

## The Executioners

by Barry R. Taylor

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The moon was a thin white smile, hanging low in the western sky. The night was dark and cheerless, lit only by the distant stars. Darkness suited our purpose. Caleb and I rowed, while John kept a careful watch from the prow as the bark slipped through the black water. No one spoke. The only sound was the splash and drip of the oars and the gentle slap of waves against the hull. Behind us, the lightless village was almost invisible, no more than an outline of darker shapes against a blue-black sky. Still, we dared no light, not even a lamp to guide the way. Our black business must not be seen.

There were four of us on the little boat, making our steady way toward Faulkner's Island. The fourth was sitting motionless in the stern seat, facing Caleb and I as we pulled on the oars. She was cloaked against the night chill by the dark robe John had wrapped her in. The cowl was pulled down low, obscuring her face. Her hands were tied. John had replaced her delicate satin shoes with fisherman's boots more suited to the rough ground of the island. She sat perfectly still, staring downward. She made no sound but now and again a plaintive sigh.

We rowed in silence a good long way until the dark of the tree-clad island bulked in front of us and John said, "Careful now, men. The rocks." We rowed more gently then, letting the boat drift forward toward the shore. The water had grown shallow. Here and there the outlines of round-topped boulders appeared, unmoving shapes among the shifting waves. We heard a growl as a rock ground against the hull, but Caleb pushed us off with his oar. We moved forward into the cove. Heavy forest crowded the shoreline, an undefined blackness in the starlit night.

At last the bow kissed the sand and John lept out to pull us up on shore. Caleb and I led our captive to the prow of the boat and then onto the sand. Still she did not look up, nor speak. Even in the heavy clothes, her wrists bound with rope, she moved with a natural, sensuous grace, as a cat stalking through long grass. Keeping her bound seemed an unnatural cruelty, as mean as keeping a wild bird in a cage.

I helped her down onto the beach. "Thank you," she whispered. Her voice alarmed me. It brought back to full awareness who she was and what we were about to do. She was no longer

a faceless, black-robed figure at the stern of the boat, but a live woman with a beating heart and warm skin and a capacity for hurt and aspiration. For all her sins she was a human being, like me, to whom we were about to do violence.

The beach was narrow, pebbled with larger stones. We stumbled in the darkness onto the path through the forest that John and Caleb had cut earlier. Roots and rocks protruded everywhere. Night-dark forest on both sides seemed poised to close in. Caleb and I held our captive on both sides, lest she stumble on the rough ground in her unfamiliar boots. I could feel the nearness of her, hear her troubled mewls and intakes of breath as we felt our way through the dark. The impulse to put an arm around her, to guide her protectively along the way was ever present. I reminded myself that we were on this lonely island for a purpose. We were there to seek justice for three dead men: a father, a brother, and a son.

Only when we were well away from shore did John pause to light a kerosene camping lamp. The harsh light made the trunks and branches around us into a shifting mosaic of light and shadow. “Not far now,” John said. He held the lamp up high as we moved deeper into the forest.

Shortly we arrived at an overgrown clearing, where the spruce and birch and alder gave way to steeple-bush and wild roses, barely discernable in the darkness. A dilapidated barn, long abandoned, rose out of the surrounding vegetation, looming grey-black in the lamp-light. Patches of cedar shakes had slipped from the walls like scales off a fish, revealing the rotting frame. A narrow, second-storey door could be reached from a staircase inside. A protruding beam above it had once been used to hoist bales of hay into the loft. We had turned it to a darker purpose now. A stout plank protruded from the open doorway, supported by a single long pole cut from a nearby tree. Three long ropes tied to the top of the pole, close beneath the plank, dangled to the ground like vines. Another long rope hung from the beam above. It ended in a noose. When we pulled on the ropes, the pole and the plank would come down, and the noose would do its service. Caleb knew the hangman’s equation; the drop would be effective.

