

THE BACK ALLEY WEBZINE

Volume III, Number 2

April, 2010

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NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN IN THE BACK ALLEY!

It's been a big year at The Back Alley Webzine. Things began just before we went to press--virtually, that is--with the last issue.

As I've mentioned before, it has been our goal at The Back Alley from our very first issue to become a Mystery Writers of America Approved Publisher. I've applied twice for that status, and both times I've received the same response: try again next year.

Back in July, I forwarded the MWA Affidavit required of all publishers, stating the basic requirements: we don't accept any money from authors, we pay the MWA short story minimum for stories, yadda yadda yadda.

By November I hadn't heard anything, so I contacted Margery Flax at MWA to check on things. Apparently, the application and affidavit had been misplaced. So, I forwarded it again, and almost instantly I heard back from Lee Goldberg, the current Approved Publishers chairman.

The verdict? Thumbs down. The reason? The MWA Approved Publishers' List was intended only for book publishers, not for periodicals. This, of course, was completely contrary to everything I had been told by R.T. Lawton, the previous Publishers Committee Chair, who--among other things--had not only told me twice before to keep applying, but also indicated that The Back Alley would be welcomed once it met the criterion for having been in business for the minimum two years. I wrote back to Lee (with whom, I should point out at the very beginning, I have become friendly since then), basically calling his attention to the fact that Dell Periodicals' *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine* and *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* had been included ever since the Approved Publisher's List had been created. I think I used the word 'bullshit' once or twice.

I also pointed out that, up to that point, MWA had been very encouraging in its correspondence with me, especially since I had stated in an earlier Editor's Note that I considered its criteria for Approved Publisher status to 'suck balls' (if I recall the terminology correctly).

To his credit (and Lee deserves a lot of credit here), he agreed that there seemed to be contradictions, and he also noted that *The Strand* (another periodical) had also been included, meaning that a precedent had been set.

Lee agreed to bring it before the MWA Board, and to suggest forming a new listing called MWA Approved Periodicals, which would include *AHMM* and *EQMM*, *The Strand*, and *The Back Alley Webzine*.

Long story short (yeah, I know. Too late.), The MWA Board approved the motion, and *The Back Alley Webzine* become the very first all electronic medium to be listed on either the MWA Approved Publishers' list or the new MWA Approved Periodicals list.

The impact? Now, any story published in *The Back Alley* will be eligible for the MWA Edgar Allan Poe Award. Also, any author published in *The Back Alley* can apply that credit toward meeting the criteria to be an Active Member of MWA. Finally--and I think this is the most important benefit--inclusion in the Approved Periodicals list means that MWA has finally recognized the power and impact of the electronic publishing medium. Can an Edgar Awards category for Best Electronic Book be far behind?

Well, in all likelihood, yes. On the other hand, great changes tend to come in baby steps, and in approving *The Back Alley*, MWA just took a doozy. More to come!

* * * * *

In our previous issue, which featured an entirely female lineup of hardboiled and noir fiction authors, we included a story entitled *The Right To Remain Silent*, by Maryland author Debbi Mack. I am extremely pleased and proud to report that Debbi's story was nominated for the Short Mystery Fiction Society's Derringer Award, in the Short Story Category. The awards will be presented around the first of May, 2010, and we are extremely hopeful that Debbi will win. In any case, Debbi's nomination means that *The Back Alley Webzine* has had at least one story nominated for the Derringer Award in each year since it the webzine went active in 2007. We've also won two of them to date, so we must be doing something right.

As I've said all along, *The Back Alley Webzine* publishes the very best in hardboiled and noir fiction. I think, after looking over the offerings in this current issue, you'll be in absolute agreement!

Rick Helms - Editor

LINEUP FOR VOLUME III, NUMBER 2



What can you say about **STEPHEN D. ROGERS** that hasn't already been written in a dozen other major mystery zines? One of the most prolific mystery authors in the country, Stephen has been published in *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, *Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine*, *Mouth Full of Bullets*, *Mysterical-E*, and *Plots With Guns*. He also has a new anthology of short stories out, entitled *Shot To Death*. He is a Derringer Award winner (2006), and has been nominated for the Derringer Award no less than six times, including a nomination this year for his short story *Gutterball*. This is Stephen's second appearance in *The Back Alley*, and we hope to see him here many more times.



Manhattan-based author **ANGELA ZEMAN** is the author of an extensive series of stories featuring Mrs. Risk, which includes her most recent novel, *The Witch and the Borscht Pearl* (Pendulum Press). She has been published numerous times in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, and has had stories included in anthologies such as *Adirondack Mysteries* (North Country Books), *On A Raven's Wing* (edited by our good friend, the late Stuart Kaminsky), *A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime* (edited by Jeffery Deaver), *Show Business is Murder* (also edited by Mr. Kaminsky), and most recently in *The Prosecution Rests*, an MWA anthology edited by Linda Fairstein.



THOMAS LARSEN lives in Lambertville, New Jersey. He has worked as a freelance author for over ten years, with publishing credits in *Newsday*, *New Millennium Writings*, the *Antietam Review*, and *Puerto del Sol*. His short story *Lids* was included in *Best American Mystery Stories-2004*. This fall, his first novel (*Flawed*) is scheduled to be published by BeWrite Books. We're not completely sure whether his story is hardboiled or noir, but we do know that it was *tres cool*, so we decided to include it in this issue. It's great having Editor's Prerogative.



NIKKI DOLSON Nikki Dolson is a fiction major at Columbia College Chicago. Her fiction has appeared in *Spine tingler Magazine*, *Story Week Reader*, *StoryGlossia #38*, and the *Red Rock Review*. She has been the Derringer Awards Coordinator for the Short Mystery Fiction Society.



RICHARD HELMS appears for only the second time—and only the first under his own name—in *The Back Alley Webzine*, which he also edits and publishes. He probably wouldn't be in this issue, except that another author got a little sluggish with sending in the publishing contract. A three-time Shamus Award nominee and two-time Derringer Award winner (the only author ever to win two Derringer Awards in the same year-2008), Helms recently had his tenth novel, and the first book in his new Judd Wheeler series (*Six Mile Creek*), published by Five Star/Cengage. The sequel, *Thunder Moon*, will be published by Five Star in June 2011. In practically every other imaginable way, he is a thoroughly unremarkable individual.



FRANK NORRIS holds a very special place in the history of noir fiction. Despite his relative lack of renown today, around the turn of the twentieth century he was setting the world on fire with his naturalistic, dark stories of doomed people.

His greatest contribution, however, came with the first volume of his projected three-volume epic tracing the role of wheat in society, *The Octopus*. Sadly, his trilogy was left unfinished when he died of complications from appendix surgery in 1901.

Continuing in this issue, we present Part Six of *McTeague*.

AMBER

by

Stephen D. Rogers

*What can you say about **STEPHEN D. ROGERS** that hasn't already been written in a dozen other major mystery zines? One of the most prolific mystery authors in the country, Stephen has been published in **Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Futures Mystery Anthology Magazine, Mouth Full of Bullets, Mystical-E, and Plots With Guns**. He also has a new anthology of short stories out, entitled **Shot To Death**. He is a Derringer Award winner (2006), and has been nominated for the Derringer Award no less than six times, including a nomination this year for his short story **Gutterball**. This is Stephen's second appearance in **The Back Alley**, and we hope to see him here many more times.*

Amber was not the type of girl you brought home to meet your mother, not unless your mother ran a bordello that catered to clients who didn't appear respectable enough to approach a whore on the street. It had taken me three hours to find her.

"Are you sure you understand the job?"

She blinked. "Sure."

"Repeat the instructions back to me." We'd been sitting in my office for almost half an hour now, going over the drill.

"I'm supposed to go to this bar--"

"What bar?"

"The Brown Shoe."

"The Oyster." The Brown Shoe? I'd never even heard of a bar called The Brown Shoe. "And then what?"

"I order a drink. You're giving me money for expenses." That part she got right. "You said you were fronting me."

"Don't worry. I'm paying for your booze. Focus on what you need to do. You go to a bar called the Oyster and you order a drink. Then what?"

"I drink it."

"And then?"

"I order another."

She was proud of herself. I could see it in how she raised her head, her eyes not clear but slightly more alert.

I pressed on. "You go to the Oyster. You order a drink or two. You find a man named Sherman Brown. What color is Sherman's hair?"

"Bald?"

"Red. His hair is red. He's about my height and my build and he has red hair. He'll probably be the only person in that bar with red hair. If he's not, he'll be the only one who introduces himself as Sherman or Sherm."

"I knew a guy named Ezekiel once."

Glancing at my watch, I decided there wasn't time to find a replacement for Amber. My client wanted results today so that he could clear the books before the quarter closed. A promotion was on the line. "Oyster. Drink. Sherman."

"I'm not stupid you know."

"I didn't say you were. I just want to make sure there's no confusion about this afternoon. I'd hate for you to lose your fee."

That sunk in. "You pay me afterwards, right? Not Sherman."

"Right. Once he leaves the room, I retrieve the camera and give you your money." I wondered how I was going to explain all this to my client if he ever requested details.

"Half now."

"Expenses now. Your fee when the job is completed to my satisfaction. That's why we're going over the details to make sure there are no complications."

"How do I know you're not going to stiff me?"

I handed her two sheets of paper. "Here are your copies of our contract and the release form. You can show them to your pimp. If I don't pay you, I'll be in breach of contract and he can legally break my legs."

"I don't have a pimp."

That was a little hard to believe. She wouldn't last a day on her own. "Who handles things for you?"

"My brother. He helps me and a bunch of other girls."

"If I don't pay, show the contract to your brother."

"I just might show it to him anyway. He's not stupid either."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see you landed such a plush deal. Not only that but you did it by yourself." I took a deep breath. "Can we go over this one more time?"

"When do I get the expense money?"

"As soon as we're done. What's the name of the bar?"

"The Oyster."

"What's the name of the man you're there to meet?"

"Sherman."

"What does he look like?"

"You. With red hair."

"Excellent." Since the last thing I wanted was to hone her to too fine a point, I skipped ahead. "And what happens after you meet him?"

"He buys me a drink."

"He might. And then what?"

"I make my moves." She wiggled or something.

"What is one of the things you say to Sherman?"

"I tell him I've been a bad girl and I need a big, strong man to give me a spanking."

"That's right." I paused. "Sherman likes his sex a little rough. At least he did. You said that's not a problem."

She grinned. "You wouldn't believe some of the things I've done for customers. Money's money."

"We all need to make a living."

"Damn straight."

Feeling all cozy from our mutual assessment of the world, I continued. "Where do you bring Sherman once the two of you leave the Oyster?"

"Back to the room."

"What room?"

"The Berkshire, across the street. Room two-twelve. That's the key on the corner of your desk. I tell him I crash there sometimes between flights."

We had decided she'd tell Sherman she was a flight attendant. It had been her first career choice. "And then what happens?"

"I sex him up and tell him he was so good that there's no charge."

I shook my head. "Don't mention money."

"Sure. Then you come in and pay me."

"The Berkshire doesn't have closets. I'll be in the room next door, listening through the wall. Just scream if you need me and I'll come running."

"Maybe I should charge you too. Some people get off on listening. There was this one time--"

"You're not charging Sherman. I'm paying you."

"And I get to keep the rest of the expense money."

"No, you return it to me." If she thought she could keep the change, she probably wouldn't buy a single drink and the gang at the Oyster would wonder why.

"I'm a big tipper you know. There might not be anything left after I order a few drinks."

"Make an effort to restrain yourself. If you can't find Sherman, what do you do?"

"I ask the bartender."

"What's his name?"

"Jimmy."

Paul worked the bar alone but he knew the score. Amber would be fine. "I think you're all set. Just remember the basics. Oyster. Sherman. Berkshire. Show him a good time and I'll pay you double your usual daily rate."

"Don't you worry about a thing. We done?"

"We're done."

"How about my expense money then?"

* * * * *

I dropped off Amber two blocks from the Oyster and found somewhere to park. I'd set up the camera earlier today and the rooms at the Berkshire were so small there was no chance of missing the action.

Sherman Brown was suing his ex-employer after being pinned to the ground by a shelving unit that fell off the wall. Sherman stated the accident left him impotent and the insurance company doctors couldn't prove it wasn't true.

I could. That is, Amber could. Once I showed Sherman the tape of their glorious afternoon together, I'd instruct him to withdraw his claim immediately. I'd even offer to dial the phone. My client wanted Sherman off the books by the end of business today.

I locked my car and darted through afternoon traffic.

The doctors couldn't prove Sherman was lying but everyone assumed he was. Sherman was simply that kind of guy, always looking for a free meal and the easy way out, never doing more than the absolute minimum required to get by and even then only producing a mediocre effort. Throw in a lawyer who smells an emotional distress windfall and the truth becomes an inconvenience best brushed aside.

I joined the thin pedestrian stream headed towards the Berkshire.

What Sherman and those like him failed to understand was that the buck always stopped somewhere. Somebody somewhere was footing the bill, a somebody who sooner or later finally decided that enough was enough and changed into boots built for stomping. Sherman was next in line to be squashed.

"Hey Peepers!"

I stopped and turned to see Manny standing in the doorway to an empty storefront.
"Manny. How's it hanging?"

He shrugged as he stepped forward. "Can't complain. You working?"

"I always have a thing or two on my plate. That's how I keep food appearing there."

"Yeah, that's right, even a slimeball private investigator has to eat."

I checked to make sure no one else was paying undue attention to the discussion. "It was nothing personal."

"Did I say it was personal? I never said it was personal. Since you asked, though, my kid died last month. What do you expect? Where's a guy like me going to get enough money for decent healthcare if no one will even hire him? Legally, I mean. But what can you do? At least it isn't personal."

"I'm sorry to hear about your daughter."

"Maria left me. That wasn't personal either." Manny laughed a laugh that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. "She's shackled up with my ex-boss. With him it was probably personal."

"You shouldn't have lied on your application."

"I'll remember that, mister employment agency. Thanks for the advice. From now on I'll always tell the truth." Manny affected a stage voice. "Excuse me, Mr. Ortega, but could you explain this reference to an arrest?" Manny slipped back into his characteristic accent. "Well you see, Sir, the poor girl I was in love with accused me of rape so that her dear father wouldn't beat her for allowing somebody else to draw water from a private well, if you know what I mean. It wasn't personal."

"I have to go now."

"Damned if the old man didn't beat her to death anyway." Manny licked his lips. "That's the funny part. In her own way, Rosita was only trying to protect the both of us but things just didn't work out as planned. Instead, everybody lost. Her. Me. Even her father."

I backed away from Manny, my eyes scanning for any sudden movement. "Good luck, Manny."

"Thanks. I guess we're even now. You took everything that still mattered in my life but then you gave me luck. You're a hell of a guy." Shaking his head, he retreated into the darkened doorway.

I hurried along, muscles tensed and my ears all but rotated to the back of my head. Manny's ex-boss had hired me to vet all the job applications on file because of a discrimination suit. Manny was one of five employees who had lied before they signed their name.

It wasn't personal. I was just doing my job when I ran the background checks, when I included the results in my report. I never even met Manny until the day his ex-boss hired me to be there when he let the five go. That's when I heard Manny's story, his plea for a second chance.

I ducked into the Berkshire. Manny was past history.

For that matter, the Berkshire was past history. The only way this sorry excuse could still be functioning was if the various inspectors had been invited to spend a complimentary hour in one of the rooms. Better yet, if the girls had taken them elsewhere.

The lobby was straight out of Slum Digest, my skin crawling at the mere thought of sitting on the sunken couch that sagged against the far wall, a gray blanket crumpled in a pile at one end. The clerk didn't even look up as I passed.

I ignored the antique elevator and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Seventeen steps including a landing. I could hold my breath that long.

The carpeting in the hall had been worn down to the floorboards in spots and there was no way to tell which of the paint colors visible on the walls was the original. On the other hand, at least I couldn't see any drunks sleeping it off. I'd rejected the two rooms on the third floor because I thought Sherman might have second thoughts about the Berkshire as the perfect romantic rendezvous if he had to step over bums on his way to the room.

Unfortunately, I didn't have any other options. The Berkshire and only the Berkshire fit the bill. I couldn't trust Amber to bring Sherman any farther than across the street from the bar where he drank, couldn't allow Sherman a moment to think with his head.

After taking a last look around, I opened the door to two-ten.

* * * * *

This room was a mirror image of the room next door. The bed was on the shared wall. Directly across from the bed, a rickety table bowed under the weight of a television. Past the television was the door to the bathroom: toilet, sink, and shower stall.

The Berkshire rented by the hour, the day, and the week. I pitied anyone who stayed here any longer. Truth be told, I pitied anyone who came through the front door.

I pressed my ear against the wall but didn't hear a thing.

It was early yet. I was sure that Amber would take her own sweet time, collecting as many free drinks as possible before going to work on Sherman. It was only natural. She was making the same money whether she hustled or polished a bar stool. Frankly, I didn't really care, just so long as she didn't forget why she was there.

I sat on the edge of the bed. Seeing Manny had unnerved me. I hadn't done anything wrong and yet that's how things turned out. He'd been a good worker until he was fired.

Perhaps I should have handled things differently. But how? I'd been hired to check facts and I'd checked them. Manny lied. It was a simple case of black and white.

For all I knew, maybe he was lying still. Maybe he was a serial rapist who'd only been caught once. Maybe if he ever had a daughter, he'd killed her himself. Even worse, maybe he was the old man who staked out a private well.

I'd completed the job I'd been hired to do. My client paid me on time and threw in a bonus for me to be there that day. I could sleep with a clear conscience.

Someone down the hall started sobbing.

And what about Sherman? Maybe he was impotent because of the accident but no one believed him because they didn't want to think such a thing was possible. If that could happen to him, it could happen to anybody. Cross your legs and call his bluff.

Well, if Sherman was innocent of insurance fraud, he had nothing to worry about. Amber would fail to arouse him and the tape would back him up. My client wouldn't be happy but I was being paid to uncover the truth, not manufacture it.

More than likely, however, Sherman was lying. Then he deserved whatever he got.

I shifted and the bed groaned.

I should have brought a book or something. There were no end tables, no bureau. Where was the Gideon Bible stored? Under the bed?

Standing, I fought the urge to pace.

I wanted to be able to hear Amber and Sherman approach. I wanted to be on top of the situation and wished again that I'd been able to fit a camera capable of transmitting into the space between the television and table so that I could see what was happening while it happened.

There was always the chance that Sherman was telling the truth. Once the scenario started to play out, he might forget his situation until it became obvious. Then a spanking game might turn ugly as shame and rage entered the mix. I wanted to be prepared for any eventuality.

I paused.

There they were now. I could hear them fumbling at the doorknob, could hear Amber making jokes and someone who had better be Sherman laughing. I was sunk if she brought back the wrong man because there wouldn't be time to reset the trap.

I heard the door slam into the wall and then their voices entered the room.

I pressed my ear against the wall.

The door closed.

Someone bounced on the bed.

Indistinct words.

Amber: Your muscles are even bigger than I imagined.

Sherman: The better to spank you with.

Amber: I have been a bad, bad girl.

A shuffle.

Laughter.

Amber cried out and then gasped.

Sherman: Wait. I need to drain the monster first.

Footsteps.

I heard the bathroom door open, the toilet seat squeak.

Amber, loudly: Don't be too long or when you come back I might be doing something bad. Then you'll have to punish me.

The sobbing down the hall stopped.

A door chain rattled.

Sherman ran across the room swearing.

The door opened and then slammed shut.

Amber grunted.

I heard a loud slap.

This wasn't any sex game.

I raced from my room and banged on the door of two-twelve. "Open up. This is security."

A shout. A scream. A thud.

After stepping back, I kicked the door and it flew open.

Sherman was lying on the floor with a knife sticking out of his bare chest. Amber stared at me with wide eyes, Sherman's wallet at her feet.

I dropped to my knees to check him for a pulse but I couldn't find one. I listened to his heart, his chest, his mouth. Nothing.

When I glanced up, Amber was gone.

I caught up with her in the lobby. "What the hell are you doing? Didn't you listen to a thing I said?"

She struggled against the hands pinning her. "I called my brother from the bar. He said to just grab all the cash and screw."

I let go of her.

Amber pulled away and crossed to the couch, laid down and curled up into a ball.

She'd blown off the job for whatever Sherman carried in his wallet. Plus the twenty I'd advanced her. And then she'd murdered him rather than wait another ten seconds for me to come through the door.

My client could clear the books but we'd never learn the truth.

The clerk asked if there was a problem.

I sighed. "Yes, there's a problem. Call the police and tell them there's a dead man in two-twelve. Tell them the killer is still here."

When Amber started to cry, I didn't have to heart to tell her I'd meant *me*.

END

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SKIP TRACE

by

Angela Zeman

*Manhattan-based author ANGELA ZEMAN is the author of an extensive series of stories featuring Mrs. Risk, which includes her most recent novel, **The Witch and the Borscht Pearl** (Pendulum Press). She has been published numerous times in **Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine**, and has had stories included in anthologies such as **Adirondack Mysteries** (North Country Books), **On A Raven's Wing** (edited by our good friend, the late Stuart Kaminsky), **A Hot and Sultry Night for Crime** (edited by Jeffery Deaver), **Show Business is Murder** (also edited by Mr. Kaminsky). and most recently in **The Prosecution Rests**, an MWA anthology edited by Linda Fairstein.*

Skip Rose strolled down a street in the warmth of a late-spring afternoon, a street he remembered, surprised to find himself almost enjoying it. Very surprised. His home as a child. He'd sworn decades ago to never return.

Plus, Skip wasn't a man who 'enjoyed' things.

Oddly, a recent trick of fate had caused a job to intersect with memory lane. After long fruitless waiting for the police to unravel the details of a woman's murder, her family, in desperate desire to know why their daughter had died, had hired Skip to find out. Like Skip, they lived in New Mexico. To them, Gary, Indiana, was a world away, too far to contemplate for themselves.

At first he'd said no. But the woman's grandfather pressed. Explained until Skip couldn't look at him. No need to 'solve' the murder, he'd insisted. "We must know only 'why'."

Trouble was, he understood a need to know 'why.' He owned a few of those himself. So...okay. A crackerjack prize. Long as he stayed focused on the job, he told himself.

That was yesterday. Today, curiosity pricked as he rolled in his soundless heel-toe walk through one of Gary's oldest bedroom communities. The too-narrow streets were still too narrow. Pot-holed, the curbs crumbled, the shabby buildings as undersized as he remembered. Nothing alive in sight, not even a stray cat. Forgotten and forsaken, it looked to Skip.

Gary'd been a filthy, over-crowded, dissatisfied mill-town in the sixties and seventies, when he'd lived here. Greedy for the distractions of vice. He remembered a mob—well, a small organized crew—squeezing the area lifeless.

He gazed upward, marveled at the blue skies. Brown sulphuric air from the steel mills used to blanket Gary, visible for miles. Ripped out a citizen's lungs. Not now, with the surgeon general cracking everybody's nuts. And the mills closed.

Home.

Whole blocks he didn't recognize, but a few things fit eerily with his memories. St. Jerome's RC Church, right there.

The mope heading up the local mob, uncle—whoever—had taken down a rival there in that exact gutter, the spot shadow-printed by St. Jerome's cross every afternoon. The rival, a steel mill supervisor with ambition, had lain panting, sprawled on his back, while his blood pooled in the gutter, then dripped down through the grill into the sewer. Though the fuzz had eventually, indifferently, removed the corpse, for two weeks his blood stained the gutter black, reminding everyone how Uncle Tupe rewarded independent thinking, until the next rainstorm scrubbed it away. That was the name: fat little Uncle Tupe, mean as a snake. You could get dead for just about nothin,' those days.

On the correct street, he looked up to check the number then suddenly ran out of oxygen. He stared at the tattered tar-paper shingles, still faintly green. Binny's Tit. Binny's Tit-For-Tat, really, but nobody used the whole name, it being more crib than bar back when. Beer in a bottle all you could get, cold if you were a regular. Nothing on tap, no hard stuff, no sodas. Young Binny behind the bar would toss you a bottle on your way upstairs if you held up a finger. From Skip's own growing up, the free-standing building seemed shrunken, but otherwise looked the same. He pushed on the wood-framed screen door. It screeched as the rust ground in the hinges.

The funk hit him hard. Urine, cigarette butts soaked in beer, and that indescribable mix of body odors of those who spend hours every day in places like this. A blowtorch couldn't clean the linoleum. While his eyes adjusted to the cavernous dark, he became ten again. Rage swept over him, a tidal wave. He shouldn't have come back. Should've refused the job. Blast his stupid and now irreversible foolishness. His word was all he owned in this world, and he'd given it and now had to deliver. For a moment he closed his eyes. Mother of God.

Ten years old.

Binny did everything then, what little that got done. Old Binny should've long ago been shelved in a home, but spent his days tied with soft rags to a chair in the corner, drooling over a peanut butter jar half-full of beer with a straw. His son would exchange the jar for a fresh one when he thought of it. Old Binny was the only one in the joint that got anything resembling a glass.

The stairs Skip remembered in the back of the room were now concealed behind a sagging, fake wall of panel-printed fiber-board, a home-made job. Skip stared at that wall so hard he should've been able to see through it.

The man behind the bar now was old, bald and yellow-skinned as a plucked stewing chicken. Thin sloped shoulders, fleshless arms, and forty pounds of belly beneath his stained golf shirt. Young Binny, Skip decided, shaken at the realization. The image of his father, but some years short of being tied to a chair.

Skip let the door smack shut and did his silent rolling walk towards Old Binny's table. He pulled back the chair facing the room, Old Binny's chair, and sat. Binny curled his lip as he studied his new customer.

"Beer, Binny," said Skip. No need to raise his voice to be heard across the empty room. "Cold," he added. Binny's eyes widened. He reached low, snagged a long-neck from a hidden

bed of crushed ice, and pitched it. Skip grabbed it out of the air as if he'd been fielding wet beer bottles all his life. Binny nodded, a silent compliment at the neat catch.

"We met?" Binny asked.

Skip looked around. "Where's the clientele? Religious holiday I forgot?"

Binny contemplatively moved a damp rag that used to be an undershirt across the bar's peeling veneer. "Can't place your face. What's the name? You know mine."

"Dad gone?" asked Skip.

Binny gave a black-lunged hack. "You knew Dad?" He gave a twisty crooked-neck nod. "Heart finally popped. In '73."

"Before or after Rosie was murdered?" Skip twisted the cap off the bottle, spraying a soft pssh of fresh beer into the funk.

"Rose—? Oh. Rosie. Right. Wan't murdered. Killed 'erself."

"Murdered."

"Whatever. Whores never live long."

"Whores never live at all." He took a long pull at the beer.

Binny's eyebrows raised with his shoulders. "Just whores."

"Still keep some upstairs?" Skip's gaze bored straight at Binny across the room while he took another long drink.

Binny breathed faster, bringing color into his cheeks and neck. "Nah. Times are different. Too much heat." He reached for an open pack of Marlboros, shook one loose and stuck it in his mouth. His other hand scrabbled for matches, as if moving independently.

"Old Binny went the same day as Rosie, as I remember it. In the afternoon."

Binny froze, cigarette still unlit. "You remember, why you askin' me?"

"Mind if I take a look?"

"Look at what?"

"Upstairs."

Binny dropped matches and cigarette. "Yeah I mind!"

Skip rose, headed for where he knew the stairs once began. Where he'd raced up and down most days as a child, running errands for the women penned upstairs like sheep. As he reached for an ill-fitting plywood door, Binny sidled from behind the bar and lurched forward. "Whoa. You can't just walk in here and—"

Skip turned to look at Binny, which stopped Binny in the middle of the room. "Why so nervous?"

Then he listened. Dead silent. Binny'd told the truth. Nothing live up there now. Maybe even the rats had bailed. But he'd bet something was upstairs. "Stolen goods?"

Binny let out a shrill screech. *Bingo*, thought Skip.

Binny scurried back around behind the bar, began to fumble down low on a hidden shelf.

“Binny!”

Binny’s head snapped up.

“Put your hands up on the bar where I can see them. That’s it. Now. I don’t want to hear any funny noises, like you cocking that .38 special you *used* to keep under there, or maybe something newer?”

Binny didn’t move, but stared bug-eyed at Skip.

Skip turned his attention again to the door. He hesitated. This had nothing to do with his case. *So it has nothing to do with me.*

He walked towards Binny, pulled out a square of paper, unfolded it, laid it on the bar still wet from Binny’s rag. “I’m hunting info on a different woman, not Rosie. Feather Whitecloud, she was called. Remember her? Gunshot here in...February 1973. Same year as—as your dad.”

Binny’s voice trembled. “Christ on a crutch, the same month.”

“Same as what?”

“That Rosie—and not an hour later, my dad’s heart give... Bad month to be on the planet, I guess. Wadn’t shot here, though.”

“Feather Whitecloud. Husband named Dave.”

“Got a picture? They all lied on their names, y’know.”

“Bin, two women and your dad, same month? Think.”

“I swear! Rose and my dad was enough!” He leaned away, narrowing his shoulders protectively. Ready for a blow, although Skip hadn’t moved.

“Her folks have a police report.”

“Lissen. If I lied to you, my guess is you’d kill me.”

“Bet on it.”

Bin shuddered. “So...so a typo on the report. Different crib, I bet. Who cares by now anyway?”

Skip studied the paper as its creases relaxed from the dampness of the bar top, thinking. Her family cared. “Who’s at the precinct from the neighborhood? Age around forty.” His age.

“Lessee...uh...uh...Marvin Lip—Lipwhatever, he’s about 40.” He stared down at the bar. “An’ one named, uh, Panzer, like the tank.” He raised his hands. “Best I know.”

Skip stared one last time at the back of the room. “Shocked you’re still alive, Bin.” He dropped a dollar bill on the bar, picked up his paper and slid it back into his pocket. He walked away.

Bin cleared his throat. “Day shift rolls in at seven, you want cops.”

As Skip pushed open the screen door without answering, Bin shouted at his back, “And beer’s gone up. More’n a dollar! Next time...” Bin’s voice trailed away. He shuddered and hunted for another smoke.

* * * * *

Skip thought hard on his walk to the precinct house. Each glance at his surroundings dragged him back into his old life, into memories he'd buried after a good deal of effort. From Binny's Tit to the precinct house was only a block downhill when he was a kid. It still was. So much, still the same.

"Panzer around?" He asked the desk officer.

The deskman was blonde and blunt featured, showing his Polish roots. Thick-necked and heavily muscled. He looked up from a stack of forms. "Whom shall I say is calling?" Skip nearly smiled. Gay lib had hit the Bible belt? Hope for humanity yet. At least in this precinct.

"Say Skip Rose, Officer—" he strained to read the name tag. "Derzhy."

"Dewey, Hon." His voice was disconcertingly basso, deepened even more by smoke and alcohol. "Uh, don't tell 'em I called you 'Hon', y'don't mind. I promised I wouldn't." He flicked one of a row of switches and growled a request for Detective Panzer. He flicked the switch back to 'off' without waiting for a reply.

Skip's eyebrows raised. Dewey noticed. "Think I don't know what I'm doing?"

A tall blonde woman in motorcycle boots, jeans, and a brown tweed blazer clattered down narrow wooden stairs that let out behind the front desk.

"Dewey, I was on the goddamned phone! I *hate* when you switch off before I can say *no!* What!"

Dewey calmly pointed his pen at Skip.

