

Typically American



Naturally Good



Return Empty Bottles Promptly

MISSION ORANGE

Mission Dry Corporation, Los Angeles

brought by a Mexican maid, pretty with her dark face and shining black hair and brightly striped skirt, and scarlet and green beads.

She went to sleep as if she had been struck. It was dusk when Monica awoke. The moment of bewilderment, of the reassembly of one's self, and one's life with which one always emerges from an exhausted, heavy sleep, caught her. Gradually she knew it was evening; that the sun's glow was gone; that there were more voices in the patio, and lights down there. She felt better; that was the rest and sleep.

Someone down in the patio laughed loudly and someone replied. She got up and went out on the balcony and stood at the railing in her dark silk dressing gown with her hair down around her shoulders. They were all down there, around a table, in the tiled center of the green patio. There were a few candles glowing in the soft blue dusk. Linda in a pink evening dress was sitting in a chaise longue with John at her feet, a glass in his hand. Gibbs was talking to another woman—Fae de Rissaud (Fae Demuth now); foreshortened at that distance but handsome and soignée and well poised and slim as Monica remembered her.

A man, short and dark with shining, brushed dark hair, wearing a white linen suit, came out of the house into Monica's range of vision, carrying a tray with ice and glasses. Everyone hailed him with gay cries and John looked up and saw her standing there. He got up. "Here she is," he cried. "Come on down, Monica."

Fae looked up and cried, "Monica, darling—" Her lovely, slender face showed no sign of the hardships of the years in France; she was a slender, graceful woman, of an age either so indefinite or so skillfully accepted that it never mattered; she was civilized, cosmopolitan, well dressed, well jeweled, perfectly poised and exquisitely knowledgeable. And—being of that breed and species of woman—completely enigmatic. Monica had always liked her and never known what she was thinking. Linda, beautiful and gay now, with no harsh blue shadows on her face, looked up too, and cried, "Darling, come down. We're all going to Ciro's to dinner."

Again it was merely a social visit; there were no shadows of murder, of violent death, of horror below the charming façade.

WHILE she slept the Mexican maid had pressed her clothes and returned them—silently, without waking her. Twenty minutes later she started downstairs and John was sitting on the top step, a glass in his hand, his white coat looming up ghostlike in the shadows.

"I was waiting," he said. And then stopped and looked at her. She'd put on the long white dress with the crimson sash—thinking, as she did so, of Bill packing it for her and the dreadful stillness in her small apartment. John looked and said, "You're lovely, Monica. I'd forgotten—" he stopped again. And said rather quickly, "I—we'll get together after dinner. We can't get away from the others until then. I've got to talk to you alone."

"All right. Did Linda tell you about the cachet?"

"Yes," he said shortly. "Shall we go down? Look out for the steps. There ought to be a light—" He put his hand out toward her. And suddenly, deliberately, held her still, put his glass down on the floor and took her very quietly into his arms and put his cheek against her hair and held her there.

It was like the moment at the airport that morning; yet it was different too; it was deliberate—not merely in greeting, but something else. "John—" she whispered, past some tight, hard throb in her throat. "You're alive. You're real—"

He held her closer against him, warm and hard and tight. And then gave a short laugh and released her. "Don't mind me," he said. "It's so good to see you. I—oh, Mona, it's been so long— Well, we'd better go down."

So they went down the stairs. At the landing there was a light like a lantern, cased in grilled iron; they went out through the wide hall, no longer shimmering in the green and gold of sunlight, and into the patio. A radio on a table was going; it was a foreign broadcast in a foreign language. Monica heard a few words in, she thought, German, as Gibbs moved and turned it off.

Fae, in a thin black gown with exquisite lines, with her gray-blond hair done high and an emerald at her throat and others at

her ears, met her, embraced her, kissed her. Brought Carlos Demuth, with a graceful motion of her jeweled hand, to meet her, and Carlos, Spanish apparently, dark and rotund but with very quick and observant dark eyes, kissed her hand and welcomed her in an unexpectedly stately manner to his house. Gibbs stood with a highball glass in his hand and his handsome, heavy face without expression and watched. Linda told John to pour her a drink.

They went to Ciro's presently to dinner; they talked; they were gay—even Gibbs joined that gaiety as frankly, apparently, as anyone. The gray satin cushions set off Linda's blond and sparkling beauty and Fae Demuth's exquisite charm and grace, and emeralds. Nobody, watching them, would have dreamed the thing that at least four of them were thinking about under that surface gaiety. Once, though, Linda touched on it; she lifted a glass and said, "Well, here's to our reunion after five years! Fae and Monica and Gibbs and, of course, darling John, you and me." John met Linda's look and smiled. (Lightly? thought Monica. Tenderly? Certainly with every semblance of

MASS. PENN. F.D.R. OKLA. OPA TENN. ARK.

