



THE WALL

By Robert Arthur

● It was a lovely bit of mural painting the imprisoned artist contributed to Death Row. It also had its uses—

— Illustrated by Kolliker

The first time I visited John Douglas at the penitentiary, after the higher court had upheld his conviction, I took with me a package of oil paints and brushes. He had requested them through the warden, who gave permission for him to receive them. The paints were compounded according to Douglas' own recipes by an old German with a tiny artists' supply shop tucked away in a Village hole-in-the-wall, and he had written that he was most anxious for them.

The paints and brushes having been examined in the prison office, a guard led me to Douglas' cell, through an interminable series of iron doors. He was in a cell at the far end of the little section reserved for the doomed, and when I stopped in front of the barred door I saw that he was already engaged in painting a mural of some sort on the concrete wall.

He had sketched in the outline of what seemed to be a section of stone wall made up of great chunks of granite, and was so absorbed in his work that for a moment he was unaware of me. Then he turned, saw us, and put down the brush.

"Hello, Henry," he greeted me, with characteristic booming heartiness. "You've brought them? Good!"

The guard let me into the cell and carefully locked the door behind me. Then he took his post where he could watch each move we made. The procedure wasn't quite usual, but, then, neither was it usual for a condemned man to be allowed painting materials.

Douglas took the paints and brushes, glanced at them with satisfaction, then put them aside.

"Sit down, Henry," he invited, indicating his narrow bunk. "Use the couch. I'll sit here on the floor, so that Jones, outside, can be sure nothing but words passes between us."

He sat down on the concrete, cross-legged like a Vogt, folded his arms and beamed at me, his blue eyes bright.

"This is a wonderful posture for concentrating, Henry," he told me. "I learned it in Tibet two years ago. Try it sometime when you have a tough case to prepare for. Also it's quite convenient when the accommodations don't include

chairs. Tell me," he changed the subject, "did Schultz make up the paints just as I specified?"

"He said he did," I answered, a little annoyed at his cheerfulness. It was scarcely the mood I'd expected to find him in, considering that he was due to be electrocuted within thirty days, unless I could win a stay or commutation from the governor—which was problematical. "He said some of the ingredients were difficult to find, but he got them. And he asked what kind of picture you're going to paint, anyway."

John Douglas laughed. He was a big man, fair-haired, with bronzed skin and a great chest from which laughter rolled in a manner impossible to ordinary men.

"My own kind, of course," he said. He waved a hand toward the preliminary sketch he'd done on the wall. "At present, a little something to enliven the rather Spartan simplicity of my suite."

"I don't see how you got the warden to agree," I told him, curious. "It's not exactly customary to extend such facilities to the inmates, you know."

John Douglas chuckled, deep in his throat.

"I blackmailed him," he stated. "I told him I'd commit suicide if he didn't let me have them, but if he did I'd promise on my honor to make no trouble and not to attempt to injure myself in any way."

"He was skeptical at first, pointing out that the precautions here against suicide are rather effective. So I gave him a demonstration. I swallowed my tongue—another useful little trick I learned in Tibet—and almost choked to death before the prison doctor could reach me. After that the warden agreed to take my word of honor. Besides, he seems to have become interested in art since I arrived. Not at all a bad chap."

I snorted, and brought up the matter on which I had really come—the preparation of an appeal to the governor for commutation of the sentence. But Douglas seemed hardly interested, even when I told him how slim the odds were of being able to save him from the electric chair.

"Try it if you want to," he told me, waving a hand negligently. "Don't bother me with the details any more than you have to, though. I really have a very interesting piece of work outlined here, and I've got to have it finished before the thirtieth."

I was thinking that the thirtieth was the day set for his execution as he stretched out a long arm and picked up a square of cardboard leaning against the wall.

It was ordinary cardboard, two by three feet perhaps, and on it Douglas had made a sketch in colored pencil. I recognized it as a working sketch from which he was painting the "mural" he had started on the cell wall.