Her rich brown eyes narrowed. She examined his clipped black hair culminating in a widow's peak, top front teeth wedged like a small prow. Eyebrows like black gashes across skin as pale as bone, eyes a startling gold-flecked turquoise. Nose thick and a little crooked, his body not tall, but too thin. Neat black pants, not denim. Black rubber sole shoes, could probably carry him up walls, the tread so deep. Black tee tucked behind a dressy belt. Black coarse weave jacket, an odd thing, sort of Asian, with pockets and folds, not fancy, but complicated. Good to hide a shoulder holster.

She whipped back the edge of his jacket. Sure enough, an elastic holster, but empty. "Where's your weapon!"

Skip, overcome by a fast-blooming private pain, said absently, "In the car. Licensed. You Panzer?"

"We have business?" When he didn't speak or move, she wheeled to leave. She said, ill-humored, "Dewey, one more and you're on school crossings."

"Skip Rose," Skip blurted.

She peered at him over her shoulder. He admired the thick swatch of 24 karat hair pulled into a ponytail that swung with her movements. High cheekbones, heavy jaw. Big-boned and strong, this woman. Panzer. A tank, but a female tank. Suddenly an image slid into place, a sucker punch. "Patsy."

She stared. After a long moment she blinked. "Skip Rose?"

He nodded.

She breathed out, “Blessed Mary.”

He knew his smile was tight and defensive when it should’ve been happy.

“You’re *alive!*”

He stood there helplessly.

She commanded Dewey, “Tell Russo to finish my call, and log me out for the day.”

Dewey reached for another lever. “The *day!* Russo will *burn.*”

She hustled Skip out, stopping at the sidewalk. She jerked him around so they were face to face. “How’d you know I was here!”

Skip paused, searching for an explanation that would leave out the painful parts. As usual, words eluded him. He stared up into that face, glowing because he was here. He knew he’d let her down. He’d practiced letting people down for a lifetime.

She pulled him into a tight embrace. “I can’t believe it’s you. I can’t believe you’re here.” Her voice throbbed with emotion. He clung, trying to return the hug.

Just as abruptly, she released him. “C’mon. You’re not saying a word. We need a drink.”

“Where.”

She gave a glum laugh. “Oh, that got you talking? Binny’s seems appropriate.”

She pulled until he followed, and they climbed the hill.

Inside, Binny gave a start at seeing them, but said only, “Beers?”

“Like you have anything else,” snarled Panzer. “Cold.”

He tossed and they both caught the slick wet bottles neatly. A neighborhood quirk the Cubs should’ve taken advantage of, thought Skip.

“So, okay. You’re alive,” said Patsy, after her first swallow. She’d calmed down.

She’s had time to think.

“Why didn’t you contact me before now?”

Skip tried to take another drink, but couldn’t swallow. “Ma dropped me at a Catholic orphanage in New Mexico the—couple days before. Didn’t occur to me anyone thought I was dead. Not much occurs to a ten year old.” *Just the basics*, he thought. *Like, that my mom didn’t want me anymore.*

“But you never came back!” Hurt swirled in her enormous eyes.

“To what? I mean—” He wanted to say he knew Patsy loved him, but the words stuck.

“You swore undying love for me, guy.”

“Ten year old passion.” He grimaced, despising himself for belittling their history.

“You didn’t come to see me even now, did you. I’m an accident.”

Always quick. “I’m a PI. On a job. It sort of collided with...with ah—”

“With your past. So sometime or other, you found out your mom died, yes?”

He looked away. The nuns had told him, tired of him hanging around the front gate, waiting, ready with his forgiveness. So *sure* she’d miss him, come back to say she was sorry, she’d had too much to drink, a mistake. They’d told him she was dead in exasperation, to make him quit hoping. It worked.

Patsy looked off into the distance. Sighed. “So why are you here? Just tell me.”

“February, the same month my ma—,” he flicked a glance over at Binny. “Same month Old Binny died...a woman was shot to death, a Feather Whitecloud, married to Dave something.”

“Gunshot?”

“Supposedly here, in the Tit.”

Patsy raised her voice. “Binny—”

“Already asked. Bin says it didn’t happen here, some mistake in paperwork. I have a copy of the police report with me.”

Patsy held out a palm. He pulled the paper from his pocket. She looked at it, squinting at places where the print had faded. “Well, that’s what it says. Maybe Binny’s right, somebody recorded an error.” She raised her shoulders. “I can check. Meet you here around seven, I’ll give you what I find.”

They left.

* * * * *

In half an hour, Skip was at the Bureau of Records, thumbing his way through tattered paper files in boxes, records not yet entered into the new computer system. The clerk explained that they were going backward from the present. Hadn’t hit the seventies yet.

He burrowed. Purchase or sale of property, utility bills, marriage, birth or death certificates.

While digging, one corner of his mind mulled over Jake Ransom, the man who’d hired him. One of the People, he’d called himself. Meaning, Skip knew from his life in the Four Corners, a Shoshone. Ransom had shown up one day in Fairville, New Mexico, a flyspeck on the map where Skip had landed some years ago.

The ancient Shoshone had approached him in the diner, appearing out of nowhere. Somehow, this apparition knew who Skip was and what he did for a living, but Skip didn’t ask how. Discretion was a requirement for citizenship in the ironically named Fairville.

She’d left the rez in 1959, age sixteen, he said. She’d met a man named Dave and announced she would travel to Gary, Indiana, to be his wife. Mr. Ransom felt certain from his knowledge of Feather’s unshakeable honor, she would have married the man or come back. And she had not come back. And then she had died. At the place of the address printed on an old, much-worn paper Ransom had held out to Skip.

A daughter of the People, Feather Whitecloud ‘of’ the Snake clan and ‘for’ the Eagle clan. Meaning her maternal and paternal clans, respectively. No photograph, but he’d described her as having mixed blood in her ancestry, therefore her skin was not as dark as most Shoshone, and she’d grown up taller and slimmer. He had extended his old, sun-withered hand, showing his

pale fleshless palm to demonstrate her skin color, and had stood to exhibit to Skip how tall she'd been in comparison.

In thirty years no police had clarified many unanswered questions and, in the tribe's opinion, never would. Now her mother was ill. Many of the People were aging, dying. Soon, all who remembered Feather as a girl would be dead. Something had to be done. They wanted—needed—to know why their daughter had had to die.

“She must not vanish from our hearts. We need the peace of understanding to complete our clan-memory of her.” And, although as her grandfather, Jake Ransom felt the responsibility heavy upon himself, he was very old. He'd decided to appeal to Skip.

* * * * *

Skip eventually found a marriage license filed for a Daven Rossinsky and Feather Whitecloud. Daven, he noticed. Mr. Ransom's Dave. *So they had married. The grandfather was right*, he thought, and wondered just exactly what 'unshakeable honor' meant. He moved to death certificates, and found hers easily. But no matter where he searched, nothing appeared about the husband. Alive or dead, Rossinsky seemed to have left Gary, Indiana.

He drove his rental car to the library, settled in front of a computer and typed in a public information search for Daven Rossinsky, limiting himself to Indiana. It bombed.

On a hunch, he asked for a search of Illinois, since Gary was basically parked on the Illinois border. A Daven Rossinsky had owned a house in Evanston, a town near Chicago. He'd moved twice after that, staying in the general Chicago area. Mr. Rossinsky was not an adventurous guy.

The last address was a tiny berg called Oakland. South of Evanston, not far. He searched for a phone number, utilities. Nothing. No phone?

Skip considered whether he should still search other states. The guy had hung out in the Gary/Chicago area most of his life. He could still be in Oakland. If this was his Daven Rossinsky. How many could there be?

It was only two pm. According to his map, Oakland would be only an hour's drive, depending on traffic.

He easily located Daven Rossinsky's address in Oakland—a modest seven story condo. The manager there directed Skip to another address in Oakland. A place where no one had private phones.

Minutes later, Skip found Daven Rossinsky. Feather's husband. Daven, Skip concluded, had either lived too well or too hard. He was sixty eight. An oxygen bottle stood ready on a stand in a corner, its rubber hose attached to a face mask—a still life tribute to emphysema. Daven, in plaid shorts and a yellow tee shirt, sat in a grey bicycle-wheeled wheel chair, although from the way he twitched and jiggled his stick-thin legs, he obviously still had some ability to use them.

“Exertion stresses his lungs, Mr. Rose,” Miss Caroline had explained as she led him down the hall. “And his arthritis acts up. Also, his arteries have hardened something fierce, so he might drift off. Just a warning. Give him a minute, he comes back.”

“Back?”

“To reality. He thinks he’s a character in those gangster movies he loves to watch. Oh, he loves his gangster movies!” In the next moment she peeked into a room off the hallway. “Mr. Rossinsky? You have a visitor, dear!”

And Skip found himself face to face with Daven Rossinsky, who sat clutching a mug of lukewarm tea and a half-eaten cookie to his bony chest. Miss Caroline bustled away and returned holding a cup of tea and a cookie that looked like oatmeal, placing it all on a saucer on a chest of drawers within reach. Skip shook his head. She left it anyway.

Skip noted that Daven didn’t mind his presence. Daven sank yellowed too-perfect teeth into the cookie and sighed in bliss. Skip winced. For a man who loved cookies, the skin that draped Daven’s bones looked alarmingly empty of flesh. His bald, brown-spotted head had shrunk to a skull, and his eyes had kept only a suggestion of blue.

Daven’s room was roomy and private, painted in saccharin pastels. Despite its obvious cleanliness, his room smelled of old man, unflushed toilet, and earlier meals.

Skip cleared his mind. “Mr. Rossinsky.”

“Yeah?” He didn’t look at Skip, his whole attention focused on the cookie.

“You had a wife. Pretty Indian girl named Feather. Remember Feather?”

Daven grimaced at him slyly, his lips stretching open on one side of his mouth. The masticated cookie was still unswallowed. Skip glanced away in revulsion.

Daven asked, mouth loaded, “Who’re you?”

“Nobody to worry about.”

“Nobody,” repeated Daven. He nodded in agreement, then swallowed.

“You remember Feather?”

Daven shrugged. “A cutie.” More cookie.

“You married her. Why?”

“Couldn’t get her in the sack, otherwise. Too—straight arrow.” He laughed, mouth wide, loving his own joke. “Indian, get it?”

“Divorce?”

Silence. Daven gulped down the last of his cookie. “*Carooooowline!* More cookies, damnit!”

“Did she die, Daven? How’d she die?”

Daven suddenly focused on Skip, eyes narrowed. “Morrie send you?”

“Who’s Morrie?”

“Greatest man in the world,” said Daven. “Morrie Jersey. I was his top gun.”

Skip sat back. Daven had evidently disconnected. He waited, following Miss Caroline’s orders, who evidently had no intention of bringing Daven another cookie. His eyes wandered to the window. He glimpsed flashes of blue, a lake, not far away, between tree trunks.

“So, what’d you do for Morrie?” asked Skip, deciding to play Daven’s game until he returned to the present.

Daven perked up. “Never got nailed, not for anything! Not many can say that, my job. Kills people.” He began to giggle. “My job kills people, get it? Never nailed?”

Skip shook his head. “Hey, Dave.”

Daven looked Skip lucidly in the eyes. “Yeah?”

“Feather.”

“Yeah?”

“Did you love her?”

“Why?”

Skip sighed, then gestured towards his uneaten cookie. Daven snatched it and began devouring it. Suddenly he stopped chewing and said eagerly, spraying cookie crumbs, “Cigarettes?”

After an incredulous glance at the oxygen tank, Skip shook his head no.

Daven flapped a hand at Skip, dismissing him.

* * * * *

Skip flagged down Miss Caroline in the hall. “Does he get any other visitors?”

She eyed him shrewdly. “He went off about Morrie Jersey, didn’t he. And said he used to kill people?”

Skip shrugged.

Miss Caroline’s lips puckered. “Anyway...only one friend, till you showed up. Father Frank. They were neighbors. He comes once a week or so.”

“I’m no friend. Only looking for information about his deceased wife. He ever mention her? A woman named Feather?”

“Ooooh, I’d remember a wife named Feather!”

Skip gave her his card, circled his cell phone number on it, handed it to her. “If he says anything about her, call me? I’m not here to make trouble, her family would just like to put her memory to rest.”

“Well...”

Skip saw what was needed. He pushed his lips into a smile, patted her hand. “Her name was Feather,” he repeated. “You’re an angel. Thanks.”

She beamed and tucked the card into a pocket.

Smiles work but money costs less.

He headed back to the condos.

* * * * *

Father Frank Passaic pulled Skip inside and led him through sliding glass doors to the ledge which served his apartment as a terrace. Soon they flanked a glass table, each teetering on the bowed legs of a white molded plastic chair. Only a rusted railing kept them from plummeting to the flowers and shrubbery seven floors below. The fragility of railing and chair worried Skip but he forced himself to sprawl, and made his face take on an expression of riveted interest. A portrait of someone with hours to spend listening to an old man's stories. He sipped the cold beer fetched for him. Father Frank didn't drink—"today," he added with a chuckle, a drunk's jibe revealing AA affiliation. He chain-smoked, flicking ashes and live butts over the railing. Skip imagined the garden below stunted and scorched from a steady rain of smoldering butts.

Father Frank was in his seventies, a tall gaunt man with leathery raddled skin. Skip wasn't surprised when the Father began unreeling his story to him, a total stranger. Long time AA alcoholics lose discretion after relating their stories at hundreds of meetings. One more telling makes no difference.

At the story's ignoble end, Skip asked him about Rossinsky.

Frank replied through exhaled smoke, "You know he was an enforcer?"

"Nurse said that came from the movies, and lack of oxygen to his brain."

Frank stared at him.

"Delusions," added Skip.

Frank slowly shook his head, dropping his eyes to the garden below. "Nope. Morrie Jersey was a hood, East Chicago. Morris Zherzinsky. Dave ran off from an orphanage, least that's what he says. Said Jersey took him off the streets, got to be a real father-son thing. Dave grew up to be the most trusted guy in Morrie's mob. Not that that's saying much."

Skip frowned, digging through those old memories again. *Morris Jersey. East Chicago?*

"You and Dave friends a long time?"

Father Frank shrugged. "I been here...since '78. Diocese retired me." He grimaced. "Firmly retired, you could say. Installed here instead of a retirement home. They got their reasons."

Skip patiently pulled his attention back to Daven. "And you met Dave when?"

"Dave?" As if they hadn't mentioned him before. "He moved in right after me. Riddled with bullets. No kidding." Short laugh. "Like a gangster in Miss Caroline's movies."

"Gunshot wounds?"

"Holed up to give himself time to recover. Only he didn't. Too much damage."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Never asked."

Skip considered Father Frank. A man of God, life dedicated to serve the lambs, his Father's flock. Too self-involved to inquire about wounds suffered by a man who seemed to be his only friend.

"Ever talk about his past?"

"All the time."

"His wife, Feather?"

Frank tried to laugh, inciting a cough that wracked him hard. He clung to the railing, which shook alarmingly, flakes of rusted iron dislodged by the tremors. Skip wondered whether he should pull them both back inside to safety, but then the cough morphed into a controlled choking.

He lit another cigarette. "Said he never met anyone like her. She had 'honor.' That's what he called it. 'Honor.' "

"Meaning what?"

Frank dragged deeply on the current cigarette. "Didn't ask."

Skip shook his head in annoyance. "You two take an interest in each other at all? Or you just take turns talking out loud?"

Frank gazed down over the railing again. "Too many ghosts. Too many debts, and nothin' we could fix." He rubbed his nicotine-stained lips. "So yeah, neither of us wants to hear, but we talk. Hell is here and now, guys like us."

Skip stood up, mouth twisted.

"Okay, we're soulless bastards." Frank glanced up at him, eyes dull. "But we know it."

Skip let himself out. *What do I know? My mother gave me away...* He recognized his awful similarity to Frank and Daven. *'Nothin' we can fix. Hell is here and now for guys like us.'*

* * * * *

He drove too fast back to Gary. He glanced at his watch. Not quite five, library was still open. He swung north.

Settled in again in front of the computer at the library, he typed in Morris—then froze over the spelling of the last name. Google picked it up third try. Morris Zherzinsky aka Morrie Jersey.

He scrolled articles pulled from the Chicago Times, magazines, and a website dedicated to Chicago mob history. He limited the search to the 50's through the 70's, since Feather had died in '73. Not knowing if he'd find a tie-in, he doggedly read everything. Some of the website articles made him shudder, the sycophantic descriptions of the mob, as if ruthlessness, gore, and greed were admirable manly traits. Morris had been a busy guy, flashy and often in the news. Keeping to chronological order as he read, Skip noticed a trail of growing complacency. The more Morris got away with things, the more careless he grew. And finally, the grand shootout

with the Chicago police aided by the FBI. Morris and some of his lieutenants had been killed, some indicted and convicted, and a few disappeared. Like Daven Rossinsky.

He leaned back in his chair. Clearly Daven had worked for Morris, but must not have fallen into the trap of complacency with him. While Morris and many of his lieutenants became media stars, Daven avoided publicity. Maybe Daven told the truth about his history. He certainly hadn't been captured in the final bloodbath. Skip executed a different search and found no indictments, no outstanding warrants for Daven Rossinsky.

Suddenly the date of the final showdown leaped to his attention. The summer of 1978. Exactly when Daven had limped into Oakland with multiple bullet wounds. Going at the numbers a different way, Skip found that although Morrie Jersey's career could be traced back to 1964, he'd become a focus of police action beginning in 1972. And in 1973 Feather had died.

Had Feather become a threat to Morris? To Daven, her husband? *Unshakeable honor. What did that mean?*

In his car, Skip dialed on his cell the phone number given to him by Jake Ransom. A man answered. "Yes?"

"Mr. Ransom?" asked Skip, confused.

"This is Elliot Spotted Horse. You calling Elliot's Drugs and Sundries?"

"Um, Jake Ransom gave me this number—"

"That's probably right. Jake uses my number if it's important. Is this Skip?"

Startled, Skip said, "Yeah."

"I'll find him and have him call you back. He doesn't have a phone of his own."

"Thanks. But just tell him I have more questions, would you? Don't let him get excited. I haven't finished the job."

"Gotcha." Click.

Skip slid back behind the wheel of the rental car.

* * * * *

By the time he pushed open the door to the Tit, he felt tired all the way to his bones. Just inside the room he paused, wondering what his problem was. Normally nothing could wear him down to this. The room swirled with smells and noise. Bodies filled the tables and stools, with a few hanging two deep waiting for a place to land. Young Binny—Skip caught himself thinking the name and grimaced. Old Binny now. Binny was hustling, striding between the bar and the standup refrigerator at a speed Skip would never have believed possible.

"Skip Rose!" A sharp male voice pierced the din. Faces turned Skip's way.

An arm from the back waved, and Skip pushed through, ignoring curious looks. But when he saw who'd shouted, his heart banged to a stop. "Boland." He didn't even know if he'd spoken the name aloud.

Dark hair had been replaced by white, the trim waist and bulky shoulders had reversed conditions. But the sapphire eyes seemed untouched by time or burdens, and Skip, when he looked, saw bottomless pools of compassion. Forgotten until now.

Although still big enough to scoop up Skip bodily, Boland only grabbed Skip's right hand with both of his and pumped. Skip let him. Behind Boland, Panzer stood, eyes glittering. Whether from anger or sorrow, Skip was beyond knowing. Too many emotions crowded in on him as suddenly a whole sheaf of those snapshots from the past sharpened into focus. He'd remembered both Binnys, but not Boland. Not Patsy. *What was wrong with him that he'd done that?*

Sargeant Boland, GPD, had adored Rosie and Skip. He'd mentioned adoption once, shyly, but Skip had bolted. Boland had had to entice him back with a joke. Skip never could handle deep emotions. *Even back then*, thought Skip.

Boland had done what he could to make things easier for both mother and boy. A task impossible even for him, under the conditions of life then.

What conditions! Skip froze between present and past in Boland's grasp. Boland himself couldn't seem to let go. And then he did.

Skip let his arm drop limply. For the third time that day he forced an upward curve upon his mouth, despising his inadequacies.

Boland spoke, his voice gruff. "Panzer says you're here on a case?"

Skip could only nod. Patsy edged forward. "He's looking into the death of a Feather Rossinsky," she said.

Skip stared at Patsy. "I never mentioned her last name. I just found that out myself."

Patsy darted a look at Boland. "The name was in the file."

"So there's more than the form I had?"

Boland said, "Get a beer, Skip. Tell us your life story." Boland's eyes reminded Skip of the lake in Oakland. Clear blue. Brimming with understanding. He stopped looking at them.

"Sure."

Patsy roused the occupants to vacate Old Binny's table and they sat.

Desperate to avoid discussing history, Skip came immediately to the point. "What else did you learn?"

"Feather had a child," blurted Patsy.

Skip drew back. "Her folks know?"

Patsy's eyebrows raised. "They didn't mention it?"

Boland twisted off the cap of his beer and swallowed deep. Skip couldn't think, too distracted by half-memories and newly resurrected pain. A child?

"Kid dead, too?" he finally asked.

Suddenly Binny loomed at his shoulder. "Pay up. Nobody on the arm, even you, tough guy."

Skip stared at Binny. "Name's Skip. Skip Rose."

Binny's face twisted in shock. "Wha—by God. The whore Rosie's little bastard?"

Skip didn't respond.

“ ‘Aa-at’s not what I meant to say,” squeaked Binny, palms up. “I uh, meant, the whore Rosie’s little boy.”

“Wanna talk over old times, Bin? Like how you made me scrub urinals to buy my mother’s lunch?”

“Hey. We all worked to get by. Little Skippy. If God don’t make miracles!” Binny grabbed up Skip’s left hand and folded it between his own dirt-creased clammy ones, his face betraying a sly disappointment that Skip not only allowed the touch, but let Binny keep holding the hand. “Your mom was a angel, that pretty gal. We all loved her.”

“Yeah, love. Twenty minutes per, and seventy-five percent to the house.” Skip’s stare held Binny captive.

Sweating despite the dank coolness of the room, Binny flung away Skip’s hand. He scrubbed his palms against his thighs. “So. Where’d you disappear to? Prayed on you at church, you know.”

“I bet.”

“Friggin’ odd. You and Rosie do a flit. Then she’s back. But then school let out and you din’t show. Next thing, bang, she’s—she...left us. We thought, well, you musta run off and her heart was set so hard on you—maybe she coun’t take you bein’ gone. No blame t’you,” he added hastily.

Skip’s face swelled and purpled with rage. Patsy let out a ragged squeal, then snatched a handful of Boland’s shirt to pull him back into his chair. “Let it happen,” she said. She turned to the rest of the room, which was frozen with tension. “Let it happen! He deserves this!”

Skip grabbed Binny by the neck and threw him to the ground. His fists pounded the bloated body like blunt hammers, the dull thuds loud in the silent room. Binny howled, “No, no!” He rolled to avoid the fists, only to receive blows to his face. Blood spurted from his nose, landing in a red lattice across the brown floor. Finally Bin curled up into a fetal position. Skip kicked at Binny’s kidneys twice, then backed away, panting. He blotted the perspiration from his eyes with a forearm.

Binny whinnied with terror. “I’m an old man, you’ll kill me!”

“I’d kill you even if you were young, you piss-stinking turd. You killed my mother. You killed those poor young girls, slaves, filling that cash register with their bodies. Dues to pay, Bin!”

“Jesus you growed strong. I don’t know ‘bout owin’ no dues, though—”

Skip’s short jab snapped Binny’s chin back hard, sweat, saliva, and blood splattering shoes of the nearby watchers. Binny went limp on the linoleum.

Suddenly Binny began a backwards crab-scramble towards the bar. Patsy sighed. “Can’t allow guns, Bin.” She stepped over and pop-punched him on the mouth without exerting herself.

Binny sprawled flat and stayed there.

Patsy sat back down at the table. She and Boland sucked at their beers as if nothing unusual had happened. Skip scanned the crowd, many of the cops still in uniform. Nobody seemed

inclined to move. Skip raised his eyebrows at Patsy, impressed by her evident power over her peers. She flashed him a sad smile that mysteriously enabled him to breathe easier.

Now able to meet Boland's eyes, Skip said, "I didn't run off."

"I know," said Boland.

Skip crouched by Binny and shook him until his eyes opened. "Sit up." Skip walked over and, reaching over the bar, snagged two fresh beers from the ice. He swung an empty chair around and straddled it. When Binny managed to sit up, Skip held out a bottle. "Feather Rossinsky."

Binny twisted off the cap, took a short swig. "Ow!" He fingered his teeth where Patsy had punched him. He dabbed at a cut on his chin, whimpering each time he touched himself.

"Bin."

Binny shuddered. "Feather, she hid out here. She, uh, had run off from her husband. He was a—a strange one. Like no feelings about anyone or anything except his boss."

"Morrie Jersey."

Bin nodded. "Morrie was East Chicago, but Dave made collection runs in this area for Morrie, pickups from Tupe. Anybody run across Feather, they clammed tight. If Dave'd found out she was hooking for a living, he'd a killed us for just knowing it. Jesus. 'Specially me. He'd a killed me for hiding her, even though she was kind of hiding in plain sight."

"I talked to Dave, Bin."

Binny jerked back. "You didn't!"

"He can't hurt anybody now." Skip sat still for a minute. "Why'd Feather run off?"

"She was—everybody *did* love her. I wasn't makin' nice... Way I heard it, when she found out what Dave did for a living, she ran."

"Why didn't she go home? She had a huge family. Why'd she—hide—here?"

For the first time Patsy spoke up. Tears shimmered unshed. "He was a raging paranoid. Wherever she was, anybody close to her would be killed, too. She knew it. She was a hero, Skip. She knew he'd find her eventually, so she stayed away from her family to keep them alive."

Skip gazed at her for a long minute. "Why do *you* know that?"

Boland and Patsy and Binny all looked at Skip. He blinked, disconcerted, around him at the silent room. What was wrong here? What...

"Tell me!" he demanded.

Bin shrugged. "He found her."

"And...?"

Nobody spoke.

Boland had tears rolling down one cheek. "She made a deal with him."

Skip stared at him.

“She had this—integrity. Wouldn’t let me marry her ‘cause she was already married, even though it was a farce. Wouldn’t even accept my help, ‘cause it mighta put *me* in danger. Except she let me be a friend to you. She knew you needed more than just her. You were her world.”

Skip felt the blood leave his face.

Patsy said, “She convinced Dave you knew nothing, not even his name. So he gave her time to stash you somewhere. Not with her folks. She worried Dave might change his mind later, hunt you down. Dangerous for both you and them. But where her family could watch over you from a distance. And where Rossinsky wouldn’t think to look for you. None of us knew where you were.”

Patsy swallowed hard, then continued. “He knew her word was gold. We all knew. That’s how she traded her life for yours.”

Boland said, “Bin let uh, Dave...wait for her here, in her room, until she got back.”

Bin, eyes huge, watched Skip nervously. “He gave me no choice, Skippie!”

Patsy continued. “Then she allowed Dave to shoot her. Have to hand it to the freak. One bullet. She didn’t suffer.”

When Skip didn’t move, Boland finished, “She was a loose end. Rossinsky never left loose ends.”

Skip’s cell phone began to ring. Automatically, he pulled it from his pocket, flipped it open, but didn’t speak. In the silent room, however, all could hear the old man’s voice. “Elliot says you have questions?”

Skip’s voice came out hoarsely. “Why now?”

“Aaahhh, you have solved it. Why now? Because all these years later, your wounds still bleed. Just watching over you has not been enough. Come home, grandson. We need you. And you need us.”

END

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RING CYCLE

by

Thomas Larsen

*THOMAS LARSEN lives in Lambertville, New Jersey. He has worked as a freelance author for over ten years, with publishing credits in **Newsday**, **New Millennium Writings**, the **Antietam Review**, and **Puerto del Sol**. His short story **Lids** was included in **Best American Mystery Stories-2004**. This fall, his first novel (**Flawed**) is scheduled to be published by **BeWrite Books**. We're not completely sure whether his story is hardboiled or noir, but we do know that it was tres cool, so we decided to include it in this issue. It's great having Editor's Prerogative.*

Lazlo Werner was thirteen when his family moved to America. They arrived in New York in the spring of 1949 and were settled in New Jersey by summer's end. He would never forget coming into the port of New York. From the deck of the ship the city skyline loomed solid and majestic. Lazlo felt his life change by the minute, for the better he could only hope. He worried that Americans would hold his name and accent against him and vowed to change both as soon as he was able. Lazlo wanted badly to be an American and thought his homeland tragically flawed for waging then losing both World Wars.

"Look Papa," he tugged his father's coat sleeve. "The woman is holding an ice cream cone."

He'd meant it to be funny. Everyone knew the Statue.

"That's a torch, son," his father missed the joke.

"... Like in Frankenstein?"

"That's right. To keep the monsters away."

Lazlo loved the Frankenstein story. His father's first edition of the Mary Shelly classic would someday rank as his prize possession. But on this, the first day of their new life, his father's words brought a chill of foreboding. It wasn't hard to guess where those monsters might come from.

"Lady Liberty, eh?" his father snorted. "Leave it to the French to make freedom a woman."

"She looks like your niece, Lillian," his mother stared intently.

"What are you saying? Lillian's only 18! That woman is much older."

"But look at her eyes! They have that same distant focus."

"Yes, you have a point. But no, the neck is all wrong for Lillian."

Lazlo saw something scary in the lady's eyes. His cousin Lillian's could melt him with a glance and he counted the minutes until he would see her. This one looked like she'd smote an army of Frankensteins.

“Papa, what’s that?” he pointed to an open barge piled high with trash.

“Garbage scow.”

“They dump their garbage in the ocean?”

His father shrugged and spat in the water. “Refuse in, refuse out.”

* * * * *

Lazlo didn’t lose the accent fast enough for some. One schoolmate in particular, Donald “Butch” Delaney took it as a personal affront. The older boy was quick with his fists and Lazlo soon had the lumps to prove it.

“Hey wiener, what did Hitler say when he heard you were born?”

“Don’t bodder me.”

“It’s no bodder. Come on, what’d he say?”

“Leave me alone.”

“Want me to tell you?”

“No.”

Delaney smiled maliciously. “Hotsie totsie, a brand new Nazi!” His Jimmy Durante, dead on the mark.

By fifteen Lazlo was as big as his nemesis and their lunch hour brawls were a playground event. The boys yelled for Butch to kick Kraut ass, but the girls were decidedly undecided. Despite the accent, Lazlo was handsome and the way he stood up to the bully was dumb, but heroic. At first it was Delaney who ended up on top, but one day Lazlo laid him out cold. As punishment the nuns kept him after school for two weeks straight. On the evening of the first day Delaney was waiting for him at the end of the schoolyard. When he shoved Lazlo against the fence the bully felt a knife at the point of his chin. After that the schoolyard wasn’t a problem for Lazlo.

* * * * *

Cousin Lillian had changed in her three years in Trenton. She was taller and prettier and Lazlo had to keep his eyes from wandering where they shouldn’t. Lillian lived with her parents and an older brother in a three room flat on Eden Street. Leon, the brother was a drunk and a hoodlum, but he’d heard about Lazlo and the Irish kid and they gave each other plenty of room. At first Lillian pretended not to know why Lazlo was always around, so one night on the roof he told her straight out.

“Love me? But Lazlo, you’re just a child,” she teased him in German. “You’re mother would think I was robbing the cradle.”

“This has nothing to do with my mother. When I’m finished school I intend to get a job and then I will ask you to marry me.”

