

Dead Man's Shoes

Day Keene

* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Dead Man's Shoes

Date of first publication: 1950

Author: Gunard Hjertstedt (as Day Keene) (1904-1969)

Date first posted: Feb. 26, 2022

Date last updated: Feb. 26, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220273

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by The Unz Review.

[Source: Weird Tales, March 1950]

Dead Man's Shoes

BY DAY KEENE

Late Friday afternoon, or rather early Friday evening, when Al Murray, the head cashier of the Bon Ton Department Store completed counting the week's cash and locked the vault on the proceeds of the Bon Ton's mid-August sale, he had not the remotest idea of returning Saturday night, packing one hundred and eighty thousand dollars into a suitcase and—leaving his wife and Los Angeles behind him—fleeing with Grace Ferris to Pandang, Singapore, and Bangkok, via Mexico City, San Salvador, and Lima.

It was, in a way, his wife's fault. She had been nagging him for months to take out more insurance. To keep peace in the family he had grudgingly consented. His application had, of course, necessitated a physical check-up, something he had neglected for years. And that was how he learned that he was to die.

The blow fell Saturday morning. There were a thousand and one things he wanted to do over the week-end. He wanted to spray his azaleas. He wanted to fix the bathroom screen. He had even thought they might pack a hamper with lunch and drive up to Santa Barbara Sunday morning to watch Al Junior play ball against San Diego.

Then all were suddenly unimportant. He, Al Murray, was going to die. When he had kept his check-up appointment the week before, Doctor Carr hadn't liked the sound of his heart or his mention of frequent spells of exhaustion. One test had led to another. He had been fluoroscoped and X-rayed. But it seemed it was the blood culture that counted. He listened more stunned than frightened as the white-haired, over-worked, under-staffed, family physician tried to soften the blow. As if such a blow could be softened.

Carr's words came to him in isolated little groups with dramatic silences between them—"... knew you'd want to know ... still difficult for me to believe ... suggest we call in a specialist ... endocarditis ... green virus ... blood culture definitely shows ... knew those spells of exhaustion.

It went on for what seemed like a long time, then Carr concluded the interview by shaking hands and saying he was sorry. "I'm sorry, too," Murray said as he rose to go.

The outer office was even more crowded than it had been. An elderly man took Murray's place in the inner office. A standing expectant mother, scarcely more than a girl, sat in the vacated chair. The nurse at the reception desk was new

and flustered. She had difficulty in finding his card in the file.

"It's Murray. A. R. B. Murray. A for Al," Murray told her.

She found the card, totaled the outside X-ray and laboratory fees, added three dollars for the current visit, accepted his money and wrote a receipt. Murray was grimly amused. Doctors certainly had a racket. Even the last drink wasn't on the house. Dead or not, you paid for the horse.

The receipt written, the nurse poised her pencil over the appointment book. "And you are to come back, when?"

"I don't have to come back," Murray told her. "The Doc fixed me up. Yes. He fixed me up just fine."

After the comparative cool and semi-darkness of the office the street was bright and hot. He had expected it somehow to have changed. It hadn't. The dusty palms in the parkway still drooped listless in the sun. The curb was still jammed with cars. Saturday shoppers crowded the walk.

Murray glanced in the mirror in the window of a jewelry store. He, too, looked the same. He felt the same. He was tired but he didn't feel sick.

His lack of emotion puzzled him. He should be praying or cursing or something. He should be frightened, but he wasn't. Instead, for the first time in his life, he felt a cool detachment from his fellow man. He was no longer one of the mob. A year from now they would still be worrying about their jobs, being nagged by their wives for drinking too much beer,

wondering how they were going to meet their mortgage payments. He was finished with all that now. The average hadn't held true in his case. Death, not life, would begin at forty.

He found his car in the Super-Market parking lot, its back seat piled high with groceries. Impervious to the heat, Mary was reading the Sunday funnies. Perspiration had streaked her make-up and plastered a dank lock of hair to her forehead. Even sitting down she bulged in places that she shouldn't and sagged in places she should bulge. She was thirty-nine, and looked it. Murray wondered why he had ever thought her attractive.

"You certainly took long enough," she greeted him. "What did you do? Stop for a beer?"

