

MANHUNT

DETECTIVE STORY MONTHLY

JANUARY
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**Erskine
Caldwell**

Author of
"God's Little Acre"

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Epitaph

Maybe, if I'd told Ray, things would be different now. But I never told Ray anything . . . so there's only one thing I can do . . .

BY ERSKINE CALDWELL

THERE'S nothing else I can do. I can't go on living any longer. Even one more day of this torment would be more than I could endure.

I've been married for two years now, and no other man in the whole world could possibly have been as dear to me as my husband, Ray, has

been every day of our life together. I can't imagine how he could have been more devoted to me, and I'm glad he's the only man I've ever been truly in love with. I could never, never, never love anybody else as I love Ray. But for two years now I've been living in constant

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torment, and I just can't stand it another day.

What has happened to me is my own fault. Ray had nothing to do with it. He doesn't even know about it. I'm the one to blame.

During all this time, night and day, I've tried to think of every possible way of persuading Walter Greenway to let me go so I can stop deceiving Ray. I've been on my knees I don't know how many times and begged him to let me go, but Walter won't listen to me. Every time I try to talk to him about it he threatens to tell my husband. Ray has always said he'll leave me if I ever deceive him and he finds out that I've been unfaithful, and I know he means it. I love him so much I'd do anything in the world to keep him from leaving me. I don't want to deceive Ray — it's the last thing on this earth I want to do. I want to be faithful to him because he's Ray, and my husband. I hate myself every minute of the day for what I've done.

Four years ago, when I was twenty-three, I went to work as bookkeeper in Walter's office. I had just finished my commercial courses at business college then. That was two years before I married Ray Hammond. Walter was a commission agent for tung oil shippers and he had a small brokerage office on the second floor of a red brick building near the waterfront between the river and Jackson Square. Walter, who had lived in New Orleans all

his life, was thirty-four then, and he had taken over the management of the commission business when his father died. There were many commission agents and forwarding companies in that section of the city, it being within a few blocks of the Mississippi River wharves and docks.

Walter was a bachelor and he lived in an apartment on the third floor of the same building. It was a large, spacious apartment with a wonderful view of the river and it had a wide, iron lacework veranda overlooking the Square. Walter was a well-dressed, handsome man with a tall, erect figure. He had very dark hair — much darker than mine — and twinkling clear eyes. It always seemed to me that it would have been easy for any girl to fall in love with him, and probably many did. I was on the verge myself of falling in love with him many times, and I've often wondered what would have happened to me if I had. I went up to Walter's apartment on the third floor after office hours several times a week, sometimes staying all night with him instead of going home to Gentilly where I lived with my mother and younger sister. Every time I stayed with Walter in those days I would have eagerly consented to marry him if he had asked me. He never asked me, but he did say many times that I was good-looking enough to satisfy any man and that he would rather have me than any girl he had ever known.

During that first year, and before I met Ray, Walter took me on week end trips to Biloxi and Gulfport and Pass Christian all summer long and we went sailboating on the Gulf and lay on the beach in the moonlight. I was happy then, because I realized how very lonely I had been before becoming intimate with Walter. He was the first man I had desire for and the first man I was willing to make love with, and maybe for that reason none of the things we did seemed to me to be improper. I thought surely he was going to ask me sooner or later to marry him, and I always hoped he would each time we were together. However, he never once proposed marriage.

“Walter,” I asked him one night on the beach at Biloxi, “are all your brothers and sisters married?”

“All three married and settled down early in life, honey,” he said, laughing about it. “But I was always different. I guess it’s just the way I am. I’m still on the outside looking in.”

“Is that the way you want it to be, Walter?” I asked.

“It sure is, honey,” he said with unmistakable meaning in his voice. “I always make it a practice to have things the way I want them.”

It was about a year after that when I met Ray Hammond, and he asked me to marry him a week after we met. Ray was kind and generous and considerate, and I was certain from the very beginning that I would never regret it if I married

him. He was not handsome like Walter, and he couldn’t afford to wear expensive clothes, but he appealed to me more than anyone else I had ever known. Ray worked for an insurance company, and he said that in a few years he would be able to support both of us, and probably two or three more in time. I knew he wanted children, and I did, too. He was willing for me to keep on working until the time came when I was to have our first child. Ray was twenty-eight then, and he looked forward to being assistant manager of the insurance office in two more years.

“We’ll be on our feet in a year or two,” he said confidently, “and you won’t have to work another day after that. That’s something I can promise. You just wait and see.”

“I don’t mind working, Ray,” I told him. “But I do want to make a home for us, and I’ll stop the day you want me to.”

“I’m going to see to it that we don’t have to wait too long for that time to come,” he said. “That’s my big ambition in life right now.”

When I told Walter the next day what I was planning to do, he told me to go ahead and marry Ray if I wanted to, but that he was not going to give me up and that he expected me to keep on coming to his apartment after business hours as I had for the past two years. I couldn’t believe he really meant what he said, and, since I was so deeply in love with Ray, we went

ahead and married. We left right away for a week's honeymoon in Florida. I was so happy with Ray that I forgot all about Walter and what he had said he expected of me.