“Marry? What makes you think I would marry you?”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” he answered her in English. “Do me this favor, Lillian. Don’t turn me down until the time comes.”

“But I’m five years older than you. When I’m thirty you’ll only be twenty-five.”

Lazlo seemed to consider this. “Well then, I could always take a mistress.”

“What a silly boy you are,” Lillian ran a hand up his leg. “No mistress could compare to me.”

Lazlo swooned as she gave him a squeeze.

* * * * *

He got a job running presses at Palmer Printing downtown, big pounding presses, Miehles and Heidlebergs. The pay was low but the huff of the feeder and thump of cylinders marked a cadence to his work that was missing from his life. He found he had a knack for machinery and could take the presses apart and put them back together without a single spring or screw left over. When parts broke or were hard to find Lazlo machined a replacement himself often to a higher tolerance. The men at the plant started calling him Doc and to his delight, the nickname stuck.

He was there six months when his mother died. Brain hemorrhage, out of the blue. Lazlo took it hard, struggled with drink for a while, but he was young and strong and the world drew him back in. Before long he was making enough money to get a place of his own. True to his word he asked Lillian to marry him.

“Oh Lazlo, I thought you’d forgotten.”

“I could never forget. I’ve waited for this moment since I was six years old.”

“Poor little Lazlo, in love with an older woman. Your mother would be spinning in her grave.”

“My mother thought you looked like the Statue of Liberty, something in your eyes. I think she always knew this would happen.”

“Do you think she’d approve?”

“She gave me these,” Lazlo took a tissue from his shirt pocket. Tucked inside were a pair of gold wedding rings.

“Oh Lazlo they’re lovely!” she took them in her hand. “Look there’s something stamped inside.”

“The first is from the goldsmith guild,” he held one to the light. “The last signifies 22 carats. I don’t know about the others.”

“Where did your mother get them?”

“From her parents. They were killed in the war.”

Lillian’s eyes glistened. She placed the rings back on the paper and folded Lazlo’s fingers around it.

“I will marry you Lazlo dear. On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You must promise never to take a mistress.”

“Agreed. I too, have a condition,” he slipped the rings back in his pocket. “From now on you must call me Doc.”

Doc Werner’s first arrest came in a pre dawn raid on his bother in law’s cigar store. Police broke down the back room door just as Leon was laying down a straight flush. It was a low stakes game, but the players were immigrants and for some in the department the wars still raged. At the station house they were photographed and fingerprinted, but the judge let them off with a small fine and long lecture.

“Not so bad,” Doc shrugged as they started home.

“For you, maybe,” Leon muttered. “Somebody owes me money.”

“Good luck trying to collect. The others had to pay a fine too.”

“There was over fifty dollars in that pot. Somebody owes me.”

Doc knew that Leon had a mean streak and he wasn’t surprised to see Willie Daunt a week later on crutches.

* * * * *

Trenton was a rough town in the 50’s, state capitol steeped in corruption and organized crime. But it was a real city with hotels and movie theaters and there was money to be made if you knew how to make it. Doc and Leon were ambitious enough. If you needed a car that couldn’t be traced or some muscle to keep a lid on things, the hineys were the men to see. Doc still worked at Palmer’s but the side money was better and the hours couldn’t be beat. Leon came up with a scheme where you contracted for home renovations then kept the sucker’s deposit without pounding a nail. He was a master at the runaround and Doc loved to listen to him work.

“I know Mr. Myers, but Eddie’s my drywall guy and he’s been laid up. ... Can’t do that. The union would shut me down in a heartbeat. ... I know it’s a lot of money but you can’t expect me to work without a deposit, ... Look, I swear to you on my father’s grave we’ll be there first thing Tuesday morning. ... I know I said that last week, but I can’t see into the future, Mr. Myers. Tuesday. You have my word on it.”

“I don’t know why you bother,” Doc shook his head. “I couldn’t stand to listen to them.”

“Whaddya mean? You see how they think. All their lives they’ve been at the bottom of the list. Convince them they can get to the top and they slip us another fifty.”

Doc had to laugh. “You gotta love the suburbs. These guys don’t even talk to each other. I got three jobs lined up on same block. All three of them think we’ll be there Thursday.”

“Top of the list,” Leon flicked his chin.

“But you. It’s like you’re twisting the knife, Leon.”

“Hey, you’re the one who baits the hook.”

“Yeah, but they’re too busy picturing their new addition to give me any grief.”

It was true. With his overalls and his tool box Doc was the picture of contractor competence. He’d arrive at their home, talk insulation and siding then walk off with a check for a grand or two. Like taking candy from a baby. The two kept it up until License and Inspections got a whiff then they turned into roofers and worked the next township.

Life was good for a while there.

* * * * *

“I hate him. He’s a liar and a thug.”

“Come on, Lil, he’s your brother. Nothing will happen.”

“Leon ruined my parents and now he’s ruining you!”

“How can you say that? You don’t like this? You want to go back to living in an apartment?”

“Yes, if that’s what it takes to keep him away from you. Get out while there’s still time, Lazlo. Please.”

“OK, soon. I promise.”

* * * * *

In the sixties everything changed. The capos came looking for greener pastures and the laissez faire went up in smoke. They didn’t just want in, they wanted it all, in Italian top to bottom. With money siphoned off the city began to crumble, plants closed or relocated, the railroad went bust and the whites started packing it in. Urban renewal made the bad thing worse. They tore down the hotels and movie theaters and made downtown a pedestrian mall. Death to retail but the junkies liked it fine. They pork barreled a brand new skyline but the buildings stood high and empty. A Holiday Inn opened by the state house with an underground parking lot and revolving restaurant. It shut down six months later, along with the minor league baseball team, the opera and two of three daily newspapers.

Palmer Printing went belly up a week before the president was shot. Doc took it stride. He caught on across the river at Bennett Brothers, but business dried up and they had to let him go. With unemployment and side jobs the Werners weren’t starving, but Doc could see the writing on the wall.

* * * * *

“So Leon, what’s up?”

“I gotta meet a guy at the diner. Jump in.”

“I don’t know, man. The kid’s been sick and Lillian has to work tomorrow.”

“Come on, it’ll take half an hour.”

It took less than that. Leon pulled in the lot and parked in back by a row of dumpsters. Five minutes later a dark colored Caddy rolled up alongside. Doc spotted at least one passenger, a black kid with a bushy head. Windows went down, bags were exchanged and the Caddy drove off into the night.

“Is this what I think it is,” Doc poked at the bag.

“Did I tell you? I had to sell the cigar store. Jimmy D offered me ten grand.”

“What are you talking about? The place is worth five times that.”

Leon gave him a look. “It was a one time offer.”

“So what, we’re dealing with spooks now?”

“Hey, I don’t like any more than you. What am I gonna do take my ten grand and retire to Florida?”

“This stuff is poison. You see what its doing to the city. Walk three blocks in any direction and you’re in the jungle.”

“Hey, the niggers want to kill themselves, who are we to stand in their way?”

“You can count me out on this one, Leon.”

“Suit yourself, partner.”

* * * * *

To help make ends meet Doc took a job at a box factory on the edge of town. Union Camp. He worked days one week and nights the next and the shifting routine was hard on his system. A machine called a corrugator ran the length of the plant feeding six presses that never shut down. The noise and the heat were unbearable. Morale was low, turnover high and safety was not a priority.

Doc hated everything about the place. Brick dust settling into lungs and gear teeth. Floors slick with grease, windows so grimy the light couldn’t penetrate. To reduce down time every safety in the plant had been bypassed. Injuries were frequent and severe. Doc’s clothes always smelled of sweat and his fingernails were rimmed in black. It was dirty work, unsuited for a man of his talents. He missed the beauty and precision of process printing and the thundering pulse of

his old Heidelberg. Here the stink of the corrugator drifted for blocks and driving in every morning his heart would sink.

And then it all began to crumble.

* * * * *

“Lazlo, come in here,” Lillian called from the kitchen. Doc struggled from the couch and joined her at the window. The girls were jumping rope in the yard. He searched out his daughter slouched on the swing.

“What’s wrong with her, Lil?”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t look right.”

As if sensing their concern the girls shouted for Ellie to join them. She slid from the swing and headed over but her movements were slow and awkward.

“I’m calling Greenwald,” Lillian snatched up the phone.

“It’s probably nothing,” Doc said just to say it. “A bug going around school.”

“She hasn’t been eating and she’s always trembling. Something’s wrong with her, I know it.”

The doctor took one look at Ellie and put her into the hospital. The Catholic one, St. Francis. Tests showed she had Huntington’s chorea, a nervous disorder marked by jerking and twitching, a rare virus with no known cure. Doctor Greenwald smiled grimly as he broke the news. Lillian sank to a chair while Doc felt the life drain right out of him.

* * * * *

“I’m her uncle, for Christ sake! What do you mean don’t call?” Doc could hear Leon’s phone rant from the living room.

“We don’t need your concern,” Lillian spoke in an angry whisper.

“Let me talk to Doc. Jesus, my own goddamn sister.”

“He’s not here. He doesn’t want to see you.”

“You’re wrong about me, Lil. I’ve been clean for a year. I just want to help.”

“Stay away, Leon.”

* * * * *

Lillian took a leave of absence to tend to Ellie while Doc struggled to pick up the slack. They were late with the mortgage two months running and the gas company threatened to cut them off.

“Fuck them,” Doc cranked up the thermostat.

“I’ll call tomorrow. Maybe I can buy some time,” Lillian slipped behind him and turned it back down. “Look at this way, Doc,” she forced a smile. “Things couldn’t get much worse.”

He looked at her with tired eyes. “I wish you hadn’t said that, Lil.”

But she had and things did. On a drizzly day at the end of November the Union Camp workers walked off the job.

* * * * *

“Hello?”

“It’s Lazlo. We need to talk.”

“Hey Doc, say how’s my little girl?”

“Not good, Leon. I won’t lie to you. I don’t think she’s going to make it.”

“What do the doctors say?”

“Doctors! They just lay on the bullshit. Listen, I’m in a pinch. You got something for me?”

“You know how it is. There’s always something shaking.”

* * * * *

A week before Christmas, 1969, Doc hijacked a truckload of liquor bound for Boston. His end was ten grand and a case of Bushmills, not enough to dig them out but it covered the bills while the strike stretched on. Ellie’s seizures were shorter and less pronounced. The doctors were encouraged, but Doc suspected she was just too weak to keep it up. On Christmas morning he carried her downstairs and held her in his lap while she opened her gifts. Her own phonograph, new records by the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, a paint by numbers kit and a leather purse with a fifty dollar bill inside. She played the records until Doc knew them by heart, but the paintings were beyond her and she’d howl in frustration as her brush flew off the page.

“Well, at least it isn’t brain surgery by numbers,” Doc flipped through the paintings, wincing at the wild slashes of color.

“I won’t ask you where you got the money, Lazlo.”

His face flushed with anger. “It’s Christmas, Lil. What am I supposed to do?”

“Keep Leon away from my baby,” her voice was flat and her eyes had that Statue of Liberty look. “He’ll charm her like he always charms you.”

* * * * *

On the night Ellie died, Doc was at the mall hauling furs through the roof of Lord and Taylor's. If he'd looked over he might have seen the hospital across the freeway, the dim light through the fourth floor window. But it was windy up there and he worked fast to keep from freezing. Thinking back he could recall no chill of recognition, no sudden flash of awareness, nothing to indicate that his one child had passed from this earth.

They buried her in the cemetery where his parents rested. He knew it was foolish, but Doc took comfort in knowing his mother was near. Lillian kept her composure at the funeral, buckling only when they lowered Ellie down. Lillian would live for twenty more years but she would never be the same. Every morning she went to Mass, slipping in late to avoid neighbors. She visited the cemetery once a week and she kept Ellie's room just how she left it.

In April the Union Camp plant closed down for good. Lillian got her old job back but by year's end the business was sold and the new owners phased out her position. Doc hired on as a feeder at print shop in Burlington, lifting and loading for half his old wages.

At night they watched TV in silence.

* * * * *

"You OK, Lil?"

"I'm just not hungry. You finish it, Lazlo."

"Come on honey. You gotta keep your strength up."

Lillian said nothing. She could stare into space for hours on end and the look scared him more than anything. More than the late night crying or the liquor on her breath, the phone calls to the psychic or the candles in Ellie's bedroom. He'd lost his daughter and he was losing his wife. All the worst things were coming down.

They sold the house and moved to an apartment out by the airport. Doc worked security at the cargo warehouse and in no time things were falling off trucks all over the city. Leon handled the wholesale end. To bypass the meatballs he worked directly with distributors, small time freelancers. Latinos, Russians. Russians! Doc marveled that such a thing could happen.

It wasn't the way to do business, but Leon had never let caution get in the way of commerce. Then one morning his car was found under the bridge with a riddled Leon stuffed in the trunk.

Doc placed a call to his cousin in Germany, packed up their dwindling possessions and booked two seats on the first flight east.

Refuse in, refuse out.

EAST BERLIN

He watched the wall come down on CNN, though you could see the crowds from their apartment window, the young and the brainless clogging the streets, wielding picks and hammers, carrying off wheelbarrows of concrete for souvenirs. He'd considered joining them, putting together a stockpile of his own, but his back was no longer up to it. He could hear bullhorns leading cheers down in the square and he knew that Lillian was listening, staring up at the ceiling from her nest of quilts and pillows. Thinking God knows what. This morning he'd stood in the doorway as she slept, watching for the rise and fall, wondering how a whole person could make such a small lump. It hadn't been so bad in the beginning. She had old friends and family, but those ranks quickly dwindled and the old look returned. He'd done what he could, keeping the house, doing the wash, even taking her to Mass in the bone chilling cold. But nothing could keep Lil from her troubles and months had passed since she'd left the apartment. Lazlo wrapped the afghan around his shoulders and held his coffee mug in both hands. If reuniting the Fatherland meant the landlord would repair the boiler, Lazlo was all for it. If not, he didn't really give a damn.

After showing the spectacle a half dozen times the station resumed regular broadcasting. He watched a fat woman in braids show how to make a baked bean casserole then caught a replay of last year's World Cup, Belgium versus the Czech Republic - an upset that had cost him a bundle. In a few hours he would take the bus to the warehouse district where he would spend the night playing cards with the other security guards. Until then he would sit here, drifting in and out in the dim TV light. He no longer thought much about the future, just getting through the day took all he had.

Once again he heard a cry go up outside but the noise fell to a ringing in his ears. A sound he'd first noticed weeks ago, but may have always been there. He set the mug aside and stuffed his hands in his armpits. His fingers were numb and if he crossed his eyes he could see snot dangling from the end of his nose. When the noon whistle blew he would fix himself some lunch, but until then he would sit. A few minutes passed in silence then the telephone rang somewhere down the hall. Cold settled over his legs and he wrapped the ends of the afghan around them. He knew he must look pathetic bound up like a mummy, but vanity was a luxury he could no longer afford. As a gesture of defiance he reached for his knit cap and pulled it down over his ears.

That's how Lil found him hours later, his body cold, his face drained of expression. She called the priest from the public phone then slipped into the bathroom with Lazlo's razor.

WEST BERLIN

Walter Beech scanned the display trays of personal effects. The offerings struck a note of melancholy, a lifetime's trinkets passing for an estate. He assumed the pose of indifference, as if his lingering was more a matter of inertia than interest. Subconsciously, he tallied the take. The pewter shakers might fetch a few pounds along with the wedding band, presuming it was really gold. The rest was junk.

But Beech was a thorough man, and though he was running late to his grandson's wedding rehearsal, he took the time to go through all of it. That he might inconvenience the parents of the bride concerned him not a whit. The bloody Huns could bloody well wait!

It was the binding that caught his eye. He knew enough about antique books to recognize the period. Turn of the century, if he wasn't mistaken. Stealing a glance around he pried the book from the row and checked the condition, very good to excellent. He felt his pulse rate soar as he opened to the title page. My God! Could it be?

Later, at the reception, he would tremble to think he might have missed it, first edition Frankenstein, certainly priceless. Sure, he'd had to buy the whole lot, but it was a small enough price to pay. The sort of find a scavenger dreams about. Wait till Roberts got a gander at this!

"Are you OK, grandpa?" young Roger sidled up beside him.

"I can safely say that I've never been better."

"Why don't you ask Gretchen to dance. I shouldn't tell you this, but she's got a thing for older gentlemen."

"What a pity," Beech's eyes fairly twinkled. "You should have thought to invite one."

He waltzed the new bride around the ballroom feeling as if he could dance all night. He didn't mention his find to anyone, partly because it hadn't been authenticated, but mostly just to savor his good fortune. In his 68 years he'd never had a feeling quite like it. Oh, he'd known a measure of success. He owned a flat in the city and a cottage in the Cotswolds and his reputation as a collector was modest but solid. That he could go to his grave with a crowning achievement brought a rush of well being that beamed like a blush.

Or, possibly, it was the badly occluded femoral artery that would put him there by week's end.

* * * * *

Three weeks after Beech's funeral the estate of Lillian Werner arrived at his London flat without a word of explanation. His widow, Sheila stored it in the basement with the rest of Beech's junk where it gathered dust for the next twelve years.

ENGLAND

Ellen bought it for him when they were in Castle Comb, a plain gold wedding band, 22 carat gold according to the inscription. Not an inscription, rather four embossed symbols rubbed to a blur.

"Try it on," she handed it to her husband. The old boy selling it beamed behind the counter. A group of women dawdled at a nearby shelf of Depression glass. The rummage sale was in the basement of a church and the buzz of a sale drew the browsers closer. Billy slipped on the ring with some trouble and held his hand up for Ellen to see.

"I'll take it," she said, more to Billy than to the old man.

"Awwww, " the women stepped up for a closer look.

“A handsome ring for a handsome gentleman,” a matronly type gave him a wink. The old man slid a drawer open and took out a polishing rag.

“Here, let me put a little shine on it for you,” he smiled to beat the band.

It took some time for Billy to get the ring off his finger. He yanked and twisted but couldn’t work it over the knuckle. The onlookers strained in sympathy and Billy could hear the old man chuckle.

“Stuck, is it?” he leaned over the counter.

“It’s the humidity,” Billy grinned. “Makes my fingers swell.”

“Be a shame to have to lop it off, now.”

The church ladies shrieked with laughter as the ring pulled free. After he’d rubbed it clean the old man passed it around so that everyone could see. Ellen was at the end of the line and when she slid it back on Billy’s finger the crowd gave them a rousing cheer.

* * * * *

“I wonder who it belonged to,” Billy studied the ring by the bedside light.

“The lot card said Beech. A limey name if I ever heard one,” Ellen took it from him.

“It might go back for generations.”

“I wonder if it’s ever been to the states.”

“I doubt it. The Brits are hoarders. They’re up to their ears in heirlooms.”

* * * * *

He never took off the ring except to study the row of symbols. Billy wasn’t the sort who went in for jewelry. He couldn’t stand anything around his neck and his wrists were too thin to fill a watchband. The ring was it, a piece of Mother England to celebrate their love. So much a part of him it would eventually lose itself in knot of arthritis and wear a groove around the bone.

END

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HOW TO BE GOOD

by

Nikki Dolson

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Revenge is a confession of pain. -Latin Proverb

As they were lowering Tonya’s husband into the ground the wind shifted and drew the smoke from her father-in-law’s cigar across to her side of funeral tent. She looked up and met his gaze over the great divide of their grief. He was surrounded by the family men: his two brothers and their sons and directly behind him, his remaining son—the loyal one, and another six or seven people that Tonya only vaguely recognized. On her side of the tent, there was only the funeral director. Just like her wedding, her family hadn’t come.

Her father-in-law, Michael, nodded at her. She looked away and focused on the coffin. It was more in the ground than out now and its sleek exterior reflected the gray clouds overhead. It was made of mahogany, its interior lined with champagne-colored silk. Sam had never liked the feel of silk, not for a shirt and most definitely not for his bed. Tonya had found this out the hard way. He’d complained long and loud when she had the mistake of bringing home a set of silk sheets, a gift from her mother. She’d given them to their neighbors the next day and lied to her mother every time she talked to her. Sam was more of a cotton kind of guy. When she’d asked if there was some other fabric she could use the funeral director had spluttered an answer that was more sales pitch so she gave in, if only to stop him from talking. She was too tired to argue over a dead man’s bed. Now she regretted it. *Champagne silk?* she thought. *Sorry, Sam.*

When the gears that lowered the coffin had stopped their clicking, Michael stood up, grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it into the hole. The gesture was so violent that Tonya flinched. He saw it and he opened his mouth to say something but the wind kicked up stronger making the funeral tent flap and a folding chair tip over in the back row. He shoved his cigar into his mouth and moved away from the hole, his brothers tight to his side. She stayed where she was, watching the people as one by one they dropped handfuls of dirt into the hole. The funeral director touched her elbow.

“Shall I walk you to your car, Mrs. Goodheart?”

Tonya shook her head and gently pulled away from his grip. She didn’t look in the hole, just like she hadn’t looked at his body earlier at the viewing. She hadn’t needed to see her

husband dead and didn't need to see the depth of the hole he was buried in now. She'd seen him alive for three years and she'd imagined him dead in the coffin of her choosing for days now. She didn't need to see anything more.

She was halfway to the car, parked strategically away from the rest of Sam's family, when she saw a black Cadillac driving slowly, too slowly, down the lane that led out of the cemetery. She heard footsteps behind her, pounding on the grass, gaining on her. She felt a hand close around her arm and she stopped, started to turn around then felt a body press against her own.

"Hey, Tonya."

It was David, the loyal son, his voice smooth in her ear. He was Sam's twin. Sam weighed thirty pounds more and the weight had rounded out his face; David was lean, his face all sharp angles. Tonya always felt the urge to feed David when she saw him. Soften him up; make him a little less hard. Mostly, though, when she saw him she felt guilty.

"I don't have anything to say to him."

David's arm looped around her. She stood still against him. His chest was hard and unyielding. Sam's body always seemed to envelope her when he hugged her.

"He just wants to see you and for you to be a part of us."

"Sam didn't want to be around your father. He had his reasons." Tonya glanced over at the Cadillac.

"Those reasons were between Sam and my dad. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

She could smell David. Sam had worn the same cologne. "Everything to do with Sam has to do with me." She pulled away, walking fast to her car.

"You're a Goodheart, Tonya." David called after her.

She didn't turn around. Only thought of Sam and how often he had said the same thing. He'd said it when they were trying to get pregnant. Sam was a Goodheart so there was nothing he couldn't do. Not quite the truth as it turned out.

Before she could get into her car, the Cadillac pulled alongside. She could make out the shape of a head behind the tinted glass. The window opened slightly and a stream of smoke escaped. Then the car pulled away stopping briefly to pick David up then continuing down the lane.

She got in her husband's Buick, started it and rubbed her hand along the bench seat, wishing he were the one driving her home. She was too tired. She checked her cell phone and saw the missed phone calls, all from her mother. She'd called her mother back later. Maybe next week. Maybe never.

She put the car in gear and pointed it home.

* * * * *

She'd meant to drive home. She drove to the house where Sam died instead.

The house was a large 1950s ranch style. Large trees draped the house in shadows. The grass was in need of a trim but it was a healthy shade of green, as were the weeds that grew in the cracks of the concrete path that led to the front door. She walked up to the front door and rang the bell. She was nervous standing there, exposed. She'd only spent a few minutes to planning her lies while the Buick's engine ticked.

Two minutes went by then she heard someone. The door opened. The owner, Fred Andrews, stood before her in high-waist shorts and a thin white undershirt and sandals. He was in his mid-sixties, pale, wide-bellied, thinning hair dyed black but not the hair in his ears.

"You're here to see the house? Come in."

She hesitated. She hadn't expected an invite in. She figured she'd have to work to make it over his threshold. Small favors. She plastered on a smile and strode in as if she knew what he was talking about.

"Sorry," he gestured to his attire, "I was out back in the yard. Let me give you a tour."

A large hallway led from the front door into the living room. Another hallway went left and the rest of the house opened up to the right. The house had light colored wood floors set diagonally. Just like the wood paneling was set in the living room. The furniture was a hodge-podge of red and green: plaid pattern on the couch, teal green on the club chairs, and a 4x6 forest green color block painting that hung on the wall. A brick fireplace painted white sat between two large windows that looked out on the backyard. Off the living room were the dining room and the kitchen, all within view of the living room. Deeper back he told her was the garage and the laundry room. Nothing seemed out of place.

"That's the garden there," He pointed out the window. She looked. All she could see was a lot of green, green grass and a patch of dirt under a very large tree. She nodded.

"I'll be honest with you I've had a few lookers but no offers yet."

"You're selling the house?" She couldn't help herself.

He cocked his head to one side. "Yeah, isn't that why you're here? My wife doesn't want live in a house where someone has died."

"Where did he die exactly?" Tonya kept looking around the room waiting to see the evidence of Sam. Some intuition about where he had been when he died.

"I didn't get your name."

She looked him in the eyes when she said, "Tonya Goodheart."

His mouth drooped open.

"I don't want any trouble Mr. Andrews. I only want to see where he died."

He closed his mouth and pointed to a spot behind her. "In front of the couch."

Tonya moved closer to the couch. She saw the floor had a slight discoloration to it.

"I took the varnish off the floor trying to get all the blood," he said.

She shivered. She crouched down and reached out her hand to touch the floor. Her fingertips slipped along the smooth floor then jerked to a stop on the area of discoloration. It felt

rough and warmer in comparison to the rest of the floor. The onset of tears stung her nose. She straightened, exhaled one long breath then turned back to him.

“Tell me what happened,” she said.

“Lady, talk to the police.”

“I did.”

“You should go.”

“You killed my husband. I’m not blaming you. I just want to understand exactly what happened. Tell me and I’ll go.”

Andrews sighed. He hitched up his shorts and crossed the room. He stopped at the hallway to the bedrooms. “See, I heard something. I grabbed my gun and came out of my bedroom. I saw your husband standing there. I said something like ‘Hey, who the fuck are you?’” He winced. “Sorry.”

“Go on,” Tonya sat down on the far end of the couch, so she could see both the spot and Andrews.

“So I see him raise his gun. And mine, it’s already up, you know. Guess it was instinct. I squeezed the trigger. A lot, I guess. Until he fell down.”

She imagined her husband falling, tilting, sliding, descending and wondered what he thought. Had he thought of her in those last seconds? Was it seconds or minutes of life after he fell down? She turned her head away from the thought, closed her eyes against the image of Sam bleeding slowly on the wood floor. When she opened her eyes, she saw only Andrews, looking uncomfortable. She blinked back tears.

“So he raised his gun.”

Andrews nodded.

“And you were standing right there?”

“No, I was closer to my bedroom.”

“Down the hall then?” She walked over to him, pointing down the dark hallway.

“Right.”

“What was he doing?”

Andrews cocked his head at her again. “What do you mean?”

“Was he picking up something? Did he have his back to you when you came out of the room so he had to turn around to see you?”

“No, he just turned his head to look at me.”

“So he saw you first.”

“I guess.”

“But you were able to fire first.”

“Guess I was the faster draw.” Andrews began to smile then remembered who he was talking to and stopped it.

“I guess so. Would you show me how he was standing when you came out?”

“Look, lady-”

“Call me Tonya.”

That seemed to soften him. “I don’t think this is going to help you get over your loss.”

“I just want to understand.” She let a couple tears fall, wiping them away with the backs of her hands.

“Sure.”

He came over the spot near the discoloration and Tonya went down the hallway.

“I’ll be you.” She said. He closed his eyes, remembering. First he turned to face her then adjusted angling, his left side away from her. He was facing the hallway for the front door, not the bedrooms.

“He had his gun in this hand,” Andrews said, making his right hand into a gun, three fingers withdrawn into his palm. His other hand was doing something odd.

“And the left hand? It was just like that?” Tonya said.

Andrews glanced down. His left hand was held up to his side, the fingers of that hand seemed to be cupping his belly. “Yeah, I remember it like that.”

Tonya walked slowly down the hall towards Andrews, picturing her husband. Sam, five-foot-ten, dressed in black, a black bag slung over his back, holding a gun and his stomach. His eyes widened, implored her, his mouth opened when she reached the juncture between the two hallways. She looked at the front door. Then back to Fred Andrews. “How many people did you hear?”

Andrews swallowed. “I only saw one.”

Tonya frowned. “Okay,” she said, “what was he after do you think? He didn’t have anything on him. I’m wondering what he might have been after.”

“You’d know better than me, I think.”

“No jewelry, paintings?” They both eyed the green painting.

“The expensive stuff is in the bedroom.”

“I see. Well thank you for your time Mr. Andrews. Good luck selling the house.” She left him standing in his living room.

* * * * *

Tonya had been a thief. Sam, too. They stole things at the request of others. Jewelry, mostly but cars, boats, and documents too. Sam disliked stealing information. Papers had little tangible value to him. He normally avoided taking on jobs that only wanted information. Tonya

had no such reservations. He'd been after documents when they met. Only she had broken in first and had what he was looking for. She remembered the look on his face when he entered the study. Finding not only the safe open but empty too. He turned around and saw Tonya standing there. He looked her up and down.

"I think you've got something of mine," he said.

She was closer to the door and maybe could've made it but she saw him shift and realized he'd catch her easily. It was the way he dropped his shoulders and planted his foot. In the short run, she'd be beat. "So what do you want to do about it?"

"You could give it to me," he said.

She shook her head.

"Or I could take it from you." She stiffened. He frowned and said, "No. I hate when people try to get cute. Look they're playing us against each other."

She settled against the nearest wall.

"Let's say I get papers from you but have to hurt you in the process. Then there's evidence. A body maybe." She glowered at him. He put his hands up. "Okay, maybe there's a little blood, from one of us."

"Gracious of you," she said.

"I try. Now with the evidence somebody— your client or mine— could call the police, they try to connect the dots, and then one of us is up to our eyeballs in this.

"And you're dead."

He pointed a thick finger at her. "Yeah, I'm dead but they're chasing after you."

Tonya frowned. She was in the system, albeit for a minor infraction when she was eighteen. She'd been swept up with a hardheaded boyfriend, fingerprinted, then released. But still, she was in the system.

"I propose a deal," he said.

She listened and agreed. They informed their clients of the others intentions, split the documents and delivered half to each client. Neither side was pleased, but they had bigger issues to deal with than Sam and Tonya. The money was non-refundable as far as Tonya was concerned and Sam had similar rules, so each got paid. No half now, half-later bullshit.

Sam appeared outside of her apartment off Tropicana Avenue a week later. She'd liked the look of him from the moment they met. She liked his bulk. He brought dinner not flowers and for that, she liked him even more. They didn't work for a while, the fallout from the last job still too fresh for new work, so they had time to get to know each other.

Three months later, they worked a job together in Florida, stealing someone's boat. They delivered it and walked away only to find out later that a body was hidden in it along with a quarter million dollars. Tonya hadn't like the feel of this job but that revelation was enough for them to decide that it would be their last job. They called themselves lucky and then called themselves retired. Sam went to work for a lock and key company, Tonya found work in a bookstore chain. They were married a few months later, his family attended; her mother sent the sheets two weeks later.

According to Sam, their job in Florida was the only time he ever worked with someone else other than his brother. He didn't like the uncertainty of depending on others. Nevertheless, it was clear to Tonya that Sam had worked with someone else in the Andrews house.