The driver of a panel truck looking for a place to park had braked and was waiting none too patiently for him to pull out of the parking space. It was hot and smelly in the car. Murray wanted time to think. It wasn't the time or the place to tell Mary.

"No. I didn't stop for a beer," he said.

"And Doctor Carr signed the application?"

He evaded the question by backing from the parking space. There was plenty of time to tell her.

"I'm a firm believer in insurance," she said for the two hundredth time. "It is ridiculous, the small amount that most men carry. And speaking of insurance, just the other day Mrs. Stewart was telling me... ."

Launched on one of her indeterminable, usually pointless stories, she talked as mechanically as he drove and Murray wondered suddenly how he had ever stood her for nineteen years. True she had been pretty as a girl. They had been through a lot together. Mary had been a good wife to him. What little they had been able to save was due to her efficient management. She was a good cook and a good housekeeper. But surely there was more to life than that.

He wondered just how he would tell her and how she would react. Outside of financial problems, their garden, and their mutual pride in Al Junior, they hadn't had much in common these last years. It might be Mary wouldn't even care. After nineteen years of marriage, of scrimping, saving, cutting corners, their marital bed and board was probably as irksome to Mary as it had become to him.

His wife concluded his story. "And how much insurance do you think he left?"

Murray said he didn't know.

"Not one penny," she confided. "On top of the thirty thousand dollars he'd embezzled, he had cashed in his insurance policies and spent every dime of the money on the little snip who had been his secretary."

Murray had missed the first of the story but he hoped whoever she was talking about had enjoyed himself. It was a wonder more married men didn't kick over the traces. Perhaps the girl had looked like Grace. Even thinking of her was a pleasure. There was a tidy dish. More, she was available, at least to him. Not that she'd been forward. She hadn't. There had been nothing between them but a few experimental kisses, more or less deftly parried on her part. At least during office hours Grace was always a perfect lady. But there were ways that a man could tell. All he had to do was crook his little finger. It showed in the way she smoothed her skirt when she knew he was watching her, in the way she looked at him when he had finished his dictation

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Murray?"

Will there be anything else, Mr. Murray? His mouth was dry. The palms of his hands were perspiring. He had better put Grace out of his mind. Girls like Grace cost money. Grace wasn't anyone's tramp. She wouldn't be content with a trip to Laguna Beach. She would want clothes, and furs, an apartment. No. Grace was way out of his class. Or was she?

He glanced at himself in the rear vision mirror. He was no Van Johnson but his face didn't scare little children. Outside of his bad ticker he was as much of a man as he ever had been. Other men of his age had affairs with their secretaries. Mary had just finished telling him of one.

"What happened to the guy?" he asked.

"What do you mean what happened?"

Murray was patient with her. "Just what I said. What happened when he got caught."

Mary acted like he was a moron. "I just finished telling you. That's how they found out he had cashed in his insurance. He went into their rumpus room the night before the annual audit, stupified himself with whiskey, and put a bullet into his mouth."

"Oh," Murray said. "I missed that."

Incubated by Doctor Carr's prognosis and hatched by the power of suggestion, the maggot of an idea began to lay its diseased eggs in his brain.

Life had cheated him. He hadn't gotten a square deal. All he had known was work. As a youth he had dreamed of travel, beauty, wealth, adventure, and position. He was going to the orient. He was going to marry a beautiful woman. Wealth, adventure and position would be his. Now, after nineteen years of hard work, with less than one year to go, not one of his dreams had come true.

His orient had consisted of a few Saturday night suppers in China Town. His only sea voyage had been to Catalina Island. Mary had been pretty. But that was years ago. He was married to an animated frump. He had less than four thousand dollars in the bank. Adventure had passed him by. He had been too young for one war, too old for the other. At

thirty-nine he was no one of consequence. He was merely 'good old Al', the trusted cashier of a big department store, at less take-home salary per week than a journeyman plumber made.

The trusted cashier of a big department store.

Mary wanted to know if he had remembered to buy the Blade Leaf 40 to spray the azaleas.

"For God's sake, shut up for just five minutes," he snapped at her. "Can't you see I'm thinking?" ...

He was still thinking at four o'clock that afternoon. If there was a flaw in the plan he had conceived, he couldn't find it. He had nothing to fear from the law. He was above the law. The State of California couldn't put a dead man in prison. Once he had had his year, they could do what they pleased with his body.