DO YOU KNOW ABBREVIATIONS?—No. 2

Test yourself on the following list of abbreviations and foreign words commonly used and see how you rate. You probably have run into most of them innumerable times in newspapers, magazines and books. If you guess 15 of them correctly, you may consider yourself fair; 18 or more qualifies you as above average; and anything over 20 is superior.

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1. ad lib. | 13. contd. |
| 2. e.g. | 14. E.N.E. |
| 3. F.O.B. | 15. Esq. |
| 4. R.S.V.P. | 16. Ut. |
| 5. I.Q. | 17. Hts. |
| 6. in re | 18. J.P. |
| 7. etc. | 19. LL.D. |
| 8. R.F.D. | 20. Messrs. |
| 9. A.C. | 21. mfg. |
| 10. adj. | 22. op. cit. |
| 11. advt. | 23. pp. |
| 12. A.W.O.L. | 24. recd. |
| 25. T.C.C. | |

(Answers on page 73)

—Charles Prout

CO. BK. N.O. N.D. A.M. P.M. M. MINN. ETC.

understanding between them.) Linda said: "Everybody is here, in fact, but Eric. Carlos, dear, you'll have to take Eric's place."

It was as if a chill, small wind had blown in through some invisible door—past other diners, through the gay and mirrored room, over their table—chilling all it touched. No one else—except John—seemed aware of it. John's eyes met Monica's briefly; his face did not change. Carlos, the soul of politeness and hospitality and Latin grace, made a little bow. "Delighted, dear Linda. Delighted," he said. "Who is this Eric?"

Fae, his wife, replied, "Just a boy we picked up on the Riviera—that was the summer war began."

There was no other mention of anything that even bordered upon Monica's visit to Mexico and Gibbs' unheralded, unexpected, unwanted presence there.

Eventually they started home and someone suggested another night club and then another. It was, however, only about two when John said firmly that they had to go home. "Monica and Gibbs are passing out on their feet," he said, "and not from liquor. They got up a good twenty-four hours ago. Let's go home."

Back again through the strange and glittering and fascinating city.

"Our city," said Carlos looking out the window of the long, shining car he had asked John to drive—apparently the Demuth garage was as well stocked as the Demuth cellar—"our city is like a woman: capricious, lovely—cruel and gracious. And never more so than at night." The glow of lights shone briefly on his dark, round and intelligent face. Not a face to be overlooked, thought Monica; not a face to be deceived.

That was all, though, really, that she thought of Carlos Demuth. They reached the house and there were long cold drinks waiting for them on a tray in the patio. Fae de Rissaud Demuth ran the kind of house where every small detail is done, as if by clockwork, behind the scenes. It was Fae who made them all go to bed. "It's late," she said. "There's always tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow." She put her slim hand on Carlos' shoulder and smiled at him. "You see how Mexican I have become. talk of Mañana." He kissed her hand; and then Monica's and Linda's. Linda lingered in the patio with Gibbs and John. Fae herself took Monica to her room, saw that everything had been done: the bed turned down, her night things laid out, fresh water in a vacuum bottle on the bed table. "It's cold at night," she said. "You'll need that eider-down. Good night, my dear. I'm glad you came."

She went away—elegant, remote, gracious—asking no questions. Monica wondered briefly if Fae de Rissaud Demuth knew anything of the maze of threat and death and horror that lay below all that bright and gay façade.

JOHN had said only a quiet good night. An hour must have passed, perhaps longer for she was half asleep, when his voice roused her. "Mona—Mona—"

He was on the balcony. There was no moon but a brightly starry sky made it light enough to see him standing in the doorway. She sat up in bed. "John—"

He came in. His body was a black moving shadow, tall and strong against the starlight beyond the window. He came to the bed and sat down on the edge of it and held her hand tightly. "Listen, Mona; don't—oh, you're not the screaming type but—do you know anything of first aid?"

"What happened?" Mona whispered.

"Come down. He's in the patio—"

"He—"

"At the foot of the trellis. I found him just now. Is this your dressing gown?"

It lay over the foot of the bed. He put it around her; he found her small mules beside the bed and held them for her bare feet. "We'll go down the stairs," he whispered. "I came up the trellis but—wait." He opened the door; the hall outside was dark. "Take my hand," he whispered.

In the thick darkness they reached the stairs and groped for the top step; they went down cautiously and carefully, with the darkness of the sleeping house all around them—sleeping, yet seeming to listen too, aware of their passage, aware of them as intruders, creeping down the darkened stairs through the wide hall. The door to the patio creaked a little as John opened it; starlight fell dimly on their faces. The night air was clear and cool; the fragrance of grass and sweet stock were all around. "This way," he whispered again and led her across the patio, to stop just below the balcony of her room. A man lay there.