She requested the autopsy report from the Clark County coroner's office. It would be close to a week before she received it. She thought about Sam over those days of waiting. During the day, she watched TV and tried to remember to eat. Sam would not have approved of her diet of canned peaches and store brand marshmallows but it was something. She did not answer the door, though she heard David calling her name. She did not answer her phone—not for her mother, not for her job and most definitely not for any of the Goodhearts.

* * * * *

The autopsy report arrived in five days. Four bullets were found in his body, five bullet wounds were noted. The fifth wound was on Sam's lower left side, no bullet found. The police report stated that a bullet had been recovered. It had to be pried out of the brick fireplace and was totally useless for identification purposes. The assumption was that it matched the other bullets, thus it matched Andrews's gun. Tonya was convinced that Sam was shot before Andrews walked out of his bedroom. He heard a sound then got out of bed. He heard a fight maybe. Then a grunt from Sam when he was shot, a silencer was used. Andrews entered the hallway. Sam raised his gun to defend himself, not against Andrews, against someone in the other hallway. Maybe.

Sam knew the truth. So did Fred Andrews.

* * * * *

Tonya posted flyers on the doors of the Andrews's neighbor's homes the next day. She'd copied a lawn service flyer she taken off a house near her apartment complex. She'd slung a messenger bag over her shoulder, put her hair up under a hat and brought a knife, an unadorned switchblade that she wouldn't mind leaving behind in someone, and a little 9mm Smith & Wesson 3913NL, a present from Sam and a gun she could hide easily under one of Sam's hooded sweatshirts. It only smelled of fabric softener but it was a comfort to her to wearing something of his. Then she parked a few blocks away and canvassed the Andrews neighborhood. Now she waited outside the Andrews house until she saw them leave. It was five o'clock.

She walked around to the next block and found the house that backed against theirs. It was deserted, red eviction/foreclosure stickers in the front window and on the door. She entered the backyard. She climbed the fence and dropped down behind the Andrews's big tree with the dirt patch in front of it. She left her bag behind and walked up to the back door. The damage from the last break-in still hadn't been repaired and she slid the door open. She stepped in and listened. There was the electric hum from the refrigerator but nothing else. She shut the door behind her and crept down the hallway. First door to the left was a small bedroom. The door to the right, a bathroom; next door on the right was a slightly larger bedroom. The last door was the Andrews's master bedroom.

Fred had decked the room out, floor to ceiling, in green paisley print wallpaper. Not pretty, at all. Tonya thought his wife was just waiting for a good excuse to get rid of this place. A large master bath opened up next to the bedroom. The roman style tub was elevated two stairs up from the tiled floor. Double sinks, shower stall and toilet behind a door. The other quarter of the room was a walk-in closet. Tonya flicked on the light. Shoes in boxes lined the floor under the hanging clothes. Winter clothes were shoved in the back. It was dark back there. The single light was not enough. She turned off the light and nestled herself down in the corner of the closet and waited for the couple to return.

Her mind wandered in the hours she had to sit there. She remembered the day they found out that Sam was sterile. The panicked look he'd given her. She'd squeezed his hand and asked the questions. They had options: adoption, of course, sperm donors and at the very least a second opinion. Tonya had very much wanted that. Sam rebuffed it all. In the hallway outside of the doctor's office, he leaned back against the wall, shoved his hand in his pockets and said, "If you were smart you would leave me now."

"Guess I'm not," Tonya said, leaning into him. "Besides who would I leave you for?"

"David."

David had a daughter that he never saw, by choice. It was proof that he could procreate, if not parent.

"I don't want David." Tonya kept her voice level.

Sam had wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer then whispering, "Good" into her hair.

She wiped at her face now with the bottom of a wool coat. She didn't like this memory. She didn't like any of the times she had lied to her husband. Minor infractions of purses bought and major ones like the one told that day. Tonya knew that if she had met David first, she would have never given Sam another look. David was every bit the bad boy. He liked the finer things. Like his suit at the funeral, Armani. He drove a whisper silent BMW and maintained a condo on the strip. He charmed and lied. He was an obedient, clean-shaven thug who enforced his father's will on others. And he enjoyed it. He would have been the perfect guy for her to fall for then be dumped by. She felt guilty for admitting it even to herself. But she had met Sam first and by the time she saw David she was mostly immune to those charms. Sam anchored her. He made Tonya want to be good and walk the straight line. With Sam at her side, she could be a different person. Without him, she could only be what she knew. She knew how to steal, how to lie, and if necessary how to hurt those who didn't capitulate to her needs.

She drew her knees up to her chest and put her head down. She was asleep before she even considered that it might be a bad idea.

* * * * *

Fred Andrews's singing woke her. Tonya winced and lifted her head slowly. His rendition of 'Come On, Eileen' might have woken her husband, it was so piercing. She checked

the time on her cell phone. She'd been there almost four hours. The couple wobbled into Tonya's line of sight. Andrews was draped over his wife and she was stumbling under his weight.

"No come on, Eileen. Come on, Fred. Just make it to the bed," she said.

They disappeared out of view. He sang on. The bed springs squeaked when Fred hit it and he let out an 'oof' in the middle of his chorus.

"Could you have gotten any drunker Fred?" she said.

"Ah, Janice. Don't be that way. Come here."

"I don't think so mister," she sang.

"Where you going?"

"I'll be back. Go to bed."

Tonya heard the soft squish of Janice's shoes on the carpet turn into clacking as she moved away from the bedroom. Tonya listened until the footsteps faded, then she listened for Fred. She heard his belt buckle as he undid it, the zipper as he pulled it down and the buckle again as it gave a muffled clunk against the floor.

Tonya stretched one leg out in front of her, then the other, rolled her shoulders and her neck. She stood up. She walked to the closet's doorway and peered out. Andrews was sitting on the edge of his bed, his pants around his ankles and his eyes shut. She stepped out into the illuminated bedroom, walked quietly up to the man and punched him in the face. Her hand hurt immediately. She wondered briefly if she broke his nose. He fell backwards holding his face, groaning. She jumped on him, straddling his chest with her knees on his upper arms.

"You lied to me Fred," she said.

"What's going on?" Fred's eyes darted back and forth. His nose wasn't bleeding much. Tonya was a little disappointed.

"Focus, Fred, right here." She slapped his face. "Remember me?"

"The wife," he said.

"Yes, the wife." She pulled out the knife, flicked its blade open and laid it against the man's neck. "How many people were here when you shot my husband?"

"I don't know."

She pressed the knife harder against his neck. He sucked in a breath.

"Tell me Fred, what kind of wife is Janice? Is she the kind of who'd hunt me down for killing her husband? Would she say fuck the police and the justice system and come after me for killing you? Is she that kind of wife?" Tonya grabbed him by the hair and pulled back, pressing the knife against his throat again. She leaned over him, held his gaze.

"I don't know how many were here. At least, one other, I saw him run out."

"One?" She pressed harder and blood flowed in a thin rivulet down onto the bedspread.

"Yes, goddamnit, one. Next day, I got a call. A man said to change my story and say I shot him five times. I wouldn't get in trouble and I'd get fifteen grand for my cooperation."

“Fred,” a voice said.

Tonya leapt off the man, pulled the gun from its holster and pointed it at Andrews’s wife. She had a poker from the fireplace in her hand. Fred tried to stand up, got tangled up in his pants and fell down between the women.

“You can put it down,” Janice said Tonya. To her husband she said, “Fred, how could you?”

“That son of bitch broke into our house.”

“So you take money for killing a man?”

“I didn’t take money for it.”

“Yes, you did. It’s what you used for the down payment on the place in Boca, isn’t it?”

“Who brought you the money?” Tonya asked.

The couple looked over at her.

“Janice, call the police,” Fred said.

“Yes, Janice, call the police so I can tell them what I know. So you can lose the house in Boca and have to stay here in this house.”

Janice’s eyes widened. She turned on her husband.

“Janice...” he said.

“Shut up, Fred,” Janice turned back to Tonya and put a hand on her chest. “I am so very sorry for your loss.”

“I’m very sorry for my loss too Janice. We are both very fucking sorry, now what?” Tonya took a step forward. “You’re in your early fifties, right? How many more years does Fred have, do you think? Ten, if you’re lucky with the way he drinks. When the day comes for you to pick out your husband’s coffin and decide between Champagne or Chantilly blue colored silk, you call me and you tell me how sorry you are for my loss. Then you watch them lower your husband—who drives you crazy when he gets drunk and sings stupid songs from the eighties—into the ground and you’ll come home and realize that’s it. Call me then and tell me you are sorry for my loss.” Tonya shook, her vision blurred and she felt herself slipping. But an arm held her up.

Janice Andrews hugged Tonya tight, whispering, “It’s okay. It’s okay.” over and over. A minute passed then Janice loosened her hold and looked at Tonya. “It’s okay to be angry.”

Fred had moved away and was pulling up his pants and reaching for the phone next to the bed. Janice let Tonya go and snatched the phone away from her husband.

“Don’t you dare. Now tell her who brought you the money.”

“Janice,” Fred groaned.

“Please...” Tonya said. She closed the knife and stuck it back into her pocket; the gun went back in its holster.

“I don’t know his name but he must have been his brother or something. He looked just like your husband.”

* * * * *

It was only twenty minutes to the Goodheart's house. Back in the eighties when the house was built, there had only been the Goodhearts and the airport that far out. Now the city surrounded their house on the hill.

Tonya pulled into their circular drive and left her car parked behind the five others that clogged it. She didn't ring the doorbell. She walked in and drifted down the hallway toward the voices she heard. Near the back of the house, she found the Goodheart men drinking and laughing. They went silent when they saw her.

Her father-in-law turned around in his chair and grinned at her.

"Goddamn, girl I didn't think you were ever gonna come around. David and I were just deciding on how we were gonna come after you."

He got up and lunged for her, grabbing her arms and pulling her into his chest, lifting and squeezing at the same time. He smelled of cigars and aftershave. Her father-in-law released her, and then held her to his side, his hand gripping her shoulder. "David, look who's here."

David set his glass down and rose from his chair. He smiled weakly.

"Michael, I need to talk to you. Alone," Tonya said.

"Of course, sweetheart. Everybody out."

David was the last to leave. He closed the double doors, his face full of concern.

Michael Goodheart sat down in his leather club chair and told her sit in the matching one. He put his drink next to an ashtray on the little table between the chairs. "Do you want a drink?"

She realized she did, desperately. She wanted to crawl into a bottle and hide. But that was for later. "No."

"Okay, what are we talking about?" He smiled at her and in that face she saw Sam. The same round cheeks; the same eyebrows even. She almost laughed. She'd never taken the time to look at her father-in-law before. There were no pictures. Sam brought with him nothing of his family when he married her and they'd moved in together. *Clean slate, he said, only my name to remind me where I came from.*

Other questions filtered up, stopping her from saying the real reason she was here. "Why did you and Sam stop talking?"

He pulled a cigar from his pocket. "Eh, his mother. She left us and he blamed me. I told him that his mother was never happy. She had the boys and spent the next ten years going on and on about wanting to leave Las Vegas. I wasn't leaving. All this sun and what like three weeks of real cold?" he scoffed. "Finally she did. Just up and left."

"Then she died." Sam had told her this bit. She died late at night on a rural road. She drove right into to one of those big timber telephone poles.

"Yes and Sam blamed me for that, too. I guess he mentioned that to you."

“He never told me why. Only that she died and he didn’t want to see you.”

“Well, Sam was like his mother. He wanted things to be a certain way and when he couldn’t get his way, he sulked. He sulked for twenty years.”

“David didn’t blame you?”

“No or if he did he got over it. I’m his father that’s enough for David. Not for Sam, though.” He sighed and lit the cigar he’d been holding. He puffed on it a few times then blew smoke rings her direction. Each one expanding as it drifted toward her like ripples in water. Tonya thought the rings formed a bull’s-eye with her father-in-law for the center target.

“I think you should stay here with us. David is very concerned about you,” he said

“David killed Sam.” She tensed, waiting for his reaction, waiting for the outrage and the anger.

Michael tapped his cigar in the ashtray. “No, that guy Andrews, he shot Sam.”

“Yes, he shot him four times. But Sam was shot before Andrews saw him. Someone else was in that house with Sam. It had to be David. Sam wouldn’t work with anyone but David or me. He trusted his brother.”

“My son is dead. My boy.” He coughed. He set his cigar in the ashtray. “What are you going to do?”

“I want to know why Sam is dead.”

“Why did you want to take Sam away?”

“What? I didn’t want leave.” Tonya was confused. She had said nothing about leaving to Sam. Where would she go? Her mother’s too small apartment off Howard Street? Tonya left her life in Chicago behind her. Her life had been here with Sam.

“Sam told David different. Sam was gearing up to leave Vegas. A few more months and he would’ve been gone. I had to do something.”

She felt the weight of the days since Sam’s death slide fully onto her. Sam died knowing his brother and his father had betrayed him. “David convinced Sam to do one more job. You set him up. There was nothing in that house except a trigger happy home owner.”

Michael stood. Tonya backed off a step; she reached for the gun under her sweatshirt. “You all are never faithful,” he said. “Nothing makes you happy. Sam was a Goodheart. Now either you’re a Goodheart like Sam or you’re not. What’s it going to be?”

Michael was on her before she could get the gun out. He grabbed her by the hair, threw her into the chair, and held her there with one hand clamped around her throat. Tonya punched and kicked at him. She drew blood on his arms but he didn’t waver, the pressure just built. She blinked away tears.

“Sam loved you. Don’t ever doubt that, sweetheart. We all fall for the wrong ones. David did too. He let her go though. We found out later she was pregnant but then she had a girl and I didn’t see the point in chasing after another one of you. Maybe when she’s older she’ll find her way to the family.”

He used both hands now. Tonya was losing focus. Spots appeared before her, obscuring the tunnel vision. She quit pawing at his arms and tried to get the gun. Her fingers closed on the handle. She pulled it around then felt a lessening of pressure on her throat as Michael tried to pull the gun from her hand. She pulled the trigger. Heard him curse. She tried to point the gun upwards and pulled the trigger again. Then Michael was off her. He was on his knees in front her. His mouth was open, his lips forming words that didn't come.

Tonya took gulping breaths. She didn't hear David enter the room.

"Tonya, give me the gun." He stood over them but he didn't look at her only extended his hand. "Give me the gun and then leave." Tonya wiped at her eyes and rubbed her neck. She used the chair to pull herself up. She staggered backwards, bumping into a lamp. David turned.

"Look, I'm sorry he's dead. I'm sorry I took him from you. You made him happy." David reached for her and she froze. He embraced her, his smooth cheek cool against her own.

"Your father," she said. Her voice was weak, her throat sore.

"I told Sam if he did one last job he could score and make enough money that you and he wouldn't have to worry. All he wanted to do was make you happy. So he took the job. Dad's plan was to let him take the fall for a job. We figured he'd do a little time and be out in a year or two. So I had to shoot him. But that guy shot him before I even heard him come out."

"It's your fault Sam's dead. You killed him."

"Okay, yes. And that made you my responsibility."

She tried to pull away from him but he only held her tighter. "No, David."

"You looked so sad at the funeral. I thought we needed to take care of you now. I thought, hoped, maybe you might see something in me. You could be happy with me."

He took the empty gun from her hand and pushed her away. "You should go now. I'll take care of this."

He pointed at his father who was slumped over now. His face pressed against the floor. His mouth had stopped moving.

"You won't have to worry."

END

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SILICON KINGS

an Eamon Gold mystery

by

Richard Helms

*Richard Helms ('Rick' to his friends), edits and publishes **The Back Alley Webzine**. His tenth novel (**Six Mile Creek**) was released by Five Star Mysteries in March, and he has an upcoming story (**The Gods For Vengeance Cry**) in **Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine**. A three-time Shamus Award nominee and the only author ever to win two Derringer Awards in the same year, Helms lives (as he puts it) 'back in the trees' in a small town in North Carolina.*

Wally Bean was almost ten years younger than I was.

He was worth about thirty million dollars more.

He had my rapt attention.

“Do you know much about computers, Mr. Gold?” he asked.

“I know how to turn one on,” I said. “I can make it go *beep*.”

“I own a computer company. Specifically, we write software.”

“I hear there’s a lot of money in that these days.”

“Yes, you could say. Last year my company netted about two hundred million.”

“Dollars?” I asked.

“And change.”

“You can buy a lot of help for just the change,” I noted.

He ignored me.

“We have a problem. Someone has been stealing our code.”

“How does someone do that?”

“That’s the problem. Code writing is a fairly high-tech operation. You’d be surprised how many people don’t even know what it is.”

“Including myself. I failed COBOL in high school.”

He regarded me with something that I took for pity. Apparently I had just flunked my human race test. I checked to make sure my opposable thumbs were still attached.

“Well, we’re way beyond COBOL now,” he said.

His inference was clear. I was not only extinct, I was fossilized.

“There are some people, though, who actually *think* in code. They live and breathe it. We look for those people. We scour colleges looking for the right candidates and snap them up.”

“*We* being?”

“My company is called Dynogix. What do you know about it?”

“A little.”

“We’ve been working on a new type of Web browser. I’m sure you know that there are two main brands of browsers out there. We’re working on a third type. It will be thirty percent faster than the competition.”

“And someone is stealing the code for your browser?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“One of our technicians cracked into a sample of a beta version of a new browser being developed by another company. Like I said, these guys live their lives in code. He recognized several specific strings, because he had written them.”

“It’s not possible that someone else just stumbled on the same strings? I heard once that an infinite number of monkeys typing on an infinite number of typewriters...”

“Not in this case,” Wally said, interrupting me. “This was part of our development code, the stuff that actually speeds up the new browser. It’s revolutionary stuff.”

“What was the name of the company developing the other program?”

“SymSystems. Their owner was one of my old coworkers, when I started at IntelliPro.”

“Are any of you Silicon Valley companies just named after a person, or are you all contractions?”

He stared at me for a few moments.

I think he blinked once or twice.

Rebooting, I guess.

He reached into his jacket pocket and slipped a folded piece of paper across my desk. I opened it.

“That’s Jeff Lopiano,” he said.

It was a high-quality graphic of a man in his late twenties, with thinning hair and a cheesy little moustache. His eyes were a watery blue. I could have stirred a highball with his neck.

“This guy owns SymSystems?” I said.

He nodded.

“I’ve included all the information we could put together -- address, license tag numbers, telephone numbers. There’s also some information about SymSystems there.”

“So you think this guy Lopiano’s behind the code theft?”

“We found it in his program.”

“But he didn’t actually *write* the program, correct?”

“Well, it seems that if it’s his program and our code, he would have had to authorize the theft. I’d like you to find out how he stole it, and close up the leak.”

“Excuse me, but that sounds like an internal security problem. That’s not exactly my line of work. How did you find me, anyway?”

“I was referred to you.”

“Who referred you?”

“Aubrey Innes.”

I nodded, and turned my swivel desk chair to face the window of my office. It was a crisp day in San Francisco, and my window faced Mount Tam across the bay. There were ten or twelve sailboats on the water between the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz.

I wished I were on one of them.

“Aubrey Innes manufactures cell phones,” I said.

“Yes.”

“There’s a big difference between finding out who’s spiriting away cases of cell phones, and who’s stealing what amounts to intellectual property, Mr. Bean.”

“I don’t see your point.”

“Did you tell Aubrey all about your problem?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why he sent you to me, then.”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s find out,” I said.

I turned the chair back to face Wally Bean and picked up the receiver to my telephone.

Several moments later, I had Aubrey Innes on the line.

“Aubrey, I’m sitting in my office with a fellow you referred to me.”

“Do tell?”

“Wally Bean?”

“Yes, I did,” he said.

“I’m not really certain what he wants, and I was hoping you could help me out a little.”

“Wally has a problem, Eamon,” Aubrey said.

“Code theft,” I said.

“He has a much bigger problem than the simple theft of code.”

“I think you’d better explain that.”

“I can’t, not without betraying a confidence. Let’s just say you’ll find out about it very soon.”

“You’re not being much help, here,” I noted.

“You don’t need my help. It will all become clear within a day or so.”

We exchanged pleasantries for a moment or so, and then I hung up.

“Aubrey says your problem is bigger than code theft,” I told Wally Bean.

“I don’t know what he means.”

“He said I would, in a day or so.”

Wally pulled out a checkbook and a Mont Blanc pen. I liked the pen. I wasn’t crazy about the checkbook.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Writing you a check,” he said, without looking up.

“Don’t do that.”

That made him look up.

“I haven’t decided whether to take your case,” I told him.

“You’re otherwise employed?”

“No. Actually I’m between cases.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“No problem. It’s just the way I am. I take the cases I want to take.”

He continued to stare.

“It’s a *me* thing,” I said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

He nodded, and turned back to writing his check.

“I understand a lot more than you think,” he said. “The high-tech data business was built on the backs of rugged individualists. We don’t spend a lot of time worrying about things like vertical lines of communication, or getting permission.”

He tore the check from his wallet and placed it on the desk. I didn’t touch it, but I could see it from where I was sitting.

It was too big to miss.

“That’s a retainer,” he said. “This situation is very important to me. If Aubrey Innes says you’re the guy for the job, I want you on it. Think it over. If you want the job, deposit the check and give me a call. If you don’t want it, tear it up and give me a call so I can find someone else.”

He stood and leaned over my desk to shake my hand.

“I’m betting you cash the check,” he said.

I listened as he walked down the stairs to Jefferson Street.

I looked down at the check on my desk. Then I swiveled back to watch the sailboats on the bay.

* * * * *

I was still watching the sailboats when Heidi Fluhr walked up the steps and into my office. We had a lunch date. She didn't knock. She doesn't have to.

Heidi is like the Swedish farmer's daughter on steroids. She's six feet of all girl and bunches of it. Sleeping with her is like running a triathlon.

Three times in one night.

She had cut her hair a few weeks before. It fell in short blonde wisps around her perfectly complected face and her cool blue eyes.

We had dated almost a year. It wasn't serious, but neither was I interested in breaking it off anytime soon. Playing night games with Heidi is like driving a Bugatti Veyron. Afterward, nothing else seems to stack up.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. I picked up the check and placed it in my desk drawer.

"New job?"

"I don't know yet. I'm thinking it over."

"What's the deal?"

"Computer gig. Industrial espionage. James Bond stuff."

"Sounds like fun."

"Sounds like a headache, on top of a toothache. Where do you want to eat?"

We walked down Jefferson past the Hyde Pier to Fisherman's Wharf, and took a booth at a place that had iced bins full of shellfish out front. I wasn't very hungry, so I ordered clam chowder in a sourdough loaf bowl. Heidi ordered half the appetizer menu.

And a salad.

"I finished the dreadnaught last night," I said, as we sipped our tea.

"Oh," she said. "That explains why you're so distant today. Every time you finish an instrument you get the thousand yard stare."

"Do not," I said.

But I knew she was right. I build guitars and other stringed instruments as a hobby. Sometimes I think I'd rather do it for a living, but then it wouldn't be fun anymore.

"What will you build next?" she asked.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Kind of like the job."

“Yeah. Kind of like the job.”

“Maybe a Selmer Maccaferri,” I said, a couple of minutes later, between bites of the chowder.

“Say again?”

“It’s a jazz guitar from the thirties. The kind that Django Reinhardt played. I have the plans for it at the Montara house. I might make it next.”

“Good for you,” she said.

I looked up.

She smiled.

“Nothing feels quite so satisfying as closure.”

* * * * *

I walked her back to her store. Heidi owns the art gallery just underneath my office. I don’t understand a lot of the stuff she sells, but that’s okay. She doesn’t understand a lot of my work.

It keeps us from getting too involved in each other’s lives.

Heidi went back to work, and I walked up the steps to my office.

There was a man sitting in my waiting room. He seemed nervous, and his watery eyes flitted back and forth as I walked in, as if he believed he had been caught in a burglary and was searching for a window escape.

“Come into my office, Mr. Lopiano,” I said.

He stood as I opened the door to my inner office.

“You know who I am?”

“I’m a detective,” I said. “I know all kinds of things.”

I took my seat behind the desk and he sat in the same seat where Wally Bean had sat that morning.

“Let me guess,” I said, “You have a problem at SymSystems.”

His head bobbed around on his pencil neck like a dashboard chihuahua.

“Amazing,” he said.

“Did Aubrey Innes send you?” I asked.

“Yes. Did he tell you I was coming?”

“No. Educated guess.”

I made a note to slap Aubrey around a little the next time I saw him.

“Want to make a bet?” I said.

“I’m not sure.”

I pulled a twenty from my pocket and slapped it down on my desk.

“That twenty says you’re working on a new Web browser, and someone’s been stealing your code.”

“Aubrey did talk with you.”

“Yes, but not about you.”

I opened my desk drawer and pulled out Wally Bean’s check and a pen. It wasn’t a Mont Blanc, but it wrote just fine. I turned the check over and endorsed it, then stuffed it in my shirt pocket.

“What’s that?” Lopiano asked.

“A decision I just made. Let’s talk about your problem.”

* * * * *

“I’ve come to kick your ass,” I said, as I settled into the leather chair next to Aubrey Innes’ sofa. He was on the sofa. In front of him was a fine sterling tea service. I recalled that Aubrey didn’t drink coffee.

“Tea?” he asked.

“No thanks. What’s the big idea, sending those kids to me?”

“Bean and Lopiano?”

“Yeah.”

“The situation amused me. I thought it would interest you.”

“Did they come to you individually too?”

“They telephoned. I knew both of them when we were grunts at DiaCom. Actually, Jeff Lopiano called me first. Wanted to know what Wally was up to. Like I knew.”

“Why would he call you?”

“You did a good job closing a hole in my distribution system last year. I was impressed. I put the word out, anyone needed an investigator, I could set them up.”

“Not that I can’t use the work...” I said.

“Feeling a little manipulated?”

“No more than your average pretzel.”

“So, what do you think?”

“I should discuss my clients’ business with you?”

“Then you took their cases.”

“I should discuss my clients’ business with you?”

“I see,” Innes said, pouring tea into a Wedgwood china cup.

“Ethics,” I said. “Confidentiality. You understand.”

“Of course. On the other hand, I’m not bound by any such constraints. Do you mind if I think out loud for a moment?”

“Not at all.”

“We have two very bright, but very introverted guys. Despite their obvious physical dissimilarities, they are intellectual and emotional twins, which is to say they are at an intellectual age somewhere around a thousand, and an emotional age of five or six. At one time, they were very close friends.”

“But competitive?”

“Of course. It’s a competitive business. Breakthroughs coming every thirty-seven seconds, you need to stay on top of things. Some of these guys work three, four years without taking a vacation.”

“But there are rewards.”

“It’s not coincidental that Bill Gates is the richest man in the world, Eamon.”

“Interesting that they would branch off into individual companies working on the same stuff.”

“You mean, why didn’t they combine their talents? Form a single company and shoot for some kind of synergistic energy?”

“Yeah. That thing you just said.”

“Ah, well...” Innes said, sipping his tea. “Now we enter the realm of gossip.”

“Oh, goody.”

“There was a girl.”

“There always is,” I said.

* * * * *

Heidi and I had spent the night at my house in Montara.

I had converted the living room into a workshop, where I built my instruments. I am a messy luthier. I had spent the afternoon the day before cleaning the shop and sharpening my hand tools, while Heidi trotted across the Pacific Coast Highway to Montara Beach to shed her clothes, read a book, and arouse the marine wildlife.

We had grilled steaks that evening, and had eaten on my deck overlooking the beach. We had drunk a lot of California merlot. The rest of the evening was a fleshy blur.

I awoke around eight-thirty with my mind working on the problem of Wally Bean and Jeff Lopiano. I dressed in jeans and a cutoff sweatshirt, made some coffee, and started puttering around the shop.

While I worked on joining the two halves of a sitka spruce soundboard, I reviewed what Aubrey Innes had told me.

Wally Bean and Jeff Lopiano had been fast buddies at DiaCom, after graduating from Cal Tech. It was their first jobs in the computer industry. Their primary interest was seeing how much more information they could stuff onto a silicon chip, even as they explored how much smaller they could make the chip.

Their secondary interest was Linda Pickett.

According to Aubrey, Jeff Lopiano claimed to have seen her first, as if that counted for anything. Maybe for eggheads like my clients it did.

DiaCom had a “work hard – play hard” philosophy. Its owner, a hoary old veteran of the high tech business (whom, I might add, was younger than I) was a little hyperactive, and expected that his younger talent would keep up with him. Besides putting in sixty-hour weeks, there were lots of company “activities” that involved things like water skiing and hang-gliding. In the evenings, the entire crew tended to congregate at local watering holes to lubricate the next day’s brainworks.

It was at one of those bars that Jeff Lopiano first spotted Linda Pickett. As Aubrey Innes told it, Wally Bean may have seen her one or two seconds later, but in Silicon Valley a second or two might as well be a lifetime.

The door to my bedroom opened. Heidi stumbled out, naked, and plopped down on the sofa that ran the length of the fourth wall of the living room. Not many women can lounge around in the buff and look natural. Heidi looked like she was posing for Titian.

“There’s coffee,” I said.

“Oh, thank God,” she moaned, rising from the couch. She padded into the kitchen.

While she poured, I laid the bookmatched spruce on top of some pipe clamps, ran a bead of wood glue down the joined edges, and then pulled them together with the clamps. In a few hours I would take the joined top plate out and plane it to its final thickness.

Or not.

The nice thing about instrument building was that nobody made me account for my time.

Heidi walked back into the living room and looked at me drowsily over the steam rising from her morning brew.

“What in hell did we do last night?” she asked.

“Pretty much all of it,” I said.

“Uh huh,” she said, nodding. “That explains it. What are you working on?”

“Maccaferri guitar. The kind that Django Rinehardt played.”

“If you say so. You have to work today?”

“I’m planning to meet with a couple of clients around one.”

“It’s just nine now.”

“Yes.”

“I have a shower running.”

“I thought I heard the water.”

“We could get clean.”

“That would be nice.”

“And then we could get dirty again.”

“That would be nicer,” I said, as I set the guitar top aside to dry.

* * * * *

Jeff Lopiano sat nervously across from me, tapping on a small digital device in his hand with a stylus. I sat calmly and watched him. The window behind me was open, and a cool breeze wafted in off the bay.

The door to my office opened, and Wally Bean walked in.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Lopiano asked.

“What’s *he* doing here?” Bean asked.

“When you think of it, in the larger sense, what are any of us doing here?” I reflected. “In this case, though, I think you two have some things in common. At the moment, that includes having hired me to investigate each other.”

“That’s a conflict of interest,” Bean protested.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Please, have a seat.”

Bean sat, reluctantly, in the seat next to Lopiano.

“Hey, Wally,” Lopiano said.

“Hi, Jeff.”

“Now, to business,” I said. “Both of you were referred here by Aubrey Innes. Each of you took him into your confidence, and told him essentially the same story. Each of you thinks the other has stolen your work. Follow me so far?”

They both nodded. Intellectual and emotional animated twin bookends.

“Detecting 101 says that this falls under the category of the impossible. A couple of ideas have occurred to me. One says that one or both of you are lying.”

“Now just a minute!” Lopiano protested.

I held up a hand to silence him.

“That was just one idea. Another idea says that both of you are telling the truth, but blaming the wrong person. I could bounce back and forth between you like a ping-pong ball, but that would just waste a lot of time and make me dizzy, so I decided to get you both in the same room and try to hash this out.”

I waited for some kind of response.

When none came, I continued.

“Mr. Bean, when did you first notice that your code had been used by Mr. Lopiano?”

“Stolen, you mean...” Bean said.

“Like hell,” Lopiano argued.

