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HEADS YOU LOSE

By GERALD VANCE

THE lady with the two heads really wasn't bad looking once you got accustomed to her.

She had been sitting across my desk from me for some fifteen minutes. I went out and told my office nurse, Jan Marston, to go home "and as soon as I can get rid of that two-headed woman, I'll check my hospital patients."

"Sure, two-headed woman," she flipped back. "If you could conjure up a woman who had a double supply of anything—it wouldn't be heads." She patted me on the cheek, kissed the tip of my nose and walked away, bouncing her pretty little—well, bouncing out the door.

The head on the left was the talkative one. She explained, softly, that the rea-

There was this dame with two heads, see? And she came to see this doctor; wanted to talk about her love life. What followed makes the average murder mystery dull as day-old dishwater. Judge for yourself.

son the nurse had not seen her was that she had materialized inside my office. "I frighten people," she said.

"Of course you do," I told her in my best bedside manner. "But it is only because you are plural from the neck up, not because you are unattractive. As a matter of fact," I went on, taking in her figure and the trim legs pertly crossed, "you are quite beautiful. Both of you."

"I am singular," she said. "Don't forget that."

I decided to forget it and said, "If I am going to help you, please don't joke with me about materializing."

The face on the left smiled. "Have it your way. The next thing you will tell me is that I have only one head."

"You have two, all right.



"If you want my opinion, you kiss like a slob!"

But it is merely rare. Not impossible. Animals have been known to be born with two heads many times. In the case of the lower classes of animals—snakes for example—it happens quite often as compared to animals of higher classification like humans. Or a little less in the strata. Double-headed calves are rare, but I have seen one. They die rather young.”

“I am four hundred and thirty-nine years old,” the left side said. She made it sound like the most natural thing in the world.

I smiled and decided to go along with her. “You don’t look a day over twenty-two.” I went to her side and offered her a cigarette, and as she took it I watched closely to see which pair of lips would wind up with it.

The left side said, “My people settled in what is now Kentucky, hundreds of years ago. There, on Shadee Mountain I was born. There we still live, some seventy-five of us. The mountain is quite secluded. No one lives there but us.”

“So I imagine.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I suppose your mother and father and brothers and sisters and cousins

and so on all have two heads?”

“Precisely.” She snubbed out the cigarette and recrossed her legs.

“Forgetting the age factor, I’ll point out where you’re wrong,” I told her.

“The age factor is easy.” The words still came from the one on the left. “We practice the old religion. Our life expectancy is one thousand years on the average.”

I wondered what the old religion was but there were other more important things. “What is your name or names?”

The left side again gave me the friendly smile. “I’m Noreen.”

“Who’s the other one?”

“She’s me. Noreen.”

“That won’t work,” I said. “You act independently. As far as I’m concerned, she’s Nadeen.”

She gave me the smile again. “She’s still Noreen. But I won’t argue with you.”

“But, listen,” I continued. “You’re all wrong because there is no reason for a race of two-headed persons. I’m a physician and an amateur anthropologist.”

The lady leaned forward and allowed the neck of the soft wool dress she wore to fall open. From the neck

down, she was normal. She was lush and firm and pink. "There is no *reason* for blue eyes as opposed to brown eyes," she replied. "There is no reason for curly hair as opposed to straight. There is no reason for left handedness. There is no *reason* for persons with double heads. Yet we do exist. My great-grandfather and grandmother were the first. They were brother and sister but they married as it seemed logical. They lived on what is now called the Island of Hawaii and were kicked out for breaking the moral code. They went east in a war canoe. With plenty of food, good winds and the help of Tao, they landed on what is now the coast of California.

"Pursued by Indians, they crossed the great desert of Arizona. They crossed the plains country of Kansas and the Mississippi River. They found a haven on Shadee Mountain and there we were born and have lived."

"And learned to materialize?" I asked, still not believing.

