

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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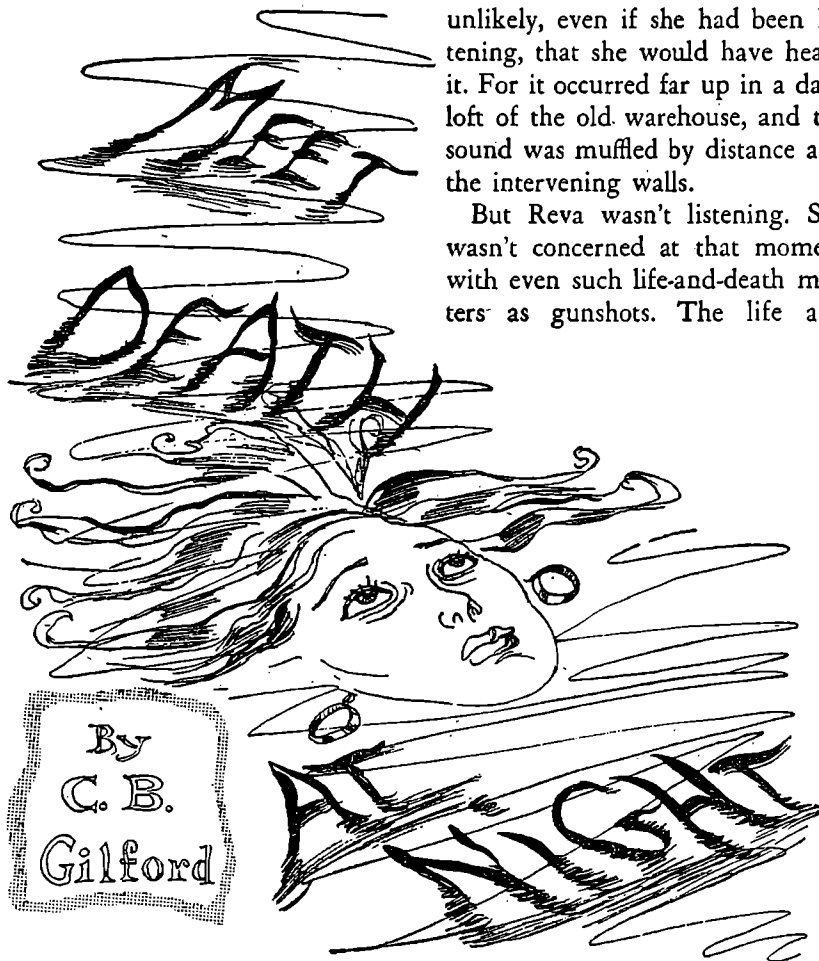
MARGUERITE BLAIR DEACON, Art Director

There seems to be little safety these days even in being rescued. This poor girl tried suicide and found her benefactor more dangerous than her second chance at life.



SHE didn't hear the shot. It was unlikely, even if she had been listening, that she would have heard it. For it occurred far up in a dark loft of the old warehouse, and the sound was muffled by distance and the intervening walls.

But Reva wasn't listening. She wasn't concerned at that moment with even such life-and-death matters as gunshots. The life and



death she had on her mind were her own, and she was considering destroying one and embracing the other.

The thing she was looking at was the river. It flowed by at her feet black and murky and almost silent, its only sound a gentle lapping at the piles of the wharf. It was a deceptively peaceful sound for the current in spots was strong and treacherous. But the blackness and the murkiness were inviting. Down beneath the shining surface, beneath the reflection of far-away city lights, there was peace. She took a half step closer.

In the warehouse a man was running down steep flights of wooden stairs, careless of the noise of his footsteps. The place was deserted. As for possible witnesses outside of the wharves, if they hadn't heard the shot, it was unlikely that they'd hear the pounding of his feet.

One person might have heard that sound of retreat and escape. Reva, with her delicate, beautiful little white ears from which the cheap, glistening bangles hung. But she was staring down at the toes of her right foot, which showed through the open-work of the shoe. They were at the very edge of the wharf. She really didn't have to throw herself into the water, she had only to lean for-

ward a little bit, and relax. . . .