“Can we focus?” I said. “Mr. Bean, when did you discover the same code in both programs?”

“About a week ago. Like I said, one of my engineers obtained a beta test version of SymSystems’ new browser.”

“Where did he get this version?” I asked.

“I didn’t ask.”

“Of course not,” Lopiano chirped. “You didn’t want to be implicated.”

I ignored him.

“What was this engineer’s name?”

“Lionel Stukes.”

I turned to Lopiano.

“And when did you notice your code in Mr. Bean’s software?”

“About a week ago, also,” Lopiano said. “It was brought to my attention by the director of my development crew, Les Crampley.”

I wrote *Lionel Stukes* and *Les Crampley* on a legal pad next to my phone.

“How did Crampley obtain it?”

Lopiano mumbled something.

“Come again?” I asked.

“I didn’t ask,” Lopiano said, a little too loud and little too petulantly.

“For people with so much on the line, you guys sure don’t ask many questions,” I said.

Neither of them replied. They just sat there like a couple of school kids called up on the principal’s carpet for smoking in the boys’ room.

“Okay,” I said. “I’m going to need whatever information you can give me on Stukes and Crampley.”

* * * * *

Lionel Stukes had been dead for about twelve hours when I arrived at his house in Daly City. The front door was festooned with yellow crime tape, and a Pacifica Police detective named Crymes stood on the front walk talking with a uniformed cop.

“Crymes,” I said, as I walked up to him.

“Wait a minute, Gold,” he said, and finished his conversation.

“I hope you dropped by to confess,” he said.

“To what?”

“Making such a mess of the guy owns this place.”

“What happened?”

“Looks like he got into an awful fight. The living room is a wreck, and not just the parts he bled all over. Someone went after him with a blunt object and an agenda. Want to look?”

“Pass. Did he have a roommate or a live-in girlfriend?”

“Not that we can tell. What mail we found was addressed to him. What’s your involvement?”

“He worked for one of my clients. Software engineer. I needed to ask him a couple of questions.”

“I might want to talk with your client,” he said.

“Trust me,” I said. “You don’t.”

“What was he, bangin’ your client’s wife?”

“You wish it were that easy. No, he had acquired some software for my client. I wanted to find out where and how.”

“Industrial espionage case?”

“I’m not sure, yet. Maybe.”

“Keep me posted?”

“Got you on speed dial,” I said, as I headed back to my car.

* * * * *

A car was backing out of Les Crampley’s driveway just as I drove up his street in San Jose. I had a couple of options. I could have blocked his path, jerked him through the keyhole, and beat some answers out of him, but I had generally found that an unproductive approach.

So, I decided to follow him.

I let him get a couple of hundred yards ahead of me, then fell into a loose tail. When we got onto Interstate 280, I let a couple of cars separate us, while I watched his license plate through the windows. Unless he had X-ray vision, he couldn’t know I was back there.

He pulled off at an exit near Redwood City, and I went with him. He drove to an office park, where he parked in a lot outside a squat complex of single story buildings.

I parked one lot over, with a good view of the car.

The door opened, and I realized I hadn’t been following Les Crampley at all. The woman who got out was dressed in black jeans and a black tank top. Her inky hair was cut at indiscriminate lengths on top and back, with a long fringe running down the back of her neck,

like a rock musician. Even from a distance I could make out her kohl-rimmed eyes and the glittery accumulata of jewelry punched through the skin of her face, nose, lips, and ears. She wasn't all that tall, but she was lanky and loose-limbed as she strode from the car to the front door of the building.

I pulled my binoculars out and scanned the front door, where I found a sign that said *Core Logic*.

I stepped out of the car and walked casually over to the next lot to memorize her license tag. I kept walking, and pulled out my cell phone.

Shirley Jones is a pal who works for the DMV at the San Francisco Civic Center. We have a past, but that was over before I met Heidi.

"This is Gold," I said.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Your boss is hovering?"

"That's correct sir."

"I need a license tag traced." I gave her the number.

"Please hold, sir."

I suffered through an elevator music rendition of some Andrew Lloyd Webber tune, until she came back on the line.

"Is there lunch in this for me?"

"Not today. I'll owe you."

"You already owe me, skinflint."

"I'm in kind of a hurry, Shirl."

"The owner's name is Linda Pickett."

"Thanks, gotta boogie."

"Wait a min..."

But I had punched the END button. Linda Pickett had walked out of Core Logic, and was headed back to her car.

I returned to my car and backed it out of the lot just as she hit the stop sign at the highway. I noted which way she turned, and made the same turn when I got there. I could make out her car about a quarter mile ahead, so I hammered down for a mile or so to cut the distance a little, and then throttled back when I had reached at a comfortable gap.

It didn't take an Einstein to figure out that Linda Pickett was probably the conduit for the beta versions of the software that Les Crampley and Lionel Stukes had received. What I couldn't figure out was why she was playing both sides against the middle. Somehow, I thought, Core Logic had to fit in to the picture, unless she was also stringing along some poor programmer sap there.

Since Lionel Stukes had been murdered, I also figured that this put Les Crampley either at risk, or directly in the limelight as a suspect. I thumbed Crymes' number on my cell speed dial.

"Crymes."

"This is Gold. I'm tailing a chick named Linda Pickett. I saw her leave a house belonging to another guy named Les Crampley about a half hour ago. Crampley found some of his code in a program that your dead guy was writing for a company called SymSystems."

"Silicon Valley outfit?"

"Yeah. The dead guy, Stukes, worked for Dynogix. I thought you might want to check in on Crampley. If he isn't dead, I think he might have a lot of explaining to do."

I gave him Crampley's address, and signed off. As soon as I hit the END button, I dialed Kevin Krantz at the Business desk of the *Chronicle*. Kevin and I go back a long way.

"Kevin, this is Eamon Gold."

"Who do you want me to check on this time?"

"So young. So cynical."

"Yeah, yeah. What's up?"

"Company called Core Logic. It's in Redwood."

"You on your cell?"

"Yeah."

"I'll get back to you."

I followed Linda Pickett through San Mateo and Daly City. She was headed back into San Francisco. As long as we were on the freeway, I could lay back a quarter mile or so, keep a few cars between us. If I was lucky, and hadn't lost my touch, she'd never know I was there.

My cell beeped. I answered it.

"This is Kevin."

"What did you find?"

"Core Logic. Founded three years ago by Hack German, a former IBM techno-geek."

"What do they do?"

"What does anyone do down in Silicon Valley? He writes software."

"What kind of software?"

"In his case, he's been developing a search engine. He saw how Google and Yahoo had made their founders very rich men, and he wants to slice off a piece of that pie."

"Search engine," I said.

"Does that mean something?"

"I don't know. What do you know about ongoing projects at Dynogix and SymSystems?"

"Not much. I'd have to get back to you."

“The quicker the better, Kev.”

Linda Pickett pulled off the highway at the Bayshore Expressway, and then took the off ramp at Van Ness. I followed her through SoMa until she hung a left at Bush, and parked in the driveway of a house between Bush and Pine in the Fillmore district.

Just as I pulled over to the curb, my cell phone rang.

“This is Kevin,” he told me when I answered. “There’s a lot of talk about both Dynogix and SymSystems, but it’s all back channel stuff. It seems their legal eagles have been preparing some patent submissions.”

“Browsers,” I said. “I already know about that.”

“No. Well, sort of, but not exactly. What do you know about the Grid, Eamon?”

“You mean like the old Firesign Theater stuff? *Grid Willing*, that kind of thing?”

“Hardly. The Grid is the next big thing. It’s going to make the World Wide Web look like a rural party line. Super high speed information access, ungodly bandwidth, real high-tech whizbang stuff.”

“So?”

“So, forward-thinking techies are already preparing to get onboard with this Grid thingie. It seems that the patents being sought by Dynogix and SymSystems revolve around super-spiders.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Spiders are part of the browsing software used by search engines to acquire and catalog webpage information. They prowl around the Web in the background, reading pages and links, and indexing what they find. That way, when you type ‘*wombats*’ into a search engine, all it has to do is find that word in the index, and it lists all the pages containing the word.”

“And these super-spiders will do the same thing on this Grid?”

“Exactly. The first company to patent a Grid-compatible search engine using hyperspeed super-spiders is going to make a buttload of money.”

“Define *buttload*.”

“Billions, Eamon. If I were a savvy investor, which I am, I’d start buying both Dynogix and SymSystems, just to hedge my bets.”

“What about Core Logic?”

“What about them?”

“You said earlier that they were into search engines also.”

“Yeah. I did, didn’t I? What are you up to, anyway?”

“I’m not sure. I’d hold off buying stock, though, if I were you. Some of the players might get benched.”

I sat in my car, watching the front of the house Linda Pickett had entered, and tried to figure out what was going on. Linda had left Les Crampley’s house and had driven all the way to Redwood City, and then spent a grand total of five minutes inside Core Logic. Then she had

driven all the way back to the city. My guess was that she had gone to Core Logic just to drop off something. She really hadn't been there long enough to get into any lengthy conversations.

I pulled out the cell phone and called Heidi at the art gallery.

"I could use a favor," I said.

"Okay."

"Check your phone book. I need to know if there's a listing for Linda Pickett on Bush Street."

"Give me a sec... No. I don't see one. There's an L. Pickett on Figueroa in San Jose. A lot of women list themselves by their first initials."

"Yeah. They do. Give me the Figueroa address and phone number."

She recited them from the phone book, and I wrote them on the pad suspended from the dash of my car. I thanked her, with a promise of more attention later in the evening, and signed off.

My next call was to Kevin Krantz at the paper.

"Got your criss-cross phone directory handy?" I asked.

"Sure."

"I need a listing for a house on Bush Street."

I gave him the house number.

"According to the directory, it's a residence. Fellow named Kerry Clapp. You want the phone number?"

"Sure."

I sat in the car for a few more minutes, ruminating over what I knew, and what I didn't. Then I pulled out the cell phone on a hunch, got the number for Core Logic, and had information connect me.

"Core Logic," a woman answered.

"Kerry Clapp, please?"

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Clapp isn't in today. Can I take a message?"

"Um, I need to speak with someone directly. Is his supervisor available?"

"Certainly sir. I'll connect you."

There was a brief interlude, and then someone picked up the phone.

"This is Hack German," he said. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, I was trying to get in touch with Kerry Clapp," I said.

"Yes. Kerry's out today. Is there anything I can do for you, Mr..."

"I don't know," I said, evading his probe. "This is a little convoluted. I was hoping Mr. Clapp could put me in touch with Linda Pickett."

There was a moment of silence on the other end.

“Who is this?” he asked. His voice had taken on a cold, edgy tone.

I punched the END button, and turned off the telephone. Maybe German could star-sixty-nine me and maybe he couldn't. I didn't have a voicemail system on my cell, so he couldn't find me that way. If he tried to call me back, he'd just get an out-of-service message.

Nobody had entered or left the Bush Street house since Linda Pickett had gone inside. I waited about five minutes, just long enough for German to get tired of trying to ring me back, and then I called Crymes.

“Did you find Les Crampley?” I asked.

“Yeah. He was at home.”

“What was his story?”

“About what, Gold? He was safe and sound, not a scratch on him. He also said he'd never heard of a woman named Linda Pickett.”

“He's lying. I saw her leave his house not two hours ago.”

“You didn't see him with her, though.”

“No, but...”

“You want to fill me in on what's going on?”

“I'm still putting it together. I think it involves theft of intellectual property, and an attempt by a company called Core Logic to keep two other companies – Dynogix and SymSystems – from filing a patent application for a computer browsing system they're both developing.”

“Industrial espionage shit.”

“It has the smell of it.”

“Not the kind of thing that usually leads to murder.”

“According to one of my sources, there are billions of dollars at stake. Makes a hell of a motive.”

“I agree. I need what you've got.”

“I'm staking out a house owned by a guy named Kerry Clapp. He works for this Core Logic company. He isn't at work today. I saw Linda Pickett go inside the house about ten minutes ago. When I called Core Logic, the owner, fellow named Hack German, lost all his warmth when I told him I was looking for Linda Pickett. Linda Pickett was involved in a lust triangle with the owners of Dynogix and SymSystems three or four years ago, which led them to split up and go their separate ways.”

“This Linda Pickett gets around.”

“I think she may be the conduit between your dead guy and Les Crampley. I think she's been stealing code from both of them and shuttling it back and forth. Probably told them it was coming from Core Logic, since they're working on the same kind of programs.”

“You're losing me.”

“The first company to file a patent application for this new kind of search engine will make Microsoft look like a corner Mom and Pop operation. By pitting Dynogix against SymSystems, Core Logic buys time to perfect its product and file first.”

“It still doesn’t explain why Stukes was murdered.”

“I know. Maybe he figured out what was going on.”

The front door of the Bush Street house opened, and two people walked out. One was Linda Pickett. The other was a tall, sinewy man in his thirties. His hair was pulled back in a blond ponytail.

“Looks like my guys are on the move,” I said. “I’ll have to call you back, Crymes.”

“Gold, wait...”

I turned off the phone and dropped my car into gear just as Linda Pickett and her fellow pulled out of the driveway and headed east on Bush, toward Van Ness.

* * * * *

As I had expected, they drove straight to Core Logic. I had a feeling when I saw them that the rangy guy with the ponytail was Clapp. I also was willing to bet that when Hack German couldn’t get me back on the phone he called Clapp, who just happened to be with Linda Pickett, and summoned them to Core Logic for a strategic planning pow-wow.

I parked nearby, in the same lot I had used earlier that day, and watched as Linda Pickett and the guy I thought was Clapp got out of the car and walked inside.

Recalling that at least one person had already been killed, I grabbed my Browning automatic from the glove compartment and stowed it on my belt, underneath my jacket.

I strolled casually into the Core Logic office. Like a lot of Silicon Valley companies, it was little more than a shell housing a cube farm with a few standalone offices for the top brass. There was a girl sitting at the front desk who looked as if she should have been in high school.

“Is Hack in?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. He’s in a meeting.”

She nodded toward on end of the hall, at a closed door next to a warren of cubicles.

“Any idea how long he’s going to be?” I asked. “I’m on kind of a tight schedule.”

“Do you have an appointment, Mr...?”

“No. Just blowing through town. Thought I’d look ol’ Hack up, maybe drag him out to bend an elbow and reminisce about the college days.”

“If you’d like to take a seat,” she said, nodding toward the waiting area. Her arms, by all appearances, must have been paralyzed, because she pointed toward everything with her chin. “He should be available shortly.”

“Sure. Just one thing. Do you have a bathroom around here somewhere? I just drove in from the airport, and I had to sit in traffic for a while.”

She directed me back along the hallway toward the cube farm. Perfect.

I walked back along the hall, almost all the way to the closed office door, then turned left toward the bathroom. When I peeked back around the corner, the receptionist had left her desk.

There was an open door across the hall. It appeared to be some kind of small conference room. I walked through the open door and closed it behind me.

A dry erase whiteboard had been installed on the wall next to the closed office the girl had shown me. I picked up one of the drinking glasses from the water station and held it up to the board. It made a terrific sound conductor.

People in the next room seemed agitated.

“Why in hell did you have to kill him?” one person, a male said.

“He’d figured out where the code originated. He was going to rat us out to Bean.”

“I thought you were going to handle Stukes.”

“I did, up to a point,” a female voice said. Must have been Linda Pickett. *“When he discovered that the code came from Core Logic instead of SymSystems, he felt betrayed. He called me over specifically to tell me that he was going to turn us in. He’d figured out the entire scheme. He was even going to call Lopiano over at SymSystems.”*

“We didn’t have a choice,” the other male voice said. I decided he must be Clapp.

“What about the other one? Crampley?”

“He’s on board,” Linda said. *“I offered to let him in on the take once the Core Logic super-spider gets patented and goes into production. I also told him we could keep getting together for sex. I tried it with Stukes, but he apparently had a few more scruples.”*

The telephone in the next room buzzed, and I heard someone pick it up.

“Yes, Brenda... Okay, thanks.”

A second later, a connecting door to my right opened, and Clapp dashed into the room. He grabbed me by the collar and started dragging me toward German’s office. I elbowed him stiffly just under the ribs, and heard the air blast out of his lungs just before he fell to his knees.

By that time, though, German was all over me. He was a big guy, maybe six-two, and he worked out. He tried to put me in a full nelson. I quickly dropped and broke his grip, but he kned me in the kidneys as I went down. A wave of heat and nausea flooded through my torso. I felt a hand snake under my jacket. Before I could stop him, German had my gun.

“Just stay down there!” he ordered. “Who in hell are you?”

I tried to make some words come out, but the pain in my lower back kept me from getting enough air to produce anything more audible than a croak.

At that moment, my cell phone jangled in my jacket pocket.

German jacked me up against the wall, held me there with his forearm against my windpipe, and grabbed the cell phone with his free hand. He held it in front of my eyes.

“Who is it?” he demanded.

I looked at the number.

“A cop. His name is Crymes. Pacifica PD.”

He let it ring. After a few moments, it stopped.

“The cops!” he said to Linda Pickett, who had joined us in the meeting room. “Look what you’ve brought down on our heads, you stupid bitch!”

He went through my pockets, and found my leather card folder.

“He’s a PI,” German said. “Name’s Eamon Gold.”

“Never heard of him,” Clapp said. He had finally gotten his breath back, and was standing next to German.

“What are you doing here, Gold?” German asked. He accented his question with a sharp fist to the short ribs on my right side. I winced, and made a silent promise to clean his clock the first chance I got.

“Working a case,” I said.

“Who hired you?”

“Bean and Lopiano. I’ve already told Crymes, that cop who was on the phone, the entire scheme. I told him that Linda Pickett was feeding Core Logic code to Stukes and Crampley. I know about the super-spider patent application, and how you’re trying to divert Dynogix and SymSystems by making them each think the other is stealing their code, until you can snipe them. Crymes knows everything.”

“Don’t shit me, man. If the cops knew everything, they’d be here already.”

“This is fucked,” Clapp said. “I didn’t sign on for this kind of shitstorm. I’m leaving.”

With his arm still pinned against my windpipe, German swung my Browning around and leveled it at Clapp.

“Nobody leaves!” he said.

“*Now* you’ve got balls?” Clapp said. “I beat the living shit out of Stukes last night because you didn’t have the guts to stop him.”

“That was different,” German said. “I can’t let you leave until we know how much Gold here has passed on to the cops.”

“Christ!” Clapp said. “We are going *down*, man.”

“No, we aren’t,” German argued. “Worst case, we have to leave the country. I have millions stashed away in the offshore accounts. We’ll be just fine.”

“What about her?” Clapp said, pointing at Linda. “She’s the connection with Dynogix and SymSystems.”

“Man,” I rasped. “You guys aren’t even good enough to be lousy criminals. What made you think you could get away with this?”

“It was her idea!” Clapp said.

“Shut up!” German said. “Let me think!”

“*She* came to *us*,” Clapp said, ignoring him. “She said she had a way to keep Lopiano and Bean off balance long enough for us to get the jump on the super-spider program.”

“I said *shut up!*” German said, just before I pivoted and sank my teeth into his forearm.

He screamed at the instant pain, and his other hand jerked. I heard the Browning explode in the crowded room, and a little scarlet flower erupted on the front of Clapp’s shirt. He clawed at the hole, as the flower grew into a splotch, and then a cascade. Slowly, he sat down on the floor, unable to take his eyes off the life that flooded out of him one heartbeat at a time.

I rammed my knee up into German’s balls, and took great delight in the way his eyes widened as his mouth formed this silent round circle, just before he dropped the Browning, doubled over, and clutched his arms to his midsection.

Linda Pickett grabbed the Browning as German went down, and had me cold before I could stop her. Her hands trembled as she tried to keep the barrel pointed at my chest. She didn’t say anything. Her eyes were dilated to the point that all I could see were pupils. She was running on pure adrenalin, and any second her fist was going to spasm and park a nine mike round right into my heart.

Just when I thought she was about to go ballistic, she cut to her right and dashed back into German’s office. I heard her run down the hall, and I took off after her.

She ran right into Crymes and a couple of uniformed Redwood City patrol cops as they walked in the front door. They instinctively drew down on her.

“Drop the fucking weapon!” Crymes yelled, using the command voice they teach in the academy.

She froze and dropped the Browning to the floor. I stood behind her, my hands already in the air.

“The others are in the back,” I said. “German killed Clapp, I think.”

Crymes directed the patrolmen to the back, as he started to cuff Linda.

“You must have called from the parking lot,” I said.

“I was going to check Core Logic out based on your call a little while ago. I got here and saw that piece of shit car of yours. Figured you had beat me to the punch. Looks like I missed the party.”

“I overheard them talking about killing Stukes,” I said.

“All in good time, Eamon. Let’s figure out what happened here first.”

* * * * *

“So Clapp killed Lionel Stukes,” I told Heidi over dinner that night at my Montara house. “It seems that Linda Pickett was screwing just about everyone except German, and she must have

been top shelf, because these guys would do just about anything for her. She told Clapp that Stukes was going to turn them all in for conspiracy, and Clapp paid Stukes a visit.”

“What happens next?” Heidi asked.

“Linda’s no idiot. As soon as she dropped the gun she started talking deal with Crymes. She’ll give up Hack German for both the conspiracy and for killing Clapp. He’ll get minimal time on the conspiracy, since it’s basically a white-collar beef. He didn’t really mean to kill Clapp, either, so he’ll probably get off with involuntary manslaughter. Linda Pickett will probably get off with probation. Same for Crampley.”

“Hardly seems fair,” she said. “After all two guys are dead over all this.”

“That’s not all. Once they realized that they’d both been royally dicked by Linda Pickett, Lopiano and Bean buried the hatchet. They’re talking merger, and they’re planning to launch their super-spider as a joint venture. Want to hear the best part? The hot shit code that makes the whole thing run really did belong to Core Logic to begin with, for all the good it does German now.”

She finished her wine, and placed the glass back on the table.

“And the silicon kings were very grateful to their savior,” she noted.

“It’s a good thing, too. I lost the Browning. It’s a murder weapon, so the police confiscated it. I’ll never get it back.”

“Yeah, but you do get the consolation prize,” she said.

“What’s that?”

She stood and started unbuttoning her blouse.

“Me,” she said.

It was a fair trade.

END

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McTEAGUE

Part Six

by

FRANK NORRIS

Classic Noir

*Frank Norris was a naturalistic writer of the very late nineteenth century, who produced some of the darkest, hardest-edged prose of his day. **McTeague** is, perhaps, his best-known work, if only because it was the foundation for the infamous Erich von Stroheim silent film **Greed**. Largely inspired by the novels of Emile Zola and the scientific work of Charles Darwin, much of Norris's literary work focused on the efforts of ordinary men to conquer - or at least control - the raging beast within. **McTeague**, the story of an ill-fated love triangle in nineteenth century San Francisco, is still considered to be one of the great American classics, ranking up there with the works of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. How great an author Norris might have become in the fullness of time we will never know, as he died in 1902, just three years after publishing **McTeague**, at the very young age of thirty-two.*

***The Back Alley** will serialize **McTeague** over seven issues, and will include articles by scholars who focus on the work of Frank Norris to help the reader understand and appreciate this very early example of naturalistically noir fiction.*

The Story So Far:

McTeague, a hulking, slow-witted former car-boy in a silver mine, has opened a sham dentist parlor on Polk Street in late nineteenth century San Francisco. Schooled only by observing an itinerant dental butcher, and some superficial readings of 'Allen's Practical Dentist' books, he engages mostly in pulling teeth and administering gas (most likely ether or nitrous oxide). His best friend, budding socialist Marcus Schouler, introduces him to a distant cousin, Trina Sieppe. Trina has a broken tooth which needs mending. While Trina is waiting to have the tooth fixed, McTeague's housekeeper Maria Macapa sells her a lottery ticket. McTeague determines that Trina's tooth can't be saved, and he has to pull it and the one next to it and fashion replacements for them. It's an operation that takes a couple of weeks and several visits to complete. At a final session, he is forced to place her under anesthesia with gas. While she is asleep, McTeague is seized by an impulse that he fights mightily, but unsuccessfully. Yielding to what he calls his 'brute', McTeague kisses Trina forcefully. Ashamed, he returns to his work, and when Trina awakens she tells him that she 'never felt a thing'. McTeague, perhaps out of guilt, immediately- if somewhat roughly- proposes marriage to Trina. She becomes very upset, refuses his proposal, and begins to vomit.

As it happens, Marcus Schouler is also in love with Trina, a fact which McTeague knew even as he kissed her and asked her to marry him. As he lies in his dental parlor, guilt-ridden, he isn't aware that Maria Macapa is robbing him blind, taking instruments and dental gold foil to sell to a Jewish pawnbroker named Zerkow.

McTeague joins with Marcus one afternoon, while Marcus - who works as an assistant for Grannis, the dog doctor - is walking some of Grannis' 'patients'. Over a couple of beers, Marcus asks McTeague what is bothering him. After considerable persuasion, McTeague confesses that he loves Trina Sieppe. Marcus realizes that McTeague would marry Trina that very afternoon if she would have him, but Marcus does not think that he himself cares for her that much. He tells McTeague that he will 'pull out', and make way for McTeague to court Trina, in the interest of their friendship. McTeague is overcome with emotion.

To cheer his friend up, Marcus plays a trick on him. He demonstrates how he can put an entire billiards ball in his mouth. McTeague is dumbstruck. Marcus takes the ball out, and then challenges McTeague to do the same thing. He does, but the ball becomes stuck. McTeague begins to panic, until the ball comes loose of its own accord. Laughing over the joke, Marcus suggests that McTeague begin his courtship of Trina as soon as possible. In a piece of foreshadowing, Marcus points to two dogs snarling at each other through a picket fence and says, "By damn they don't love each other. Just listen; wouldn't that make a fight if the two got together? Have to try it some day."

Having received his friend's blessing, McTeague begins to court Trina. Because her family is from the Old World, all his dates with her are taken as family outings – picnics at the bay, family suppers at her home, and a memorable trip to Schuetzen Park across the bay. After that trip, he begins to see her every Sunday and Wednesday, and one day she meets him at the train without her family. They take a walk, and McTeague confesses to Trina his deepest desire – to have a large gilded tooth mounted outside his dental parlor to announce to one and all his profession.

Once again McTeague asks Trina to marry him, and he kisses her. Alarmed, she takes off and returns to her home, where she asks her mother what she should do. Trina can't decide whether to marry McTeague – on the one hand she finds herself aroused by him, but she is also frightened by his size and rare outbursts of temper. She realized at last that McTeague had awakened the Woman in her, and that she was, for better or worse, irrevocably bonded to him.

Marcus suggests to McTeague that he take Trina to the theater – something that would be a completely novel experience for both of them. McTeague takes Trina and her family to the theater in San Francisco. Never having seen a vaudeville show before, McTeague is amazed at all the different acts, and only leaves reluctantly when Trina's young brother August wets the pants of his new Lord Fautleroy suit.

Upon returning to McTeague's dental parlors, where McTeague intends to treat the family to dinner, they are called down by Maria Macapa, who excitedly proclaims that Trina's lottery ticket had the winning number, and that she has won five thousand dollars! Everyone is excited, except for Marcus Schouler, who realizes that by giving Trina up to save his friendship with McTeague, he has also given up any chance of sharing in his cousin's amazing new wealth.

"You fool, you fool, Marcus Schouler! (he exclaims) If you'd kept Trina you'd have had that money. You might have had it yourself. You've thrown away your chance in life -- to give up the girl, yes -- but this," he stamped his foot with rage -- "to throw five thousand dollars out of the window -- to stuff it into the pockets of someone else, when it might have been yours, when you might have had Trina AND the money -- and all for what? Because we were pals . Oh, 'pals' is all right -- but five thousand dollars -- to have played it right into his hands -- God DAMN the luck!"

Over the next two months, Trina and McTeague prepare for their impending wedding. McTeague has big plans for the five thousand dollars Trina won in the lottery—a new house, lavish furnishings, feasts—but it soon becomes evident that Trina is frugal, and satisfied with a small monthly dividend from investing the money. She finally invests in her Uncle Oelbermann's toy store in the Mission District, at an interest rate of six percent.

Marcus Schouler, in the mean time, has grown more and more resentful about losing his chance at Trina's money. He picks arguments with McTeague, claiming that the dentist owes him money, and then refusing it when McTeague offers to pay him back. McTeague is distressed and puzzled over what he might have done to insult his dear friend. Finally, during one particularly vehement argument in a bar, Marcus demands part of the five thousand dollars as a reward for bringing McTeague and Trina together. When McTeague refuses, Marcus breaks McTeague's pipe, and throws a knife at him.

Trina has a surprise for McTeague, however. She brings him a present one day—a huge gilded tooth to go over the door of his dentist studios, the very tooth he had dreamed of placing there.

On the eve of the wedding, Trina's mother brings McTeague and Marcus together in her home and demands that they reconcile. They do so, and become friends again. Trina is still upset at Marcus for demanding part of the money, and declares, "It's mine! All mine!" She immediately relents, however, and amends her declaration by saying, "That is, it's ours."

McTeague and Trina are married, and Marcus makes quite a show of congratulating Trina on her nuptials. However, when it comes time for Trina's family to return to Oakland, she panics, and tells her mother that she is afraid. Her mother attempts to comfort her, and then the family leaves her alone with McTeague. When he attempts to embrace her, she panics again, and can only tell him that she is frightened by the sheer size and power of him. He professes his love for her again, and she yields willingly to him.

As she embraces him, she says, "You must be good to me -- very, very good to me, dear -- for you're all that I have in the world now."

It doesn't take long for problems to arise in McTeague's and Trina's marriage, and—as is often the case—their troubles tend to revolve around money. Trina has a large nest egg of over five thousand dollars, but also seems very reluctant to spend any of it. Fearful of losing her money, she has become miserly. McTeague finds a house they can rent, for thirty-five dollars a month plus water, but Trina says that they can't afford it, despite the fact that McTeague's dentist parlors are flourishing. McTeague signs a contract for the house anyway, which infuriates Trina. They have a terrible argument. Later, regretting her part in it, she decides to give McTeague ten dollars. However, when she pulls out her money from her bedroom chest, she finds rationalizations not to part with a single coin.

McTeague recovers quickly from the conflict, and suggests that they go to Scheutzen Park for another picnic. The picnic turns into a multi-family affair, and even Marcus Schouler comes along. The men decide to engage in a wrestling contest. When all the preliminary matches are completed, the only two men left to wrestle for the win are McTeague and Marcus. They wrestle, and McTeague thinks he has pinned Marcus. As he celebrates, Marcus—who prides himself on his wrestling ability and is enraged that the simple giant dentist might have bettered him, protests that it was not a legitimate pin, and that McTeague must give him a second chance. The other men agree, and McTeague and Marcus wrestle a second time. This time, Marcus bites of the lobe of McTeague's ear. McTeague, whose brutish nature lies just under his placid, good-natured surface, loses control and becomes furious, intending to kill Marcus. The other men and Trina try to intervene, as McTeague grasps Marcus's arm and snaps it like a twig. Finally, Trina is able to reach McTeague by appealing to his medical expertise, asking him how to stop the bleeding from his damaged ear.

The picnic breaks into two groups—one working on setting Marcus's broken arm, and the other watching Trina attending to McTeague's bleeding ear.

All at once, Trina's cousin Selina begins to giggle hysterically, and cries out with a peal of laughter: "Oh, what a way for our picnic to end!"

