

A Death In Fever Flat

By George W. Cronyn

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SCENE: *In the great Far West, i. e., far from the "Movie" West.*

CHARACTERS

HANK [*proprietor of the Good Hope Roadhouse*]. LON PURDY [*about whom the play is concerned*]. MIZPAH [*his wife, called "Padie"*]. THE STAGE DRIVER. THE GHOST OF HARVEY MACE. THE GHOST OF THE OTHER MAN.

THE TIME *is the present, about 11 P. M.*

This is not a Bret Harte play, nor is it designed for W. S. Hart. And it should be performed with none of that customary and specious braggadoccio of western plays.

A DEATH IN FEVER FLAT

A PLAY BY GEORGE W. CRONYN

[THE SCENE is laid in the so-called dining-room of one of those forlorn hostelries of the great Plains, which goes by the name of Mace's Good Hope Roadhouse, a derisive title evidently intended to

signify the traveler's hope of early escape from its desiccated hospitality.

This room is sometimes reluctantly frequented by a rare guest, usually a passenger on his way via auto stage, to some place else, whom delays en route have reduced to this last extremity of lodging for the night. The room is a kind of lumber yard of disused cheap hotel furniture.

Nothing can be drearier.

Most of this junk is heaped along the left (stage) wall, and it has a settled look of confusion which the processes of gradual decay will, apparently, never disturb. Tables tip crazily against the plaster of the greasy wall. Chairs upturned on these, project thin legs, like the bones of desert places, toward a ceiling fantastically stained. One table smaller than the rest, sees occasional use, for it stands somewhat out of the débris and has about it three chairs reasonably intact. A pack of cards and several dirty glasses adorn the top.

A stairway rises along the right wall, beginning at the rear, and attaining to a rickety landing, supported by a single post of doubtful strength, to which is affixed a glass lamp in a bracket. (Inasmuch as the stairway is turned away from the audience, those who ascend are completely hidden until their heads top the last riser.) At the right front, between the landing and the proscenium, a door (now shut) leads to the Bar, the one spot of brightness in this lump, the shining crack at its sill bespeaking the good cheer beyond. And that crack is the only illumination to this morgue of defunct appetites, for the moonlight, which enters by way of a small window at the right, is rather an obscuration, inasmuch as it heightens the barren mystery of the room's entombing shadows.

Double doors center of rear wall lead to the outside. A window on either side of the door.

So much for the melancholy set.

From the Bar percolates the lubricated melodiousness of the few regular customers who constitute the population of Fever Flat, with the exception of three worn-out women folks, two haggard cows and three hundred or so variegated dogs. The female element are to home, the dogs, astray and astir, with lamentable choruses.

Sounds from the Bar, samples only.]

A JOLLY SOUL [*hoarsely*]. Pitch into her, boys! Tune up your gullets! [*With quavering pathos.*] "She was born in old Kentucky"--

ANOTHER SUCH [*with peeve*]. Aw, shet up, that's moldy! Giv's that Tennessee warble, Hank!

VOICE OF HANK [*rather rich and fine*].

"When your heart was mine, true love, And your head lay on my breast, You could make me believe By the falling of your arm That the sun rose up in the west--"

[*There is a momentary pause, filled in by--*

A VOICE. Y'oughter go courtin' with that throat o' yourn, Hank.

Mace [*as if misanthrope*]. Aw, women--

[*During the laugh that follows, an auto horn blares outside and a bright shaft is visible through the rear windows.*]

VOICES. Stage's come! Stage's come!

[*There are sounds indicating the rapid evacuation of the Bar, and a moment later one of the rear doors is jerked open and the Stage Driver enters, dragging in two heavy suitcases which he deposits near the small table with appropriate grunts, meanwhile encouraging the passengers to enter.*]

STAGE DRIVER. Uh! perty lumpy bags--come in, folks, come in! Seems like you might be carryin' all your b'longings.

[The two passengers enter; the man, quickly, nervously, almost furtively; the woman, with that weariness which ignores everything except its own condition.]

STAGE DRIVER. Come in and set, lady; don't be skeered. Looks a little spooky, but Hank'll have a glim fer ye in two shakes. *[Places a chair for her.]* Here, I know you're plumb tuckered. Make y'self t'home. *[Looking around at the drear surroundings.]* 'S fer 's yer able.