I heard a gasp from our prisoner as she stepped into the clearing and saw what we had prepared for her. John set down the lamp. “Untie her hands,” he said. Caleb gave him a look of doubt, but I moved to free her hands from the chaffing ropes. Those hands were small and delicate, with long fingers that had once borne several rings. John reached up and roughly pulled down her cowl.

Even in the unforgiving light of the lamp, the beauty revealed was breathtaking. An angel's face, informed with delight and innocence, yet at the same time feminine and sensuous, awaking desire in every man who beheld her. Eyes as deep and blue-green as a tropical ocean. All this nestled in a thick fall of auburn hair that caught the strong light of the lamp and reflected it back as soft lustre. Yet beneath that enchanting exterior, we knew now, lay something cold and ruthless, as calculating as a panther stalking its prey.

If old John was moved by that beauty, he showed no sign of it. "Teresa Dechalons," he said, as formal as any black-robed judge, "you have escaped the law three times, perhaps more. But you cannot escape your judgment. We three are here to avenge the murders of Craig Southlee, Bruce Allen and Samuel Fraser."

Our prisoner looked around at each of us in turn, clear terror on her face. She knew all of us well. "Please," she blurted, "What are you doing? I am innocent. I have told the world a thousand times, I have never killed anyone. It was a run of bad luck and nothing more. Cold, cruel coincidence. I am no murderer!"

"Your feigned appeals may work on a jury, but we are not so easily swayed," old John said. "Three men have died at your hand, no matter how well you conceal it. A father, a brother and a son. We are not here to try you again. We are here to carry out judgement."

"Those men were my husbands!" Dechalons wailed. "I loved them all, as well and truly as any woman loved any man. And they were all taken from me! I know your grief is real, and your anger grows from it. But look beyond a moment and consider mine. I have been made a widow three times over. And each time was a heartbreak from which I thought I would never recover. You have lost family that you loved, but I tell you here and now you have never known the depths of grief that I have felt."

Dechalons was indeed three times a widow, though she was still young. No one knows anything of her history. She claimed she was from Montreal, and she moved east for a bilingual government job. She arrived in our village in full bloom, poised, educated and charming. She was perhaps twenty-five when she married Craig Southlee, the dashing son of a local property owner. Two years later Craig died when the scaffolding he was standing on to inspect a building project collapsed. Locking pins at the base of the scaffold had been forgotten, or removed. Teresa Dechalons, who had visited the site that morning, was the sole inheritor of the estate.

Two years later Dechalons married Bruce Allen, another wealthy man who had been a friend of Southlee. Allen died of a massive heart-attack eighteen months later. He was an older man, and his heart condition was no secret. There was suspicion, but no charges.

Dechalons seemed to disappear after Allen's death, rarely appearing in public. When she re-appeared after another three years she was married to Samuel Fraser, who owned a great deal of land. Samuel died violently in his own home with a kitchen knife rammed through his chest.

This time Dechalons could not avoid a charge of murder. She was found at the scene with blood on her hands and her fingerprints on the knife handle. She claimed at trial that Samuel died in a dispute with a neighbour over property lines that turned violent. She was crying over his body, uselessly trying to pull the knife out of his heart, when the police arrived. Other evidence in the case was ambiguous; Dechalons was acquitted by a deeply conflicted jury.

"Do not try your bewitchery on me," John fumed. His face was a moonscape of light and shadow in the lamplight. "You murdered my son. You waited until no one else was on the scaffold, then you pulled the pins out. So you could be a rich widow."

"No!" she cried. "Craig was my first love. We were deeply happy together. He gave me everything I wanted, and all his love besides. Why would I ruin that? When that scaffolding fell it crushed me along with him."

"Oh?" scoffed Caleb. "And what of my father then? Another tragic accident? Convenient to marry an older man, isn't it. Easier to stage a natural death. There was digitalis in his bloodstream, that's what stopped his poor heart. What did you do, feed him a cup of hot foxglove tea?"