The cardboard sketch showed a long section of stone wall, made up of huge granite blocks, in the center of which was an arch and a massive double doorway of oak, iron-studded. The two halves of the door were open, swung outward on their hinges, to reveal a scene beyond the wall that Douglas had only indicated as yet. I could see a fountain, sending a spray of water high into the air, and beneath it a pool.

All the rest was vague, merely sketched-in lines, save for the girl standing just inside the open doors, looking outward. She was a tall, slim girl with masses of dark hair falling about her shoulders, a circlet of leaves about her forehead. She wore a gossamer-light gown that was blowing in the wind, molding itself against her body, and stood with one hand upraised, touching the door, the other on her breast at the base of her throat.

She was smiling at us—a little smile, shy and inviting at the same time.

"The same girl!" I said involuntarily, and Douglas chuckled.

"The one that Helen made such a fuss about?" he asked. "Yes, it's the same one. Well, if that's all Henry, I'd like to get back to work. I appreciate your coming and bringing the paints, and give you full authority to do anything you think best. I want you to feel satisfied that you tried."

"But, honestly, I don't think there's any use. The evidence against me is apparently conclusive to everyone but you, although the only thing I did was to try to save Helen by grabbing her before she could fall over that rail. Chance is a greater master of irony than even Bernard Shaw. However, let's not bemoan. I'll look forward to seeing you again—when? Next week? Fine. And listen. Find out for me the date of the full moon this month, will you?"

With that I left, since he obviously wanted me to go, the whole interview having been highly unsatisfactory.

All the way back to town I puzzled over his attitude, which from the very beginning had been that of a man quite uninterested in the outcome of his trial.

I didn't believe that John Douglas had killed his wife Helen, although everyone else, including the jury, did. I was sure his story was the truth. He had said that Helen had come to his studio, which was separate from their apartment, had violently accused him of misconduct with a model, had slashed several recently completed pictures with a knife, and had wound up by going into an hysterical, screaming rage.

Lest she damage more of his work, he had caught her wrists and forced her out of the studio as gently as possible. But in the hall she had broken free from him with a violent movement

that had thrown her against, and over, the rail around the stair well.

He had grabbed her then, to save her. With one hand he had caught her by the neck and shoulders. The other she had clawed at, trying to pull herself back. But his effort had been unsuccessful. She had fallen, screaming, over the rail. As the stairs were circular, and went down for five flights, she had fallen the whole distance and been killed.

But the marks of his fingers had been on her neck and shoulder, his wrists had been scratched and torn by her nails as if in a struggle—and the building superintendent, attracted by her cries, had come out into the hall just in time to see him apparently thrusting her over the rail as she struggled against him.

It was a convincing case against him, and he had done nothing to make it better. He had told his story briefly, almost boredly, with a take-it-or-leave-it air, and had made no effort to conceal his contempt for the mentalities of the prosecutor, the jurymen and even the judge.

The prosecution had made much of the fact of his wife's accusation that he was having an affair with a model. They had been unable to prove the charge, or to produce the model, and I managed to keep mention of it in the official testimony to a minimum. But it had its effect on the jury.

About a year before his wife's death, John Douglas had returned from a six months' wandering through Tibet. Unexpectedly abandoning the competent portrait and landscape work that he had done for years and earned a highly satisfactory income thereby, he had begun a startling series of nudes and seminudes in imaginative settings.

Always the chief figures in the canvases had been the same girl. Tall, slender, with dark hair; a grave, oval face with thoughtful eyes veiled by long lashes; a body that was not voluptuous and not girlish, yet partook of both those qualities; amazingly lovely but with a definite quality of not belonging in this world.

The settings had been as intriguing to professional artists as the figures. Backgrounds of fantastic lakes, streams, the shore of a turbulent purple sea; green dells, fountains, pools where fauns and satyrs bathed. The best known of the pictures, the one that the papers had chosen to reproduce most during the trial, showed the girl who appeared in all the canvases petting a unicorn on the bank of a violet stream.