The gunman's footsteps were a clatter on the concrete floor of the warehouse now. Then there was the sound of a door opening, swinging on slightly rusty hinges. He was outside, glancing in all directions, wanting to make sure that his exit was unobserved before abandoning the shadows of the doorway.

Reva had acted at almost the same instant. The courage had finally come to her. After all, it did take courage. Her body had swayed toward the river, she had allowed the tenseness to drain out of her muscles. With a flash of those tawdry ear rings, arcing through the darkness like thrown away cigarettes, she tumbled through unresisting air, fell into the water with a splash that was louder than the gunshot had been.

The man saw her go. He saw the pale flash of the ear rings. He knew it was a girl. He knew she'd gone into the water purposefully, not accidentally. He stood frozen in the doorway, a strange assortment of instincts battling inside him. After the first splash there had been no other sound, not even a gurgle. The river flowed quietly by, unconcerned, perhaps even unaware.

The man moved slowly, staying hidden in shadow as much as he

could. He drifted furtively across the wharf, his shoes making hollow sounds on the old boards. Finally, almost reluctantly, he reached the edge, and looked down into the water.

For eyes like his, accustomed to the darkness, it wasn't hard to find the girl. Not a complete girl, of course. Just a white oval face floating on the putrid, befouled river like a water lily on a fragrant pond.

The thought must have come to him, if she wants to die, why doesn't she turn over and submerge her face? Why does she want to prolong the agony? Is it that she prefers to die while gazing upward at the stars? Thoughts such as these could have come to this man, who was an expert in the details of death. He had seen more than one man die, struggling against the lethal fire in his guts, clutching desperately at life. Here was someone who actually wanted to die. Temporary insanity. It had to be something like that. People just didn't die willingly.

Whatever his thoughts, his body was rigid and poised on the edge of the wharf. Possibly his mind did not make a definite decision. Possibly his body acted automatically, and his mind forgot that he was a killer by trade, and his whole being reacted as an ordi-

nary, law-abiding citizen might. Whatever the complex or the primitive motivations involved, the physical movements were suddenly swift. He peeled his jacket off and cast it aside on the wharf. Then came the shoulder holster with its weighty steel contents. And finally his shoes.

He entered the water with a perfect flat dive, and his arms were flailing immediately in a powerful crawl stroke. He was a strong, skilled swimmer, and he reached the girl before she fully realized that a rescue was being attempted.

That realization came too late. She might have tried to elude him, or to disappear under the surface so he couldn't find her. She did neither. When his hand grasped her upper arm, she began to struggle. But he seemed to be prepared for that. Something, either his fist or the palm of his hand, hit her in the face. She wasn't knocked unconscious, but merely stunned into obedience and resignation. The man commenced to tow her back toward the wharf, and she didn't resist. Instead, she surrendered to the joy of the moment—somebody was concerned for her welfare, somebody cared.

When they reached the wharf, she did not have to be told what to do. The man helped her, of course, but mostly she used her

own strength to climb up. She went first, and he followed. Then they faced each other, dripping, in the dimness, saying nothing in the beginning, listening to their own labored breathing and the puddling of water beneath their feet.

"Little girl," the man said finally, "that was stupid."

He had called her a little girl, and somehow his choice of words sent a pleasant chill through her. She was young, yes, and small; but she no longer thought of herself as a little girl.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said, meaning she should be grateful for the words rather than the deed.

"Don't bother," he interrupted gruffly.

That was the kind of talk she was more used to. "I won't," she told him. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

He made a funny little derisive noise at that, then instead of attempting more conversation, sat down and started pulling on his shoes. Then he picked up the shoulder holster and strapped it over his wet shirt.

"Are you a cop?" she asked him.

He seemed to grin at that. She couldn't see his face clearly in the dimness, but she'd already gotten the notion that he was sort of good-looking. There was no doubt

that his shoulders were broad and that he was strong.