Nor was there any use waiting. There would never be any more money in the store vault than there was tonight. And when a man had only three hundred and sixty-five days to live it was foolish to waste even one.

He reconnoitered the yard with his eyes. Mary was talking, as usual, this time over the back fence to Mrs. Almroth. The shadow cast by the pepper tree had lengthened. The transvaal and the blue-eyed daisies were closing their petals against the coming night. All up and down the street a merry whirring of sprinklers had begun. The fragrance of night blooming jasmine permeated the patio. It was cool. It was quiet. It was

peaceful. Planning to do the thing he was, Murray realized with a sense of shame that he had been comfortable with Mary. And he was letting Mary down. He was running out on her.

On the other hand, with only a year to live he had a right to taste life. He had that much coming to him. It was better for him to go out like a gilded heel than a comfortable ox in a mortgaged stall.

Walking into the house he dialed Grace Ferris' number. He would leave the decision up to Grace. If her answer was no he would forget the whole thing. If her answer was yes—

"This is Al Murray," he told her without preamble when she answered. "I want to see you tonight, in about an hour. I—I have something to ask you, Grace. Do you want to see me or not?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then she laughed. "You took a long time, Al. I had almost given up hopes of you. All right. My apartment. In an hour."

His heart pounding, Murray bathed and shaved and put on his best suit. Grace had called him Al. She had expected him to phone her. Her remembered laughter caught in his throat and tied little knots in his groin. His lips were dry. The palms of his hands perspired. He had wasted time.

His fingers shook so badly he could scarcely knot his tie. He felt as if he was suffocating. Grace would be in his arms in an hour. There seemed little doubt as to what her decision

would be. If her voice and general attitude were criterions, she would jump at the chance to leave a dull and poorly paid position for a year of luxury, adventure, and Al Murray. She had everything to gain. If anything should go wrong, he would be the one who had taken the money, if any.

He considered packing a bag and decided against it. A packed bag would entail explanations. He could pick up a bag in town, and anything else he needed when they reached Mexico City.

They would stay at the Hotel de la Reforma, he decided. "A suite," he would tell the clerk. Money would be no object.

A smudge of dirt on her nose, Mary was grubbing around the base of a rose bush as he walked out to the car. "Those darn sow bugs are at it again," she complained, then, glancing at him, rocked back on her heels in wifely suspicion. "Where are you going all dressed up?"

Sudden panic swept Murray. He was walking out on Mary. After nineteen years of almost constant association, of sharing one bed, one table, he was leaving her for good. If he left town, as planned, the odds were one hundred to one he would never see her again.

He managed to mumble, "Santa Monica," and invented a Retail Credit Men's Association dinner. "Almost forgot all about it."

"Oh," she accepted the explanation.

He stooped to kiss her but she had resumed her grubbing around the rose bush. "Well, don't be too late if you can help it. I thought we might pack a lunch and drive up to Santa Barbara tomorrow. You know how it would please Al."

Murray wished she hadn't mentioned Al. He drove out of the drive-way too fast, then forced himself to slow down. The matter of disgrace was one thing that couldn't be gotten around. It would hurt Mary, of course. But it would hurt Al Junior the most. Al wasn't ashamed of him. Al didn't think he was a failure. Al thought his old man was tops.

His year of freedom, adventure, ecstasy, in sudden jeopardy, Murray worked desperately to salve his conscience.

He wasn't really letting Mary down. The hot flame that once had welded them into a single entity had long since burned down to an ash. They had some money in the bank. Six more monthly payments would clear up the amortized mortgage on the house. His proposed theft could in no way touch her financially. With the money in the bank, plus his present insurance at the end of the year, she would have enough to carry her for three or four years if she was careful. She wasn't entirely unattractive. She might even marry again.

Al was young. He had a good start in life. At eighteen he was signed up on a big league baseball farm team. Next year, in two years at least, he would be playing big league ball and making all kinds of money. Time healed all wounds. Modern youth was morally calloused. Once he knew all the facts, Al would understand. In time he would probably even kid about it... .

"Yeah. My old man was a heller," he'd say. "One day a doc slipped him the news he had only a year to live. So what did he do, sit down and bawl about it? He clipped his firm for a hundred and eighty grand, picked up a black-haired little dish, and grabbed him a handful of clipper for China."