THE MAN. I thought the stage went through to Hollow Eye to-night?

DRIVER. Well, sir, she do, but this time she don't. I've been havin' to run ten miles on low already and I jest don't dast take her across that thirty miles of sand the way she is. She'll drink water like a thusty hoss and like as not lay down and die on us half way out. Then where'd we be? No sir; you folks'll just have to camp here at Fever Flat till I kin do a tinkerin' job to-morrow mornin'. So I'll step into the Bar and tell Hank you're here. *[At the door to the Bar.]* Hank'll do the best he kin fer ye. He's a squ'ar man. Good-night to ye! *[Goes out, leaving the door half open.]*

THE MAN *[briefly]*. Good-night. *[Looking about.]* What a hole! Like somebody died here and they'd gone off and left it all stand just the way it was. *[He goes to the open door at the rear and stares at the naked moonlit buttes.]* Them hills gits my goat. They're nothin' but blitherin skeletons, and this bunch of shacks they call Fever Flat looks like no more'n a damn bone yard to me. *[Shutting the door.]* Ugh! it's cold in here. Feel like I was sittin' on my own grave's edge.

THE WOMAN *[scarcely raising her head, and speaking with no emotion, in a dead dry voice.]* You didn't use to be so pernickety, when you was punchin' on the range, Lon.

LON *[wasplishly]*. And you didn't use to look like a hag, neither, Padie.

PADIE [*with a momentary flash*]. Drink's poisoning your tongue, too.

LON [*viciously*]. Who's drinking? Cain't I take a thimbleful now'n then without all this jawin'?

PADIE. You ain't takin' thimblefuls. You're just soakin' it up. You'll be gettin' snakes if you keep on. 'n then, what'll I do? [*Resuming her air of weary indifference.*] Not that I care so much what you do with yourself--or what becomes of me. Nothing matters.

LON [*petulant and aggrieved*]. There you go, actin' abused. How 'bout my rights 'n pleasures? Ain't got none, I s'pose.

PADIE. Oh, shut up, you make me sick.

[*Hank enters; a ruddy, vigorous, young man, strangely out of place among all this rubbish. He wears a barkeeper's apron and speaks cordially.*]

HANK. Howdyedo, folks! Howdye do! Well, this is a kinda rough lay-out fer you-all. Y'see the Stage is due here at five, and stops fer grub, then makes Hollow Eye by about nine, but here 'tis ... [*pulls out watch*] half an hour of midnight an' I s'pose you ain't et, yet, eh? [*Lights the glass lamp.*]

PADIE. Thanks. We've had sandwiches, but maybe my husband'd like something.

LON [*significantly*]. Wet.

[*Padie shrugs indifferently, and fixes her hair. As she turns toward Hank, the light for the first time falls full on his face. Padie stares fixedly at him, and half rises, with a little cry.*]

LON [*with a quick, startled glance at Hank, speaks to her in a sharp, threatening voice*]. Padie! Sit down! Are you gittin' plumb loco drivin' out so late in autymobiles? [*To Hank, apologetically.*] You kinda

flustered us, mister, cause you have a little the look a friend of ourn that died suddint. Mournful case. Pardner o'mine. No, you're not much like. He was tall, heavy-built and lighter complected. Must a been consid'ble older, too.

PADIE [*almost in a whisper*]. No.

LON. Older, I say. My wife's kinda wrought up by this here little spell of travelin'.

HANK [*sympathetically*]. Oh, you're not used to it, eh?

PADIE [*slowly and deliberately*]. We've been at it--[draws out the word into a burden] years.

LON [*impatiently*]. That is, off'n on, m'dear. Only off'n on.

PADIE [*monotonously*]. All the time.

HANK [*trying to be a little jocosse to break the oppressive atmosphere*]. Should think you might hanker after yer own nest, lady.

PADIE [*rising rudely*]. Well, just keep your thoughts!

HANK [*completely abashed*]. Yes, ma'am. Your room is just at the top of the landin'. I'll make ye a light. [*He hustles away upstairs to cover his embarrassment, taking the suitcases with him.*]

LON [*irritably*]. You're always tryin' to belittle me in public. Is that any way fer a wife to act? I wanta know.

PADIE. What do you always lie so fer?

