

THE UNFAITHFUL

A Story

BY WHITFIELD COOK

HAMP had sometimes read about sin in the magazines. In those shiny women's magazines that Lola bought and left around the apartment. It was different when you read about it like that. It was like something out of another world. It was big and glamorous and wicked and soul-shaking. And when you saw sin in the movies, it always seemed to go on in beautifully decorated rooms and the girl would be lighted so she looked like a dream, with her eyelashes casting shadows and her lips so perfect. It always seemed awfully important, sin in the movies.

It was not like that, though. Not with Hamp. It was just something that happened, like you caught a cold. And he still couldn't believe it. As he stood there behind the counter washing glasses, he still couldn't believe that he'd been unfaithful. For the first time. And what would Lola say? Because she'd be sure to find out. He was no good at lying.

He rinsed a batch of glasses in the soapy, oily water, feeling the heat on his big red hands, feeling the ends of his fingers crinkling from the hot water. He stared over the counter as he worked, down the length of the narrow drug store, his small, pale eyes unfocused, his thoughts on last night, and on the future, and on money. His forehead was wrinkled and his thin, brownish hair fell a bit down towards his eyes. A nerve in his thin neck kept twitching. Oh, God, he thought, oh, my Jesus!

It was a quiet period after the breakfast rush. There were only two customers at the counter. He'd have about a half hour to do the dishes and get tidied up. Then the women would begin coming in, the housewives, plopping down for a soda in the middle of the morning, or for a cup of coffee. And that would go right into the noon rush. And the afternoon would be busy, too. Saturday. Lots of kids. So he ought to do his thinking now.

But he couldn't seem to think straight. Everything was all confused. He kept thinking about things he didn't want to think about. Things about Lola. Like their marriage and their honeymoon. *Oh, my Jesus, was that a sweet time!* Like the magic of the first time he saw Lola dancing on the stage. She had a little moment when she danced all by herself and the spotlight was just on her. And Mike Lash said she had what it takes and she could go far. . . . Like when he heard Lola telling people he was a pharmacist. He frowned and plunged his hands into the dirty water. ("Well, Christ, I can't tell 'em you're a soda jerker, can I?")

After the noon rush, when he had a few minutes to eat, he'd call the hospital. He'd find out how Lola was. Then at six he'd go right up and see her. He'd sit with her a while. He'd tell her not to worry. But what if she asked him what he did last night? He wouldn't want to lie to Lola. He had never lied to Lola. . . .

It was a funny thing — Lola wasn't really pretty, he guessed, but she always seemed pretty to him. On the stage she had always looked beautiful. And her legs were fine. Lola was proud of her legs. No wonder she was frightened by

this accident. A girl like Lola, with those beautiful legs, to be lying up there in Roosevelt Hospital. *Oh, my Jesus!* . . . Hamp could remember so clearly how they used to go swimming when they were on their honeymoon. There was a little lake near the tourist cabin they had in Vermont. They'd drive over at noon and park by the shore. And Lola would dive right in and swim surely and steadily. When she swam back to him, he'd smile at her and say, "Good girl." And then they'd kid around a little and Lola would pretend she was going to duck him because she knew he hated being ducked. But finally she'd kiss him instead, her face and lips all cool and sweet from the cold water. And then they'd get out and lie on the worn old canoe dock and dry in the sun. *Oh, my Jesus, what a sweet time! What a sweet, faraway time! Four years ago . . .*

"Coffee and a custard roll."

Hamp automatically wiped a rag across the counter in front of a fat man with a weak voice. He drew the coffee and flipped a custard roll from the glass case onto a plate. He cut the roll in half. The man lifted a piece sullenly and looked inside. They usually complained because there wasn't enough custard. This fat man said nothing.

II

Hamp stared dreamily down the length of the store. He could think clearly about last night now. So clearly that it frightened him. . . .

He had gone home to the apartment at six and Lola hadn't been home. Maybe she'd gone to a movie, he figured. He turned the radio on and flopped down on the big double day-bed. He listened to some swing and some news and to Lum and Abner. And then he opened the glass-paneled door that went into the tiny kitchenette. It had once been an entryway, but it had been converted into a kitchenette. He looked into the icebox. He wondered if maybe he should start something for dinner.

While he was standing there, wondering, the phone rang and it was Emily, Lola's sister. She said she was at Roosevelt Hospital and Lola had fallen down and broken her leg.

"My God, how? When? . . ."

"You just come on over," said Emily.

Hamp threw on his coat and ran out of the apartment and down the two flights of creaking stairs. He walked to the corner of Eighth Avenue and hailed a taxi. It would cost about seventy cents, he figured, but never mind.