Both heads nodded. "Learned is the exact word," said the lady on the left. "We learned it to survive. In the early days the Indians pursued us. We found that we

frightened them just as we frighten the present day people. So like a chameleon learns to blend his color to the background, we learned to be invisible. We also learned the art of self-teleportation. We travel in an instant. We came from Kentucky to your office in a fraction of a second."

It was growing late. While she—they—sat there I called the hospital and had a resident physician check on my patients. I turned back to the lady. "I'm afraid I can guess why you have come to see me."

"Yes," she said with a note of sadness. "I want you to remove one of my heads. I want to leave the mountain forever. I want to live a normal life."

"You won't be able to live a normal life if you expect to remain on earth for six hundred more years," I told her. "That would be too hard to explain."

"I will quit the old religion," she said softly. "I will marry. I will have normal children. I will live forty or fifty more years with the man I love and then I will die with him. I will die with him sooner if I must."

"You will go live with the

man you love," I echoed. "Does he, too, have—" I cut it off. Those words "two heads" sounded too much like a joke I once heard. "Is he one of your clan?"

"No," she said. "You."

I jumped to my feet, and headed for the liquor cabinet. I poured myself a stiff one and downed it. I said, "Preposterous. I've never seen you before in my life."

"I've watched you many times," said the lady on the left. Her words were so gentle, so full of worship that I turned, startled. I saw a look in the eyes of the left side. The woman was truly in love with me! I poured another drink, downed it. I asked if she'd have one. They both declined.

Noreen said, "I have been to your home. I have sat by your side. I have enjoyed your happinesses and hated your sorrows." Her eyes glanced downward. "I have lain by your side at night."

I shook my head, not believing. Then I was caught by the eyes on the right. They flashed. They shot a lightning bolt at me.

"What's wrong?"

For the first time the right side spoke. "I hate you," it said. "I expect to kill you. Some night when you're

asleep, I'll cut your throat."

The left side began sobbing as the right side went on.

"I'm in love too. With a boy on the mountain. A boy of my own kind. I've lain with him, too, and I was visible and he was awake. That is a real love, doctor. That is why I'll kill you. I won't give him up."

"Well," I said, somewhat unnerved. "If I perform this operation, there's no question in my mind as to which head gets the knife."

There was silence as the left side continued to hide her eyes and sob and the right side shot looks of hatred at me. Then the lady with the twin hairdoes slowly faded from my sight. I figured she went back to the mountain.

I worked late that night drafting my report to the American Medical Association. I also drank. I do not know how I got home and neither do I know if I lay with a two-headed woman. I do know that I was alive the next day.

At the office, the nurse Jan gave me a cold stare. "You got drunk. You had a lady in your office and you were so slopped with whiskey you wrote a nightmare report to the American Medical Associ-

ation. If I had mailed it as you instructed, you would have been defrocked or whatever it is they do to drunken doctors."

"They take away their licenses," I told her. My head splitting with each word. "Thanks for tearing up the report. I thought it was a good gag."

"Not very funny," Jan said. "Who was the woman you had the gay party with in your office?"

"The two-headed woman," I told her. "How did you know she was here?"

"She dropped a couple of handkerchiefs," Jan said sarcastically.

I beat a retreat to the office.

I went to the veterinarian I knew who had purchased the two-headed calf. After it died, he mounted the skeleton. I asked him if I could see it.

"You're the first physician I ever knew who was interested in cows," he said. "Thinking of switching?"

I ignored his wit and studied the calf. The spinal vertebrae were peculiar. At the neck, the column branched and at the branch were twin vertebrae so situated that if a surgeon could tie off the unwanted spinal cord, a

severance could be made without difficulty. The calf would not appear a freak if one head had been severed. Like my lady, Noreen, the necks were so constructed that the removal of one head—Nadeen—and a little plastic surgery could obliterate any trace of a second head.

There was a problem in surgery, but not really an acute one. That is, if my patient happened to be constructed as the calf.