LON [*with rising voice*]. That's my business. I'll do as I damn please. And don't you go too fer, crossin' me. I won't stand it. Some day I'll up, an--

PADIE [*contemptuously*]. Beat me. That's all that's left to *you*, wife-beater.

[Lon raises his hand as though to strike her, but lets it fall as Hank reappears on the landing.]

HANK. Excuse me, m'am. Have you your own towels by you? Ourn is pretty scaly. It's been so long since we've had in women folks, at least, ladies.

PADIE [*moving toward the stair*]. Thanks, we have some.

[*Lon to Padie as Hank, hidden from audience, descends.*]

LON. You might as well be decent, Padie. You ain't got none other but me.

PADIE [*bitterly*]. Yes, you've took me from 'em. We've been trapsin and trapsin till I'm plumb sick. Yes, I'm--

[*Her voice breaks and she runs blindly toward the stair, almost into the arms of Hank, which further increases his consternation.*]

HANK [*holding her off*]. Stidy, stidy. There's the ladder, m'am. Can't I fetch you somethin'? Toddy?

[*Padie shakes her head, runs up, and slams her door.*]

HANK [*to Lon in friendly fashion*]. Women folks is cur'us, cur'us.

LON [*surlily*]. Take my advice and keep free from 'em.

HANK. It was a woman did fer my brother.

LON [*with increased interest*]. Oh, you've got a brother, eh?

HANK [*simply*]. Had.

LON. Where is he?

HANK. Down at Laguna Madre, Arizony.

LON [*leaning forward and gripping the edge of the table*]. Ranchin'?

HANK. Buried.

LON [*haltingly*]. How--what were you saying--about a woman?

HANK. A woman done fer him. That's what they said, I don't know. I didn't git there fer a long time. There was a mix-up.

LON. Well, well. That's strange.

HANK [*eagerly*]. I s'pose you heard of it? It was in all the papers. It even got as fer as Denver.

LON. No, I don't remember. But I've read of similar cases.

HANK. You've been to Arizony, I s'pose.

LON. No, not quite. I've been all around them parts, but never Arizony.

HANK. 'Tain't what you'd call a perty country, but it's mighty satisfyin'. Too blame cold up here.

LON. Why don't you move?

HANK. I'm agoin' to, but you see my brother had half interest in this here tavern and there was some litigation about it. Case's just finished. I been here three years, ever since he went. But I'm pullin' my stakes, you bet. I wouldn't be *buried* here! Would you?

LON [*dryly*]. I'd rather not.

HANK. So she took me fer a friend that'd croaked, eh? That's cur'us.

LON. Eh? What's that? Who?

HANK. Your wife.

LON. Oh, yes. Well, he was a good ten years older. And dark-complected.

HANK. Thought you said he was light.

LON. Mebbe I did. Well, he mought have been a trifle lighten'n you, but then, size him up by the average, he was dark. Let's fergit him. Bring us a bottle of your best--and see that the glass is clean.

HANK. To be sure. [*Goes out.*]

[*Lon sits with his head between his hands, brooding. The voice of Hank rises from the Bar, rendering the second verse of the Tennessee "warble."*]

HANK [*in the Bar*].

There's many a girl can go all round about
And hear the small birds sing.
And many a girl that stays at home alone,
And rocks the cradle and spins.

[*As the song ends, the door at the rear opens soundlessly, revealing the vast expanse of moonlit plains and desolate buttes. Lon shivers and turns up his coat collar, finally facing about to discover the cause of the chill. Observing the open door, he goes to it, closes and locks it, the click of the key being distinctly audible. He then returns and sits as before, and again the song comes.*]

HANK [*in the Bar*].

There's many a star shall jangle in the west;
There's many a leaf below.
There's many a damn that will light upon the man
For treating a poor girl so.

[Now both of the double doors swing open, without sound. Lon shivers, then, looking over his shoulder, suddenly gets up, glares about him and makes hastily for the door to the Bar, where he almost collides with Hank entering with bottle and glass.]

HANK. Here, mister, I was just comin'.

LON. What the devil's the matter with your doors?

HANK. Them? Oh, the lock's no good. When the wind's southwest they fly right open. Got to be wedged with a shingle.

[He goes over to the doors, slams them shut, picks up a shingle from the floor and inserts firmly between them.]