Just after he had climbed into the taxi, he remembered that he and Lola never had taken out that hospitalization insurance. Hamp felt sick to his stomach; and he started to bite the nails of his left hand. . . .

He could see again so vividly Lola's face as he came into her hospital room. She was in a semi-private room. That's what Lola said it was. It had three other beds in it. It was high and old and had dark wooden moldings. Lola was lying very still and the sheets were smoothed neatly across her breast. Her head was little against the pillows. And her black hair was flattened out around her in an odd way. Without make-up, her face looked more pinched and tired than Hamp had ever seen it.

"Lola girl," he said and went and stooped over her and kissed her. "Oh, my God, Lola girl, what happened? . . . You gonna be all right, huh?"

"Hello, Hamp," said Lola quietly as if she were far away, as if all that had happened to her in the last hours had taken her far away.

"Emily said it was your leg."

"Yeah." Lola's lips quivered and her eyes were misty.

Hamp held her hand tightly. "It don't hurt, does it?" he asked, looking closely into her sweet, fa-

miliar face.

Lola moved her head No. "Not much. They fixed it. They gave me something. But, Hamp, my leg, . . . my dancing . . ."

"It's gonna be all right, honey. They fix broken legs up good as new."

"I don't know. . . ."

"Sure they do."

Lola drew in her breath as if she were going to sob, but she didn't.

"How did it happen, girlie?" said Hamp.

"I fell downstairs," said Lola. Then she turned her head a little, so she wasn't looking right at him. "I thought I'd go up to see Mike Lash. You remember, I used to dance with him. I just thought I'd go up and say 'Howdy.' And I did. And when I was leaving, I fell down those goddam stairs in that crumby old rehearsal building."

She turned her head to the side, away from Hamp.

"Why didn't you send for me right away, honey? I'd have left the store."

Lola didn't answer for a moment. "Emily was nearer," she said then. "I had them send for Emily."

Hamp stroked her hand. He looked at her big dark eyes, which were staring off into space. He felt the tears coming into his own eyes. He felt he couldn't bear to see Lola

look so worn and beaten. He wanted to pick her right up in his arms and make her leg well, make a miracle happen, and carry her out of that dimly lit room.

"I gotta be here quite a long while. Then I'll have the cast for three months. Oh, Christ, oh, why did it have to happen!"

"Now, Lola, don't. . . . It might have happened to anybody."

"Then why *didn't* it happen to anybody!"

"Now, Lola, don't."

"And how we gonna pay for it, how the hell we gonna pay?" she said in an agonized whisper.

"Now, Lola girlie, don't you worry. . . . Don't you worry now."

After a while a nurse came in and said Hamp had better leave. They wanted Lola to sleep. They were going to give her a sedative.

When he came out onto the street, it was raining. Not hard, just a slow, misty drizzle. He started walking. He felt dazed and as if his movements were a little out of control. *How we gonna pay for it? Oh, my Jesus!* He looked down at his shoes and at the wet pavement, full of oily puddles. After a while his feet would get wet. No matter. He turned down Ninth Avenue and walked slowly along through the blur of rain and small Neon signs.

III

He walked all the way home. Forty blocks almost, thinking and thinking, until he felt his brain would burst. The cold dampness was all over his face. And he kept stretching out his fingers nervously and then clenching them. And he realized he was holding his jaws tense, his teeth pressed together. He guessed he'd have to have a drink.

Below Twenty-second Street he went into a little bar. He put his foot on the rail and stared at the taffy-colored tin wall. He drank a straight rye. He could feel it nestling in a warm ball in his stomach. He could feel it spreading up into his chest and down into his loins. But it didn't seem to relax him any. He had another. Then he remembered he hadn't eaten yet and he paid for his drinks and went to a lunch counter.

It was steamy inside and the windows were dripping. The air was close with heat and smoke. The radio was moaning a blues song, the deep bass notes over-emphasized. He kept thinking about the hospital bills and the doctors' bills and the way Lola looked, as if she was worrying her heart out. *How the hell we gonna pay?* What can a guy do on fifteen

a week? How can he save? How can he be ready for emergencies?

The loud, vibrating, dreamy music sank into him. He felt empty and lonely. Not empty for lack of food. But just empty, all over. He bit his fingernails. Where would he get the money? What would he do?

He felt somebody touch his shoulder and he looked up.

"Hello, George Hampton!" she said.

It was a girl he used to know in his home town in New Jersey. Gertrude Brophee. She lived nearby and he had run into her once before.

"Why, hello, Gertrude," he said.