Teresa turned to him. Her voice was desperate. "Caleb, I miss your father as much as you do, believe me. But I swear to you it was the fates that chose that moment for his heart to give out, not I. He was taking medication for his heart, digoxin. That's what the autopsy found in his blood. My god, Caleb you know this! Why do you keep blaming me?"

"Because you profit every time someone dies!" Caleb shouted. "You kill men for money, you murdering witch!" He was working himself into a fury, feeding off the isolating darkness around us.

She whirled over to me. I found myself confronting those ocean-deep eyes, brimming with fear and sorrow. "Did I profit from the death of poor Samuel?" she demanded. "Did I? You know I did not. After Craig and Bruce died, I made Samuel promise to make a will, one that

excluded me entirely. He didn't want to do it, but I insisted. He left everything to you, his dear brother instead. Tell me then, why would I stab a gentle, kind man whom I loved as deeply as did you?"

I faltered. There was something profoundly honest in those tear-filled eyes, something that seemed more than mere contrivance and fear. Was she being truthful, or merely an excellent actor? People who murder without compunction can be convincing liars because they have no conscience to betray them. "The knife," I said. "The blood. Neighbours heard you shouting. You were right there . . ."

"I was insane!" she almost screamed. "I was beside myself, out of my mind with shock and horror. I heard shouting and commotion in the kitchen. I recognized the voice of an angry neighbour. I ran into the kitchen to find Samuel – my husband, my beloved – lying on the floor! There was blood everywhere. I collapsed over him. I kept screaming and crying and shouting at him to get up, to breathe, to not make me a widow yet again. I kept yanking at the knife handle; maybe if I pulled it out he would magically be whole again. I swear to god, Stuart, I wanted nothing at that moment so much as to die beside my beloved Samuel. If I had succeeded in pulling out the knife, I would have turned it on myself."

She was heaving in sobs now. She turned this way and that, searching for any sign of mercy from the three men bent on handing her the ultimate punishment. For a moment I looked past the lovely, tortured woman to the dark forest beyond. I could almost see the silhouettes of the three dead men standing among the trees, watching us, awaiting our decision. The shadows in the forest demanded justice, not revenge. We would be judged by our actions as we were judging hers. A cold chill shivered up my spine; the night seemed to grow even darker.

Before I could marshal a reply to Teresa's plea, Caleb broke in. "A cooked up story, if ever there was one," he said, his voice heavy with disdain. "You had a dispute with Samuel, probably because he changed his will without telling you, foiling your scheme. You lost your temper. A murderer is never far from violence. You grabbed a knife and you knew how to use it. Then you concocted some story about an angry neighbour."

She shook her head. Long hair shimmered in the lamp light. "No, no, no, I beg of you, no. There was another man, I swear it. There were bloody footprints on the front steps. Footprints of a man's boot as he ran off. I saw –"

“Enough!” old John shouted. “We are not here to debate. We are here to act. Bring her to the barn.”

I looked to the shadows, watching us. Their eyes were wide open, their expressions expectant. “Wait, wait a minute, men” I said. “Are we certain of this course? We believe this woman to be a murderer, and she probably is. But what if we are wrong? Death is absolute. Death cannot be undone. We have sworn to uphold justice where the justice system has failed. If we hang her and she is a murderer, then we are avengers. If she is not, then we are the murderers. Are we certain, beyond any reasonable doubt, that this woman here, Teresa Dechalons, married and then murdered, three men?”

“I am certain,” Caleb replied. “She killed my father.”

“As am I,” said John. “She killed my son. And your brother, Stuart.”

Our captive broke in, desperate. “Please. I beg of you, don’t do this. I swear by all that is holy and sanctified that I am innocent! I have committed no crime, harmed no man. And you would murder me! It was capricious fate that deprived me of my husbands, not my hand. Please look in your hearts and know that I speak the truth!” She was outright crying now, making no effort to stem the tears. She toyed with the ties on her black robe.

I said, “Maybe we should – ”

“Enough talk!” old John thundered. “Bring her to the barn and let us be done.”