A man in a dark suit, half on his face, a thick, flaccid huddle in the starlight. John bent for a moment and then stood up.

"It's too late," he said. "He's dead. He was still breathing and I thought—but he's dead now."

Dead. A limp, ugly huddle, like Eric somehow; horrible. Monica could see the face, half of it, the eyes half open.

But it wasn't Carlos Demuth who had taken Eric's place. It was the little man, the swarthy, sleepy, smiling little man with the spaniel eyes who had traveled with them. Who had said his name was Joe Sproul.

The stars looked down upon the patio with a hundred eyes. The windows of the house, blank and shining in the starlight, looked down, too.

It was very still; there was no wind. But somewhere near them the vines, the shrubbery, some thick loop of wisteria or bougainvillea rustled softly.

(To be continued next week)

No Longer Think of Me

Continued from page 16

looked after them, and his heart leaped when she turned her head and stared full and gravely at him for a moment.

Doris jogged his elbow. "When did you arrive, darling?"

"Just got here. Nice party, Doris."

Her bright, animated, slightly worn mask dropped for an instant. "It's terrible. But what can you do? You've got to do something."

"Who is that girl dancing with Chuck? Friend of his?"

"No, she lives in that dinky house across the road. She doesn't know anyone here, but she's doing all right. Her name is Jessie."

"I know. She told me."

"You, too?"

He waited, still watching the girl and

Chuck. "Oh, she's got it, though I'm damned if I know what," Doris said peevishly. "Well, perhaps I do, even if I never had it. But she's just another scalp-collector, Beck. No—I'll take that back. She's really a good kid. Her husband is somewhere in the Pacific, fighting, and she's just passing the time. Doesn't mean a thing, no matter what her eyes tell you."

Someone across the room screeched, "Hey, Doris! Dor-rie! Any more ice around?"

Doris touched his arm. "I'll be back. I'll bring you a drink."

Beck relaxed on a window seat. Another man had cut in on Chuck, and the girl danced away with him, making the change expertly and coolly. Beck watched her boldly, but she did not look at him again.

Doris reappeared and put a glass into his hand.

"It's good to have you here, Beck, even if all you do is sit around and scowl at people."

"I'm scowling because they're so young and I'm not."

"There you go! Always trying to make me feel old."

"I'll be forty pretty soon. And in two months you'll be—"

"Stop it! That was one of the worst things about being married to you, Beck. You never forget an anniversary or a birthday, as a normal man should."

"Not my own birthdays."

A young sailor with a flushed face and fine, serious brown eyes sat down beside Doris and blurted, "Say, you know what I was telling you? Well, I mean it. I'm not kidding. I never met anybody like you before."

He made an awkward but determined attempt to kiss her, and Beck took advantage of the confusion to get away. Jessie Hayes and her last partner had left the room. He had been watching for her to return, though

he managed to smile at his own interest.

A girl in a blue dress bumped into him, staggered and almost fell. She brushed aside his helping hand, saying over her shoulder as she hurried on—

"Sorry. My husband—sorry—"

Beck sauntered into the kitchen, where a small group of people were seriously drinking, and talked a few minutes with Tom Drennen, who was a Marine sergeant. Tom was exactly his own age, and Beck resentfully thought he should have left the war to the kids. Tom was rather patronizing, as usual.

WHEN Beck finally broke away, loud voices from the library attracted him, and he looked in.

The girl in the blue dress was screaming a steady stream of invective at Chuck Stoddard. Chuck was shouting angry answers, and beside Chuck was Jessie's last partner, listening with his mouth open, like an interested but bewildered spectator. Behind this trio, Jessie stood in an angle of books.

Blue Dress shouted hoarsely. "Whaddya think I am? Think I'll lie down and take it? I'll slap her ugly face, I'll bust that busted nose of hers. Sneak off with my husband! Who does the little — think she is? All right, I'm shouting! I'll shout all I please, see? Yeah, and you think I'll let a little—"

Jessie stood very still, as though trying to hold herself out of this scene by complete immobility. Beck stepped around the trio, smiling at her, and took her arm.

"I've been looking for you," he said calmly. "Let's get out of here."

He steered her toward the door. The others swung around, drawn by the movement, and Beck put all the authority of his extra years into his voice.

"Hold her a moment, Chuck."

He swept Jessie out of the library without the appearance of haste, hearing Chuck's voice beat angrily against that of the girl in the blue dress. Beck led the way across the hall, through the solarium, and out the side door into the night. Jessie spoke only once, saying, "Thanks. That could have been nasty."

Beck squeezed her arm reassuringly, but not until she had locked the door of her house behind them did she relax. She sat down, letting him see the relief in her eyes, and sighed shakily.