They had gone to junior high school together in Red Bank. And Gertrude was the same Gertrude, with the broad mouth and warm, friendly gray eyes. Only she was bigger and sort of disappointed-looking now. Hamp had always thought Gertrude was nice. And now they had a bond in a way, because Gertrude worked at a soda fountain, too. At a Liggett's.

"Just come off the job?" said Gertrude.

"No, I just come from the hospital. My wife broke her leg."

"Oh, say, I'm sorry."

"Yeah."

"I sure am sorry."

Hamp looked down at his coffee.

He picked up the spoon and started to stir it. "You eaten?"

"Just finished," said Gertrude.

"I thought we might sit together," said Hamp.

"Sorry. But I just finished," said Gertrude. She was buttoning her coat.

"How you been, Gertrude?" said Hamp, with an effort.

"Fine."

And she was just standing there, pulling her collar up around her neck. Looking at Hamp's thin little face with the hurt blue eyes and untidy brown hair.

"You look like you need a drink, boy," she said.

"I've had one," said Hamp.

"You look like you need another."

Gertrude still looked at him. And the heavy, languorous music swirled around them and got into the mind. Maybe Gertrude decided he must be lonely. Or maybe she felt suddenly lonely herself. Or maybe it was just that she remembered Red Bank, New Jersey.

"Listen," she said, "why don't you come home with me and let me cook you up something decent. You can have a drink, too. You don't want to sit here and eat alone. Not tonight."

"Well, Gertrude, that's awful nice of you. . . ."

"Come on. I'll love doin' it. And we can talk over old times. Huh? . . . Aw, come on, George Hampton."

There was something about the way she said George Hampton. Just the way she used to say it in high school. Somehow it made the years drop away and it almost seemed as if he was meeting Gertrude after school, the way he used to.

So he went. He flipped down a nickel for his coffee and went up to Gertrude's for sausages and scrambled eggs and homemade cake. "I love to make cake," Gertrude said.

They drank gin, because it was all Gertrude had in the house. And after a while, Hamp began to feel lighter and less troubled and the hospital and Lola and the drug store all seemed way off in another age. He felt good. And he and Gertrude talked about Red Bank.

Do y' remember . . . ? And the time we went . . . And old Beet-nose Northrop with his funny hats? . . . Remember that class picnic . . . ? And the time Joe Gavin fought Joe Harrison over Milly Wicker? . . . Remember, huh? . . . Remember, remember, remember . . .

Time went flying by and the worry drifted off into nothingness. They were both sitting on Gertrude's ugly green studio couch and

Gertrude had her head back against the wall. Her solid, rather heavy neck was nice, stretched back that way. Hamp looked at it. He just kept looking at it. And smiling, too, because he was dreamy and happy and the sharp, hurtful little thoughts had gone away.

Gertrude rolled her head a little against the wall. She turned it and looked at Hamp.

"Gee, I ain't had such a good time for . . . for a long time," said Hamp.

"Me, too," said Gertrude.

Hamp looked at her. And then he put out his hand and rested it on her neck. It was warm and he could feel the big artery pulsing under his fingers. Gertrude didn't move. She just smiled gently at him.

"Oh, Gertrude . . ." And he moved closer and kissed her. And suddenly he felt warm and free and powerful. And Gertrude reached up and pulled off the light above them.

It was like something he'd always wanted. He'd known Gertrude since he was a boy. She was like his family and his old gang and his town. She was like home. . . .

Later, they lay still and heard the rain falling in the narrow court outside Gertrude's window. They could see the grimy rayon curtains blowing a little. And then Hamp

got up and went back to his apartment.

IV

Well, that's how it had happened. Just as simply as that. And now he was an unfaithful husband. And, standing there, behind the drug store counter, he could hardly believe it. He'd never had much to do with women. Lola had been almost the only one. And what would Lola think? Darling Lola, lying up there in that hospital, miserable and bitter. He'd treated her rotten. But maybe she'd understand.

"Chocolate malted," said a man sharply.

"An egg in it?" said Hamp.

"No egg."

The afternoon rush was starting now. It would keep up steady till six. Then Moe came on and Hamp could knock off.

When he left the drug store at six-fifteen, Hamp took a bus uptown to the hospital. In the main hall he met Lola's sister, Emily, on her way out. Emily looked a lot like Lola, except that no one would ever think her pretty, not even Hamp, or Everett, her husband. Her nose and chin were just too sharp and witch-like. And her rather gawky neck looked like fine gray sandpaper.

Her eyes snapped at Hamp, as if all this were his fault.

"How is she?" said Hamp.

"O.K.," said Emily sullenly.

"I'm so worried about her," said Hamp.

"I'm worried about how you're gonna pay for all this," said Emily, pulling on her gloves savagely. "You and Lola sure haven't got any money for hospital bills."