The pictures were unorthodox, and the dealers had been shy of handling them, calling them old-fashioned rococo in which the public was not interested. Heedless of the instant falling off of his income, John Douglas had turned a deaf ear to their criticisms and gone ahead with absorbed interest in his new field.

Part of Helen Douglas' smoldering rage, that had finally broken out so tragically, had been due to the diminishment of Douglas' income. The rest had been jealousy of the tall, lovely girl he was so constantly depicting.

Helen Douglas was beautiful, too—a tall, blond, crisp beauty which concealed a knifelike sharpness. She had been John Douglas' model, and he had married her—quickly losing interest in her, however, when the limitations of her character made themselves plain. But even when he was infatuated with her, he had never painted her so glowingly alive as he did the unknown girl of his last canvases.

Her suspicions, perhaps, were only natural. It was well known that, in the past at least, John Douglas had always used a model for figure work. He was not an "imagination" painter.

But no one ever saw the model come or go from the studio. The closest thing to substantiating evidence that she actually existed came from the superintendent of the building, the same who had actually seen Helen Douglas' fall. He testified to hearing voices, Douglas' and a woman's, murmuring in the studio, always after dark and particularly on the nights of the full moon. Sometimes, he testified, he heard music and laughter, and occasionally the sound of a woman singing.

I tried to force an admission from him that what he had heard might have been a radio, but failed. He was an Italian, he knew a little of music, and he persisted that it was not a radio. The music was always that of stringed instruments, he stated. And the singing was in a language he did not know.

John Douglas' testimony concerning these matters on direct questioning was damaging to himself in the extreme, and I was helpless to better matters because he did not seem to care what the jury thought. Although denying that he had in any way misconducted himself, he admitted that he always worked from a model, and that he had had a model for the pictures in question. Not only that, he added, but every other figure in them had been painted from living models, too—nymphs, satyrs, fauns, unicorn and all.

And where, the prosecutor asked with heavy irony, had he gone to find these unique models? Douglas had only waved his hand airily, remarking that he had not found it necessary to go anywhere—he had only had to look. With, he added, the proper kind of vision.

I might have entered a plea of insanity, and his testimony would have supported it. But Douglas himself refused to let me do this. And it was as much because the judge and jury felt that he was mocking their intelligence, I think, as to punish him for murder that he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

When the verdict was brought in, he only shrugged.

Douglas still refused to let me raise the issue of insanity, and my appeal was of no avail. The higher court reaffirmed the conviction. John Douglas was sentenced to death by electrocution before midnight of the thirtieth day of that month. And the governor, after I had exhausted all my arguments, refused to grant a stay or commute the sentence.

It took a couple of weeks to reach a final dead end in my efforts, but by the time I made my second trip up to see John Douglas, I knew well enough what the outcome was going to be. He did not, however, seem ruffled when I told him bluntly that there was little use in hoping.

"Hope?" he said, raising his brows at me. "I don't bother with hope, Henry. I prefer action. By the way, did you remember to look up for me the date of the full moon?"

I told him the twenty-ninth. He nodded with satisfaction.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now let's talk about something else. How do you like my *chef d'oeuvre*?"

He gestured toward the side wall of the cell. It was now almost covered with the painting he was making. On a larger scale, the mural followed the sketch he had shown me. The stones of the wall were done, and seemed so harsh and three-dimensional that I had to restrain myself from reaching out to touch them. The arch had been painted in, too, and he had begun outlining the massive doors. The background, as seen through the open doors, was still blank.

"It's interesting," I said, acidly, "but is it really worth concentrating all your attention on at a time like this, when you might better be engaged in helping me try to save your life?"

"Oh, definitely," John Douglas assured me airily. "Really I wouldn't trade this for all the other work I've done. It's unfinished, of course, but I assure you it's going to be a remarkable thing by the time I'm through. Pity it will be so inaccessible. I don't suppose many art lovers will be willing to commit murder just to get in for a look at it."