"Well, what are you going to do with me?" she demanded. "Turn me in to the cops?"

"I'm not looking for any cops," he assured her. "But that's a good question. What am I going to do with you? Take you home, I guess."

She shook her head. "I don't have a home."

"How about an address then?"

"No address. Why don't you just throw me back in the water?"

"After all the trouble I've gone to already? I like to finish the things I start."

He had her by the arm again suddenly, and his grip was as futile to resist as it had been in the water. She walked along beside him because she had no choice. She'd lost her shoes in the river, and the rough cobblestones they encountered as they turned away from the wharf were cruel to her feet. The man didn't realize it, or simply didn't care, because he dragged her along at a fast pace.

Fortunately it wasn't a long walk. In a cluster of very black shadows there was a car. The man opened the door on the driver's side, shoved her in ahead of him past the steering wheel, and before she could settle down on the seat,

the car was already in motion.

She didn't ask him where they were going. She tried not even to think of the strangeness of her situation. The car, she sensed, was an expensive one. The seat was leather, and the wetness of the passengers probably wouldn't damage it. Also it was soft and comfortable, and the only thing she disliked about the ride was the night breeze coming through the windows and plastering her thin, sodden dress to her already chilled skin.

"I guess I could drop you off at the Salvation Army or some place like that,"—he said after a while.

"What's the difference?" she asked him.

"Then I suppose you'd head right back for the river the first chance you got."

"I guess I would."

"That's what I don't like," he told her. "When I bother to save somebody's life, I want it to stay saved. Just like when I . . ." Unaccountably he didn't finish the sentence.

The rest of the ride was in complete silence. They entered a neighborhood of rather swank apartment buildings. The car stopped in a dark area at the rear of one of them.

"The shape we're in," the man said, "we'll have to go up the back

way and hope nobody sees us."

He led her by the hand, through a huge basement garage, to an empty service elevator. They went secretly and stealthily, like burglars, and nobody saw them. They got off at the sixth floor, and hurried down a thickly carpeted corridor. The man produced a key, opened a door, flicked a light switch, and they were inside.

Reva couldn't resist a pleased exclamation. "Boy, do you live in a swell place!"

"This isn't mine," he corrected her. "It belongs to a girl named Diane who is out of town for a while. She's the generous kind, and she won't care."

Reva did as she was told then. She walked into a big, frilly bedroom, stripped off her own wet things, hung them in the adjoining bath, rubbed herself dry with an enormous Turkish towel, then had several closets of clothes to choose from. She selected a thick, warm robe finally, and found a pair of slippers for her feet.

When she emerged, she could smell fresh coffee percolating, and her savior, in dry clothes himself, was waiting for her. He really was good-looking, she decided now. Not like a movie actor though, more like an athlete. He wasn't tall, but he seemed very solid. His face was square and pleasant, his

dark hair, though very short, was curly, and his eyes were brown and gentle.

"How do you feel?" he wanted to know.

"I feel fine."

He brought in the coffee, in a big silvery percolator. It was hot, and completed the job of warming her up. They sat in chairs opposite each other and sipped it, and eventually they talked.

"What's your name?" he asked her.

"Reva Renard."

"Real name?"

She shook her head.

"Are you married, Reva?"

"No, I'm not."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a model."

He raised his eyebrows. "What covers are you on this month?" He wasn't trying to belittle her, but it amounted to the same thing.

"All right," she said, "I'm not on any covers. I'm not anywhere. I've had to do other things."

"And I don't suppose you liked those other things."

"I hated them."

"But you're a very pretty girl, Reva Renard. Why don't you go back to the home town and marry one of your old boy friends?"

She shook her head fiercely at that suggestion, and the bangles, still clinging to her ears, rattled

unmusically. "It's too late for me to do that now. That's the whole point, don't you see?"

He pretended at least that he saw. "So that's why you jumped in the river tonight?"