The first day I went back to work, after that wonderful week in Florida with Ray, Walter told me to meet him in his apartment that afternoon instead of going home at five-thirty. I cried and tried my best to make him understand that I was in love with Ray and did not want to be unfaithful. I was so upset I didn't know what to do. At first, Walter laughed at me and joked about my concern. After that, when I kept on begging him to let me go, he became very angry and said he would tell Ray we had been lovers for two years if I did not do as he wanted me to do. Maybe I should've told him to go ahead and tell Ray anything he wanted to, and then maybe everything would have been different after that. Probably that would have been the wisest thing to do. Or maybe I should have told Ray that I had been intimate with Walter. I think Ray would have forgiven me at that time, because we were so much in love and it seemed like there would never be an end to our honeymoon. In either case, I could have given up my job in Walter's office and found work somewhere else. But I was afraid of Walter Greenway. I was afraid of what might happen if I refused to go to his apartment with him, and so at five-thirty I went up to the third

floor instead of going home to Ray.

Walter made gin fizzes and we sat there looking at each other for a long time. It was summer then, and warm, and occasionally a languid breeze from the Gulf passed through the open windows. I was thinking of Ray and the little house we'd rented. I could see him waiting at home for me and I knew how hurt he would be if he knew where I was and the reason for my being there. I couldn't hold back the tears after that.

"There's no use taking on like that, honey," Walter said after a while. He sat down beside me and put his arms around me and kissed me. I wanted to resist him and drive him away from me, but I knew how useless it would be to try. He was accustomed to having his way with me at will, and I could tell how determined he was then to continue making love to me. By that time I was so weak and limp with fear and unhappiness that I was completely helpless. When I opened my eyes at last, it was growing dark everywhere, and after that I lay there sobbing for a long time. Later, I heard Walter say, "You're going to feel a lot better about this now, honey. You're not the kind of girl who'd want to put an end to all we have. We've known each other too long for that to happen now. This can go on forever, and you know it, don't you?"

"I don't know — I don't know!" I cried. "All I know is that I want to go — please let me go, Walter!"

"You're excited now, honey. Just be calm, and you'll feel a lot better."

"I'm going to tell Ray — I'm going to tell him everything as soon as I get home!"

"If you do, it'll be the last time he'll be around to listen to you. You'd better think about that."

I could feel myself trembling all over.

"Oh, dear God!" I cried weakly.

Walter left me and went to the other side of the room.

"I'm going to make some gin fizzes," I heard him say. "That'll help."

When I got home at ten o'clock that night, I wanted to tell Ray everything that had happened and beg him to forgive me and help me. He saw at once how upset I was, and he tried to get me to tell him what the reason was for my being like that. He took me into his arms and held me tightly, but even when I clung to him I still couldn't bring myself to tell him. Every time I remembered the threat that Walter had made I was afraid something terrible might happen to Ray. I knew Walter once had killed a man in an argument about a woman, and I was afraid something might happen to Ray now.

That's why I didn't tell Ray that time, or the next time I was with Walter. And so for two years I've continued going to Walter's apartment every time he's told me he wanted me to go. That has happened at least once a week, sometimes two

or three times a week. Ray believes I work late at the office those nights, and I don't think he has ever suspected the reason why I come home late so often.

Ray has never stopped talking about our having a child since we were married two years ago, and I've waited all this time, hoping every day that Walter would let me go. Ray has been promoted to assistant manager of his office now, and he's earning three times the salary he was getting when we were married. Several times lately he's said he thinks it's time for me to stop working. Night after night, lying awake in the darkness beside Ray, I've hoped and prayed that Walter would find somebody else he wants more than me. But it's been the same week after week, and he still says I'm the most desirable woman he knows, and now I'm pregnant and I'm not sure whose child I'm carrying. I love Ray too much to let him think he was the father of a child when I could never be certain if he or Walter is the father. As long as I lived, no matter how much I loved the child I gave birth to, I'd be miserable and unhappy for Ray's sake.

It's too late now to beg Walter again to let me leave my job and stop seeing him, because even if he did let me go, I would still never know whether he or Ray was the father of the child.

I can't tell Ray now, and ask him to forgive me, because even if he did forgive me, we would still be living

in that awful uncertainty. I wish now I had told Ray about Walter two years ago. I should have told him everything that day I went back to work after our honeymoon — I should've told him even before that. That's what I ought to have done. But it's too late now — oh, so late.

I'm suffering for what I've done, and now that the baby is on the way, I can't endure this torture another day.

There's only one thing left for me to do. I just can't live any longer.

I've got to go ahead and do what I've decided. I couldn't endure waking up in the morning one more time and having this terrible feeling for even one more day. It'll be better for everybody, too. It'll be better for Ray.

There may be other ways, but I can't think of any now. I've thought and thought until my mind refuses to be a mind any longer. I've got to go ahead and do what I've decided to do.

. . . My name was Amelie.



MUGGED AND PRINTED

ERSKINE CALDWELL returns to *Manhunt* this month with another of his fine and realistic stories, *Epitaph*. Caldwell, of course, is the author of *God's Little Acre* and many other best-selling books and short stories, including his latest novel, *Love And Money*, which has received rave reviews from readers and critics alike. If you're waiting for your bookseller to order more copies of this fast-selling book, pass the time in reading *Epitaph*, as well as future Caldwell stories, in this magazine.



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