"Lord! How did that happen to me? I danced once with that boy. I never saw him before, you know. And he said would I drink a beer, and I said all right. We went out to the bar and Chuck was there, and then she came in and before I knew it—What was it all about, anyhow?"

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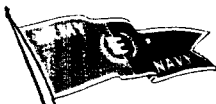
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LET’S ALL
BACK THE ATTACK
BUY WAR BONDS

"No one ever knows."

"Chuck just made it worse. You handled it wonderfully, and I'm more grateful than I can say."

Beck was pretty well pleased with himself, but he said casually, "Forget it. But I want to stay out of it, so I'll park here for a while, if you don't mind?"

"I wish you would. I'm beginning to get the jitters."

At first they talked idly. She showed him around the flimsy little bungalow. There was a kitchen no roomier than a matchbox, a collapsible bedroom, a vertical bathroom, and the one comparatively grand, studio-like room, complete with tiny fireplace and a wide front window. The window should have overlooked a panorama, but from it one saw only a few stunted trees and Doris' huge house across the road.

Later Jessie brewed coffee and scrambled eggs. By that time she was calling him Beck and laughing and talking gaily. Beck had the ability of making people like him, when he thought it worth the effort—and now he was making a tremendous effort.

Over the coffee he adroitly led her to talk about herself. She told him about her childhood, her daily life, her neighbors, her tastes in food and drink and books and people. He wanted to know something of her husband, and asked, "Isn't it pretty lonely, living here alone?"

"No-o-o. There's a big garden. That keeps me busy. And I look after the neighbors' kids for miles around, when they want a day off. If I only had—I mean, I read, too. I like it here. But I enjoyed talking to you. There isn't anyone much to talk to."

He probed deeper. "Still, it must be lonely at times, with your husband off to war. Miss him plenty, don't you?"

She shook her head. "Not very much. The world is full of men, if all I wanted was a man. Of course, I'm married to Jimmy until further notice."

"Like it? Being married, I mean?"

"I didn't have much time to find out before he went away. I liked what I saw of it."

BECK sensed that this talk bothered her and he changed the topic. "I'd like to come back and talk to you again. That's about all my life amounts to—talk."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "I know better than that. Doris has told me a lot about you."

"Yes. I have money, time, good health, and no conscience. She thinks that means I'm happy. Poor Doris has a conscience. You knew we'd been married?"

She nodded. "I never understood why it didn't take. Doris thinks you're wonderful."

"We get along very well since the divorce. She wanted it. It's over. I finally outgrew Doris. I kept track of the years and she never would. Doris wants to be twenty forever, poor thing."

"She's still young—and really beautiful."

"She is my age."

Jessie laughed. "And you're so ancient!"

"I am ancient, from where you stand."

"Pooh!"

"I don't try to fool myself, as Doris does. That's hard for a man to do, these days. The war is for young men. All I'm good for is to stay home and run my business. In other words, I'm out of it."

"I never heard such nonsense," Jessie said. "Doris has told me—you make some sort of airplane instruments, and that's more important than a soldier."

"No, I'm outmoded. For example, there's you. Kids like Chuck and that girl's husband fall in love with you at sight and kick up their heels like colts. Suppose I behaved that way? You know I won't, of course. That's why I'm here. I'm safe. I talk to you, look at you. You're so young and bright it makes my heart ache to look at you, but you know very well I won't do more than look—and talk. But I'd like to come again, if my talk doesn't bore you."

He was careful not to say too much or speak too seriously, but he was pleased when she made some uncertain movement to stack the dishes on the table. He was even more pleased when she smiled and said easily, "That's an original line, and I'll bet you do well with it. But if you'd like to—of course I'm not bored, and I'm home most every day."

He laughed with her and stood up. "It's nearly two, and I'm going home. We old-timers need our sleep."

She did not argue, but walked out on the

front porch with him. They stood there for a moment, looking across at the countless lighted windows of Doris's house. Beck could see the girl's face only as a pale blur, but he thought she was looking at him expectantly—or defensively. He believed he knew what she was thinking. That had always been his trouble, knowing what people were thinking.

But he would not offer to kiss her. He wanted no payment, and when he did he would want more than that. He said good night offhandedly and went down the flagstone steps.

In Doris's house the party had scattered through the endless halls and rooms, and the few people he met looked at him and even shouted cheerfully at him without really seeing him, as though he were a ghost come back for his hat. He thought he had gotten safely away, but Doris caught him at the front door.

"Beck, where have you been?"

"My dear, we haven't been married for eight years. Remember?"

"You've been over there with that girl. I heard about it."

"We've been talking."

"Talking? About what?"

"About the things people usually talk about."