"Yes. And you didn't help matters any when you pulled me out. I'm warm and dry, but nothing has really changed."

He nodded. "I know. I have a responsibility for you now."

He told her then to stay and live in this apartment for a while, at least till she had a better chance to think things over. There was food in the apartment, and plenty of clothes. Diane, the girl who lived here, wouldn't be back for weeks. And of course he'd be dropping in frequently. Rather than argue with him, she consented to the arrangement.

"What's your name?" she asked him at the door as he was leaving.

"Real name?"

"Whatever name you go by."

"All right. It's Johnny Cone."

"That's a funny name. It sounds like a . . ."

"Like what?"

"Like a gangster or something."

"You have quite an imagination, little girl."

When he had gone, she leaned against the door and let that strange little thrill run through her body again. He had called her

a little girl for the second time, even after she had told him something about herself. She even forgot for the moment that he had a funny-sounding name like Johnny Cone.

The next morning she discovered that Diane's newspaper deliveries hadn't been stopped when she left town, and the early edition lay in the hallway by the door. Because she was lonely Reva Renard opened the paper and read it. The murder was on the front page.

The victim's name was Nick Tavener. It was a name familiar to her, of course, as it was familiar to everybody in town. Nick Tavener had been the boss of most of the rackets. That's what people had always thought anyway, even though the police had never proved it sufficiently to keep Nick in jail very long. Well, now they wouldn't have to worry about Nick any more. He'd been shot, murdered in cold blood, in one of those old warehouses down by the wharves.

The news article also listed some of Nick's associates, men whom the police certainly intended to question now. There were a dozen names on this list, and among them was the name Johnny Cone.

Reva spent the hours after that listening for the ring of the doorbell or the phone. Neither instrument obliged. The afternoon newspaper gave further information on the murder of Nick Tavener, which seemed to be stirring up quite a fuss generally. Some of the obvious suspects had already been questioned, among them Johnny Cone. The results of the questioning were not being made public, but no arrests seemed to have been made.

In between reading the paper and thinking about Johnny, Reva spent the rest of the time sitting at Diane's boudoir table. She worked at her long black hair till it didn't look like she'd been in the river the night before. She even managed to erase some of the dark circles under her blue eyes. Johnny had said she was pretty, and she agreed with him. At first she'd been reluctant to use anything out of Diane's wardrobe. But now she found a blue dress that exactly matched her eyes, and she put it on and sat down in the living room to wait hopefully for Johnny.

It was almost eleven when he arrived. He raised his eyebrows when he saw the blue dress, and he smiled, to himself mostly, it seemed. "You're prettier than I thought you were," he said.

She wished then that he would take her in his arms and kiss her. But then she wondered why he should do a thing like that. She didn't really matter to him. Anyway, he didn't kiss her.

Possibly, however, the reason for the oversight was the fact that the things he saw next were the newspapers lying spread out on the coffee table. He looked at them for a long minute, then back to her.

He didn't waste time trying to pretend. "I spent most of the day today down at Homicide," he announced frankly. "They thought maybe I killed Nick Tavener. What made them think it was that I had reasons for killing Nick. But they couldn't prove that I was anywhere around that warehouse. In fact, I could prove that I was at the other end of town at the time. I spent the whole evening playing poker at Charlie Plant's."

He sat down on the long, enormous sofa and smiled up at her. "Have you located the liquor supply yet?" he asked her. "Why don't you fix me a scotch with a little water?"

"I don't know where it is."

He pointed. "Over there. That's not a snack bar, little girl. It's a liquor bar. And Diane always stocked the best."

She hurried to obey him. When

she brought the glass back to him, he sampled it without comment. "Aren't you joining me?" he asked.

"I don't like it very much," she answered.

"Or is it that you want to keep a clear head for thinking?"

"I've been doing quite a bit of thinking."

"It took your mind off your own problems for a while anyway, didn't it?"

"Yes, I haven't thought of myself at all since I read the morning paper. I've just been thinking of you."