The wholly imaginary, and rather unsatisfying, monologue reminded Murray of a detail of his plan. On his way to Grace's apartment he must remember to stop in at the Pan-Pacific office and attempt to buy an immediate passage for Manila, now, tonight. It would be impossible to obtain on such short notice but he could pound on desks, act nervous, make himself remembered. It would serve two purposes. When the theft was discovered Monday the police would search for a single man. The scene in the Pan-Pacific office would also point to his supposed direction of flight. Before turning to other channels the police would spend at least several days checking all West Coast shipping.

That gave him Monday and Tuesday, and possibly Wednesday. His car might be found by then, but he and Grace would be miles away. They would be in Mexico City preparing for the next leg of their flight. Both of them were dark. He spoke Spanish fluently. They would fly to El Paso or Laredo and enter the country on easily procured tourist permits. But once south of the border they would vanish. The Senor and Senora something or other would supplant Al Murray and Grace Ferris. By the time it was known Grace was with him he would have purchased forged passports and they would be on their way to Guatemala.

Murray realized he was speeding again and forced himself to slow down to the prescribed twenty-five miles an hour.

From Guatemala they would go to Peru. He knew something of that country. Just the other day the store had received a letter from one of its buyers there stating that regular trans-Pacific shipping and passenger service had been restored again between Lima and most of the Far Eastern ports. Secure in their new identity, with one hundred and eighty thousand dollars to spend, he and Grace could take their time. They could, for example, book passage for Singapore, with stop-overs at Tahiti, Apia, any of a dozen romantic, palm-fringed islands. After that Timor, Pandang, Bangkok, Hongkong, Foochow, Shanghai.

Murray's mood saddened. There was so much he wanted to see, and so little time in which to see it. Life wasn't fair. He had always lived a clean, Christian life. He had worked hard for long hours. He had contributed to the church, the Red Cross, the Community Chest. He had neither chased, nor stolen, nor blasphemed. He had never killed anyone. And what had it got him? A sentence of death at forty.

He parked in front of the apartment building in which Grace lived and sat looking up at the windows, one of which was hers. Once committed to that which he had in mind there would be no turning back. He felt suddenly nervous and shy. Heartburn replaced his armor. He had kidded with the boys about being a man among men. But except in the dim distant reaches of his youth, isolated cases best forgotten, he had

never known any woman but Mary. There had been no need to know any.

He reached twice for the car door handle, and twice withdrew his hand. He had told Grace he would see her in an hour. Little more than half an hour had passed. Perhaps it would be best to go to the store first and get the money. Money talked. With one hundred and eighty thousand dollars in his possession there would be no need to feel shy. The money would talk.

All he would need to say would be, "Throw a few things in a bag. We're driving down to Las Vegas."

He could, of course, give Grace a hint they wouldn't be coming back. That would only be fair. It would give her a chance to pack any prized personal possessions. Women always had them. Take the store-room at home for example. It was filled with trinkets of one kind and another. They were worth nothing in themselves but Mary would never part with them. They were unpacked and dusted off every time they moved. The silly letters he had written Mary when he was courting her ... the lamp Aunt Sophie had given them for a wedding present ... the one-eared, one-eyed, battered teddy bear that had been Al's constant bed companion until he had been five. Murray grinned as he thought of it. Al sure had been a card. He wouldn't go to sleep unless he had the fool bear in his arms. The hours he had spent looking for that bear. The box with one of Al's baby curls in it ... the dolls he had bought for Pam when they had known Al was to have a sister. But Pam hadn't played with them long... .

His grin had become an aching grimace. Murray sat erect and lighted a cigarette. How had his mind ever got into the store-room? It was a part with the past. The past was dead, and in a year so would he be. The thing to do was to think of himself, think of the next twelve months, of Grace, Timor, and Bangkok. The tinkling of temple bells, exotic sights and smells, the sun rising like thunder out of China, love, romance, sable nights and azure days.

On impulse he left the car, walked into the lobby of the building, and picking up a house phone asked the switchboard operator to connect him with Miss Ferris' apartment.

Again there was the same little catch of breath that did things to his anatomy as soon as Grace recognized his voice.