Zerkow repeatedly pressures Maria Macapa to tell him about the gold dishes she had once bragged about owning, but she claims to know nothing about them. Finally, exasperated, he beats her and tries to threaten her into telling him where the dishes are located. She runs to Marcus Schouler, begging for protection. Zerkow threatens Marcus with a knife, but Marcus bullies him into standing down. Maria cries that she has no idea what dishes Zerkow wants. Trina, however, reminds her that she used to brag about the dishes all the time. Maria continues to plead ignorance, and Marcus just laughs at her and tells her to come to him if she is in trouble.

Trina, over the course of several weeks, demonstrates an increasing level of anxiety over her sweepstakes money and the \$25 a month in interest that it generates. First, her mother writes from Oakland to tell her that she is in a bad way, and to request that Trina send her fifty dollars to tide her over. McTeague urges her to send the money, and Trina—after a considerable argument—agrees to send \$25 one month, and another \$25 the next. When McTeague later inquires as to whether she sent the money, she says that she did, when in reality she didn't.

Then, word reaches her that Marcus Schouler is planning to leave San Francisco. When he shows up at the McTeague home to say goodbye, Trina presumes that he will ask for money to live on while establishing himself, and vows that she will not give him a dime. Marcus, however, only wishes to tell them goodbye, and that he will likely never return to San Francisco, as he is headed for southern California to begin a ranch with an 'English duck' as a co-investor.

McTeague receives a letter from City Hall, ordering him to quit practicing dentistry, as he never went to dental college, and has no license to practice.

Trina is immediately gripped with terror of poverty or—worse—that she and McTeague might be sent to prison should he keep practicing. McTeague initially ignores the order, but then another, more strident order arrives, and Trina collapses into despondency. McTeague suggests that they can live on her sweepstakes winnings until he can straighten out his affairs, but she resolutely refuses. She says that this is HER money, and his loss of his practice means that they will lose their home and perhaps go to prison.

He closes his dental parlors, and they move to a one-room apartment in a boarding house. McTeague insists that they can live on some of the two hundred dollars Trina has saved, but Trina insists that she only has seventy-five, and they must live on the \$25 monthly interest on her sweepstakes money, and the thirty dollars that her Uncle Oelbermann gives them. What she doesn't tell him is that she has actually saved three-hundred dollars, but she doesn't want to part with a penny of it.

They sell all their possessions from their house, except for McTeague's concertina and their caged canary, which he insists on keeping. Another dentist does drop by to offer ten dollars for the gilded tooth sign outside McTeague's parlors, but McTeague refuses to part with it.

Trina takes a job whittling toy Noah's Ark animals, and McTeague finds low-paying work fashioning dental tools. They fight constantly over the spending of dimes and quarters. After several months, however, McTeague is fired due to 'hard times'. Trina demands all the money he has on hand, and sends him out to apply at other surgical tools companies for work. He asks for car fare, since it looks like rain, but Trina refuses, and tells him it won't rain.

The leather worker Frennis sees McTeague walking in the rain and invites him in. They drink whiskey together, ostensibly to warm McTeague up, and all this does is fuel McTeague's anger toward Trina and her miserly nature. He returns home, furious, and demands his severance pay back. She lies to him, telling him that she used it to pay the grocer. He again says that they could dip into her five thousand dollars sweepstakes money to get out of the 'rat hole' in which they live. She now becomes furious herself, and says that now that McTeague is unemployed they will not even be able to afford the 'rat hole', and that they will need to find even more meager lodgings. McTeague tells her to leave him alone, and he goes to bed.

Trina wonders, however, where McTeague got money for whiskey—not knowing that he was treated by Mr. Frennis. She wonders whether he has some hidden cache of funds, and decides she will have to keep an eye out for it.

Chapter 16

A week passed, then a fortnight, then a month. It was a month of the greatest anxiety and unquietude for Trina. McTeague was out of a job, could find nothing to do; and Trina, who saw the impossibility of saving as much money as usual out of her earnings under the present conditions, was on the lookout for cheaper quarters. In spite of his outcries and sulky resistance Trina had induced her husband to consent to such a move, bewildering him with a torrent of

phrases and marvellous columns of figures by which she proved conclusively that they were in a condition but one remove from downright destitution.

The dentist continued idle. Since his ill success with the manufacturers of surgical instruments he had made but two attempts to secure a job. Trina had gone to see Uncle Oelbermann and had obtained for McTeague a position in the shipping department of the wholesale toy store. However, it was a position that involved a certain amount of ciphering, and McTeague had been obliged to throw it up in two days.

Then for a time they had entertained a wild idea that a place on the police force could be secured for McTeague. He could pass the physical examination with flying colors, and Ryer, who had become the secretary of the Polk Street Improvement Club, promised the requisite political "pull." If McTeague had shown a certain energy in the matter the attempt might have been successful; but he was too stupid, or of late had become too listless to exert himself greatly, and the affair resulted only in a violent quarrel with Ryer.

McTeague had lost his ambition. He did not care to better his situation. All he wanted was a warm place to sleep and three good meals a day. At the first -- at the very first -- he had chafed at his idleness and had spent the days with his wife in their one narrow room, walking back and forth with the restlessness of a caged brute, or sitting motionless for hours, watching Trina at her work, feeling a dull glow of shame at the idea that she was supporting him. This feeling had worn off quickly, however. Trina's work was only hard when she chose to make it so, and as a rule she supported their misfortunes with a silent fortitude.

Then, wearied at his inaction and feeling the need of movement and exercise, McTeague would light his pipe and take a turn upon the great avenue one block above Polk Street. A gang of laborers were digging the foundations for a large brownstone house, and McTeague found interest and amusement in leaning over the barrier that surrounded the excavations and watching the progress of the work. He came to see it every afternoon; by and by he even got to know the foreman who superintended the job, and the two had long talks together. Then McTeague would return to Polk Street and find Heise in the back room of the harness shop, and occasionally the day ended with some half dozen drinks of whiskey at Joe Frenna's saloon.

It was curious to note the effect of the alcohol upon the dentist. It did not make him drunk, it made him vicious. So far from being stupefied, he became, after the fourth glass, active, alert, quick-witted, even talkative; a certain wickedness stirred in him then; he was intractable, mean; and when he had drunk a little more heavily than usual, he found a certain pleasure in annoying and exasperating Trina, even in abusing and hurting her.

It had begun on the evening of Thanksgiving Day, when Heise had taken McTeague out to dinner with him. The dentist on this occasion had drunk very freely. He and Heise had returned to Polk Street towards ten o'clock, and Heise at once suggested a couple of drinks at Frenna's.

"All right, all right," said McTeague. "Drinks, that's the word. I'll go home and get some money and meet you at Joe's."

Trina was awakened by her husband pinching her arm.

"Oh, Mac," she cried, jumping up in bed with a little scream, "how you hurt! Oh, that hurt me dreadfully."

"Give me a little money," answered the dentist, grinning, and pinching her again.

"I haven't a cent. There's not a -- oh, MAC, will you stop? I won't have you pinch me that way."

"Hurry up," answered her husband, calmly, nipping the flesh of her shoulder between his thumb and finger. "Heise's waiting for me." Trina wrenched from him with a sharp intake of breath, frowning with pain, and caressing her shoulder.

"Mac, you've no idea how that hurts. Mac, *stop!*"

"Give me some money, then."

In the end Trina had to comply. She gave him half a dollar from her dress pocket, protesting that it was the only piece of money she had.

"One more, just for luck," said McTeague, pinching her again; "and another."

"How can you -- how CAN you hurt a woman so!" exclaimed Trina, beginning to cry with the pain.

"Ah, now, cry," retorted the dentist. "That's right, *cry*. I never saw such a little fool." He went out, slamming the door in disgust.

But McTeague never became a drunkard in the generally received sense of the term. He did not drink to excess more than two or three times in a month, and never upon any occasion did he become maudlin or staggering. Perhaps his nerves were naturally too dull to admit of any excitement; perhaps he did not really care for the whiskey, and only drank because Heise and the other men at Frenna's did. Trina could often reproach him with drinking too much; she never could say that he was drunk. The alcohol had its effect for all that. It roused the man, or rather the brute in the man, and now not only roused it, but goaded it to evil. McTeague's nature changed. It was not only the alcohol, it was idleness and a general throwing off of the good influence his wife had had over him in the days of their prosperity. McTeague disliked Trina. She was a perpetual irritation to him. She annoyed him because she was so small, so prettily made, so invariably correct and precise. Her avarice incessantly harassed him. Her industry was a constant reproach to him. She seemed to flaunt her work defiantly in his face. It was the red flag in the eyes of the bull. One time when he had just come back from Frenna's and had been sitting in the chair near her, silently watching her at her work, he exclaimed all of a sudden:

"Stop working. Stop it, I tell you. Put 'em away. Put 'em all away, or I'll pinch you."

"But why -- why?" Trina protested.

The dentist cuffed her ears. "I won't have you work." He took her knife and her paint-pots away, and made her sit idly in the window the rest of the afternoon.

It was, however, only when his wits had been stirred with alcohol that the dentist was brutal to his wife. At other times, say three weeks of every month, she was merely an incumbrance to him. They often quarrelled about Trina's money, her savings. The dentist was bent upon having at least a part of them. What he would do with the money once he had it, he did not precisely know. He would spend it in royal fashion, no doubt, feasting continually, buying himself wonderful clothes. The miner's idea of money quickly gained and lavishly squandered, persisted in his mind. As for Trina, the more her husband stormed, the tighter she drew the strings of the little chamois-skin bag that she hid at the bottom of her trunk underneath her bridal dress. Her five thousand dollars invested in Uncle Oelbermann's business was a glittering, splendid dream which came to her almost every hour of the day as a solace and a compensation for all her unhappiness.

At times, when she knew that McTeague was far from home, she would lock her door, open her trunk, and pile all her little hoard on her table. By now it was four hundred and seven dollars and fifty cents. Trina would play with this money by the hour, piling it, and repiling it, or gathering it all into one heap, and drawing back to the farthest corner of the room to note the effect, her head on one side. She polished the gold pieces with a mixture of soap and ashes until they shone, wiping them carefully on her apron. Or, again, she would draw the heap lovingly toward her and bury her face in it, delighted at the smell of it and the feel of the smooth, cool metal on her cheeks. She even put the smaller gold pieces in her mouth, and jingled them there. She loved her money with an intensity that she could hardly express. She would plunge her small fingers into the pile with little murmurs of affection, her long, narrow eyes half closed and shining, her breath coming in long sighs.

"Ah, the dear money, the dear money," she would whisper. "I love you so! All mine, every penny of it. No one shall ever, ever get you. How I've worked for you! How I've slaved and saved for you! And I'm going to get more; I'm going to get more, more, more; a little every day."

She was still looking for cheaper quarters. Whenever she could spare a moment from her work, she would put on her hat and range up and down the entire neighborhood from Sutter to Sacramento Streets, going into all the alleys and bystreets, her head in the air, looking for the "Rooms-to-let" sign. But she was in despair. All the cheaper tenements were occupied. She could find no room more reasonable than the one she and the dentist now occupied.

As time went on, McTeague's idleness became habitual. He drank no more whiskey than at first, but his dislike for Trina increased with every day of their poverty, with every day of Trina's persistent stinginess. At times -- fortunately rare he was more than ever brutal to her. He would box her ears or hit her a great blow with the back of a hair-brush, or even with his closed fist. His old-time affection for his "little woman," unable to stand the test of privation, had lapsed by degrees, and what little of it was left was changed, distorted, and made monstrous by the alcohol.

The people about the house and the clerks at the provision stores often remarked that Trina's fingertips were swollen and the nails purple as though they had been shut in a door. Indeed, this was the explanation she gave. The fact of the matter was that McTeague, when he had been drinking, used to bite them, crunching and grinding them with his immense teeth, always ingenious enough to remember which were the sorest. Sometimes he extorted money from her by this means, but as often as not he did it for his own satisfaction.

And in some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistible, virile power.

Trina's emotions had narrowed with the narrowing of her daily life. They reduced themselves at last to but two, her passion for her money and her perverted love for her husband when he was brutal. She was a strange woman during these days.

Trina had come to be on very intimate terms with Maria Macapa, and in the end the dentist's wife and the maid of all work became great friends. Maria was constantly in and out of Trina's room, and, whenever she could, Trina threw a shawl over her head and returned Maria's calls. Trina could reach Zerkow's dirty house without going into the street. The back yard of the flat had a gate that opened into a little inclosure where Zerkow kept his decrepit horse and ramshackle wagon, and from thence Trina could enter directly into Maria's kitchen. Trina made long visits to Maria during the morning in her dressing-gown and curl papers, and the two talked at great length over a cup of tea served on the edge of the sink or a corner of the laundry table. The talk was all of their husbands and of what to do when they came home in aggressive moods.

"You never ought to fight um," advised Maria. "It only makes um worse. Just hump your back, and it's soonest over."

They told each other of their husbands' brutalities, taking a strange sort of pride in recounting some particularly savage blow, each trying to make out that her own husband was the most cruel. They critically compared each other's bruises, each one glad when she could exhibit the worst. They exaggerated, they invented details, and, as if proud of their beatings, as if glorying in their husbands' mishandling, lied to each other, magnifying their own maltreatment. They had long and excited arguments as to which were the most effective means of punishment, the rope's ends and cart whips such as Zerkow used, or the fists and backs of hair-brushes affected by McTeague. Maria contended that the lash of the whip hurt the most; Trina, that the butt did the most injury.

Maria showed Trina the holes in the walls and the loosened boards in the flooring where Zerkow had been searching for the gold plate. Of late he had been digging in the back yard and had ransacked the hay in his horse-shed for the concealed leather chest he imagined he would find. But he was becoming impatient, evidently.

"The way he goes on," Maria told Trina, "is somethun dreadful. He's gettun regularly sick with it -- got a fever every night -- don't sleep, and when he does, talks to himself. Says 'More'n a hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold. More'n a hundred pieces, an' every one of 'em gold.'

Then he'll whale me with his whip, and shout, 'You know where it is. Tell me, tell me, you swine, or I'll do for you.' An' then he'll get down on his knees and whimper, and beg me to tell um where I've hid it. He's just gone plum crazy. Sometimes he has regular fits, he gets so mad, and rolls on the floor and scratches himself."

One morning in November, about ten o'clock, Trina pasted a "Made in France" label on the bottom of a Noah's ark, and leaned back in her chair with a long sigh of relief. She had just finished a large Christmas order for Uncle Oelbermann, and there was nothing else she could do that morning. The bed had not yet been made, nor had the breakfast things been washed. Trina hesitated for a moment, then put her chin in the air indifferently.

"Bah!" she said, "let them go till this afternoon. I don't care WHEN the room is put to rights, and I know Mac don't." She determined that instead of making the bed or washing the dishes she would go and call on Miss Baker on the floor below. The little dressmaker might ask her to stay to lunch, and that would be something saved, as the dentist had announced his intention that morning of taking a long walk out to the Presidio to be gone all day.

But Trina rapped on Miss Baker's door in vain that morning. She was out. Perhaps she was gone to the florist's to buy some geranium seeds. However, Old Grannis's door stood a little ajar, and on hearing Trina at Miss Baker's room, the old Englishman came out into the hall.

"She's gone out," he said, uncertainly, and in a half whisper, "went out about half an hour ago. I -- I think she went to the drug store to get some wafers for the goldfish."

"Don't you go to your dog hospital any more, Mister Grannis?" said Trina, leaning against the balustrade in the hall, willing to talk a moment.

Old Grannis stood in the doorway of his room, in his carpet slippers and faded corduroy jacket that he wore when at home.

"Why -- why," he said, hesitating, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "You see I'm thinking of giving up the little hospital."

"Giving it up?"

"You see, the people at the book store where I buy my pamphlets have found out -- I told them of my contrivance for binding books, and one of the members of the firm came up to look at it. He offered me quite a sum if I would sell him the right of it -- the -- patent of it -- quite a sum. In fact -- in fact -- yes, quite a sum, quite." He rubbed his chin tremulously and looked about him on the floor.

"Why, isn't that fine?" said Trina, good-naturedly. "I'm very glad, Mister Grannis. Is it a good price?"

"Quite a sum -- quite. In fact, I never dreamed of having so much money."

"Now, see here, Mister Grannis," said Trina, decisively, "I want to give you a good piece of advice. Here are you and Miss Baker -- -- " The old Englishman started nervously -- "You and Miss Baker, that have been in love with each other for -- -- "

"Oh, Mrs. McTeague, that subject -- if you would please -- Miss Baker is such an estimable lady."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Trina. "You're in love with each other, and the whole flat knows it; and you two have been living here side by side year in and year out, and you've never said a word to each other. It's all nonsense. Now, I want you should go right in and speak to her just as soon as she comes home, and say you've come into money and you want her to marry you."

"Impossible -- impossible!" exclaimed the old Englishman, alarmed and perturbed. "It's quite out of the question. I wouldn't presume."

"Well, do you love her, or not?"

"Really, Mrs. McTeague, I -- I -- you must excuse me. It's a matter so personal -- so -- I -- Oh, yes, I love her. Oh, yes, indeed," he exclaimed, suddenly.

"Well, then, she loves you. She told me so."

"Oh!"

"She did. She said those very words."

Miss Baker had said nothing of the kind -- would have died sooner than have made such a confession; but Trina had drawn her own conclusions, like every other lodger of the flat, and thought the time was come for decided action.

"Now you do just as I tell you, and when she comes home, go right in and see her, and have it over with. Now, don't say another word. I'm going; but you do just as I tell you."

Trina turned about and went down-stairs. She had decided, since Miss Baker was not at home, that she would run over and see Maria; possibly she could have lunch there. At any rate, Maria would offer her a cup of tea.

Old Grannis stood for a long time just as Trina had left him, his hands trembling, the blood coming and going in his withered cheeks.

"She said, she -- she -- she told her -- she said that -- that -- -- " he could get no farther.

Then he faced about and entered his room, closing the door behind him. For a long time he sat in his armchair, drawn close to the wall in front of the table on which stood his piles of pamphlets and his little binding apparatus.

"I wonder," said Trina, as she crossed the yard back of Zerkow's house, "I wonder what rent Zerkow and Maria pay for this place. I'll bet it's cheaper than where Mac and I are."

Trina found Maria sitting in front of the kitchen stove, her chin upon her breast. Trina went up to her. She was dead. And as Trina touched her shoulder, her head rolled sideways and showed a fearful gash in her throat under her ear. All the front of her dress was soaked through and through.

Trina backed sharply away from the body, drawing her hands up to her very shoulders, her eyes staring and wide, an expression of unutterable horror twisting her face.

"Oh-h-h!" she exclaimed in a long breath, her voice hardly rising above a whisper. "Oh-h, isn't that horrible!" Suddenly she turned and fled through the front part of the house to the street door, that opened upon the little alley. She looked wildly about her. Directly across the way a butcher's boy was getting into his two-wheeled cart drawn up in front of the opposite house, while near by a peddler of wild game was coming down the street, a brace of ducks in his hand.

"Oh, say -- say," gasped Trina, trying to get her voice, "say, come over here quick."

The butcher's boy paused, one foot on the wheel, and stared. Trina beckoned frantically.

"Come over here, come over here quick."

The young fellow swung himself into his seat.

"What's the matter with that woman?" he said, half aloud.

"There's a murder been done," cried Trina, swaying in the doorway.

The young fellow drove away, his head over his shoulder, staring at Trina with eyes that were fixed and absolutely devoid of expression.

"What's the matter with that woman?" he said again to himself as he turned the corner.

Trina wondered why she didn't scream, how she could keep from it -- how, at such a moment as this, she could remember that it was improper to make a disturbance and create a scene in the street. The peddler of wild game was looking at her suspiciously. It would not do to tell him. He would go away like the butcher's boy.

"Now, wait a minute," Trina said to herself, speaking aloud. She put her hands to her head. "Now, wait a minute. It won't do for me to lose my wits now. What must I do?" She looked about her. There was the same familiar aspect of Polk Street. She could see it at the end of the alley. The big market opposite the flat, the delivery carts rattling up and down, the great ladies from the avenue at their morning shopping, the cable cars trundling past, loaded with passengers. She saw a little boy in a flat leather cap whistling and calling for an unseen dog, slapping his small knee from time to time. Two men came out of Frenna's saloon, laughing heartily. Heise the

harness-maker stood in the vestibule of his shop, a bundle of whittlings in his apron of greasy ticking. And all this was going on, people were laughing and living, buying and selling, walking about out there on the sunny sidewalks, while behind her in there -- in there -- in there -- --

Heise started back from the sudden apparition of a white-lipped woman in a blue dressing-gown that seemed to rise up before him from his very doorstep.

"Well, Mrs. McTeague, you did scare me, for --"

"Oh, come over here quick." Trina put her hand to her neck; swallowing something that seemed to be choking her. "Maria's killed -- Zerkow's wife -- I found her."

"Get out!" exclaimed Heise, "you're joking."

"Come over here -- over into the house -- I found her -- she's dead."

Heise dashed across the street on the run, with Trina at his heels, a trail of spilled whittlings marking his course. The two ran down the alley. The wild-game peddler, a woman who had been washing down the steps in a neighboring house, and a man in a broad-brimmed hat stood at Zerkow's doorway, looking in from time to time, and talking together. They seemed puzzled.

"Anything wrong in here?" asked the wild-game peddler as Heise and Trina came up. Two more men stopped on the corner of the alley and Polk Street and looked at the group. A woman with a towel round her head raised a window opposite Zerkow's house and called to the woman who had been washing the steps, "What is it, Mrs. Flint?"

Heise was already inside the house. He turned to Trina, panting from his run.

"Where did you say -- where was it -- where?"

"In there," said Trina, "farther in -- the next room." They burst into the kitchen.

"LORD!" ejaculated Heise, stopping a yard or so from the body, and bending down to peer into the gray face with its brown lips.

"By God! he's killed her."

"Who?"

"Zerkow, by God! he's killed her. Cut her throat. He always said he would."

"Zerkow?"

"He's killed her. Her throat's cut. Good Lord, how she did bleed! By God! he's done for her in good shape this time."

"Oh, I told her -- I TOLD her," cried Trina.

"He's done for her SURE this time."

"She said she could always manage -- Oh-h! It's horrible."

"He's done for her sure this trip. Cut her throat. LORD, how she has BLED! Did you ever see so much -- that's murder -- that's cold-blooded murder. He's killed her. Say, we must get a policeman. Come on."

They turned back through the house. Half a dozen people -- the wild-game peddler, the man with the broad-brimmed hat, the washwoman, and three other men -- were in the front room of the junk shop, a bank of excited faces surged at the door. Beyond this, outside, the crowd was packed solid from one end of the alley to the other. Out in Polk Street the cable cars were nearly blocked and were bunting a way slowly through the throng with clanging bells. Every window had its group. And as Trina and the harness-maker tried to force the way from the door of the junk shop the throng suddenly parted right and left before the passage of two blue-coated policemen who clove a passage through the press, working their elbows energetically. They were accompanied by a third man in citizen's clothes.

Heise and Trina went back into the kitchen with the two policemen, the third man in citizen's clothes cleared the intruders from the front room of the junk shop and kept the crowd back, his arm across the open door.

"Whew!" whistled one of the officers as they came out into the kitchen, "cutting scrape? By George! SOMEBODY'S been using his knife all right." He turned to the other officer. "Better get the wagon. There's a box on the second corner south. Now, then," he continued, turning to Trina and the harness-maker and taking out his note-book and pencil, "I want your names and addresses."

It was a day of tremendous excitement for the entire street. Long after the patrol wagon had driven away, the crowd remained. In fact, until seven o'clock that evening groups collected about the door of the junk shop, where a policeman stood guard, asking all manner of questions, advancing all manner of opinions.

"Do you think they'll get him?" asked Ryer of the policeman. A dozen necks craned forward eagerly.

"Hoh, we'll get him all right, easy enough," answered the other, with a grand air.

"What? What's that? What did he say?" asked the people on the outskirts of the group. Those in front passed the answer back.

"He says they'll get him all right, easy enough."

The group looked at the policeman admiringly.

"He's skipped to San Jose."

Where the rumor started, and how, no one knew. But every one seemed persuaded that Zerkow had gone to San Jose.

"But what did he kill her for? Was he drunk?"

"No, he was crazy, I tell you -- crazy in the head. Thought she was hiding some money from him."

Frenna did a big business all day long. The murder was the one subject of conversation. Little parties were made up in his saloon -- parties of twos and threes -- to go over and have a look at the outside of the junk shop. Heise was the most important man the length and breadth of Polk Street; almost invariably he accompanied these parties, telling again and again of the part he had played in the affair.

"It was about eleven o'clock. I was standing in front of the shop, when Mrs. McTeague -- you know, the dentist's wife -- came running across the street," and so on and so on.

The next day came a fresh sensation. Polk Street read of it in the morning papers. Towards midnight on the day of the murder Zerkow's body had been found floating in the bay near Black Point. No one knew whether he had drowned himself or fallen from one of the wharves. Clutched in both his hands was a sack full of old and rusty pans, tin dishes -- fully a hundred of them -- tin cans, and iron knives and forks, collected from some dump heap.

"And all this," exclaimed Trina, "on account of a set of gold dishes that never existed."

Chapter 17

One day, about a fortnight after the coroner's inquest had been held, and when the excitement of the terrible affair was calming down and Polk Street beginning to resume its monotonous routine, Old Grannis sat in his clean, well-kept little room, in his cushioned armchair, his hands lying idly upon his knees. It was evening; not quite time to light the lamps. Old Grannis had drawn his chair close to the wall -- so close, in fact, that he could hear Miss Baker's grenadine brushing against the other side of the thin partition, at his very elbow, while she rocked gently back and forth, a cup of tea in her hands.

Old Grannis's occupation was gone. That morning the book-selling firm where he had bought his pamphlets had taken his little binding apparatus from him to use as a model. The transaction had been concluded. Old Grannis had received his check. It was large enough, to be sure, but when all was over, he returned to his room and sat there sad and unoccupied, looking at the pattern in the carpet and counting the heads of the tacks in the zinc guard that was fastened to the wall behind his little stove. By and by he heard Miss Baker moving about. It was five o'clock, the time when she was accustomed to make her cup of tea and "keep company" with him on her

side of the partition. Old Grannis drew up his chair to the wall near where he knew she was sitting. The minutes passed; side by side, and separated by only a couple of inches of board, the two old people sat there together, while the afternoon grew darker.

But for Old Grannis all was different that evening. There was nothing for him to do. His hands lay idly in his lap. His table, with its pile of pamphlets, was in a far corner of the room, and, from time to time, stirred with an uncertain trouble, he turned his head and looked at it sadly, reflecting that he would never use it again. The absence of his accustomed work seemed to leave something out of his life. It did not appear to him that he could be the same to Miss Baker now; their little habits were disarranged, their customs broken up. He could no longer fancy himself so near to her. They would drift apart now, and she would no longer make herself a cup of tea and "keep company" with him when she knew that he would never again sit before his table binding uncut pamphlets. He had sold his happiness for money; he had bartered all his tardy romance for some miserable banknotes. He had not foreseen that it would be like this. A vast regret welled up within him. What was that on the back of his hand? He wiped it dry with his ancient silk handkerchief.

Old Grannis leant his face in his hands. Not only did an inexplicable regret stir within him, but a certain great tenderness came upon him. The tears that swam in his faded blue eyes were not altogether those of unhappiness. No, this long-delayed affection that had come upon him in his later years filled him with a joy for which tears seemed to be the natural expression. For thirty years his eyes had not been wet, but tonight he felt as if he were young again. He had never loved before, and there was still a part of him that was only twenty years of age. He could not tell whether he was profoundly sad or deeply happy; but he was not ashamed of the tears that brought the smart to his eyes and the ache to his throat. He did not hear the timid rapping on his door, and it was not until the door itself opened that he looked up quickly and saw the little retired dressmaker standing on the threshold, carrying a cup of tea on a tiny Japanese tray. She held it toward him.

"I was making some tea," she said, "and I thought you would like to have a cup."

Never after could the little dressmaker understand how she had brought herself to do this thing. One moment she had been sitting quietly on her side of the partition, stirring her cup of tea with one of her Gorham spoons. She was quiet, she was peaceful.

The evening was closing down tranquilly. Her room was the picture of calmness and order. The geraniums blooming in the starch boxes in the window, the aged goldfish occasionally turning his iridescent flank to catch a sudden glow of the setting sun. The next moment she had been all trepidation. It seemed to her the most natural thing in the world to make a steaming cup of tea and carry it in to Old Grannis next door. It seemed to her that he was wanting her, that she ought to go to him. With the brusque resolve and intrepidity that sometimes seizes upon very timid people -- the courage of the coward greater than all others -- she had presented herself at the old Englishman's half-open door, and, when he had not heeded her

knock, had pushed it open, and at last, after all these years, stood upon the threshold of his room. She had found courage enough to explain her intrusion.

"I was making some tea, and I thought you would like to have a cup."

Old Grannis dropped his hands upon either arm of his chair, and, leaning forward a little, looked at her blankly. He did not speak.

The retired dressmaker's courage had carried her thus far; now it deserted her as abruptly as it had come. Her cheeks became scarlet; her funny little false curls trembled with her agitation. What she had done seemed to her indecorous beyond expression. It was an enormity. Fancy, she had gone into his room, INTO HIS ROOM -- Mister Grannis's room. She had done this -- she who could not pass him on the stairs without a qualm. What to do she did not know. She stood, a fixture, on the threshold of his room, without even resolution enough to beat a retreat. Helplessly, and with a little quaver in her voice, she repeated obstinately:

"I was making some tea, and I thought you would like to have a cup of tea." Her agitation betrayed itself in the repetition of the word. She felt that she could not hold the tray out another instant. Already she was trembling so that half the tea was spilled.

Old Grannis still kept silence, still bending forward, with wide eyes, his hands gripping the arms of his chair.

Then with the tea-tray still held straight before her, the little dressmaker exclaimed tearfully:

"Oh, I didn't mean -- I didn't mean -- I didn't know it would seem like this. I only meant to be kind and bring you some tea; and now it seems SO improper. I -- I -- I'm SO ashamed! I don't know what you will think of me. I -- " she caught her breath -- "improper" -- she managed to exclaim, "unlady-like -- you can never think well of me -- I'll go. I'll go." She turned about.

"Stop," cried Old Grannis, finding his voice at last. Miss Baker paused, looking at him over her shoulder, her eyes very wide open, blinking through her tears, for all the world like a frightened child.

"Stop," exclaimed the old Englishman, rising to his feet. "I didn't know it was you at first. I hadn't dreamed -- I couldn't believe you would be so good, so kind to me. Oh," he cried, with a sudden sharp breath, "oh, you ARE kind. I -- I -- you have -- have made me very happy."

"No, no," exclaimed Miss Baker, ready to sob. "It was unlady-like. You will -- you must think ill of me." She stood in the hall. The tears were running down her cheeks, and she had no free hand to dry them.

"Let me -- I'll take the tray from you," cried Old Grannis, coming forward. A tremulous joy came upon him. Never in his life had he been so happy. At last it had come -- come when he had least expected it. That which he had longed for and hoped for through so many years,

behold, it was come to-night. He felt his awkwardness leaving him. He was almost certain that the little dressmaker loved him, and the thought gave him boldness. He came toward her and took the tray from her hands, and, turning back into the room with it, made as if to set it upon his table. But the piles of his pamphlets were in the way. Both of his hands were occupied with the tray; he could not make a place for it on the table. He stood for a moment uncertain, his embarrassment returning.