He smiled. "Besides picking out a blue dress that matches your eyes, that is."

"Maybe I did that because I was thinking of you too."

If he understood what she meant, he gave no sign. "I really didn't hurry back here," he said, "because I thought you'd probably left. Either you'd gone back to the river the minute I was out of sight, or you read the morning paper, put a simple two and two together, and headed for parts unknown."

She sat down in a nearby chair. "If you don't care whether you live or die," she told him, "then there's no reason to be afraid."

He smiled at her again. His eyes were very intelligent. He did-

n't look hard or cruel. He didn't look like a gangster at all. "If a person cares enough to pick out a dress that matches her eyes, then that person also cares whether she lives or dies," he pointed out gently.

She tried not to be angry with him because she really had no right to. "Do you think I'll squeal on you, Johnny?" she asked him.

"It's possible."

"But you saved my life."

"Yes, that's what's stopping you, temporarily at least. If it weren't for that, and you had important information on a murder, you'd give it to the police in a minute. That's because you're naturally a public-spirited citizen."

"Well, I haven't squealed yet, Johnny."

"I know that. Because if you had, I'd have heard from the boys at Homicide."

"Don't you trust me, Johnny?"

The smile never left his face, and he answered softly. He wasn't trying to scare her, just stating a fact. "In my business, little girl, if you want to be a success, you don't trust anybody."

She could have cried in her frustration. Why didn't he understand her? He'd had enough experience with women. Like Diane, for instance. No, maybe that was the trouble. All his experience had

been with such women as Diane.

"What are you going to do then," she asked him, "since you don't trust me?"

"That's what's been on my mind today, Reva." His eyes had narrowed ever so slightly, his smile was gone, and he had stopped calling her "little girl."

"Are you going to kill me?"

He glanced away, and looked at his empty glass instead. "You'll have to admit," he said, "that's the only way I could be absolutely sure of being safe."

"But that's so silly," she objected. "What about all those people at Charlie Plant's who told the police you were playing poker with them last night when you weren't? Do you have to kill all of them too?"

He smiled again, but it was a weary smile, without gaiety. "I can't seem to get this through your head, can I? Charlie Plant and the other guys, they've all got good reasons to back up my alibi. But that's not the most important thing. I trust them because they're used to lying. That's the difference between them and you, don't you see? You're not used to lying. It goes against everything you are. You're an honest little girl, and you've got a conscience. A conscience spells trouble in my business."

She wanted to go to him, to touch him, to run her hands over his forehead and smooth out the creases. "I guess I should be flattered if that's your opinion of me," she said instead.

"Maybe you should."

"But it seems so silly for you to be wondering whether you ought to kill me when just last night you went to so much trouble to save my life."

He squirmed a little, and he didn't answer. Finally he got up, still avoiding her eyes, walking to the little bar, and fixed himself a second drink.

"Why did you save me last night?" she asked, pursuing him with the question. "You had just shot a man, and you were trying to get away without anybody seeing you. But then you jumped in the water after me. That took you a long time, when you could have been escaping. You took a big chance with your alibi to save the life of a stranger."

He turned, with the fresh drink in his hand, to face her. "What are you trying to do now," he demanded, "flatter me?"

She looked down at the blue dress and her hands twisting in her lap, and she said, "I don't know what there was between you and Nick Tavener. Maybe he deserved to be shot. But I think

you're a pretty nice guy, Johnny."

He slammed the untasted drink down on the surface of the bar, spilling quite a lot of it. Then he walked across the room, opened the door, and went out.

Reva called after him, but he didn't come back.

She had a plan. She worked it out in her devious, intricate little feminine brain during the next two days while she waited for Johnny. She worked it out as she sat in front of Diane's mirror and tried to make herself as pretty as she could for Johnny's sake. And she was very hopeful, because the mirror promised her. She'd always been pretty, that was how she'd gotten by. But the scars were disappearing, the scars of the things she's had to do and hadn't liked. A better face was being born in the mirror, an almost beautiful face, an almost happy face, with sparkling eyes full of light and lips that wanted to be kissed.