"Beck, you're a jackass! Or else you're a

fort, without volition, as a starving man's dreams are all of food.

She helped him celebrate his birthday. He planned everything very carefully. When he called, she was dressed and waiting, excited as a child. She all but jumped up and down with eagerness when he pinned on the corsage, and he laughed at her.

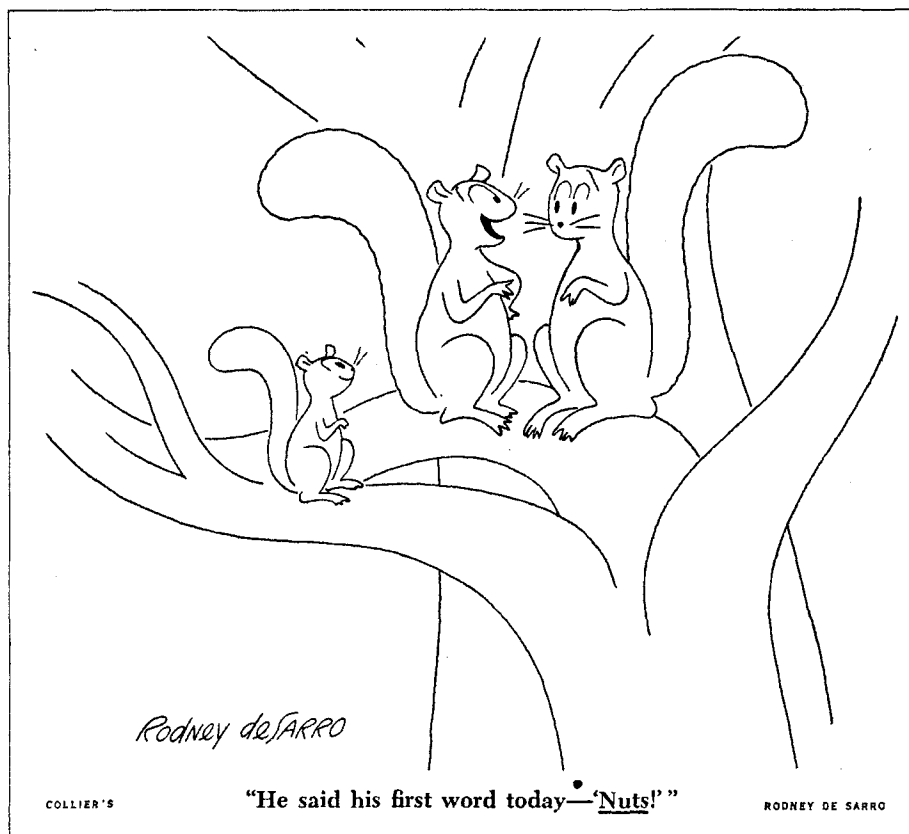
"But I haven't been out for so long," she protested. "And once in a while it's fun, isn't it?"

"We'll make this a night to remember," Beck promised.

She was immediately doubtful and warned him, "I wouldn't go with anyone else, you know. I'm a married woman, even if it's not obvious. I'll give Jimmy a square deal, at least until he gets home again."

"Take it easy," Beck said. "I may tell you you're beautiful, but it doesn't mean anything. You're just a lovely kid, and I'm showing you the world. After all, it's your world."

BECK knew everyone in the sparkling city of the night. He was a quiet guest and a good spender, and wherever they went he was welcomed with flattering attentions. Jessie obviously began to think of him as Somebody, and though this was the effect he had set out to achieve, he was amused.



dirty, wicked—really, Beck, she's too nice."

"She is," he agreed gravely. "And now, though I've had a wonderful time, I must tear myself away."

Doris said vehemently, "Beck, listen to me! I won't stand for anything like that. I won't!"

"Take it easy," Beck said. "And you'd better stay away from that brandy, my love. It will turn your hair gray and you wouldn't like that. Good night."

HE WENT home and to bed, but not to sleep. His exhilaration amused him, but he enjoyed it and encouraged it.

He told himself, "It's silly to fall in love at my age, but if I don't act silly, it will be all right."

He thought of Jessie's husband, possibly at that hour on some nameless, bloody battlefield, but he pushed the picture away quickly. Worry about that when the time comes, he advised himself. She said she didn't miss him.

He waited two days before going to see her again, and then deliberately made it a short, friendly visit, making no attempt to recover the close, pleasant contact of the first night. After that, he saw her almost every day.

He carefully hid his true feelings from her. That sort of thing was for the kids. His way must be slow and sure. When he was not with her, he lived in a sweet, slow dream, musing over the gentle curve of her cheek, the swift and delicate motions of her arms. He recalled these things without ef-

He was very attentive to her in public and she instinctively played up to him. Her smile was slower, warmer; she showed him the best side of her profile—she acted all the delicate comedy of coquetry, and did it very well, too. But he realized that all of this was not for Coleman Beck, but for her audience—of which he was one member. He had no intention of deluding himself into thinking it anything more.