"Well, I'll keep trying," I told him, discouragedly, and got to my feet to leave. "I'll see you again next week. By then I should have the governor's decision."

He did not answer. He was already oblivious of me, working with absorbed attention at a fine bit of detail on one of the great wooden doors.

The following week, when I visited him to report on the final failure of my efforts, he only nodded and did not even put down his brush. Wall, arch and door were finished now, in meticulous detail that showed every splinter in the wood of the doors, every crevice in the stone wall.

The background had been blocked in. The girl in the doorway had not been added yet, but there was a fountain to be seen through the wide-swung doors. In the pool at its base half a dozen nymph-like forms were bathing, and on the far side, a unicorn was drinking. In the extreme background was the suggestion of a golden beach and a purplish sea.

"I know you feel bad, Henry," John Douglas told me, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his prison uniform, and it was as if he was trying to console me. "I guess I haven't been very cooperative. But then, the life I'd been leading up to the last year was rather dull and disappointing. I'm looking forward to what's ahead now. Truly. I'm really grateful to Helen for falling over that rail and releasing me in this manner. For that's what it amounts to—a release that I know now would have been impossible for me to attain in any other way."

I stared at him.

"If you mean that you look upon this as merely a way to commit suicide without actually having the onus of the act fall upon you," I began, "I can hardly agree with you that—"

"Suicide?" he interrupted me. "Oh no, far from it, Henry. I still have a lot of ability to enjoy life. A lot of it," he added, his eyes glinting with amusement. "And work, too." He waved his brush toward the picture that was taking form on the cell wall.

"It's coming along, wouldn't you say?" he asked. "Although not as fast as I'd hoped. There are two guards outside the cell every minute of the day and night, keeping an eye on me, and I find it hard to concentrate properly. But I'll be finished in time. Will I be seeing you next week, Henry?"

I told him that I did not know. That I had other clients to whose affairs I must give some attention, and though I would still keep trying



to prevail upon the governor to grant a stay, I probably would not make the trip up unless I had something definite to report. Although, I added, naturally I would be up to see him before—

"Oh, of course," he boomed, slapping me on the shoulder. "And believe me, Henry, I appreciate your efforts more than, perhaps, I seem to. Do you think you could manage to drop in the evening of the twenty-ninth? I don't believe the warden will make any difficulty—in fact, he's become rather interested in this thing I'm painting—and—well, after that matters will be rather too imminent for comfortable talking."

I agreed that in any case I would visit him on the twenty-ninth, and feeling more distressed than he seemed to, I left him working with concentrated care under the watchful gaze of his guards.

I was, as I had been afraid, unable to pry any further action out of the governor. So I did not see John Douglas the following week—there really was no point in it. On the twenty-ninth I drove up to the prison, taking care that no one knew of my visit lest the reporters trail me and try to extract a last-minute story from me. It was early in the evening, and I ate on the way, arriving at the grim, gray-walled building shortly after dark, with a full moon just rising above the trees.

There was no trouble about seeing Douglas—the warden himself, a small, alert man with an intelligent face, conducted me to his cell.

John Douglas was sitting rather wearily on his bunk, his big body slumped with fatigue, but when the door was unlocked for me he rose alertly.

"Hello, Henry," he said cheerfully. "Hello, warden. Come in, too. I haven't anything private to say, and you might like to inspect the finished work. I put the last touches on only an hour ago. It gives your prison the distinction of being the only one in the world with a masterpiece on its walls. Art lovers from all over the world will be breaking into jail to see it, if you aren't careful."

The warden stepped inside behind me, and the guards locked the door. Within the cell we stood staring mutely at the picture. It was a masterpiece. He was not speaking boastfully. Even my untrained eyes could recognize the living, glowing beauty of the scene.