"No . . ."

"And *we* can't do anything for you. Everett's not doin' much business."

"Oh, I wasn't expectin' . . ." said Hamp quickly.

"Well, don't," cut in Emily.

"Don't act so cross, Emily," said Hamp.

"Well, I am cross. I told Lola she shouldn't try to go back on the stage. A wife's place is with her husband. If she hadn't begun rehearsing with Mike Lash this wouldn't have happened."

Hamp looked puzzled. Lola hadn't told him she was rehearsing.

"Why you'd be willing to let her take up her dancing again is more than I can see. You oughta have more backbone, Hamp."

"Look," said Hamp, looking past Emily, "just *how* did this accident happen?"

"Didn't Lola tell you? She was rehearsing with Mike Lash, and she

took a spill doing a fancy turn and came down on her leg. Naturally she'd be stiff after four years of not dancing."

So Lola hadn't fallen downstairs. She'd been rehearsing with Mike Lash. . . . And she had never told him. She had lied to him.

"I'm goin' up now," said Hamp, fingering his hat uneasily.

"Yeah, you better."

He moved along the hall to the elevator. Maybe Lola wasn't ever going to tell him, he thought. Maybe she was just going to land a job with Mike Lash as a partner and leave him. He felt suddenly terrified, because he hadn't known what was in Lola's mind. Maybe he didn't know Lola at all. After four years even.

She looked just the same as she had yesterday, lying there unhappily between the neat sheets. Her hair had been combed and brushed. It looked awfully straight, somehow. She looked at Hamp a long time when he appeared around the end of the screen.

"Hello, Hamp."

"Hello, Lola girlie." Hamp kissed her tenderly.

It was quite dim in the room, and when Hamp sat down on the straight chair near the bed, he was in the shadow. He could hear the faint voices of visitors at the other

beds.

"How do you feel, Lola?"

"O.K."

Lola didn't seem to want to talk much. Her mouth looked more unhappy than ever. Hamp leaned over and kissed her a second time. She came to life a little then. "How'll you get along, Hamp? About meals and things?" she said.

"I'll get along," said Hamp.

"Did you get your own dinner last night?"

Here it comes, thought Hamp. Now Lola was going to find out. She'd know.

"I ran into Gertrude Brophee," said Hamp casually. "You know, that girl I introduced you to once? From Red Bank?"

"Oh."

"She cooked me a supper at her place."

"That was nice," said Lola. She meant it. Her voice sounded as if she really wasn't paying much attention.

"I — I stayed up there most of the evening."

"Uh-huh," said Lola. She *wasn't* paying attention. She didn't care. Hamp felt it like a blow. She didn't care what he'd been doing.

Lola turned her head away from him on the pillows.

Hamp swallowed. He wanted desperately to tell her about Ger-

trude. He wanted to explain it didn't mean anything. He wanted Lola to say, Never mind, baby. He wanted them to be close again. He didn't want to carry that secret around with him. Even if Lola had secrets from him, even if she lied to him. He didn't want to lie to her. Only by telling her could he make it all right.

He sat there for a long moment, saying nothing.

"Hamp," said Lola finally, staring up at the dim ceiling, "how we gonna pay for all this? What we gonna do?" Lola's forehead was all wrinkled, and she bit her lip.

"Now don't you worry, Lola girl."

Hamp leaned over her and touched her hair awkwardly.

Lola moved her head in a little gesture of irritation. "Don't," she said.

Hamp sat up straight in the chair again. And the room was very still. And then he knew that he wouldn't tell Lola about Gertrude Brophee. There'd be no point. Lola wouldn't even care. He would never tell her. And maybe it was only the first of many things he would never tell her.

Sitting there in the shadow, clutching nervously at his hat, he felt full of a nameless hurt. He felt his eyeballs beginning to sting. He

blinked quickly.

Lola just stared up at the ceiling, her lips pressed together desperately.

It was so still, Hamp could hear

her breathing. His thoughts went back to their honeymoon. He couldn't help it. *Oh, my Jesus, what a sweet time. What a sweet, faraway time . . .*

SONG FOR A VIOLIN

BY ALINE W. LIEBMAN

THE wind in the forest,
Caressing the trees,
Sings hollow,
And futile,
And shrill;
Orange, and amber, and crimson,
The leaves,
Quivering,
Drop,
And lie still.

The forest is quiet,
The forest is dead,
And cool and insistent,
The rain.
Oh, where is my love,
With the pale, half-shut eyes,
And the mouth
Like a strawberry stain?

Where is my lovely one?
Winter is here!
A blast
And a great silver cry.
Sharp points of ice
Are the stars in the night,
And the moon
Is a tear
In the sky.