The night was thinning when they started homeward. Away from the lights and excitement, Jessie yawned frankly for a while and then curled against him and slept.

At the top of the flagstone steps when, after some sleepy fumbling, she had found her key, Beck kissed her good morning. It was a casual, I-had-a-wonderful-time sort of kiss, but he ran down the steps whistling like a boy.

The ignition keys were gone from his car. He felt a swift flush of anger and strode across the road, walking into Doris's house without knocking. Doris was sprawled on a chair just inside the door. She looked at him owlishly.

"Happy birthday, darling."

"I'll take my car keys."

"Last birthday I gave you a party here. Remember? This time's a private party, that it?"

"Doris—keep out of this. Let me—let us alone, understand?"

"You have a good time, darling?"

"Keep out of it," he repeated angrily. "If you try to get this dirty, heaven help you!"

Doris suddenly flung the keys at him. Her mouth gaped grotesquely, and tears started down her cheeks. "Beck, oh, Beck! What's wrong with me? What did I do wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong with you," he said roughly. "Just stop drinking and act your age. Quit chasing these kids. You're fifteen years older than Chuck."

"You should talk! Look at you." Doris put out her tongue, tasting the tears on her mouth, and then wiped her nose with her sleeve.

"It's different," Beck said. He wanted Doris to understand how different it was, and he went on: "Can't you see that? It's the only real thing I've ever found. I'm serious. I need it—I've got to have it. Can't you see how that is?"

"You're no better than I am. There was that Greek what's-her-name, and I know you and Mrs. Williams—"

"That was playing. They knew it and I knew it and you know it. But now I'm serious, and if you smear it up—Well, don't try."

"You're a fool," Doris sniffed. "At least I never was a fool. You think you're so wise, and look at you! And she's not even pretty."

Beck picked up the keys and said, "Please don't try to hurt me or help me, Doris. Let us alone. Good night."

He left with his emotions at a full boil, but by the time he had reached his apartment, he was calm enough to smile at himself and think sarcastically, Thank God, no one made a recording of that outburst. It was pretty naïve. I hope Doris was too tight to remember what I said, or I'll never live it down.

The tight tangle of his nerves kept him awake. The tolerant watchman of his thoughts said that it must appear to Doris as if he were doing exactly what she was. She chased kids like Chuck. He was after Jessie. Perhaps if he were honest he would admit it was the same thing.

But it's not, he argued desperately. It's not like that at all. I don't merely want a young love. I want only Jessie. I'm not chasing after my youth like a pup after a butterfly, tripping over stones and falling into dirty ditches. And I'd be good to Jessie, I'd be good for her. I'd never hurt her. And I'm not soft—I'm as tough as any man.

He slipped into a half dream, seeing Jessie's brown arms dancing over a salad bowl while she looked at him over her shoulder. . . .

HE SAW Doris only once in the next few weeks. He met her on the street in town one morning. They talked pleasantly for a few minutes, and Doris told him she thought the government might make use of the big old house as a rest home, or convalescent home.

He felt easier about Doris after that meeting, but there was still the problem of Jessie's husband, that sooner or later he would have to meet. He was patient, but he knew he was not patient enough to play this waiting game for long.

The problem finally solved itself. He had considered that as a possible solution, but discarded it, thinking, That would be too easy. Yet when it happened that way, it was not easy. It was the most bitter, painful hour of his life.

He had promised Jessie a picnic that day, a long walk in the same forest above her house. He arrived laden with pigs' feet, rye bread, beer, and other assorted ingredients for a picnic lunch.

Jessie opened the door. She smiled, and it might have fooled anyone else, but he had watched her too long and too carefully. He dropped his packages on the nearest chair and turned to look at her.

"What's happened, Jessie?"

This time her smile almost went wrong. She shook her head in mute stubbornness.

"Come here," Beck said chidingly. "Tell me what's gone wrong. What else am I good for, but to be told stuff?"

Once when he was six he had tried to steal a light bulb and broken it, cutting his hand. He had wanted to hide, and he met his mother, holding the cut hand behind him while he talked to her—and then she had seen the blood dripping and caught him in her arms and he had cried then. He had been trying so hard not to let her know he was hurt, feeling that the wound was in some way a punishment. And she had mothered him and he had cried.

