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JOHN McCLOUD.....*Editor*
CHAS. W. ADAMS.....*Art Director*

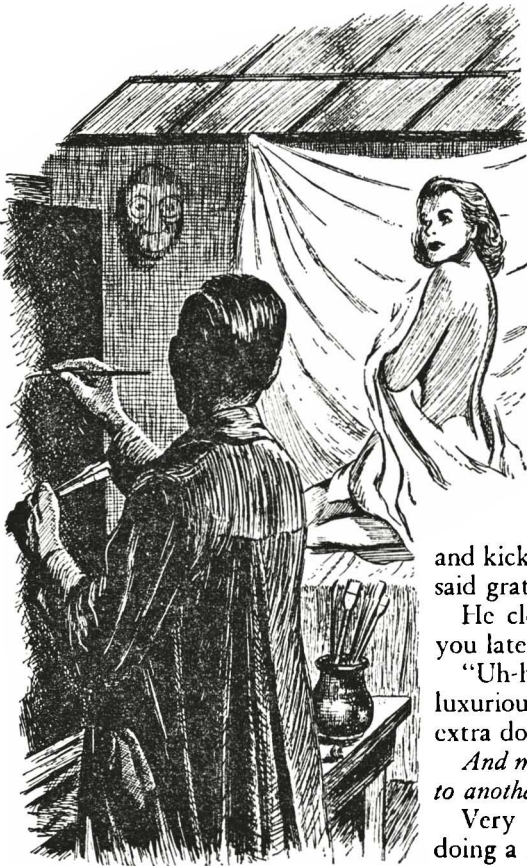
E. A. TULMAN.....*Managing Editor*
R. E. DECKER.....*Business Manager*

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Less Perfect

*The stuff in the little amber bottle was wonderful.
It was going to clear up all his problems.
It was going to take care of his wife.*

BY FRANCES CARFI MATRANGA



AT THE SOUND of her high heels clicking in the hall, his heart leaped in his breast, then resumed its natural tempo. He swung his wheel chair around so that he faced the door, and when she entered the room his eyes went over her swiftly.

"Hello, darling," she said. She leaned down and kissed him. "Did you have a good day?"

He nodded, searching her face for some sign. There was none. There never was. Her face was as innocent as always — eyes big and blue beneath hair like polished leather, nose short and tilted, mouth like a rosebud against pale velvet.

How can she look so innocent? he wondered.

She put her bundles down, eased herself gracefully into a chair and kicked off her shoes. "Ahh," she said gratefully. "Feels good."

He cleared his throat. "He kept you late today," he said.

"Uh-huh," she said, stretching luxuriously, "but it means a few extra dollars."

And more time to display your body to another man, he thought.

Very casually he asked, "Is he doing a nude of you?"

She gave him a searching look, then smiled. "No. Semi-nude."

He envisioned her ripe white curves beneath filmy veiling. The most provocative way a woman could pose, he reflected. A dozen times more effective than total nudity.

He forced himself to smile. "I suppose he'll be finished with you soon."

"Couple more sittings," she said. "Then Danielson is going to use me." She slipped her feet back into her shoes, picked up her bundles and walked into the kitchen.

He sat quite still in his wheel chair, his mind spinning. *Danielson*. . . He had met the artist once. Big blond brute of a fellow, he remembered, with muscles like a fighter. He'd found it hard to believe that Danielson was the same man who was so famous for his nude paintings.

What did artists think about — really — when they painted naked women, he wondered. What, exactly, went through their minds? Could they ever really look at a beautiful naked woman as just a model?

He wheeled his chair to the kitchen doorway and watched his wife as she prepared dinner. *She's my world*, he thought. *I can't stand sharing her with anyone. Anyone!* The thought of her posing in the nude for other men was slowly driving him mad.

She was too beautiful; that was the trouble. Her body was perfect,

and so she was always in demand. If only she'd listened to him, he reflected bitterly. If only she'd given up modeling when he begged her to. He remembered how hurt she'd looked. It was all for the sake of art, she'd said.

Had she really expected him to believe that? *For the sake of art!*

He moistened his lips. "Danielson," he said. "He's married, isn't he?"

She walked into the trap. "He's a bachelor," she said. "I thought I told you."

His hands closed into tight hard fists. *Of course he's a bachelor*, he thought. *Why get married when you can have a beautiful naked woman in your studio all day? And if she happens to be another man's wife, what's the difference?*

Hate filled him, hate for her and for artists and for the world. He was helpless, and she was taking advantage of him. Maybe he was only half a man, but that didn't give his wife a license to be unfaithful. He thought of the amber-colored bottle he had hidden away, remembering how he'd so often been on the verge of using it, only to lose his nerve at the last instant.

They ate their dinner in silence. He watched her stealthily. Once, before the accident three years ago, he had been muscular and virile and demanding, and her passion had matched his own. Now he was a useless cripple.

I can't stand it any longer, he thought. *I'd rather see her dead.*

The summer heat was stifling. Tiny beads of perspiration gleamed on her forehead. She mopped at her face with her apron, and as soon as the meal was over she disappeared into the bedroom. When she came back, she was wholly nude.

He watched her as, completely without self-consciousness, she moved about the table, collecting the dishes. *This is the way those artists see her*, he thought. *She hasn't any shame at all. She enjoys flaunting herself in front of men. She loves it.* Sudden fury welled up inside him.

"I want you to stop modeling!" he shouted. "Get another job, do you hear? Anything but what you're doing now!"

She whirled to face him. She stared at him, and her blue eyes turned cold. "I thought we had straightened that out. I thought you understood."

"I understand too well."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean! Stop being so innocent!"

Her voice was low, lifeless. "You're mistaken."

"Am I?" he said. "You expect me to believe that there's never been anything between you and those artist friends of yours? You mean you could be the way you are now and not one of them ever felt any-

thing except professional interest? That *you* never felt anything? You want me to believe you've denied yourself these last three years?" He broke off. He was sobbing now, his hate a twisted knot in his stomach.

She stared at him with wide eyes, her face white, her hand trembling against her mouth. "Yes," she said so softly it was almost a whisper. "I've felt . . . I've wanted . . . but I never have! Because . . . because I've loved only you."

She turned and ran into the bedroom. He heard the creaking of springs, and then the sound of soft crying.

She admits she's wanted to, he thought. *Does she really expect me to believe the rest?*

He remained where he was until the crying ceased, and then wheeled himself into the bedroom. She lay stretched across the bed, asleep, her form white and lovely in the twilight.

He looked at her loveliness, hating it.

He knew what he must do to make her his.

In a moment he would get out that bottle of carbolic acid.

"Everything will be all right, you'll see," he whispered, and reaching out, he stroked the yet unscarred flesh of her body.



IN THIS ISSUE:

PASSION

And FRANCES CARFI MATRANGA is on tap
with *Less Perfect*, a short-short shocker.