Apparently the scene was illuminated by moonlight, for the colors were subdued and a curious haziness hung over the whole composition—the sea beach in the background, the high-jetting fountain, the pool, the bathing nereids, the drinking unicorn, the velvet grass. The moonlight haze gave an atmosphere of enchantment to the scene, yet curiously made it more real because the details were not too definite to the eye.

Except for the girl standing in the doorway,

smiling at us. She was as she had been in the preliminary sketch, save that I almost expected to hear her speak, almost believed she was about to take a step toward us. A chaplet of bay leaves was about her forehead, and her hair rippled about her shoulders as if stirred by an actual breeze.

"Lord!" It was the little warden. "She . . . she—"

He couldn't find the right words, and neither could I. But I knew what he meant.

Douglas had been watching our faces, and he nodded in satisfaction.

"I hope you won't get into any trouble for letting me paint it, warden," he said with genuine concern. "I—well, I'm afraid there may be questions asked about it afterward."

"I don't care if there are," the warden said crisply. "I'm retiring next month, anyway. And"—he spoke with a curious humbleness—"to be able to see this is worth going through some trouble for."

"Good!" Douglas exclaimed, and picked up from his bunk the preliminary sketch I had seen before. "Henry," he said, "I want to give this to you. I've amplified it, and gone over it in oils. The cardboard isn't much of a material to work on, but go to Schultz. He'll fix it up so it will last as well as canvas. And some day it should be worth a lot, if you want to sell it."

"All right for him to have it, warden?"

"Oh, surely," the little warden agreed, scarcely hearing him. He was frowning at the picture. "It . . . damn it!" he said bewilderedly. "It seems to have changed, somehow!"

"That's the moonlight," John Douglas said blandly. "The moon is rising, of course, so the light is gradually changing. Listen hard, and perhaps you can hear the waves breaking on the beach."

The warden looked at him with quick suspicion. But in the silence of the moment a murmuring filled the cell, like waves on a beach far distant. For just an instant; then one of the guards in the corridor moved with a squeaking of heavy-soled shoes, and the sound was gone.

"Well, Henry," Douglas said then, before the warden could make any comment, "thanks for everything. I appreciate it all from the bottom of my heart. Good-by now. And hang onto that picture. I have a hunch my stuff will start rising soon."

He gripped my hand quickly, let it go, and a moment later, both of us a little bewildered, the warden and I were following a guard down the many corridors leading to the outside.

I didn't see John Douglas again.

Sometime that night, with his execution hardly a dozen hours off, he escaped.

There was a terrific uproar about it, of course, and a legislative inquiry. The warden was forced to resign, though as he had planned to within a few weeks, anyway, it was not a great hardship on him. Especially as he and his men were finally absolved from complicity in the unprecedented escape, and he did not lose his Civil Service pension. Suspicion continued to cling to him, of course; but no one ever explained how John Douglas had gotten out of his death cell, deep in the bowels of the penitentiary, with two guards almost within touching distance of him.

However, sometime after the whole affair had been buried as an unsolved mystery, the former warden stopped in at my office to see me. He had gained a little weight, looked quite cheerful and, curiously, had become an art collector in a small way. He was buying such of John Douglas' later works as he could pick up within the limitations of his purse—they were rising in value by leaps and bounds.

He eyed the sketch Douglas had given me, which hung above my desk, but did not try to persuade me to part with it.

"I thought you might like to know," he said instead, meeting my eyes, "about a couple of details that did not come out in the inquiry. Douglas disappeared from the cell about midnight, at a moment when neither of the guards happened to be looking in at him.

"They said"—he hesitated an instant—"they said that suddenly they heard a sound like waves crashing on a beach, and a gust of warm, flower-scented air blew past them. And when they turned, to look into the cell, Douglas was gone.

"They called me at once. He was gone, all right, and without leaving any trace as to how he had managed it. But I thought it best to caution them not to mention the sound of waves at the inquiry, or the gust of air, or that the picture, when we entered the empty cell, was not as Douglas had originally painted it. Those doors, that were open—when you and I went in—were closed tightly."