He remembered that, for no reason. He knew that Jessie was holding some hurt out of his sight. He put his arms around her,

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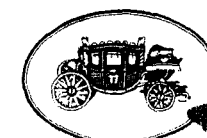
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D I V I S I O N O F G E N E R A L M O T O R S

feeling her body stiff and tense, and coaxed, "What is it? What's happened to the child?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, Jessie! I know you, don't I? Tell me what's wrong. I'll fix it. I'll make it right again. I always do, don't I? Tell me, Jessie."

Then she sagged against him, weeping, so suddenly that he had not time to be astonished, whimpering, "He's dead. He's killed—oh, Beck, he's killed!"

Beck was almost surprised enough to ask, "Who? But he caught himself, patting her shoulder and crooning meaningless, comforting words into her hair."

"Oh, baby. Poor kid. And that's one thing I can't fix, isn't it? I'm so sorry, Jessie. Poor, small Jessie..."

His mouth made gentle sounds, and an emptiness opened within him like a crevasse in the ice, and he looked into that bottomless cavern, thinking, "There you are. She really did. She loved him. She wouldn't even let me see how much. Why do we hide it? I did and she did. If it doesn't matter, we parade it—if it's real, we hide it. I should have known that. I should have known, no matter what she said. But I did know it. I just didn't want to admit it."

"Poor little baby," he whispered. "I'll hold on to you. I'm here, and I'll hold tight to you, and you cry. Now you can cry, Jessie."

She made little, frightened sounds, and he felt her tears through his shirt. He petted and talked to her, crooning the same words over and over. When she had cried herself empty and began to hiccup, he kissed her reddened nose, and made her drink some wine.

His brain looked on sardonically and told him, "This is the result of careful planning. You did well. It's you she depends on, you she needs. She waited for you to come, she waited for you so that she could cry. Oh, well done!"

This was his part and he played it through, comforting and caring for her. He coaxed and scolded, and when at last she started to talk, he listened while she told him all the things she had locked in her heart. He did not need to be told, now, but he listened while in words that sometimes stopped her throat she told him about the man—the bright, brave, wonderful young man she had married.

IT WAS nearly midnight when he left. She was asleep and he knew she would sleep for a long time, waking tired and weak and sad, but with no need of him.

Doris was sitting in his car. All his gentleness was used up and he said roughly, "Get out."

"I've been waiting hours. I want to talk to you."

"No. Get out, please." And he blurted, "Jessie's husband was killed."

Doris sighed. She opened the car door and got out. "That does it, doesn't it? Here you are to comfort the afflicted widow and catch her on the rebound."

He rubbed his lips. They felt oddly stiff. "It was a break, wasn't it? I played it that way. No fireworks, no young capers. Safe and sure—that's me. I didn't need fireworks, I only needed her. So now all I have to do is wait a little longer. And I can't do it."

"You can't—what are you talking about? Are you crazy?"

"It's no good without fireworks, you see? I'm pretty sure she'd marry me when she gets over this, and yesterday I thought that was all I wanted. But now I know you've got to have the colored lights and the noise, or it's no good. And he got all of that."

"You poor darned fool!" Doris's voice shook a little and he guessed she was laughing at him, though it was too dark to see her face.

"No. I should have been a fool, and gotten over it. It's always better to be a fool, because then when you get something it's fine and foolish. Know what I'm going to do—well, that doesn't matter."

He leaned out of the car and held her away from it, giving her shoulder a friendly pat when he released it. "Night, Doris. Have a look at her in the morning, will you? I'll be busy."

He drove away, hearing her call his name, but he would not stop.

He made it a clean break, not phoning or writing. He tried to write; something easy and witty, but sympathetic, but he could set down nothing but gibberish, and he gave it up.

She won't miss me very much, he assured himself. She feels too bad to think about me, and when that's over she'll be out of the habit of having me near.

He was busy, and that helped. He went to the Navy, because he had owned boats all his life, and he had a good practical knowledge of marine engines. It was all much easier than he had supposed that it could be.

His business was the easiest part. He merely signed his name a few times, and everything went on as usual. There were a lot of little loose ends—personal obligations, the apartment, physical and mental examinations. The activity got him through the next few days very well, but the nights were bad.

Then on Wednesday evening Doris was waiting for him in the lobby of his apartment building.

VICTORY PARADE

by Royal Arch Gunnison

SHORTLY after the "glorious victories of the forces of His Imperial Japanese Majesty at Bataan and Corregidor," Lieutenant General M. Homma and the top officers of the naval landing party ordered a "Victory Parade" in the city of Manila.

The line of march took thousands of cocky, bandy-legged Japanese troops down the business section, across the Pasig River Bridge, and past government buildings to the green Luneta Park at the edge of Manila Bay.

There, framed against the background of angular masts and stacks of ships sunk in the inner harbor, stood the deep-chested lieutenant general, an admiral in stiff whites, and thirty or more military, naval and civilian aides. The victorious army, afoot and in trucks, passed in review. Thousands of Filipinos watched along the route of the march. Some turned their backs when the color guards passed.