“No!” screamed Teresa. She pulled off her cloak and threw it over Caleb, momentarily blinding him. She pushed me aside with both arms, then dashed forward and grabbed the lantern from the ground beside old John. Before any of us could properly react she turned on her heels and dashed away down the path toward the beach.

“Get after the witch!” old John roared, “Don’t let her get away!”

We tumbled down the trail like hounds after the fox, but she had the light and we didn’t. The darkness became a physical impediment, full of trips and traps. Our quarry was lithe, and quick. She made impressive time down the path, despite the rough ground and her cumbersome boots. We watched the light recede into the darkness before us. By the time we arrived at the shore, Dechalons was running down the beach past the boat, waving the lamp about and calling for help at the top of her lungs. On the open ground we made better time. We closed on her quickly. She stopped, yanked off her boots, and threw them forcefully at Caleb, who was in the lead. One missed, the other struck his ear; she gained a few seconds.

Running barefoot now, she tossed the lantern into the water. Full darkness descended with a hiss. The moon had set, leaving only the indifferent stars to watch our scene. Dechalons was a darker shape moving down the grey-black beach. She began making strange movements as she ran. In a moment we encountered her dress, and then her slip and camisole lying on the sand.

The beach ended at a cluster of twisted spruce trees clinging to an outcropping of granitic rocks. There was no place left for Teresa to go. As we approached she turned about and drew herself up tall, dressed now only in her foundations. She reminded me then of Venus being born out of the sea. Her auburn hair was wild and blown about, her eyes blazing with defiance. I don't think I have ever seen someone so beautiful as Teresa Dechalons at that instant.

"If I am to die tonight," she shouted as we approached, "it will be by my own hand, and not by yours!" She turned and dashed into the lake. When she was waist deep she dove into the water and began swimming strongly toward the mainland. We could only watch from the shore until her dark form merged with the night.

"Get the boat," I said. "We can still catch her."

Old John shook his head. "We would never see her in the dark. She's as good as dead anyway. She'll never make it back to shore. That's too far for anyone to swim."

Caleb surprised me. He said, "This isn't the way it was supposed to end." He was looking out over the water where Dechalons had disappeared. "We were planning to execute her, ready to end her life right here, but instead we drove her to take her own life. Doesn't seem right, somehow." I could hear the doubt and confusion in his voice.

I had thoughts of my own about the events of the night, but I kept them to myself. We collected her clothes from the beach and took them back to the bark along with the useless lantern. Caleb wanted to take down the noose and the scaffold but without the lantern we had no light to work by. We rowed away as silently as we came in.

No one ever saw Teresa Dechalons again. There were questions, of course, once her disappearance became known. We three made a pact that we would never again speak of the events of that dark night with the strangely smiling moon. We burned her clothes; we told the police that we knew nothing. Old John and Caleb were convinced that she drowned in the lake, and the fire in their souls was quelled. I'm not so sure.

Murderer or not, Teresa Dechalons had demonstrated deep reserves of courage and resourcefulness that night on Faulkner's Island. Would she swim pugnaciously toward the

mainland that she could never hope to reach, drowning in the lake rather than letting three angry men execute her? Or would she do the clever thing, swimming out far enough to be out of sight, then angling back to the island again? She was a strong swimmer. She could find a rock to cling to until we were gone, then swim back to the island, tired and cold perhaps, but alive.

It was midsummer. The old barn and her abandoned cloak would provide shelter and warmth. Perhaps she could make a fire. If she survived the night, it would be merely a matter of time before some passing fishing boat noticed the half-clad beauty waving from the beach. Gazing into that innocent face and those fathomless blue-green eyes, who would doubt her story about a capsized boat leaving her stranded? The fishers would take her to a different port, down the shore a way, and from there she could begin to build a new life.

I don't know if any of this is true. I'm not sure anymore whether Teresa Dechalons truly was a murderer or if the deaths of her husbands was, as she put it, "cold, cruel coincidence". But as I was standing on the shore of Faulkner's Island, watching her swim away into the blackness, it seemed to me that she was already veering to the right.