He searched my face, his eyes bright and unblinking.

"Closed tightly," he repeated. "There was nothing to be seen but the wall and the closed doors. That's easy enough to explain, of course. He must have changed the picture after we left. But I didn't say anything about it, because there wasn't any way to explain this."

He took something from an envelope and held it on the palm of his hand for me to see.

"This was on the floor of the cell, just at the foot of the closed doors," he said. "In case you don't recognize it, I had a botanist identify it for me. It's a bay leaf."

THE END.



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THE HAG SELEEN

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● Modern adults are too well trained to ignore magic as superstition—it takes a child to handle the matter properly!

Illustrated by Cartier

It was while we were fishing one afternoon, Patty and I, that we first met our friend the River Spider. Patty was my daughter and Anjy's. Tacitly, that is. Figuratively she had originated in some hot corner of hell and had left there with such incredible violence that she had taken half of heaven with her along her trajectory and brought it with her.

I was sprawled in the canoe with the nape of my neck on the conveniently curved cedar stern piece of the canoe, with a book of short stories in my hands and my fish pole tucked under my armpit. The only muscular energy required to fish that way is in moving the eyes from the page to the float and back again, and I'd have been magnificently annoyed if I'd had a bite. Patty was far more honest about it; she was fast asleep in the bilges. The gentlest of currents kept my mooring line just less than taut between the canoe and a half-sunken snag in the middle of the bayou. Louisiana heat and swampland mosquitoes tried casually to annoy me, and casually I ignored them both.

There was a sudden thump on the canoe and I sat upright just as a slimy black something rose out of the muddy depths. It came swiftly until the bow of the canoe rested on it, and then more slowly. My end of the slender craft sank and a small cascade of blood-warm water rushed on, and down, my neck. Patty raised her head with a whimper; if she moved suddenly I knew the canoe would roll over and dump us into the bayou. "Don't move!" I gasped.

She turned puzzled young eyes on me, astonished to find herself looking downward. "Why, daddy?" she asked, and sat up. So the canoe did roll over and it did dump us into the bayou.

I came up strangling, hysterical revulsion numbing my feet and legs where they had plunged into the soft ooze at the bottom. "Patty!" I screamed hoarsely.

She popped up beside me, trod water while she knuckled her eyes. "I thought we wasn't allowed to swim in the bayou, daddy," she said.

I cast about me. Both banks presented gnarled roots buried in rich green swamp growth, and I knew that the mud there was deep and sticky and soft. I knew that that kind of mud clutches and smothers. I knew that wherever we could find a handhold we could also find cottonmouth moccasins. So I knew that we had to get into our canoe again, but fast!

Turning, I saw it, one end sunken, the other high in the air, one thwart fouled in the black tentacles of the thing that had risen under us. It was black and knotted and it dripped slime down on us, and for one freezing second I thought it was alive. It bobbed ever so slowly, sluggishly, in the disturbed water. It was like breathing. But it made no further passes at us. I told Patty to stay where she was and swam over to what I could reach of the canoe and tugged. The spur that held it came away rottenly and the canoe splashed down, gunwale first, and slowly righted itself half full of water. I heard a shriek of insane laughter from somewhere in the swamp but paid no attention. I could attend to that later.

We clung to the gunwales while I tried to think of a way out. Patty kept looking up and down the bayou as if she thought she hadn't enough eyes. "What are you looking for, Patty?"

"Alligators," she said.

Yeah, I mused, that's a thought. We've got to get out of here! I felt as if I were being watched and looked quickly over my shoulder. Before my eyes could focus on it, something ducked behind a bush on the bank. The bush waved its fronds at me in the still air. I looked back at Patty—

"Patty! Look out!"

The twisted black thing that had upset us was coming down, moving faster as it came, and as I shrieked my warning its tangled mass came down on the child. She yelped and went under, fighting the slippery fingers.

I lunged toward her. "Patty!" I screamed. "Pat—"

The bayou bubbled where she had been. I dived,