"Yes. I'm downstairs," he said in answer to her question. "But I'm not coming up right now. I have a little errand I want to take care of before I see you. An errand concerning us. I just wanted to hear your voice."

She said, "Oh!" pleased, then laughed.

Murray pressed his lips closer to the mouth piece of the phone. His heartburn was gone. The blood was pounding in his ears. He could actually feel her in his arms, her slim, lithe, warm, young body, a blazing torch that seared his senses. A husk in his voice he asked, "Look, honey. How would you like to go to Las Vegas?"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight."

"With you?"

"With me."

Her voice caught in her throat again. "I—I'd love to, Al."

"Good," Murray said. "Good. We'll leave in about a half hour. Throw a few things in a bag. Throw quite a few things in a bag." He skirted the truth. "I don't know how long we may be gone or just where we may wind up."

He hung up before she could question him and swaggered as he left the lobby. Timor, Bangkok, Grace, a suite at Raffles in Singapore. His past thirty-nine years might have been dull but he would make this last one count. He'd *make* his dreams come true.

It was seven by the time he reached the heart of town. The luggage shop where he had planned to buy a bag was closed but he found a Main Street pawn shop open and bought a battered tan leather traveling bag that would serve his purpose.

Out on the walk again, the street seemed strangely quiet and deserted without its day time crowds. Here and there a couple strolled or paused to window shop, but the hurry and the bustle of the business day had been replaced by an almost cathedral-like silence. There were few taxi cabs and fewer

private cars. As Murray emerged from the pawn shop a police car cruised by on the far side of the street.

He studied its receding tail lights thoughtfully, his throat muscles tightening slightly. He had told Grace, "*I have a little errand I want to take care of before I see you. An errand concerning us.*"

Pure trivia. A minor thing. All he intended to do was pack a twenty dollar traveling bag with one hundred and eighty thousand dollars that did not belong to him.

Fear entered his mind for the first time since he had made his decision. It probed with experimental fingers at his stomach, his groin, his heart, during the brief scene he made in the Pan-Pacific office near the Biltmore when he was courteously informed the next flight to Manila was filled. Fear nagged his heels as he parked his car in the deep shadows of the Bon Ton parking lot and crossed the paving to the locked side door.

The store closed at noon on Saturdays during July and August. During the same period, due to his length of service and position, he wound up his week on Friday night so as to have his week-end free. Johnson, his assistant, computed and banked Saturday morning's receipts. On every second Friday, of which the preceding day had been one, the week's receipts were held inviolate in the vault against the bi-monthly payroll. Johnson didn't have access to the vault. But the youthful assistant cashier was an eager beaver. He popped in and out at odd times. He worked long hours of his free time poring over the books of the store, familiarizing himself with its

general financial set-up against the day when he would step into Murray's shoes. There was no time lock on the vault. But, on the other hand, he had no logical reason to open and enter the vault until nine o'clock Monday morning. If young Johnson should be in the office it would complicate matters.

Murray forced a calm he did not feel. There was nothing about his appearance at the store to excite suspicion. As with Johnson, he often worked odd and long hours. He hadn't risen to be cashier of the Bon Ton by keeping one eye on the clock. But the theft *couldn't* be discovered until Monday morning. He *had* to have that much time.

Kelly, the chief guard, unlocked the door in answer to his rapping. A bluff, elderly, man with close-cropped white hair, he was genuinely glad to see Murray. He greeted him with respect, then wanted to know what brought him back to the store at seven-fifteen on a hot summer's night.

Murray patted his traveling case. "I came back to rob it, Jim," he told him, straight-faced. "I'm going to load the receipts from the August clearance sale in here and skadaddle to Alaska with the boodle."

Kelly left off mopping at his face and laughed until he had to hold his sides. "Buy two tickets," he called after Murray. "I'll clean out the petty cash-tills and come with you."

It was hot in the store with the air-conditioning unit turned off for the week-end. Murray left him laughing, mopping at his face, and took the self service elevator to the office floor.

The fourth floor guard saluted him smartly and, his pistol bulging largely on his hip, continued his patrol. Johnson was not at his desk. Here and there, as per store regulations, a desk lamp had been left lighted but the big outer office was deserted. Murray went directly to his own private office and switched on the light. A few feet behind his desk the massive steel door of the vault, set flush with the rough plaster of the wall, gleamed dully. He dropped the traveling bag in front of it, then, from sheer force of habit, looked at the statement sheet on his blotter.