LON [*relieved*]. H'm. Well, that's all right.

HANK. Now it's blame cur'us the way old places gits. You'll hear these floor boards creak at times like as if som'un was sneakin' over 'em b'ar-foot. Feller told me onct it was made by contrapshun and temper'ture. Mebbe so, but I reckon [*knowingly*] there's more goes on around than we give credit fer.

[Hank dusts off the table and puts bottle and glass down. Lon seizes them eagerly and begins drinking.]

LON [*after a couple of glasses*]. You mean--spirits?

HANK. Well, I dunno as you'd call 'em that. But it's a fact, there's more liquor goes over the Bar than gits paid for. 'Tain't *stole* either. It just goes.... As old Pete Gunderson used to say, "I'm a hell of a th'usty p'uson, and when I croak I'll be a hell of a th'usty spirit." I sometimes wonder--

[Padie appears above, in a loose dressing sack, her hair hanging in a great wavy mass, and holding a pitcher.]

PADIE. Lon, please fetch some water.

LON [*not moving*]. I don't dast go out in the night. I've caught a kind of chill from to-day's drive.

HANK [*going up the stairs*]. I'll fetch it you, m'am.

[*She comes down to meet him and the two are momentarily hidden from the audience. Lon continues to drink steadily, pouring down one glass after another. Hank reappears, treading with a certain gayety, and goes out rear, whistling the Tennessee "warble."*]

PADIE [*leaning out of the shadow of the stairway toward her husband*]. Ain't you comin' up soon, Lon?

LON [*ignoring the query*]. Scarcely no resemblance whatever.

PADIE [*with sudden fierceness*]. You lie!

[*She ascends to the top of the landing. Outside a pump cranks dismally.*]

PADIE [*relenting a little*]. You'll be seein' things, Lon, if you keep it up.

LON [*rising, perfectly steady*]. Mind your business. Wish to hell I had a newspaper.

[*He goes out through the door to the Bar, while Padie runs a comb reflectively through the exuberant tumult of her dark hair. Hank enters and stops a moment, half blinded by the light, then looks up, and shading his eyes, smiles.*]

PADIE [*coyly*]. Is it the light in your eyes, mister?

HANK [*daringly*]. It's you, ma'am, are blinding them. [*He runs up the stairs with the pitcher.*]

PADIE [bending toward him as he comes near the top steps]. You'd better reach it to me. Maybe the landing'll not hold the two of us.

HANK. It'll hold two that have such light hearts as we.

PADIE. Ah, you don't know mine, mister.

HANK [reaching her the pitcher]. There, the clumsy mut I am! Spillt the cold water on your pretty bare toes!

[As she leans over to take the pitcher her hair falls suddenly about his head, almost covering his face.]

PADIE [drawing it back, with a deft twirl]. I've most smothered you!

HANK. I wouldn't want a sweeter death.

PADIE [*looking down into his eyes*]. Indeed, you're the picture of--an old lover of mine.

HANK. I'd rather be the picture of the new.

[He makes as if to clasp her about the ankles, but she puts a hand on his shoulder and pushes him gently back.]

PADIE. You've been very kind to a wanderer--from Arizony. Don't spoil it. Good-night!

HANK [turning about, mutters]. Good-night.

[He clatters loudly down the stairs as Lon reënters, studying a newspaper. Lon seats himself, still absorbed. Hank favors him with a glare of positive hatred.]

HANK [with a sneer]. All fixed fer the night, eh?

LON [*grunting*]. G'night.

HANK. Well, I hope you like this country better'n Arizony.

LON [*starting out of the news*]. The hell you say!

HANK. Your wife was wishing herself back there.

LON [*settling back to his paper and bottle*]. Well, that's where she come from. I don't. Women allus want what they ain't got.

HANK [*retiring*].

When your heart was mine, true love, And your head lay on my breast,

[*He goes out, closing the door.*]

You could make me believe by the falling of your arm That the sun rose in the west.

[*During the singing of this last stanza, the double doors swing wide as before, revealing a Figure standing motionless outside, bathed in moonlight. At the same time the flame in the glass lamp begins to flicker and wane. Lon holds the paper closer to his face, finally almost buries his nose in it, as if conscious of the Presence, but stubbornly resolved to ignore it. The Figure moves, and as it crosses the threshold the feeble light expires. Lon, however, still sits, as if absorbed in the newspaper, pretending to sip from the glass. The Figure in a thin mocking voice, echoes the song of the other, standing just behind Lon's chair.*]

THE FIGURE [*a thin echo*].