She continued to read the newspapers, of course. The murder of Nick Tavener was still making the front page. The police were certain it had been a gang killing, which narrowed down the list of suspects. But there'd been no arrests.

Johnny Cone returned to the apartment finally after an absence of forty-eight hours. The passage of time had affected him adversely. He looked tired, strained.

He confronted Reva in the doorway of the apartment when she answered the bell, and for a few seconds they stood close to each other. It was he who had to speak first, and his voice was hoarse and somehow hollow.

"Diane is coming back to town," he announced. "You'll have to vacate."

"All right," she answered quickly. "Just give me a minute to change back to my own clothes."

"You don't have to. Diane won't mind . . ."

"But I mind. After living in her apartment for three days, I don't want to thank her by stealing from her."

"Oh yes, that conscience of yours. All right, go ahead. I'll wait."

She tried to ignore the menace in his words, and retired quickly to the bedroom. When she climbed back into her old black dress and saw herself in the mirror, she had a moment of despair. The black dress cancelled out the beautiful face. It was tight, thin, as cheap as the person who wore it. She didn't like herself, how could Johnny like her? Still, she couldn't change

her mind about the dress now. When she went back to the living room, she refused to meet his gaze.

But he seemed to ignore the dress, or not to care. "My car's downstairs," he told her.

She followed him down obediently. She got a better look at the car this time. It was long and shiny and new. Johnny was prosperous.

When they were on their way, and she was far over in her corner of the seat, watching his grim profile as he drove, she finally asked the question. "Have you decided yet, Johnny?"

"Decided what?"

"About me. Are you going to kill me for the sake of your alibi?"

He chewed his lower lip. "You don't mind putting it straight, do you?"

"Why don't you put it straight to me, Johnny?"

"I'll admit I've been thinking about it." He paused, then continued more swiftly. "All right, here it is straight. There's only one thing that holds me back. And that's how I might feel. Killing you wouldn't be the same as killing Nick Tavenor."

"How did you feel when you were killing him?"

"I felt nothing. Absolutely nothing. No more than a man does when he sees a rat in a garbage can and he shoots it."

"But it would be different with me?"

"Sure it would be different."

"How?"

"Well, if I killed you, I'd be killing something innocent. And you couldn't call Nick Tavener innocent."

"I'm not innocent either, Johnny."

"Yes, you are. I don't care what you think about yourself, because you're wrong. You're innocent . . . and you're good."

"But you could kill me just the same, couldn't you, Johnny? You'd swallow your feelings."

"I don't know. There's the other thing to think about too. That thing they call the instinct for self-preservation. It's a pretty strong instinct in me. That's how I've come as far as I have."

They drove on. She watched him in the glare of passing headlights, and could see that he was hurting inside, and she pitied him.

"Where are you taking me, Johnny?"

"Why don't you just sit back and enjoy the ride?"

"Is that what it is, Johnny, a ride? Or do they still call it that nowadays? Are you taking me for a ride?"

"Don't talk crazy," he said.

"Just answer the question, Johnny."

But he wouldn't answer. He sat hunched over the steering wheel, intent on the road ahead, refusing even to look at her. They were driving north. She didn't know their whereabouts. The area was completely unfamiliar to her. But she began to watch for the opportunity. They hadn't crossed the river yet, but sooner or later, if they kept going in this direction, they would inevitably come to it. So she waited, and was silent.

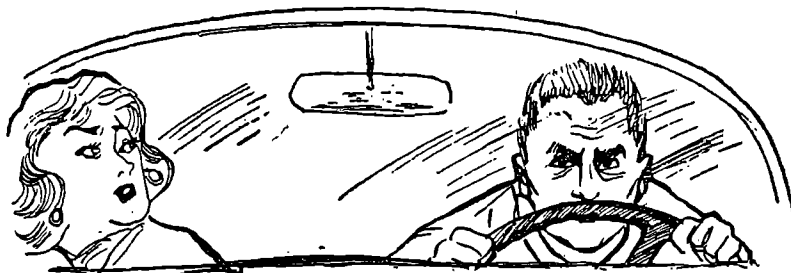
She still had her plan. The details would have to depend on circumstances, but the general intention was clear in her mind. And she hadn't abandoned it.