It had been a good Saturday morning for August. Household Utensils and Yard Goods were off but Ladies Dresses had more than equalized their quota. Shane was a smart buyer. With a few more department heads like Shane

Murray shook his head doggedly. The future of the Bon Ton had nothing to do with him now. He had himself to think of. He had made his decision. All that remained to be done was pack the money in the bag, pick up Grace, and get out of town. He would leave the car in Las Vegas and fly to El Paso or Laredo, whichever flight left first. By the time the theft was discovered and a search was instigated he would be in Mexico City.

The tips of his fingers tingling, he felt in his pocket for a cigarette, found he had none and opened the bottom drawer of his desk to get a package from the carton.

The condition of the drawer was a disgrace. He had meant to clean it out for years but had never quite gotten around to it, it was such a handy catch-all. Under one full and one emptied carton of cigarettes, a stack of dog-eared travel folders, most of them pre-war, were jumbled up with equally dog-eared inter-office memoranda that hadn't been important enough to file but that he had saved for one reason or another, the expensive, unsmoked, pipe the wagon men had given him the time he had gone to bat for them in the matter of a raise, a pair of Mary's gloves, the few personal letters that Al had written him from boot camp. A punk kid seventeen, and in the Navy.

Murray picked up one of the letters and weighed it in his palm. Hoping that Al would understand had been whistling in the dark. Al wasn't the sort of boy to boast about the skeletons in the family closet. When other men spoke of their fathers he'd merely never mention him. Or, if Al did speak of him, he would speak of some childhood incident, the time they had gone deep sea fishing off Newport ... their camping trip up at Big Bear ... the summer the three of them had driven up to Klamath Falls to see Mary's brother. He would never boast his father had embezzled money and left his mother for a younger woman. The fact he had only twelve months to live wouldn't mitigate Al's feelings. He would consider him a quitter, a loud mouth who after years of popping off about honesty, loyalty, and marital fidelity, had been too weak-kneed to toe the mark when the big test had come.

Dropping the letter back into the drawer, his cigarette still unlighted, Murray picked up a sheet of inter-office

memoranda. It was a tabulation of an office collection amounting to sixteen dollars and fifty cents, for what, or for whom, he could not recall. One of the girls had left or gotten married, and he had given two dollars.

He wadded it into a ball and opened the account book to a page that began;

Week of May 22nd	
Lunches	\$.60
Cigarettes	3.00
Gasoline	4.89
Hotel (Amr. plan)	120.00

He remembered the week. It had really begun on a Tuesday. He had come to work that Monday but Monday night Mary had cried so hard he had begged the rest of the week off and had driven her up to Santa Cruz in the hope of, if not assuaging her grief, getting her away briefly from the rows of little dresses in the closet, and the stubbed-toed little shoes, and stamp sized underthings that had to be packed away or given to a more fortunate family.

Hard-eyed, he dropped the book back in the drawer, kicked the drawer shut and twirled the combination on the vault. He couldn't live in the past. In twelve months he would be one with it. He had those twelve months to think of and he must act now.

The vault door open, he reached for the bag. What did it matter to him, a man with twelve months to live, if he was betraying two trusts, that he was running out on Mary, that he was failing a firm in whose employ he had risen from stock boy to cashier? Grace was waiting for him. All he had to do was put the money in the bag, close the door of the vault and walk out of the store. No one would question him. No one would stop him. By the time the theft was discovered he would be safe in Mexico City. Beyond Mexico lay Guatemala and Peru.

He reached for a sheaf of money, then knew that he couldn't do it. He couldn't steal. He couldn't walk out on Mary. He hadn't lied to Al when he had tried in a fatherly way to impress on him the well stated fact of unknown authorship that—

Sow a Thought, and you reap an Act;
Sow an Act, and you reap a Habit;
Sow a Habit, and you reap a Character;
Sow a Character, and you reap a Destiny.