I worried about it. I had not seen Two-Heads for a week, but from time to time it seemed as if I felt her presence. In my half-sleep I wondered if she were near me.

The image of her haunted me. The left side of her haunted me pleasantly while the right side sent a chill down my back. That dame could kill. She'd be the death of me if she had her way.

Of course I didn't for an instant plan to do the operation. I was only interested as a surgeon. Could it be done? I found myself making sketches of the two-headed woman. I marked on the diagram exactly how the cut would be made, exactly where the spinal cord would be tied off, the precise spot where the superfluous neck vertebrae would be removed.

Then she came again.

She materialized before me as I sat at dusk in my office. She wore a powder blue suit, trimly fitted. The hair on both heads was expertly dressed, curled short in the fashion of the day. She had been working on herself, this double dome, and I was flattered that she had worked to please me.

"Where have you been?" I demanded.

"To the Shadee," the right side said pleasantly.

"You sound almost civil," I said. "The last time you were here you wanted to kill me."

She smiled coyly. The left side, my girl-friend Noreen, giggled. "She's been to the mountains with her boyfriend," Noreen said.

"Well so have you," I shouted. "And let me remind you, that this double person business ends at the shoulders."

"Drop dead," said the one on the right and she gave me that carving look of hers. The one on the left purred at me. "Come here."

As I walked to her side, her eyes beheld me as if seeing glory. She was soft with love. It came from her and engulfed me. I shook with it and I fell in love in an

instant. I kissed her and knew I was hopelessly trapped.

I took care of that smart alec on the right side that night. I gave her a mickey that put her away till day-break and the one on the left, my Noreen, laughed in my ear and whispered to me all night.

It wouldn't really be murder, I told myself over and over again.

I fired nurse Jan. She protested that I was out of my mind when I closed my practice. Over her protests, I eased her gently out of the door and closed the building which housed my medical office.

With Noreen invisible at my side, I drove to a little seaport town on the Florida Gulf coast. I rented an out of the way house. I set up a laboratory and made ready for the operation. Noreen (with Nadeen under sedatives most of the time) lived with me in her visible state. We had a hard time coaxing Nadeen to do it, but she agreed to the sedatives and to go independently invisible so things wouldn't look bad to any one who happened to look in on us.

I spent hours running my

fingers over my love's neck, probing here, knuckling there and making more sketches. Finally all was prepared.

"We'll operate tomorrow night," I said.

To a surgeon, the operation was a dream. Like cutting a piece of cheese. I separated the vertebrae and did some plastic work. I was pretty busy, working alone, but it was a clean job about three hundred stitches and three hours.

Noreen, my love of the left, lay sleeping peacefully in our bed. As I made her comfortable, I figured that two weeks of care would make her better than new. The stitches could be removed and in another week, we'd be married. The worse that could come of it would be that Noreen would have a stiff neck for a week or so.

That's the way I had it figured.

But after I dug a ten-foot hole outside and went back for the head that was Nadeen — *I couldn't find it*. It had vanished.

They arrested us six weeks later as we were driving toward Tucson, Arizona.

Laughingly, I explained the whole thing. I had performed an operation on my wife. She had a second head, you see, and I removed it. I showed them the thin traces of the incision and the stitch marks.

They let Noreen go. They took me back to New York.

The police lieutenant asked, "The operation was performed in Florida?"

"It was."

"And where is Nadeen?"

"You mean the part I removed? I don't know."

"We do," the lieutenant said. They showed it to me. She was found in my closed New York medical office. Jan, burgled the joint after I left, led the police to it.

The jury was impossible. A head without a body, they ruled, was still a corpse. The body would be found, they said, some day. Bodies always are.

Every time I think of it, waiting here in this dark cell, I see Nadeen's head with its mocking smile disappearing and then coming back again to its place beside Noreen.

And Noreen, where are you? Back on Shadee Mountain? I'll never know.

They're going to fry me tomorrow.

THE END