The Japanese insisted that Jorge Vargas, former secretary to President Quezon (then mayor of Greater Manila, and chairman of the Philippines Executive Commission), and members of the commission march in the parade—in the sweltering heat—carrying small Japanese flags. This was designed to be the supreme insult. This was planned, "enforced victory." The Filipino population of Manila was to note thereby that the Japanese government had taken over for keeps; and that the Filipino government was openly subservient.

But on such official occasions there must be martial music. A parade without music—even discordant Japanese band music—is pretty flat. The Japanese army had a few bands in the Philippines, but not enough for such a celebration as this. There was only one answer. Order out some Filipino bands to be spotted in the parade.

The parade went off as scheduled. The Japanese exulted. The bands stamped past the reviewing stand. Ancestral swords and gold teeth flashed in the morning sun.

Toward the end of the parade, one of these Filipino bands approached the reviewing stand. The drum major chirped on his whistle, gave the downbeat with his baton.

Every Filipino within hearing turned—startled. Then broad grins, followed by cheers from the crowd. The conquerors, somewhat surprised at this "spontaneous recognition of victory," graciously acknowledged the cheers. The band marched on and dispersed. And so did the crowd...

As the band passed the reviewing stand it had played—The Stars and Stripes Forever. ★★★

"Hello," he said, hoping to keep this very casual, "why didn't you go up?"

"I preferred to wait down here. Would you take me home, Beck?"

So that was all. He was relieved. "Certainly. Ready now?"

"Almost. I've been shopping. No—I've been tracking you down, you jackass! So you really did it? They really took you?"

"Why not? You've seen me beat the kids at games. I'm tough enough."

"When is it official? Or is it already?"

"It is," he said shortly. "Leaving tomorrow."

"You big idiot," Doris said, smiling at him affectionately. "That's one of the things that made it so bad for me. You never got any older, and I did. Look at you now! You said this war was for kids, and now you're proving it."

"Don't tease me, Doris. I'm pretty tired."

"I'm not teasing you, darling. I know how you feel. Funny part of it is, we pulled on the same line and got different fish. I'm sick of fish. I'm going to Montana."

"Montana? To the ranch? What's the idea?"

"Like you—I want to be doing something that matters. Perhaps I'll marry a poor but honest shepherd. Or should I keep the home fires burning for you, darling? Tell me, shall I wait for you?"

She was smiling, and her voice was mocking, but the seriousness in her eyes made him uncomfortable.

"Don't do that, Doris—don't talk nonsense. You know people can't live backward."

She shrugged. "Oh, well—I just wanted to hear you say it again. Good luck, you wonderful chump!"

"Wait—you wanted me to take you home."

"Not now—by, darling."

She was gone before he could remonstrate. Just as well, he thought. Across from Doris's house was Jessie's small white house, and he would have looked at it, of course, and Jessie might even have been outdoors.

HE WENT up to his apartment. The place made him uneasy. He was anxious to be away. He prowled into the kitchen, feeling like a stranger, and then went around to the bedroom.

Jessie was sitting on his bed, her legs crossed under her. He looked at her in stupefied silence, the floor unsteady beneath his feet. He walked to the side table and picked up the whisky bottle.

"No, don't," Jessie said.

He set down the bottle and lighted a cigarette. Jessie put her hat on backward. She was a girl who looked wonderful with her hat on backward. She said nervously, "Doris had them let me in. Was it all right?"

He nodded helplessly, thinking, Damn Doris. I've got to get her out, or I'll do something foolish.

She took off her hat and picked a thread from it. "Doris said you—that you had enlisted. Did you, really?"

He nodded again, afraid to open his mouth because of the wild words crowding for release.

"But why?"

He dropped the cigarette and smashed it on the carpet. Not looking at her, he said, "You shouldn't have come here."

"But why did you?"

The inner voice that never let him drink too much or act like an idiot said warningly, "Careful, brother." And then, from somewhere so deep down that he could not stop it, the first skyrocket went up. He looked at her and said, "It helps make me even with him. I'm as good—yes, and as foolish—as he was, do you see?"

She rubbed her nose with the flat of her hand. "You knew how I felt about Jimmy. You knew everything about me, didn't you? I never let anyone know how much Jimmy mattered, so that if... but you knew how it was, didn't you? And I thought if something did happen, you'd be there, and then you went off, too. And now I'll have you to worry about, and if anything should... oh, Beck!"

The skyrockets and pinwheels soared and spun, and he had his arms around her, babbling the wildest kind of nonsense. But, as he had almost missed learning; there are times when nonsense has more meaning than wisdom, though only the young and wise know it.

THE END



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