He had lived on the right side of the fence too long. Cashiers worthy of the name didn't abscond with their firm's money. He had promised his God and Mary to love, honor, and support her until death parted them. He would have to keep his bargain. He wanted suddenly to keep it. Mary was suddenly lovely in his eyes. He didn't want to part from her. Their flesh was one. Her spirit and her love had never wavered. Even in the matter of the insurance that had started

this whole thing she hadn't been thinking of herself. She hadn't been thinking of him. She had insisted it be an endowment policy, something for *them* to live on when he could no longer work. Us, We, Mr. and Mrs. Al Murray, an inseparable entity.

He closed and locked the vault, sat down at his desk and taking the account book from the jumbled drawer read through it page by page—

The first payment on the house ... the time Al had broken his arm ... the new davenport for the living room ... a grocery bill ... a bouquet of flowers on mother's day ... a lawnmower ... a rhododendron they couldn't afford ... an azalea they could afford ... twenty dollars to the church's organ fund ... ten dollars to the Red Cross ... perpetual care and a small granite cross

It wasn't an account book. It was a record of dreams bought and paid for. Dreams with fairer scenes than any palm-fringed south sea lagoon, with sweeter music running through them than the tinkling of any foreign temple bells. He must have been out of his mind. His life hadn't been meager. It had been rich and full. He would be sorry to leave it.

He was still thumbing through the account book when Kelly came in at midnight and wanted to know if he was going to work all night.

"No," Murray told him, "No. I'm leaving for home in a few minutes, Jim. Just as soon as I make a phone call."

It was a difficult call to make. He made no attempt to explain. He merely told Grace not to expect him—ever, and hung up with her opinion of him meaning nothing in his ears. He wanted to get home to Mary. He wanted to spend as much time with her as possible.

It was cooler in the car and pleasant driving. The sky was a black velvet net with a fabulous haul of silver stars. The moon was a shining promise. He felt no fear, only a great regret that in so short a time he had to leave anything so beautiful.

It was at the corner of Van Nuys Boulevard, less than two miles from his house, that the police radio car crowded him to the curb and after checking the make of his car and its license the alert young patrolman wanted to know if his name was Al Murray.

Puzzled, Murray admitted it was and produced his driver's license.

"It's him," the patrolman informed his partner. "You follow along behind us. I'll ride down to the station with him." So saying he got into the car with Murray and told him to drive to the Valley Station.

Murray protested, "Now wait. Just one minute, officer. What is this all about? I haven't done a thing."

"That's fine," the patrolman informed him. "I'm glad we got to you in time." He added cheerfully. "You see it isn't so, chum."

Murray considered the statement. The more he considered it, the less sense that it made. "You got to me in time for what?"

The patrolman explained, as to a slightly stupid child. "In time to keep you from doing anything. You see when the doc calls your wife she knows you have lied to her about going to the Retail Credit Men's Association dinner on account of it was last week you forgot it, and she's afraid you are going to do a Dutch. So she comes down to the station and she pounds on desks and cries on the inspector's shoulder until he agrees to put out a radio pick-up on you."

His throat muscles contracted, Murray asked, "Then Mary knows? Doctor Carr called my wife? Mary knows I have only twelve months to live?"

The patrolman was patient with him. "Sure. Like I just told you, chum. Only it ain't so. See? The doc gets stewing about your case after office hours on account of the laboratory report don't exactly jibe with his own general findings. So about nine o'clock he goes over the whole thing again and finds the laboratory has made a mistake and sent him a report on a guy named M. H. B. Murray while your initials are not quite that. And his nurse and him being so rushed they don't catch it at the time and he gives you a bum steer. Catch on? It ain't you, it's this other Murray who's got his travel orders. One of them coincident things. But that don't do you any good if you jump off the Santa Monica pier or pump yourself full of monoxide."

Murray gripped the steering wheel hard. It wasn't so. He wasn't going to die. A mistake had been made, whose fault did not matter. But a queer thought struck him. M. H. B. Murray—*Might Have Been Murray, Might Have Been Me*, either way you looked at it it was strange, unreal. But it had happened. Then he thought of Mary and smiled. Mary was waiting for him. Mary wanted him. He was glad he was not M. H. B. Murray, except in the realm of fantasy. He was himself.

"You're okay? You can drive?" the patrolman asked.

His eyes shining, Murray nodded. "Yes. I can drive," he told him.

[The end of *Dead Man's Shoes* by Gunard Hjertstedt (as Day Keene)]