You could make me believe by the falling of your arm That the sun rose up in the west.--

[*Lon picks up the soiled pack of cards from the table and begins to shuffle them mechanically, nor does he once turn toward the apparition.*]

LON [*in a hoarse whisper*]. And what'r you doin' here?

[The Figure sits down nonchalantly in a chair a little to one side of Lon's. He is dressed in the western style, that is, without style, corduroys, heavy boots, flannel shirt. In fact, he looks almost natural. But there is a curious dark mark in the center of his forehead--or is it a round, dark hole?]

LON [*petulantly*]. Cain't you stay where you was put--with a heap o' rocks on top o' ye?

THE FIGURE [*thinly ironical*]. Can't seem to give up the old habits, y' know.

LON [*thickly, tossing the pack down*]. What's the hell's a corpse got to do with habits?

GHOST [*unmoved*]. You pore fool, you'll learn when you come over.

LON [*huskily*]. Come over--wh'ar?

GHOST [*significantly*]. Where I am. [*Sings in a quavering voice.*]

There's many a girl can go all round about
And hear the small birds
sing--

LON [*snarling*]. Dry up on them corpse tunes o' yourn, Harvey Mace.

GHOST [*leering*]. Oh, you recognize me, eh? You recognize your old friend and pardner, do you, Lon Purdy?

LON [*sullenly*]. I *knowed* you'd come.

GHOST [*triumphantly*]. And you believe in me, eh? Well, that's good, too.

LON [*stubbornly*]. Believe? Well! I knowed I'd be seein' things soon, what with the booze. I knowed it'd be the snakes or you. Padie told me I'd be seein' things.

GHOST [*maliciously*]. So you believe in *her*, anyway. Well, how's Padie--and the children?

LON. You know damn well we ain't had none.

GHOST. What, no children! How unfortunate! The house of love not to be graced with fruit ... sterile, sterile.

LON [*belligerently*]. Er you referrin' to me?

GHOST. To your spiritual union only, my friend. Physically, I know, nothing was wanting for a perfect match,--female form divine to mate with big blond beast. A race of superpeople!

LON. What the hell 'r' you gabbin'? You allus had a lot of talky-talk. That's what made a hit with Padie, before, before--

GHOST. Before the Other Man came along and cut us both out.
[*Sings.*]

And many a girl that stays at home alone
And rocks the cradle and spins.

GHOST [*reflectively*]. Yes, I'm afraid we both stood up pretty poorly alongside him. I had the words, the brain, the idea. I could charm her, tantalize her, quicken her mind, arouse her imagination. That's why I cut you out with her.

LON [*sneeringly*]. Gab!

GHOST. Yes, gab. It was one better to her than mere brute--guts! You personified strength. You didn't have nerves enough to be afraid of anything. You had endurance, cheek, deviltry, and a kind of raw good

nature. These took with the gay, immature girl she was, until I came. You had--Guts; I had--Gab.

LON. And the Other Feller?

GHOST. He had the Gift.

LON. What you mean?

GHOST. He was a full man. His personality exuded from him like incense. It wrapped and enfolded you and warmed you, and yet it was not a grain feminine, but deeply, proudly masculine. You tolerated him, I--loved him. I had the fine passion for Padie, but when I first saw the two of them together I *knew* she was his, or [with a keen, stern look at Lon] ought to be ... and she has been, always.

LON [*jumping to his feet, and knocking over his chair*]. You lie like hell! She's mine! She's been mine all these three years! I won her and I own her! What little of love she ever had fer you or him is buried down in Laguna Madre with the bones of both of ye! And all hell can't take her from me!

GHOST [*rising tall and pale*]. He kin, and he's done it! You *thought* you'd got her. But he's had her, or rather, she's had *him* in her heart ever since they took the rope from his neck and pronounced him legally dead, and justice vindicated, and laid him away in the desert. All that time since, he's belonged to her. When you laid by her side nights, it was his arm she felt about her waist, not yours; his breath was on her cheek, and his heart was beating against hers. Oh you poor, poor fool!

