimmy Vale felt something like fire eat into his left leg, and blood, warm and wet, flowing down his hip and soaking the cloth of his trousers. He heard Alice screaming, and people all around him were yelling; but it was one steady drone, and he couldn't make out what they were saying. Then, above it all, he heard that gun scream thunder. He saw the killer's hand jump in his pocket and the flame belching through the cloth of his coat.

He felt his own body jump as the slug slammed into his shoulder: but his whole side was numb, numbness that was still pain, and he couldn't feel it, now.

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And as swiftly, his own gun was coming up. He felt it bucking in his fist, the hammer pinching his hand as the sleeve slammed back; and there was a thunder, pounding against his eardrums and drowning out the other. He saw the man before him gasp and blood trickled from his lips. Then slowly he fell forward on his face, his gun still flaming.

Jimmy Vale swung on his heel as the second man was pulling his gun from his pocket. He never made it. Vale's automatic came up, the barrel slashing across the hood's face and knifing his nose. The man's eyes rolled far back into his head, and his hand dropped limply from his pocket. He crumpled to the dock.

Jimmy heard Alice calling his name, her voice seeming very far away. He saw the people around him, their white faces, their mouths gaping wide, all spinning round and round till they were a nauseating blur. Then the blur grew dark and seemed to be closing in on him, smothering. Alice's voice was very faint, now: he could hardly hear it. He tried to call to her.

And that's all he remembered.

When Jimmy Vale awakened, everything was white. It hurt his eyes. And there were nurses and doctors around him, and police and officers from the ship. Alice was sitting alongside his bed, her face anxious and her eyes wet.

Jimmy smiled at her; and when he tried to speak, she told him to be quiet.

After a while, they told him that they'd found Hans Wagner dead on the floor of his cabin. The sealed case had been opened and was found clutched in his hand.

Jimmy smiled again. He forgot the pain and felt a bit stronger. He thought of how carefully he had planned to die; how he'd make it look accidental. Suffocation; The closed porthole, no ventilation, the electric fan turned on and eating up the oxygen.

He'd thought that Wagner would go into his cabin after that case. There must have been no oxygen left in there, then. He couldn't have gotten out, anyway; but perhaps he fainted while going through those papers, without really knowing what was happening till it was too late to even yell.

If he hadn't fainted, it must have been a terrible way to die.

Jimmy Vale closed his eyes again, Everything was all right now.

THE END.