Quite suddenly, after what seemed miles, she saw it. The low, small bridge first, and then the river moving sluggishly under it, reflecting the opposite shore lights on its black surface.

They were approaching on the bridge road. Wasn't Johnny intending to drive across? No, he wasn't. At the last turn before they reached the bridge, he swerved the car to the left, heading down a dark street that followed the river. This was her chance, possibly her last chance. She kicked off her shoes, Diane's shoes.

"Stop the car!" she screamed.

He reacted as she'd been sure he would, obeying the startling command before he had a chance to



think. His foot pressed automatically on the brake, the car jolted and skidded to a shrieking stop.

She didn't hesitate, but had opened the door and was already running while the car still quivered. She ran to the bridge. There was a raised sidewalk for pedestrians just inside the railing. She raced up that sidewalk toward the center of the bridge. Johnny's pursuing footsteps sounded far behind her.

But he caught her, as she'd wanted him to catch her, before she reached the center. His hands grabbed at her shoulders, stopping her, then crushing her against the railing. For an instant they were close together in something almost like an embrace, both of them panting, their bodies in a kind of desperate communion.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked her savagely, pushing her a little away from him.

"I'm going back to the river."

"That's what I thought, you little fool."

"Would you rather kill me, Johnny, than have me kill myself?"

It was a question he couldn't answer immediately, and she took the opportunity to disentangle herself from his arms completely. When she spoke to him, she wasn't acting or pretending. The words were truthful, genuine.

"Why did you have to pull me out of the water in the first place, Johnny? So I could fall in love with you? That's not so strange, is it, a girl falling in love with a man who saved her life? And I didn't change my mind about you, Johnny, when I found out you killed Nick Tavener. He was your enemy. It was self-preservation when you killed him. It wasn't murder. It wasn't murder to me anyway. But then you were afraid, Johnny, afraid of me. I understood that, too, because you could never know how much I was in love with you, that I'd rather die myself than harm you. That's what I want to do, Johnny. I want to kill

myself so you won't be afraid any more. But I don't want you to kill me. Like you said, it wouldn't be like killing Nick Tavener. You'd never get over it. Because you've got a conscience too, Johnny, and I'd be on your conscience for the rest of your life. So let me do it myself, Johnny. We'll just go back to where we started, only this time you'll pass right by like you never saw me. Understand, darling? Oh darling Johnny, I love you so much."

Before he could reach for her, she leaped up onto the railing. Over the railing, and then she was falling. The distance wasn't far because it wasn't a high bridge, but it seemed an eternity before the water came up to meet her.

The impact, when she hit, knocked the air out of her lungs. As she knifed down into the black depths, she swallowed some water, and it terrified her into making the effort to paddle back up to the surface. She didn't know how to swim, the movement was primitively instinctive.

Then she felt the air again, and

breathed it in. And saw the sky, full of bright stars. And the head and shoulders of Johnny up there, as he leaned over the railing and stared down at her.

No, she wasn't going to call up to him. She wanted his reaction to be entirely his own. She'd proved her love for him. And she knew, deep in her woman's heart, that Johnny loved her. He'd only been afraid of the threat she'd held over him. But now she'd demonstrated that there was no threat. He could love her safely. This time, when he jumped in and rescued her, this time would have real meaning.

The stars were blotted out for a few seconds as the current swept Reva Renard under the bridge. When she emerged on the downstream side, Johnny was leaning over that railing too. His face gleamed white and pale in the starlight, but she couldn't read the expression on it.

The current grew swifter. Johnny's face receded, became a mere speck, then invisible. There were only the stars. The water felt cold . . . but friendly.