LON [*throwing his glass straight at the ghost*]. You lyin' pup!

GHOST [*bursting into a gale of eerie laughter*]. Ha! ha! ha! you *poor* fool! *Now* you believe in me!

[*Lon whips out his revolver and aims at the ghost, then slowly returns it to the holster, as he realizes the futility of the move.*]

GHOST. Go on, my boy! Let's have another one here. [*He points to the dark hole in his forehead.*]

[*Lon, wiping his own face with the back of his hand, and shuddering, slumps down into his seat and stares vacantly at the table.*]

GHOST. Another one, just like the last--for your friend and pardner. [*He stresses the words with intense irony.*] Do you remember the *last* time you pulled that trick? What a foxy one it was! How astutely planned! Planned, my friend. I remember when we two went up the canyon together, just such a shining night as this, I asked you why you had borrowed--the Other Man's horse, and you said, yours was a little lame. Oh! excellent dissembler! Most crafty of liars! You *stole* that horse. You stole that horse to put a rope around the Other Man's neck! You knew the pinto was shod different from any pony in those parts. You knew where they'd track him to, when they found the job you'd done. Then we sat down to smokes and cards. And I remember the curious glitter in your eyes. I was dealing. [*The Ghost shuffles the cards on the table, then lays down the pack in front of Lon.*] Cut!

[*Lon mechanically obeys.*]

GHOST [dealing]. And after several hands, you brought up the subject of Padie. And I told you I was out of the race--and that you'd better get out too, because the best man already had her. And then--and then I sensed you were going to draw, and when I had my gun out, it was empty. Clever boy! You had it fixed right. And so you plugged me square. And the moon and stars went out for me and I dropped into the black gulf.

[*Lon, throwing his hand down, buries his face in his hands, groaning.*]

GHOST [*pitilessly*]. You left me with my face to the stars for the coyotes to find. Then, very coolly, you turned the Other Man's horse toward home and sent him off cracking. And you jumped to a piñon log that led off to a ledge of lava where your footprints wouldn't show. And you turned up in half an hour with the boys in town. Then you

inquired casually where the Other Man was. You *knew*, you devil! You knew they'd never get an alibi from him for that night, 'cause-- Padie was with him. Padie had her dear arms about his neck while you, clever dog! were out fixing to put a rope there. And you done it, too! *Won* her? Yes, you did--like hell! After the trial was all over, and the dead buried, me and him, you passed a dirty whisper around town about her, and then married her, to save her good name. That's how you won her.

[There is an immense silence, broken only by the heavy breathing of Lon, which comes in rattling gasps.]

GHOST [sings].

There's many a star shall jangle in the west, There's many a leaf below, There's many a damn that will light upon the man For treating a poor girl so.

GHOST. But I ain't forgot all you done for me. Neither has the Other Man, [*with deep solemnity*] and he's come--to settle too--

LON [staggering up]. No! I don't believe in you! You're nothin' at all! There ain't no--

[Lon sways and catches at the table; as he swings around, the figure of Another stands outside the door, a tall figure with something white twisted about its neck. Lon with a cry of horror puts out his arms as if to ward off the apparition and backs slowly toward the left wall.]

FIRST GHOST [coming toward him]. Murderer! betrayer! We've come to settle!

LON [screaming]. No! no! no! I don't believe--

[He falls, and the pile of rubbishy furniture topples over on to him with a crash. The two apparitions vanish. The door to the bar is flung open and Hank leaps in, at the same moment that Padie appears above, whitely clad.]

PADIE. Lon! Lon! What's the matter?

HANK [*going toward the pile of stuff*]. Go back! It's something terrible.

[*He heaves the heavy pieces from the body and drags it out, as Padie, with a long cry, flies down the stairs. He feels the breast quickly and rises before Padie reaches the table.*]

HANK. I'm afraid he's done for.

PADIE [*drawing a deep quivering breath*]. Oh.

HANK. He must 'a' fell.

PADIE. I knew--drink'd do fer him.

HANK. Did you--love him--so much?

PADIE [*very low*]. Once--a little. [*With sudden, fierce joy.*] I don't care! Now--I kin--live!

HANK [*looking out over the desert where the dawn begins to show*]. Both of us.

[Curtain.]