"Oh, won't you -- won't you please -- " He turned his head, looking appealingly at the little old dressmaker.

"Wait, I'll help you," she said. She came into the room, up to the table, and moved the pamphlets to one side.

"Thanks, thanks," murmured Old Grannis, setting down the tray.

"Now -- now -- now I will go back," she exclaimed, hurriedly.

"No -- no," returned the old Englishman. "Don't go, don't go. I've been so lonely to-night -- and last night too -- all this year -- all my life," he suddenly cried.

"I -- I -- I've forgotten the sugar."

"But I never take sugar in my tea."

"But it's rather cold, and I've spilled it -- almost all of it."

"I'll drink it from the saucer." Old Grannis had drawn up his armchair for her.

"Oh, I shouldn't. This is -- this is SO -- You must think ill of me." Suddenly she sat down, and resting her elbows on the table, hid her face in her hands.

"Think ILL of you?" cried Old Grannis, "think ILL of you? Why, you don't know -- you have no idea -- all these years -- living so close to you, I -- I -- " he paused suddenly. It seemed to him as if the beating of his heart was choking him.

"I thought you were binding your books to-night," said Miss Baker, suddenly, "and you looked tired. I thought you looked tired when I last saw you, and a cup of tea, you know, it -- that -- that does you so much good when you're tired. But you weren't binding books."

"No, no," returned Old Grannis, drawing up a chair and sitting down. "No, I -- the fact is, I've sold my apparatus; a firm of booksellers has bought the rights of it."

"And aren't you going to bind books any more?" exclaimed the little dressmaker, a shade of disappointment in her manner. "I thought you always did about four o'clock. I used to hear you when I was making tea."

It hardly seemed possible to Miss Baker that she was actually talking to Old Grannis, that the two were really chatting together, face to face, and without the dreadful embarrassment that used to overwhelm them both when they met on the stairs. She had often dreamed of this, but had always put it off to some far-distant day. It was to come gradually, little by little, instead of, as now, abruptly and with no preparation. That she should permit herself the indiscretion of actually intruding herself into his room had never so much as occurred to her. Yet here she was, IN HIS ROOM, and they were talking together, and little by little her embarrassment was wearing away.

"Yes, yes, I always heard you when you were making tea," returned the old Englishman; "I heard the tea things. Then I used to draw my chair and my work-table close to the wall on my side, and sit there and work while you drank your tea just on the other side; and I used to feel very near to you then. I used to pass the whole evening that way."

"And, yes -- yes -- I did too," she answered. "I used to make tea just at that time and sit there for a whole hour."

"And didn't you sit close to the partition on your side? Sometimes I was sure of it. I could even fancy that I could hear your dress brushing against the wall-paper close beside me. Didn't you sit close to the partition?"

"I -- I don't know where I sat."

Old Grannis shyly put out his hand and took hers as it lay upon her lap.

"Didn't you sit close to the partition on your side?" he insisted.

"No -- I don't know -- perhaps -- sometimes. Oh, yes," she exclaimed, with a little gasp, "Oh, yes, I often did."

Then Old Grannis put his arm about her, and kissed her faded cheek, that flushed to pink upon the instant.

After that they spoke but little. The day lapsed slowly into twilight, and the two old people sat there in the gray evening, quietly, quietly, their hands in each other's hands, "keeping company," but now with nothing to separate them. It had come at last. After all these years they were together; they understood each other. They stood at length in a little Elysium of their own creating. They walked hand in hand in a delicious garden where it was always autumn. Far from the world and together they entered upon the long retarded romance of their commonplace and uneventful lives.

Chapter 18

That same night McTeague was awakened by a shrill scream, and woke to find Trina's arms around his neck. She was trembling so that the bed-springs creaked.

"Huh?" cried the dentist, sitting up in bed, raising his clinched fists. "Huh? What? What? What is it? What is it?"

"Oh, Mac," gasped his wife, "I had such an awful dream. I dreamed about Maria. I thought she was chasing me, and I couldn't run, and her throat was -- Oh, she was all covered with blood. Oh-h, I am so frightened!"

Trina had borne up very well for the first day or so after the affair, and had given her testimony to the coroner with far greater calmness than Heise. It was only a week later that the horror of the thing came upon her again. She was so nervous that she hardly dared to be alone in the daytime, and almost every night woke with a cry of terror, trembling with the recollection of some dreadful nightmare. The dentist was irritated beyond all expression by her nervousness, and especially was he exasperated when her cries woke him suddenly in the middle of the night. He would sit up in bed, rolling his eyes wildly, throwing out his huge fists -- at what, he did not know -- exclaiming, "What what -- " bewildered and hopelessly confused. Then when he realized that it was only Trina, his anger kindled abruptly.

"Oh, you and your dreams! You go to sleep, or I'll give you a dressing down." Sometimes he would hit her a great thwack with his open palm, or catch her hand and bite the tips of her fingers. Trina would lie awake for hours afterward, crying softly to herself. Then, by and by, "Mac," she would say timidly.

"Huh?"

"Mac, do you love me?"

"Huh? What? Go to sleep."

"Don't you love me any more, Mac?"

"Oh, go to sleep. Don't bother me."

"Well, do you LOVE me, Mac?"

"I guess so."

"Oh, Mac, I've only you now, and if you don't love me, what is going to become of me?"

"Shut up, an' let me go to sleep."

"Well, just tell me that you love me."

The dentist would turn abruptly away from her, burying his big blond head in the pillow, and covering up his ears with the blankets. Then Trina would sob herself to sleep.

The dentist had long since given up looking for a job. Between breakfast and supper time Trina saw but little of him. Once the morning meal over, McTeague bestirred himself, put on his cap -- he had given up wearing even a hat since his wife had made him sell his silk hat -- and went out. He had fallen into the habit of taking long and solitary walks beyond the suburbs of the city. Sometimes it was to the Cliff House, occasionally to the Park (where he would sit on the sun-warmed benches, smoking his pipe and reading ragged ends of old newspapers), but more often it was to the Presidio Reservation. McTeague would walk out to the end of the Union Street car line, entering the Reservation at the terminus, then he would work down to the shore of the bay, follow the shore line to the Old Fort at the Golden Gate, and, turning the Point here, come out suddenly upon the full sweep of the Pacific. Then he would follow the beach down to a certain point of rocks that he knew. Here he would turn inland, climbing the bluffs to a rolling grassy down sown with blue iris and a yellow flower that he did not know the name of. On the far side of this down was a broad, well-kept road. McTeague would keep to this road until he reached the city again by the way of the Sacramento Street car line. The dentist loved these walks. He liked to be alone. He liked the solitude of the tremendous, tumbling ocean; the fresh, windy downs; he liked to feel the gusty Trades flogging his face, and he would remain for hours watching the roll and plunge of the breakers with the silent, unreasoned enjoyment of a child. All at once he developed a passion for fishing. He would sit all day nearly motionless upon a point of rocks, his fish-line between his fingers, happy if he caught three perch in twelve hours. At noon he would retire to a bit of level turf around an angle of the shore and cook his fish, eating them without salt or knife or fork. He thrust a pointed stick down the mouth of the perch, and turned it slowly over the blaze. When the grease stopped dripping, he knew that it was done, and would devour it slowly and with tremendous relish, picking the bones clean, eating even the head. He remembered how often he used to do this sort of thing when he was a boy in the mountains of Placer County, before he became a car-boy at the mine. The dentist enjoyed himself hugely during these days. The instincts of the old-time miner were returning. In the stress of his misfortune McTeague was lapsing back to his early estate.

One evening as he reached home after such a tramp, he was surprised to find Trina standing in front of what had been Zerkow's house, looking at it thoughtfully, her finger on her lips.

"What you doing here'?" growled the dentist as he came up. There was a "Rooms-to-let" sign on the street door of the house.

"Now we've found a place to move to," exclaimed Trina.

"What?" cried McTeague. "There, in that dirty house, where you found Maria?"

"I can't afford that room in the flat any more, now that you can't get any work to do."

"But there's where Zerkow killed Maria -- the very house -- an' you wake up an' squeal in the night just thinking of it."

"I know. I know it will be bad at first, but I'll get used to it, an' it's just half again as cheap as where we are now. I was looking at a room; we can have it dirt cheap. It's a back room over the kitchen. A German family are going to take the front part of the house and sublet the rest. I'm going to take it. It'll be money in my pocket."

"But it won't be any in mine," vociferated the dentist, angrily. "I'll have to live in that dirty rat hole just so's you can save money. I ain't any the better off for it."

"Find work to do, and then we'll talk," declared Trina. "I'M going to save up some money against a rainy day; and if I can save more by living here I'm going to do it, even if it is the house Maria was killed in. I don't care."

"All right," said McTeague, and did not make any further protest. His wife looked at him surprised. She could not understand this sudden acquiescence. Perhaps McTeague was so much away from home of late that he had ceased to care where or how he lived. But this sudden change troubled her a little for all that.

The next day the McTeagues moved for a second time. It did not take them long. They were obliged to buy the bed from the landlady, a circumstance which nearly broke Trina's heart; and this bed, a couple of chairs, Trina's trunk, an ornament or two, the oil stove, and some plates and kitchen ware were all that they could call their own now; and this back room in that wretched house with its grisly memories, the one window looking out into a grimy maze of back yards and broken sheds, was what they now knew as their home.

The McTeagues now began to sink rapidly lower and lower. They became accustomed to their surroundings. Worst of all, Trina lost her pretty ways and her good looks. The combined effects of hard work, avarice, poor food, and her husband's brutalities told on her swiftly. Her charming little figure grew coarse, stunted, and dumpy. She who had once been of a catlike neatness, now slovened all day about the room in a dirty flannel wrapper, her slippers clap-clapping after her as she walked. At last she even neglected her hair, the wonderful swarthy tiara, the coiffure of a queen, that shaded her little pale forehead. In the morning she braided it before it was half combed, and piled and coiled it about her head in haphazard fashion. It came down half a dozen times a day; by evening it was an unkempt, tangled mass, a veritable rat's nest.

Ah, no, it was not very gay, that life of hers, when one had to rustle for two, cook and work and wash, to say nothing of paying the rent. What odds was it if she was slatternly, dirty, coarse? Was there time to make herself look otherwise, and who was there to be pleased when she was all prinked out? Surely not a great brute of a husband who bit you like a dog, and kicked and pounded you as though you were made of iron. Ah, no, better let things go, and take it as easy as you could. Hump your back, and it was soonest over.

The one room grew abominably dirty, reeking with the odors of cooking and of "non-poisonous" paint. The bed was not made until late in the afternoon, sometimes not at all. Dirty, unwashed crockery, greasy knives, sodden fragments of yesterday's meals cluttered the table, while in one corner was the heap of evil-smelling, dirty linen. Cockroaches appeared in the crevices of the woodwork, the wall-paper bulged from the damp walls and began to peel. Trina

had long ago ceased to dust or to wipe the furniture with a bit of rag. The grime grew thick upon the window panes and in the corners of the room. All the filth of the alley invaded their quarters like a rising muddy tide.

Between the windows, however, the faded photograph of the couple in their wedding finery looked down upon the wretchedness, Trina still holding her set bouquet straight before her, McTeague standing at her side, his left foot forward, in the attitude of a Secretary of State; while near by hung the canary, the one thing the dentist clung to obstinately, piping and chittering all day in its little gilt prison.

And the tooth, the gigantic golden molar of French gilt, enormous and ungainly, sprawled its branching prongs in one corner of the room, by the footboard of the bed. The McTeague's had come to use it as a sort of substitute for a table. After breakfast and supper Trina piled the plates and greasy dishes upon it to have them out of the way.

One afternoon the Other Dentist, McTeague's old-time rival, the wearer of marvellous waistcoats, was surprised out of all countenance to receive a visit from McTeague. The Other Dentist was in his operating room at the time, at work upon a plaster-of-paris mould. To his call of "Come right in. Don't you see the sign, 'Enter without knocking'?" McTeague came in. He noted at once how airy and cheerful was the room. A little fire coughed and tittered on the hearth, a brindled greyhound sat on his haunches watching it intently, a great mirror over the mantle offered to view an array of actresses' pictures thrust between the glass and the frame, and a big bunch of freshly-cut violets stood in a glass bowl on the polished cherrywood table. The Other Dentist came forward briskly, exclaiming cheerfully:

"Oh, Doctor -- Mister McTeague, how do? how do?"

The fellow was actually wearing a velvet smoking jacket. A cigarette was between his lips; his patent leather boots reflected the firelight. McTeague wore a black surah negligé shirt without a cravat; huge buckled brogans, hob-nailed, gross, encased his feet; the hems of his trousers were spotted with mud; his coat was frayed at the sleeves and a button was gone. In three days he had not shaved; his shock of heavy blond hair escaped from beneath the visor of his woollen cap and hung low over his forehead. He stood with awkward, shifting feet and uncertain eyes before the dapper young fellow who reeked of the barber shop, and whom he had once ordered from his rooms.

"What can I do for you this morning, Mister McTeague? Something wrong with the teeth, eh?"

"No, no." McTeague, floundering in the difficulties of his speech, forgot the carefully rehearsed words with which he had intended to begin this interview.

"I want to sell you my sign," he said, stupidly. "That big tooth of French gilt -- YOU know -- that you made an offer for once."

"Oh, I don't want that now," said the other loftily. "I prefer a little quiet signboard, nothing pretentious -- just the name, and "Dentist" after it. These big signs are vulgar. No, I don't want it."

McTeague remained, looking about on the floor, horribly embarrassed, not knowing whether to go or to stay.

"But I don't know," said the Other Dentist, reflectively. "If it will help you out any -- I guess you're pretty hard up -- I'll -- well, I tell you what -- I'll give you five dollars for it."

"All right, all right."

On the following Thursday morning McTeague woke to hear the eaves dripping and the prolonged rattle of the rain upon the roof.

"Raining," he growled, in deep disgust, sitting up in bed, and winking at the blurred window.

"It's been raining all night," said Trina. She was already up and dressed, and was cooking breakfast on the oil stove.

McTeague dressed himself, grumbling, "Well, I'll go, anyhow. The fish will bite all the better for the rain."

"Look here, Mac," said Trina, slicing a bit of bacon as thinly as she could. "Look here, why don't you bring some of your fish home sometime?"

"Huh!" snorted the dentist, "so's we could have 'em for breakfast. Might save you a nickel, mightn't it?"

"Well, and if it did! Or you might fish for the market. The fisherman across the street would buy 'em of you."

"Shut up!" exclaimed the dentist, and Trina obediently subsided.

"Look here," continued her husband, fumbling in his trousers pocket and bringing out a dollar, "I'm sick and tired of coffee and bacon and mashed potatoes. Go over to the market and get some kind of meat for breakfast. Get a steak, or chops, or something."

"Why, Mac, that's a whole dollar, and he only gave you five for your sign. We can't afford it. Sure, Mac. Let me put that money away against a rainy day. You're just as well off without meat for breakfast."

"You do as I tell you. Get some steak, or chops, or something."

"Please, Mac, dear."

"Go on, now. I'll bite your fingers again pretty soon."

"But -- -- "

The dentist took a step towards her, snatching at her hand.

"All right, I'll go," cried Trina, wincing and shrinking. "I'll go."

She did not get the chops at the big market, however. Instead, she hurried to a cheaper butcher shop on a side street two blocks away, and bought fifteen cents' worth of chops from a side of mutton some two or three days old. She was gone some little time.

"Give me the change," exclaimed the dentist as soon as she returned. Trina handed him a quarter; and when McTeague was about to protest, broke in upon him with a rapid stream of talk that confused him upon the instant. But for that matter, it was never difficult for Trina to deceive the dentist. He never went to the bottom of things. He would have believed her if she had told him the chops had cost a dollar.

"There's sixty cents saved, anyhow," thought Trina, as she clutched the money in her pocket to keep it from rattling.

Trina cooked the chops, and they breakfasted in silence. "Now," said McTeague as he rose, wiping the coffee from his thick mustache with the hollow of his palm, "now I'm going fishing, rain or no rain. I'm going to be gone all day."

He stood for a moment at the door, his fish-line in his hand, swinging the heavy sinker back and forth. He looked at Trina as she cleared away the breakfast things.

"So long," said he, nodding his huge square-cut head. This amiability in the matter of leave taking was unusual. Trina put the dishes down and came up to him, her little chin, once so adorable, in the air:

"Kiss me good-by, Mac," she said, putting her arms around his neck. "You DO love me a little yet, don't you, Mac? We'll be happy again some day. This is hard times now, but we'll pull out. You'll find something to do pretty soon."

"I guess so," growled McTeague, allowing her to kiss him.

The canary was stirring nimbly in its cage, and just now broke out into a shrill trilling, its little throat bulging and quivering. The dentist stared at it. "Say," he remarked slowly, "I think I'll take that bird of mine along."

"Sell it?" inquired Trina.

"Yes, yes, sell it."

"Well, you ARE coming to your senses at last," answered Trina, approvingly. "But don't you let the bird-store man cheat you. That's a good songster; and with the cage, you ought to make him give you five dollars. You stick out for that at first, anyhow."

McTeague unhooked the cage and carefully wrapped it in an old newspaper, remarking, "He might get cold. Well, so long," he repeated, "so long."

"Good-by, Mac."

When he was gone, Trina took the sixty cents she had stolen from him out of her pocket and recounted it. "It's sixty cents, all right," she said proudly. "But I DO believe that dime is too smooth." She looked at it critically. The clock on the power-house of the Sutter Street cable struck eight. "Eight o'clock already," she exclaimed. "I must get to work." She cleared the breakfast things from the table, and drawing up her chair and her workbox began painting the sets of Noah's ark animals she had whittled the day before. She worked steadily all the morning. At noon she lunched, warming over the coffee left from breakfast, and frying a couple of sausages. By one she was bending over her table again. Her fingers -- some of them lacerated by McTeague's teeth -- flew, and the little pile of cheap toys in the basket at her elbow grew steadily.

"Where DO all the toys go to?" she murmured. "The thousands and thousands of these Noah's arks that I have made -- horses and chickens and elephants -- and always there never seems to be enough. It's a good thing for me that children break their things, and that they all have to have birthdays and Christmases." She dipped her brush into a pot of Vandyke brown and painted one of the whittled toy horses in two strokes. Then a touch of ivory black with a small flat brush created the tail and mane, and dots of Chinese white made the eyes. The turpentine in the paint dried it almost immediately, and she tossed the completed little horse into the basket.

At six o'clock the dentist had not returned. Trina waited until seven, and then put her work away, and ate her supper alone.

"I wonder what's keeping Mac," she exclaimed as the clock from the power-house on Sutter Street struck half-past seven. "I KNOW he's drinking somewhere," she cried, apprehensively. "He had the money from his sign with him."

At eight o'clock she threw a shawl over her head and went over to the harness shop. If anybody would know where McTeague was it would be Heise. But the harness-maker had seen nothing of him since the day before.

"He was in here yesterday afternoon, and we had a drink or two at Frenna's. Maybe he's been in there to-day."

"Oh, won't you go in and see?" said Trina. "Mac always came home to his supper -- he never likes to miss his meals -- and I'm getting frightened about him."

Heise went into the barroom next door, and returned with no definite news. Frenna had not seen the dentist since he had come in with the harness-maker the previous afternoon. Trina even humbled herself to ask of the Ryers -- with whom they had quarrelled -- if they knew anything of the dentist's whereabouts, but received a contemptuous negative.

"Maybe he's come in while I've been out," said Trina to herself. She went down Polk Street again, going towards the flat. The rain had stopped, but the sidewalks were still glistening. The cable cars trundled by, loaded with theatregoers. The barbers were just closing their shops. The candy store on the corner was brilliantly lighted and was filling up, while the green and yellow lamps from the drug store directly opposite threw kaleidoscopic reflections deep down into the shining surface of the asphalt. A band of Salvationists began to play and pray in front of Frenna's saloon. Trina hurried on down the gay street, with its evening's brilliancy and small activities, her shawl over her head, one hand lifting her faded skirt from off the wet pavements. She turned into the alley, entered Zerkow's old home by the ever-open door, and ran up-stairs to the room. Nobody.

"Why, isn't this FUNNY," she exclaimed, half aloud, standing on the threshold, her little milk-white forehead curdling to a frown, one sore finger on her lips. Then a great fear seized upon her. Inevitably she associated the house with a scene of violent death.

"No, no," she said to the darkness, "Mac is all right. HE can take care of himself." But for all that she had a clear-cut vision of her husband's body, bloated with sea-water, his blond hair streaming like kelp, rolling inertly in shifting waters.

"He couldn't have fallen off the rocks," she declared firmly. "There -- THERE he is now." She heaved a great sigh of relief as a heavy tread sounded in the hallway below. She ran to the banisters, looking over, and calling, "Oh, Mac! Is that you, Mac?" It was the German whose family occupied the lower floor. The power-house clock struck nine.

"My God, where is Mac?" cried Trina, stamping her foot.

She put the shawl over her head again, and went out and stood on the corner of the alley and Polk Street, watching and waiting, craning her neck to see down the street. Once, even, she went out upon the sidewalk in front of the flat and sat down for a moment upon the horse-block there. She could not help remembering the day when she had been driven up to that horse-block in a hack. Her mother and father and Owgooste and the twins were with her. It was her wedding day. Her wedding dress was in a huge tin trunk on the driver's seat. She had never been happier before in all her life. She remembered how she got out of the hack and stood for a moment upon the horse-block, looking up at McTeague's windows. She had caught a glimpse of him at his shaving, the lather still on his cheek, and they had waved their hands at each other. Instinctively Trina looked up at the flat behind her; looked up at the bay window where her husband's "Dental Parlors" had been. It was all dark; the windows had the blind, sightless appearance imparted by vacant, untenanted rooms. A rusty iron rod projected mournfully from one of the window ledges.

"There's where our sign hung once," said Trina. She turned her head and looked down Polk Street towards where the Other Dentist had his rooms, and there, overhanging the street

from his window, newly furbished and brightened, hung the huge tooth, her birthday present to her husband, flashing and glowing in the white glare of the electric lights like a beacon of defiance and triumph.

"Ah, no; ah, no," whispered Trina, choking back a sob. "Life isn't so gay. But I wouldn't mind, no I wouldn't mind anything, if only Mac was home all right." She got up from the horse-block and stood again on the corner of the alley, watching and listening.

It grew later. The hours passed. Trina kept at her post. The noise of approaching footfalls grew less and less frequent. Little by little Polk Street dropped back into solitude. Eleven o'clock struck from the power-house clock; lights were extinguished; at one o'clock the cable stopped, leaving an abrupt and numbing silence in the air. All at once it seemed very still. The only noises were the occasional footfalls of a policeman and the persistent calling of ducks and geese in the closed market across the way. The street was asleep.

When it is night and dark, and one is awake and alone, one's thoughts take the color of the surroundings; become gloomy, sombre, and very dismal. All at once an idea came to Trina, a dark, terrible idea; worse, even, than the idea of McTeague's death.

"Oh, no," she cried. "Oh, no. It isn't true. But suppose -- suppose."

She left her post and hurried back to the house.

"No, no," she was saying under her breath, "it isn't possible. Maybe he's even come home already by another way. But suppose -- suppose -- suppose."

She ran up the stairs, opened the door of the room, and paused, out of breath. The room was dark and empty. With cold, trembling fingers she lighted the lamp, and, turning about, looked at her trunk. The lock was burst.

"No, no, no," cried Trina, "it's not true; it's not true." She dropped on her knees before the trunk, and tossed back the lid, and plunged her hands down into the corner underneath her wedding dress, where she always kept the savings. The brass match-safe and the chamois-skin bag were there. They were empty.

Trina flung herself full length upon the floor, burying her face in her arms, rolling her head from side to side. Her voice rose to a wail.

"No, no, no, it's not true; it's not true; it's not true. Oh, he couldn't have done it. Oh, how could he have done it? All my money, all my little savings -- and deserted me. He's gone, my money's gone, my dear money -- my dear, dear gold pieces that I've worked so hard for. Oh, to have deserted me -- gone for good -- gone and never coming back -- gone with my gold pieces. Gone-gone -- gone. I'll never see them again, and I've worked so hard, so so hard for him -- for them. No, no, NO, it's not true. It IS true. What will become of me now? Oh, if you'll only come back you can have all the money -- half of it. Oh, give me back my money. Give me back my money, and I'll forgive you. You can leave me then if you want to. Oh, my money. Mac, Mac,

you've gone for good. You don't love me anymore, and now I'm a beggar. My money's gone, my husband's gone, gone, gone, gone!"

Her grief was terrible. She dug her nails into her scalp, and clutching the heavy coils of her thick black hair tore it again and again. She struck her forehead with her clenched fists. Her little body shook from head to foot with the violence of her sobbing. She ground her small teeth together and beat her head upon the floor with all her strength.

Her hair was uncoiled and hanging a tangled, dishevelled mass far below her waist; her dress was torn; a spot of blood was upon her forehead; her eyes were swollen; her cheeks flamed vermilion from the fever that raged in her veins. Old Miss Baker found her thus towards five o'clock the next morning.

What had happened between one o'clock and dawn of that fearful night Trina never remembered. She could only recall herself, as in a picture, kneeling before her broken and rifled trunk, and then -- weeks later, so it seemed to her -- she woke to find herself in her own bed with an iced bandage about her forehead and the little old dressmaker at her side, stroking her hot, dry palm.

The facts of the matter were that the German woman who lived below had been awakened some hours after midnight by the sounds of Trina's weeping. She had come upstairs and into the room to find Trina stretched face downward upon the floor, half-conscious and sobbing, in the throes of an hysteria for which there was no relief. The woman, terrified, had called her husband, and between them they had got Trina upon the bed. Then the German woman happened to remember that Trina had friends in the big flat near by, and had sent her husband to fetch the retired dressmaker, while she herself remained behind to undress Trina and put her to bed. Miss Baker had come over at once, and began to cry herself at the sight of the dentist's poor little wife. She did not stop to ask what the trouble was, and indeed it would have been useless to attempt to get any coherent explanation from Trina at that time. Miss Baker had sent the German woman's husband to get some ice at one of the "all-night" restaurants of the street; had kept cold, wet towels on Trina's head; had combed and recombed her wonderful thick hair; and had sat down by the side of the bed, holding her hot hand, with its poor maimed fingers, waiting patiently until Trina should be able to speak.

Towards morning Trina awoke -- or perhaps it was a mere regaining of consciousness -- looked a moment at Miss Baker, then about the room until her eyes fell upon her trunk with its broken lock. Then she turned over upon the pillow and began to sob again. She refused to answer any of the little dressmaker's questions, shaking her head violently, her face hidden in the pillow.

By breakfast time her fever had increased to such a point that Miss Baker took matters into her own hands and had the German woman call a doctor. He arrived some twenty minutes later. He was a big, kindly fellow who lived over the drug store on the corner. He had a deep voice and a tremendous striding gait less suggestive of a physician than of a sergeant of a cavalry troop.

By the time of his arrival little Miss Baker had divined intuitively the entire trouble. She heard the doctor's swinging tramp in the entry below, and heard the German woman saying:

"Righd oop der stairs, at der back of der halle. Der room mit der door oppen."

Miss Baker met the doctor at the landing, she told him in a whisper of the trouble.

"Her husband's deserted her, I'm afraid, doctor, and took all of her money -- a good deal of it. It's about killed the poor child. She was out of her head a good deal of the night, and now she's got a raging fever."

The doctor and Miss Baker returned to the room and entered, closing the door. The big doctor stood for a moment looking down at Trina rolling her head from side to side upon the pillow, her face scarlet, her enormous mane of hair spread out on either side of her. The little dressmaker remained at his elbow, looking from him to Trina.

"Poor little woman!" said the doctor; "poor little woman!"

Miss Baker pointed to the trunk, whispering:

"See, there's where she kept her savings. See, he broke the lock."

"Well, Mrs. McTeague," said the doctor, sitting down by the bed, and taking Trina's wrist, "a little fever, eh?"

Trina opened her eyes and looked at him, and then at Miss Baker. She did not seem in the least surprised at the unfamiliar faces. She appeared to consider it all as a matter of course.

"Yes," she said, with a long, tremulous breath, "I have a fever, and my head -- my head aches and aches."

The doctor prescribed rest and mild opiates. Then his eye fell upon the fingers of Trina's right hand. He looked at them sharply. A deep red glow, unmistakable to a physician's eyes, was upon some of them, extending from the finger tips up to the second knuckle.

"Hello," he exclaimed, "what's the matter here?" In fact something was very wrong indeed. For days Trina had noticed it. The fingers of her right hand had swollen as never before, aching and discolored. Cruelly lacerated by McTeague's brutality as they were, she had nevertheless gone on about her work on the Noah's ark animals, constantly in contact with the "non-poisonous" paint. She told as much to the doctor in answer to his questions. He shook his head with an exclamation.

"Why, this is blood-poisoning, you know," he told her; "the worst kind. You'll have to have those fingers amputated, beyond a doubt, or lose the entire hand -- or even worse."

"And my work!" exclaimed Trina.

Chapter 19

One can hold a scrubbing-brush with two good fingers and the stumps of two others even if both joints of the thumb are gone, but it takes considerable practice to get used to it.

Trina became a scrub-woman. She had taken council of Selina, and through her had obtained the position of care-taker in a little memorial kindergarten over on Pacific Street. Like Polk Street, it was an accommodation street, but running through a much poorer and more sordid quarter. Trina had a little room over the kindergarten schoolroom. It was not an unpleasant room. It looked out upon a sunny little court floored with boards and used as the children's playground. Two great cherry trees grew here, the leaves almost brushing against the window of Trina's room and filtering the sunlight so that it fell in round golden spots upon the floor of the room. "Like gold pieces," Trina said to herself.

Trina's work consisted in taking care of the kindergarten rooms, scrubbing the floors, washing the windows, dusting and airing, and carrying out the ashes. Besides this she earned some five dollars a month by washing down the front steps of some big flats on Washington Street, and by cleaning out vacant houses after the tenants had left. She saw no one. Nobody knew her. She went about her work from dawn to dark, and often entire days passed when she did not hear the sound of her own voice. She was alone, a solitary, abandoned woman, lost in the lowest eddies of the great city's tide -- the tide that always ebbs.

When Trina had been discharged from the hospital after the operation on her fingers, she found herself alone in the world, alone with her five thousand dollars. The interest of this would support her, and yet allow her to save a little.

But for a time Trina had thought of giving up the fight altogether and of joining her family in the southern part of the State. But even while she hesitated about this she received a long letter from her mother, an answer to one she herself had written just before the amputation of her right-hand fingers -- the last letter she would ever be able to write. Mrs. Sieppe's letter was one long lamentation; she had her own misfortunes to bewail as well as those of her daughter. The carpet-cleaning and upholstery business had failed. Mr. Sieppe and Owgooste had left for New Zealand with a colonization company, whither Mrs. Sieppe and the twins were to follow them as soon as the colony established itself. So far from helping Trina in her ill fortune, it was she, her mother, who might some day in the near future be obliged to turn to Trina for aid. So Trina had given up the idea of any help from her family. For that matter she needed none. She still had her five thousand, and Uncle Oelbermann paid her the interest with a machine-like regularity. Now that McTeague had left her, there was one less mouth to feed; and with this saving, together with the little she could earn as scrub-woman, Trina could almost manage to make good the amount she lost by being obliged to cease work upon the Noah's ark animals.

Little by little her sorrow over the loss of her precious savings overcame the grief of McTeague's desertion of her. Her avarice had grown to be her one dominant passion; her love of money for the money's sake brooded in her heart, driving out by degrees every other natural affection. She grew thin and meagre; her flesh clove tight to her small skeleton; her small pale mouth and little uplifted chin grew to have a certain feline eagerness of expression; her long,

narrow eyes glistened continually, as if they caught and held the glint of metal. One day as she sat in her room, the empty brass match-box and the limp chamois bag in her hands, she suddenly exclaimed:

"I could have forgiven him if he had only gone away and left me my money. I could have - yes, I could have forgiven him even THIS" -- she looked at the stumps of her fingers. "But now," her teeth closed tight and her eyes flashed, "now -- I'll -- never -- forgive -- him -- as-long -- as -- I -- live."

The empty bag and the hollow, light match-box troubled her. Day after day she took them from her trunk and wept over them as other women weep over a dead baby's shoe. Her four hundred dollars were gone, were gone, were gone. She would never see them again. She could plainly see her husband spending her savings by handfuls; squandering her beautiful gold pieces that she had been at such pains to polish with soap and ashes. The thought filled her with an unspeakable anguish. She would wake at night from a dream of McTeague revelling down her money, and ask of the darkness, "How much did he spend to-day? How many of the gold pieces are left? Has he broken either of the two twenty-dollar pieces yet? What did he spend it for?"

The instant she was out of the hospital Trina had begun to save again, but now it was with an eagerness that amounted at times to a veritable frenzy. She even denied herself lights and fuel in order to put by a quarter or so, grudging every penny she was obliged to spend. She did her own washing and cooking. Finally she sold her wedding dress, that had hitherto lain in the bottom of her trunk.

The day she moved from Zerkow's old house, she came suddenly upon the dentist's concertina under a heap of old clothes in the closet. Within twenty minutes she had sold it to the dealer in second-hand furniture, returning to her room with seven dollars in her pocket, happy for the first time since McTeague had left her.

But for all that the match-box and the bag refused to fill up; after three weeks of the most rigid economy they contained but eighteen dollars and some small change. What was that compared with four hundred? Trina told herself that she must have her money in hand. She longed to see again the heap of it upon her work-table, where she could plunge her hands into it, her face into it, feeling the cool, smooth metal upon her cheeks. At such moments she would see in her imagination her wonderful five thousand dollars piled in columns, shining and gleaming somewhere at the bottom of Uncle Oelbermann's vault. She would look at the paper that Uncle Oelbermann had given her, and tell herself that it represented five thousand dollars. But in the end this ceased to satisfy her, she must have the money itself. She must have her four hundred dollars back again, there in her trunk, in her bag and her match-box, where she could touch it and see it whenever she desired.

At length she could stand it no longer, and one day presented herself before Uncle Oelbermann as he sat in his office in the wholesale toy store, and told him she wanted to have four hundred dollars of her money.

"But this is very irregular, you know, Mrs. McTeague," said the great man. "Not business-like at all."

But his niece's misfortunes and the sight of her poor maimed hand appealed to him. He opened his check-book. "You understand, of course," he said, "that this will reduce the amount of your interest by just so much."

"I know, I know. I've thought of that," said Trina.

"Four hundred, did you say?" remarked Uncle Oelbermann, taking the cap from his fountain pen.

"Yes, four hundred," exclaimed Trina, quickly, her eyes glistening.

Trina cashed the check and returned home with the money -- all in twenty-dollar pieces as she had desired -- in an ecstasy of delight. For half of that night she sat up playing with her money, counting it and recounting it, polishing the duller pieces until they shone. Altogether there were twenty twenty-dollar gold pieces.

"Oh-h, you beauties!" murmured Trina, running her palms over them, fairly quivering with pleasure. "You beauties! IS there anything prettier than a twenty-dollar gold piece? You dear, dear money! Oh, don't I LOVE you! Mine, mine, mine -- all of you mine."

She laid them out in a row on the ledge of the table, or arranged them in patterns -- triangles, circles, and squares -- or built them all up into a pyramid which she afterward overthrew for the sake of hearing the delicious clink of the pieces tumbling against each other. Then at last she put them away in the brass match-box and chamois bag, delighted beyond words that they were once more full and heavy.

Then, a few days after, the thought of the money still remaining in Uncle Oelbermann's keeping returned to her. It was hers, all hers -- all that four thousand six hundred. She could have as much of it or as little of it as she chose. She only had to ask. For a week Trina resisted, knowing very well that taking from her capital was proportionately reducing her monthly income. Then at last she yielded.

"Just to make it an even five hundred, anyhow," she told herself. That day she drew a hundred dollars more, in twenty-dollar gold pieces as before. From that time Trina began to draw steadily upon her capital, a little at a time. It was a passion with her, a mania, a veritable mental disease; a temptation such as drunkards only know.

It would come upon her all of a sudden. While she was about her work, scrubbing the floor of some vacant house; or in her room, in the morning, as she made her coffee on the oil stove, or when she woke in the night, a brusque access of cupidity would seize upon her. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes glistened, her breath came short. At times she would leave her work just as it was, put on her old bonnet of black straw, throw her shawl about her, and go straight to Uncle Oelbermann's store and draw against her money. Now it would be a hundred dollars, now sixty;

now she would content herself with only twenty; and once, after a fortnight's abstinence, she permitted herself a positive debauch of five hundred. Little by little she drew her capital from Uncle Oelbermann, and little by little her original interest of twenty-five dollars a month dwindled.

One day she presented herself again in the office of the whole-sale toy store.

"Will you let me have a check for two hundred dollars, Uncle Oelbermann?" she said.

The great man laid down his fountain pen and leaned back in his swivel chair with great deliberation.

"I don't understand, Mrs. McTeague," he said. "Every week you come here and draw out a little of your money. I've told you that it is not at all regular or business-like for me to let you have it this way. And more than this, it's a great inconvenience to me to give you these checks at unstated times. If you wish to draw out the whole amount let's have some understanding. Draw it in monthly installments of, say, five hundred dollars, or else," he added, abruptly, "draw it all at once, now, to-day. I would even prefer it that way. Otherwise it's -- it's annoying. Come, shall I draw you a check for thirty-seven hundred, and have it over and done with?"

"No, no," cried Trina, with instinctive apprehension, refusing, she did not know why. "No, I'll leave it with you. I won't draw out any more."

She took her departure, but paused on the pavement outside the store, and stood for a moment lost in thought, her eyes beginning to glisten and her breath coming short. Slowly she turned about and reentered the store; she came back into the office, and stood trembling at the corner of Uncle Oelbermann's desk. He looked up sharply. Twice Trina tried to get her voice, and when it did come to her, she could hardly recognize it. Between breaths she said:

"Yes, all right -- I'll -- you can give me -- will you give me a check for thirty-seven hundred? Give me ALL of my money."

A few hours later she entered her little room over the kindergarten, bolted the door with shaking fingers, and emptied a heavy canvas sack upon the middle of her bed. Then she opened her trunk, and taking thence the brass match-box and chamois-skin bag added their contents to the pile. Next she laid herself upon the bed and gathered the gleaming heaps of gold pieces to her with both arms, burying her face in them with long sighs of unspeakable delight.

It was a little past noon, and the day was fine and warm. The leaves of the huge cherry trees threw off a certain pungent aroma that entered through the open window, together with long thin shafts of golden sunlight. Below, in the kindergarten, the children were singing gayly and marching to the jangling of the piano. Trina heard nothing, saw nothing. She lay on her bed, her eyes closed, her face buried in a pile of gold that she encircled with both her arms.

Trina even told herself at last that she was happy once more. McTeague became a memory -- a memory that faded a little every day -- dim and indistinct in the golden splendor of five thousand dollars.

"And yet," Trina would say, "I did love Mac, loved him dearly, only a little while ago. Even when he hurt me, it only made me love him more. How is it I've changed so sudden? How COULD I forget him so soon? It must be because he stole my money. That is it. I couldn't forgive anyone that -- no, not even my MOTHER. And I never -- never -- will forgive him."

What had become of her husband Trina did not know. She never saw any of the old Polk Street people. There was no way she could have news of him, even if she had cared to have it. She had her money, that was the main thing. Her passion for it excluded every other sentiment. There it was in the bottom of her trunk, in the canvas sack, the chamois-skin bag, and the little brass match-safe. Not a day passed that Trina did not have it out where she could see and touch it. One evening she had even spread all the gold pieces between the sheets, and had then gone to bed, stripping herself, and had slept all night upon the money, taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body.

One night, some three months after she had come to live at the kindergarten, Trina was awakened by a sharp tap on the pane of the window. She sat up quickly in bed, her heart beating thickly, her eyes rolling wildly in the direction of her trunk. The tap was repeated. Trina rose and went fearfully to the window. The little court below was bright with moonlight, and standing just on the edge of the shadow thrown by one of the cherry trees was McTeague. A bunch of half-ripe cherries was in his hand. He was eating them and throwing the pits at the window. As he caught sight of her, he made an eager sign for her to raise the sash. Reluctant and wondering, Trina obeyed, and the dentist came quickly forward. He was wearing a pair of blue overalls; a navy-blue flannel shirt without a cravat; an old coat, faded, rain-washed, and ripped at the seams; and his woollen cap.

"Say, Trina," he exclaimed, his heavy bass voice pitched just above a whisper, "let me in, will you, huh? Say, will you? I'm regularly starving, and I haven't slept in a Christian bed for two weeks."

At sight at him standing there in the moonlight, Trina could only think of him as the man who had beaten and bitten her, had deserted her and stolen her money, had made her suffer as she had never suffered before in all her life. Now that he had spent the money that he had stolen from her, he was whining to come back -- so that he might steal more, no doubt. Once in her room he could not help but smell out her five thousand dollars. Her indignation rose.

"No," she whispered back at him. "No, I will not let you in."

"But listen here, Trina, I tell you I am starving, regularly -- -- "

"Hoh!" interrupted Trina scornfully. "A man can't starve with four hundred dollars, I guess."

"Well -- well -- I -- well -- " faltered the dentist. "Never mind now. Give me something to eat, an' let me in an' sleep. I've been sleeping in the Plaza for the last ten nights, and say, I -- Damn it, Trina, I ain't had anything to eat since -- "

"Where's the four hundred dollars you robbed me of when you deserted me?" returned Trina, coldly.

"Well, I've spent it," growled the dentist. "But you CAN'T see me starve, Trina, no matter what's happened. Give me a little money, then."

"I'll see you starve before you get any more of MY money."

The dentist stepped back a pace and stared up at her wonder-stricken. His face was lean and pinched. Never had the jaw bone looked so enormous, nor the square-cut head so huge. The moonlight made deep black shadows in the shrunken cheeks.

"Huh?" asked the dentist, puzzled. "What did you say?"

"I won't give you any money -- never again -- not a cent."

"But do you know that I'm hungry?"

"Well, I've been hungry myself. Besides, I DON'T believe you."

"Trina, I ain't had a thing to eat since yesterday morning; that's God's truth. Even if I did get off with your money, you CAN'T see me starve, can you? You can't see me walk the streets all night because I ain't got a place to sleep. Will you let me in? Say, will you? Huh?"

"No."

"Well, will you give me some money then -- just a little? Give me a dollar. Give me half a dol -- Say, give me a DIME, an' I can get a cup of coffee."

"No."

The dentist paused and looked at her with curious intentness, bewildered, nonplussed.

"Say, you -- you must be crazy, Trina. I -- I -- wouldn't let a DOG go hungry."

"Not even if he'd bitten you, perhaps."

The dentist stared again.

There was another pause. McTeague looked up at her in silence, a mean and vicious twinkle coming into his small eyes. He uttered a low exclamation, and then checked himself.

"Well, look here, for the last time. I'm starving. I've got nowhere to sleep. Will you give me some money, or something to eat? Will you let me in?"

"No -- no -- no."

Trina could fancy she almost saw the brassy glint in her husband's eyes. He raised one enormous lean fist. Then he growled:

"If I had hold of you for a minute, by God, I'd make you dance. An' I will yet, I will yet. Don't you be afraid of that."

He turned about, the moonlight showing like a layer of snow upon his massive shoulders. Trina watched him as he passed under the shadow of the cherry trees and crossed the little court. She heard his great feet grinding on the board flooring. He disappeared.

Miser though she was, Trina was only human, and the echo of the dentist's heavy feet had not died away before she began to be sorry for what she had done. She stood by the open window in her nightgown, her finger upon her lips.

"He did looked pinched," she said half aloud. "Maybe he WAS hungry. I ought to have given him something. I wish I had, I WISH I had. Oh," she cried, suddenly, with a frightened gesture of both hands, "what have I come to be that I would see Mac -- my husband -- that I would see him starve rather than give him money? No, no. It's too dreadful. I WILL give him some. I'll send it to him to-morrow. Where? -- well, he'll come back." She leaned from the window and called as loudly as she dared, "Mac, oh, Mac." There was no answer.

When McTeague had told Trina he had been without food for nearly two days he was speaking the truth. The week before he had spent the last of the four hundred dollars in the bar of a sailor's lodging-house near the water front, and since that time had lived a veritable hand-to-mouth existence.

He had spent her money here and there about the city in royal fashion, absolutely reckless of the morrow, feasting and drinking for the most part with companions he picked up heaven knows where, acquaintances of twenty-four hours, whose names he forgot in two days. Then suddenly he found himself at the end of his money. He no longer had any friends. Hunger rode him and rowelled him. He was no longer well fed, comfortable. There was no longer a warm place for him to sleep. He went back to Polk Street in the evening, walking on the dark side of the street, lurking in the shadows, ashamed to have any of his old-time friends see him. He entered Zerkow's old house and knocked at the door of the room Trina and he had occupied. It was empty.

Next day he went to Uncle Oelbermann's store and asked news of Trina. Trina had not told Uncle Oelbermann of McTeague's brutalities, giving him other reasons to explain the loss of her fingers; neither had she told him of her husband's robbery. So when the dentist had asked where Trina could be found, Uncle Oelbermann, believing that McTeague was seeking a reconciliation, had told him without hesitation, and, he added:

"She was in here only yesterday and drew out the balance of her money. She's been drawing against her money for the last month or so. She's got it all now, I guess."

"Ah, she's got it all."

The dentist went away from his bootless visit to his wife shaking with rage, hating her with all the strength of a crude and primitive nature. He clenched his fists till his knuckles whitened, his teeth ground furiously upon one another.

"Ah, if I had hold of you once, I'd make you dance. She had five thousand dollars in that room, while I stood there, not twenty feet away, and told her I was starving, and she wouldn't give me a dime to get a cup of coffee with; not a dime to get a cup of coffee. Oh, if I once get my hands on you!" His wrath strangled him. He clutched at the darkness in front of him, his breath fairly whistling between his teeth.

That night he walked the streets until the morning, wondering what now he was to do to fight the wolf away. The morning of the next day towards ten o'clock he was on Kearney Street, still walking, still tramping the streets, since there was nothing else for him to do. By and by he paused on a corner near a music store, finding a momentary amusement in watching two or three men loading a piano upon a dray. Already half its weight was supported by the dray's backboard. One of the men, a big mulatto, almost hidden under the mass of glistening rosewood, was guiding its course, while the other two heaved and tugged in the rear. Something in the street frightened the horses and they shied abruptly. The end of the piano was twitched sharply from the backboard. There was a cry, the mulatto staggered and fell with the falling piano, and its weight dropped squarely upon his thigh, which broke with a resounding crack.

An hour later McTeague had found his job. The music store engaged him as handler at six dollars a week. McTeague's enormous strength, useless all his life, stood him in good stead at last.

He slept in a tiny back room opening from the storeroom of the music store. He was in some sense a watchman as well as handler, and went the rounds of the store twice every night. His room was a box of a place that reeked with odors of stale tobacco smoke. The former occupant had papered the walls with newspapers and had pasted up figures cut out from the posters of some Kiralfy ballet, very gaudy. By the one window, chattering all day in its little gilt prison, hung the canary bird, a tiny atom of life that McTeague still clung to with a strange obstinacy.

McTeague drank a good deal of whiskey in these days, but the only effect it had upon him was to increase the viciousness and bad temper that had developed in him since the beginning of his misfortunes. He terrorized his fellow-handlers, powerful men though they were. For a gruff word, for an awkward movement in lading the pianos, for a surly look or a muttered oath, the dentist's elbow would crook and his hand contract to a mallet-like fist. As often as not the blow followed, colossal in its force, swift as the leap of the piston from its cylinder.

His hatred of Trina increased from day to day. He'd make her dance yet. Wait only till he got his hands upon her. She'd let him starve, would she? She'd turn him out of doors while she hid her five thousand dollars in the bottom of her trunk. Aha, he would see about that some day. She couldn't make small of him. Ah, no. She'd dance all right -- all right. McTeague was not an imaginative man by nature, but he would lie awake nights, his clumsy wits galloping and frisking under the lash of the alcohol, and fancy himself thrashing his wife, till a sudden frenzy of rage would overcome him, and he would shake all over, rolling upon the bed and biting the mattress.

On a certain day, about a week after Christmas of that year, McTeague was on one of the top floors of the music store, where the second-hand instruments were kept, helping to move about and rearrange some old pianos. As he passed by one of the counters he paused abruptly, his eye caught by an object that was strangely familiar.

"Say," he inquired, addressing the clerk in charge, "say, where'd this come from?"

"Why, let's see. We got that from a second-hand store up on Polk Street, I guess. It's a fairly good machine; a little tinkering with the stops and a bit of shellac, and we'll make it about's good as new. Good tone. See." And the clerk drew a long, sonorous wail from the depths of McTeague's old concertina.

"Well, it's mine," growled the dentist.

The other laughed. "It's yours for eleven dollars."

"It's mine," persisted McTeague. "I want it."

"Go 'long with you, Mac. What do you mean?"

"I mean that it's mine, that's what I mean. You got no right to it. It was **STOLEN** from me, that's what I mean," he added, a sullen anger flaming up in his little eyes.

The clerk raised a shoulder and put the concertina on an upper shelf.

"You talk to the boss about that; t'ain't none of my affair. If you want to buy it, it's eleven dollars."

The dentist had been paid off the day before and had four dollars in his wallet at the moment. He gave the money to the clerk.

"Here, there's part of the money. You -- you put that concertina aside for me, an' I'll give you the rest in a week or so -- I'll give it to you tomorrow," he exclaimed, struck with a sudden idea.

McTeague had sadly missed his concertina. Sunday afternoons when there was no work to be done, he was accustomed to lie flat on his back on his springless bed in the little room in the rear of the music store, his coat and shoes off, reading the paper, drinking steam beer from a

pitcher, and smoking his pipe. But he could no longer play his six lugubrious airs upon his concertina, and it was a deprivation. He often wondered where it was gone. It had been lost, no doubt, in the general wreck of his fortunes. Once, even, the dentist had taken a concertina from the lot kept by the music store. It was a Sunday and no one was about. But he found he could not play upon it. The stops were arranged upon a system he did not understand.

Now his own concertina was come back to him. He would buy it back. He had given the clerk four dollars. He knew where he would get the remaining seven.

The clerk had told him the concertina had been sold on Polk Street to the second-hand store there. Trina had sold it. McTeague knew it. Trina had sold his concertina -- had stolen it and sold it -- his concertina, his beloved concertina, that he had had all his life. Why, barring the canary, there was not one of all his belongings that McTeague had cherished more dearly. His steel engraving of "Lorenzo de' Medici and his Court" might be lost, his stone pug dog might go, but his concertina!

"And she sold it -- stole it from me and sold it. Just because I happened to forget to take it along with me. Well, we'll just see about that. You'll give me the money to buy it back, or -- -- "

His rage loomed big within him. His hatred of Trina came back upon him like a returning surge. He saw her small, prim mouth, her narrow blue eyes, her black mane of hair, and up-tilted chin, and hated her the more because of them. Aha, he'd show her; he'd make her dance. He'd get that seven dollars from her, or he'd know the reason why. He went through his work that day, heaving and hauling at the ponderous pianos, handling them with the ease of a lifting crane, impatient for the coming of evening, when he could be left to his own devices. As often as he had a moment to spare he went down the street to the nearest saloon and drank a pony of whiskey. Now and then as he fought and struggled with the vast masses of ebony, rosewood, and mahogany on the upper floor of the music store, raging and chafing at their inertness and unwillingness, while the whiskey pirouetted in his brain, he would mutter to himself:

"An' I got to do this. I got to work like a dray horse while she sits at home by her stove and counts her money -- and sells my concertina."

Six o'clock came. Instead of supper, McTeague drank some more whiskey, five ponies in rapid succession. After supper he was obliged to go out with the dray to deliver a concert grand at the Odd Fellows' Hall, where a piano "recital" was to take place.

"Ain't you coming back with us?" asked one of the handlers as he climbed upon the driver's seat after the piano had been put in place.

"No, no," returned the dentist; "I got something else to do." The brilliant lights of a saloon near the City Hall caught his eye. He decided he would have another drink of whiskey. It was about eight o'clock.

The following day was to be a fete day at the kindergarten, the Christmas and New Year festivals combined. All that afternoon the little two-story building on Pacific Street had been

filled with a number of grand ladies of the Kindergarten Board, who were hanging up ropes of evergreen and sprays of holly, and arranging a great Christmas tree that stood in the centre of the ring in the schoolroom. The whole place was pervaded with a pungent, piney odor. Trina had been very busy since the early morning, coming and going at everybody's call, now running down the street after another tack-hammer or a fresh supply of cranberries, now tying together the ropes of evergreen and passing them up to one of the grand ladies as she carefully balanced herself on a step-ladder. By evening everything was in place. As the last grand lady left the school, she gave Trina an extra dollar for her work, and said:

"Now, if you'll just tidy up here, Mrs. McTeague, I think that will be all. Sweep up the pine needles here -- you see they are all over the floor -- and look through all the rooms, and tidy up generally. Good night -- and a Happy New Year," she cried pleasantly as she went out.

Trina put the dollar away in her trunk before she did anything else and cooked herself a bit of supper. Then she came downstairs again.

The kindergarten was not large. On the lower floor were but two rooms, the main schoolroom and another room, a cloakroom, very small, where the children hung their hats and coats. This cloakroom opened off the back of the main schoolroom. Trina cast a critical glance into both of these rooms. There had been a great deal of going and coming in them during the day, and she decided that the first thing to do would be to scrub the floors. She went up again to her room overhead and heated some water over her oil stove; then, re-descending, set to work vigorously.

By nine o'clock she had almost finished with the schoolroom. She was down on her hands and knees in the midst of a steaming muck of soapy water. On her feet were a pair of man's shoes fastened with buckles; a dirty cotton gown, damp with the water, clung about her shapeless, stunted figure. From time to time she sat back on her heels to ease the strain of her position, and with one smoking hand, white and parboiled with the hot water, brushed her hair, already streaked with gray, out of her weazened, pale face and the corners of her mouth.

It was very quiet. A gas-jet without a globe lit up the place with a crude, raw light. The cat who lived on the premises, preferring to be dirty rather than to be wet, had got into the coal scuttle, and over its rim watched her sleepily with a long, complacent purr.

All at once he stopped purring, leaving an abrupt silence in the air like the sudden shutting off of a stream of water, while his eyes grew wide, two lambent disks of yellow in the heap of black fur.

"Who is there?" cried Trina, sitting back on her heels. In the stillness that succeeded, the water dripped from her hands with the steady tick of a clock. Then a brutal fist swung open the street door of the schoolroom and McTeague came in. He was drunk; not with that drunkenness which is stupid, maudlin, wavering on its feet, but with that which is alert, unnaturally intelligent, vicious, perfectly steady, deadly wicked. Trina only had to look once at him, and in an instant, with some strange sixth sense, born of the occasion, knew what she had to expect.

She jumped up and ran from him into the little cloakroom. She locked and bolted the door after her, and leaned her weight against it, panting and trembling, every nerve shrinking and quivering with the fear of him.

McTeague put his hand on the knob of the door outside and opened it, tearing off the lock and bolt guard, and sending her staggering across the room.

"Mac," she cried to him, as he came in, speaking with horrid rapidity, cringing and holding out her hands, "Mac, listen. Wait a minute -- look here -- listen here. It wasn't my fault. I'll give you some money. You can come back. I'll do ANYTHING you want. Won't you just LISTEN to me? Oh, don't! I'll scream. I can't help it, you know. The people will hear."

McTeague came towards her slowly, his immense feet dragging and grinding on the floor; his enormous fists, hard as wooden mallets, swinging at his sides. Trina backed from him to the corner of the room, cowering before him, holding her elbow crooked in front of her face, watching him with fearful intentness, ready to dodge.

"I want that money," he said, pausing in front of her.

"What money?" cried Trina.

"I want that money. You got it -- that five thousand dollars. I want every nickel of it! You understand?"

"I haven't it. It isn't here. Uncle Oelbermann's got it."

"That's a lie. He told me that you came and got it. You've had it long enough; now I want it. Do you hear?"

"Mac, I can't give you that money. I -- I WON'T give it to you," Trina cried, with sudden resolution.

"Yes, you will. You'll give me every nickel of it."

"No, NO."

"You ain't going to make small of me this time. Give me that money."

"NO."

"For the last time, will you give me that money?"

"No."

"You won't, huh? You won't give me it? For the last time."

"No, NO."

Usually the dentist was slow in his movements, but now the alcohol had awakened in him an ape-like agility. He kept his small eyes upon her, and all at once sent his fist into the middle of her face with the suddenness of a relaxed spring.

Beside herself with terror, Trina turned and fought him back; fought for her miserable life with the exasperation and strength of a harassed cat; and with such energy and such wild, unnatural force, that even McTeague for the moment drew back from her. But her resistance was the one thing to drive him to the top of his fury. He came back at her again, his eyes drawn to two fine twinkling points, and his enormous fists, clenched till the knuckles whitened, raised in the air.

Then it became abominable.

In the schoolroom outside, behind the coal scuttle, the cat listened to the sounds of stamping and struggling and the muffled noise of blows, wildly terrified, his eyes bulging like brass knobs. At last the sounds stopped on a sudden; he heard nothing more. Then McTeague came out, closing the door. The cat followed him with distended eyes as he crossed the room and disappeared through the street door.

The dentist paused for a moment on the sidewalk, looking carefully up and down the street. It was deserted and quiet. He turned sharply to the right and went down a narrow passage that led into the little court yard behind the school. A candle was burning in Trina's room. He went up by the outside stairway and entered.

The trunk stood locked in one corner of the room. The dentist took the lid-lifter from the little oil stove, put it underneath the lock-clasp and wrenched it open. Groping beneath a pile of dresses he found the chamois-skin bag, the little brass match-box, and, at the very bottom, carefully thrust into one corner, the canvas sack crammed to the mouth with twenty-dollar gold pieces. He emptied the chamois-skin bag and the matchbox into the pockets of his trousers. But the canvas sack was too bulky to hide about his clothes. "I guess I'll just naturally have to carry YOU," he muttered. He blew out the candle, closed the door, and gained the street again.

The dentist crossed the city, going back to the music store. It was a little after eleven o'clock. The night was moonless, filled with a gray blur of faint light that seemed to come from all quarters of the horizon at once. From time to time there were sudden explosions of a southeast wind at the street corners. McTeague went on, slanting his head against the gusts, to keep his cap from blowing off, carrying the sack close to his side. Once he looked critically at the sky.

"I bet it'll rain to-morrow," he muttered, "if this wind works round to the south."

Once in his little den behind the music store, he washed his hands and forearms, and put on his working clothes, blue overalls and a jumper, over cheap trousers and vest. Then he got together his small belongings -- an old campaign hat, a pair of boots, a tin of tobacco, and a pinchbeck bracelet which he had found one Sunday in the Park, and which he believed to be

valuable. He stripped his blanket from his bed and rolled up in it all these objects, together with the canvas sack, fastening the roll with a half hitch such as miners use, the instincts of the old-time car-boy coming back to him in his present confusion of mind. He changed his pipe and his knife -- a huge jackknife with a yellowed bone handle -- to the pockets of his overalls.

Then at last he stood with his hand on the door, holding up the lamp before blowing it out, looking about to make sure he was ready to go. The wavering light woke his canary. It stirred and began to chitter feebly, very sleepy and cross at being awakened. McTeague started, staring at it, and reflecting. He believed that it would be a long time before anyone came into that room again. The canary would be days without food; it was likely it would starve, would die there, hour by hour, in its little gilt prison. McTeague resolved to take it with him. He took down the cage, touching it gently with his enormous hands, and tied a couple of sacks about it to shelter the little bird from the sharp night wind.

Then he went out, locking all the doors behind him, and turned toward the ferry slips. The boats had ceased running hours ago, but he told himself that by waiting till four o'clock he could get across the bay on the tug that took over the morning papers.

* * * * *

Trina lay unconscious, just as she had fallen under the last of McTeague's blows, her body twitching with an occasional hiccough that stirred the pool of blood in which she lay face downward. Towards morning she died with a rapid series of hiccoughs that sounded like a piece of clockwork running down.

The thing had been done in the cloakroom where the kindergarten children hung their hats and coats. There was no other entrance except by going through the main schoolroom. McTeague going out had shut the door of the cloakroom, but had left the street door open; so when the children arrived in the morning, they entered as usual.

About half-past eight, two or three five-year-olds, one a little colored girl, came into the schoolroom of the kindergarten with a great chatter of voices, going across to the cloakroom to hang up their hats and coats as they had been taught.

Half way across the room one of them stopped and put her small nose in the air, crying, "Um-o-o, what a funnee smell!" The others began to sniff the air as well, and one, the daughter of a butcher, exclaimed, "'Tsmells like my pa's shop," adding in the next breath, "Look, what's the matter with the kittee?"

In fact, the cat was acting strangely. He lay quite flat on the floor, his nose pressed close to the crevice under the door of the little cloakroom, winding his tail slowly back and forth, excited, very eager. At times he would draw back and make a strange little clacking noise down in his throat.

"Ain't he funnee?" said the little girl again. The cat slunk swiftly away as the children came up. Then the tallest of the little girls swung the door of the little cloakroom wide open and they all ran in.

TO BE CONTINUED

This story is in the public domain.

PLEASE NOTE!!!

Moratorium on New Submissions!

Since being qualified as an MWA Approved Periodical, The Back Alley Webzine has been swamped with submissions. On one hand, this is a really good thing, because many of these have been of exceptional quality, which gives us a truly rich pool from which to select stories for the webzine.

However, The Back Alley Webzine is not a corporate entity. It is a labor of love with a miniscule staff. We all have day jobs, and over the last several months we have also had to deal with several deaths in the family.

Because of this, we find ourselves at The Back Alley with a significant backlog of stories. We need to wade through this backlog, select the very best to include in the webzine, and--this is the hardest part--send out about a hundred or so rejections.

In order to find the time to do this, we are placing a brief moratorium on new submissions. As of August 10, 2010, we believe that this moratorium should last no more than a couple of months, but things happen. If you have a story that you think would be a good fit for The Back Alley Webzine, we would like to see it, but we do ask that you not submit it until this brief moratorium is lifted, and we have an opportunity to dispose of the current backlog.

Of course, if your name is Michael Connelly, Ken Bruen, Robert Crais, Christa Faust, Reed Coleman, Allen Guthrie, or Lawrence Sanders, please feel free to disregard this notice. Everyone else, we appreciate your patience. Thanks for reading The Back Alley Webzine, and keep writing!