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SHOCK



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Exciting Shock-Mystery Novel

DEATH IS A DAME **Frederick C. Davis** 8
 Was she really his wife? Or was she evil-souled Zelda—biding her time until her next murder?

Two Spine-Tingling Suspense Novelettes

HELL'S BELLE **Robert Turner** 42
 Despising himself and exotic Roxy, Ben Harlow went all out to win her love with a grisly murder memento.

HOMICIDAL HOMESTEAD **Bruno Fischer** 84
 Luscious Della's scarecrow husband bought a knife—and brooded on slaughter.

Six Gripping Short Stories

NIGHTMARE MAN **John E. Harbaugh** 28
 His hog-fat wife jeered little Herman's dream into a hideous nightmare.

HER BLACK WINGS **John D. MacDonald** 32
 Three men had loved her—and died violently. I was next. . . .

SKULDUGGER'S LOOT **H. C. Malcolm** 38
 Human skulls grinned in the window—yet thick-skulled Dutch wanted in.

A CENTURY OF THE KILLER CURSE **D. L. Champion** 63
 An ancient kill-curse was crawling in the mind of a lovely heiress. . . .

STRANGLER'S MOON **Curt Hamlin** 73
 Strange, garroted women were his stepping stones to heights of homicide.

CRYPT OF THE JEALOUS QUEEN **Jack Bennett** 78
 She flew away on butterfly wings . . . strewing her vengeance with a cobra's venom.

Features and Departments

WITHOUT WARNING **A Department** 6
 Preview of "Blood of the Vixen" by John D. MacDonald.

THE PERFECT GIFT (A Storiette) **John Bender** 72
 Everything worked out perfectly—for no one.

ADVENTURES INTO THE UNKNOWN 82
 The Secret of Glamis Castle. **Frederick Blakeslee**

The next issue will be out March 19th.

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Nightmare Man



HERMAN WILLIS was a little man. He was little in stature and little in importance to a busy world, just one of the millions of little men who grub at grimy, work-a-day jobs. Herman Willis was a pants presser. A quiet, near-sighted, completely bald little man who asked nothing of the world and of whom the world asked nothing. Yet, the People of the State of New York were going to demand that little Herman Willis be made to pay the Supreme Penalty.

It had been one of those sweltering, hot New York days. Herman had spent nine hours in a cloud of steam over his presser and was glad when it was time to lock up the shop and go home.

He walked up Second Avenue towards Fifty-sixth street, a tired, drooping little figure of a man. As he began to think of the evening ahead, however, the weariness slipped from his shoulders and his step became buoyant. He was anxious to get home to *her*. There was a particularly nice bit of business coming up with *her* tonight—that is, if he could depend upon Mr. Streech. And Mr. Streech had *promised* that he would have it for him tonight.

Herman Willis stopped at a delicatessen and bought ten cents worth of potato salad, a dill pickle, a loaf of rye bread, and fifteen cents worth of cold luncheon meat. In the liquor store next door, he bought a pint bottle of gin. Then he walked up Fifty-sixth Street towards First Avenue.

He stopped under the sidewalk awning of an expensive-looking hotel in the middle of the block, and peered into the cool lobby. The doorman saw him and walked out to him. Herman noticed that he was wearing a new uniform. That was a good

healthy sign—for the business tonight.

"Hello, Herman," the doorman said. He reached in his hip pocket and drew out a handkerchief. Herman watched his hand and flinched with disappointment when he saw only the handkerchief. The doorman wiped his forehead. "Been a hot day, eh, Herman?"

"Yes, Mr. Streech," Herman said. "It's been a steaming hot day."

The doorman laughed and nudged Herman in the ribs. "I get it. You work in steam all day."

Herman watched him wipe his forehead. He wondered whether he was ever going to stop. Back and forth went the handkerchief; under his eyes, under his nose, across his face and around the back of his neck.

The doorman couldn't stand the look of torture in Herman's eyes any longer. "I got it for you, Herman," he whispered. "I tore it off when I turned the old uniform in yesterday. I told them I lost it." He reached in a side pocket and drew out a gold epaulet.

Herman fondled the metallic gold strands and sighed, "I'll never be able to thank you enough, Mr. Streech. I needed it very badly."

The doorman watched Herman cross the street and enter a dismal, yellow-brick tenement house. He smiled expansively and felt that he had done a remarkably good deed. He wondered what Herman was going to do with the epaulet.

As Herman climbed the stairs to his sixth-floor, front apartment, the stench assailed his nostrils. It was the indefinable stench of too many humans crowded in too old tenements, the greasy odors of frying foods blended with the over-all smell left by millions of past



◆
By
John E.
Harbaugh
◆

*His hog-fat wife jeered
little Herman's dream
of beauty into a
hideous nightmare.*



Her rasping voice came to him: "A lousy little pants presser. . . . An' all the guys with dough I could of married. . . ."

meals. It seeped into the very walls. Each individual odor crowded its busy way into the master fetor which proclaimed the dwelling a stable for human animals.

Herman climbed the stairs and for once, he didn't mind the hall's depressing odors. He held the epaulet tightly in his hand and his eyes were shining.

He entered his flat and glanced toward the window overlooking the street. For thirteen years he had always looked first at the window to see if she was there, as if some terrible circumstance of Fate might have removed her while he was at work. She was there tonight, though, just as she had always been there for thirteen years.

The great mountain of female flesh beside the window had long ago lost its contours. It was as though someone had shoveled three hundred pounds of soft white fat into one pile and left it beside the window. The room reeked of her unwashed body. From under a mass of stringy hair, her little, piggish eyes regarded Herman.

HER voice was shrill, petulant: "You're late tonight. You're late every night, but tonight you're later. I seen you stop and talk to the doorman. He gave you something. What was it he gave you?"

Herman held out the gold epaulet and said, "It's for *her*—in there." He pointed to the bedroom. He noticed the empty gin bottle on the window ledge, fumbled in the paper bag under his arm, and gave his wife the bottle he had just purchased.

He took the remaining contents of the bag to the kitchen. It was stifling hot in the tiny room and he decided that he would eat his supper later. Perhaps the weather would cool off later. He walked towards the bedroom, clutching the gold epaulet.

"Don't you close that door like you did last night," Rosie snarled at him.

"I get damn lonesome sittin' in this stinkin' joint all day without nobody to talk to. I ain't goin' to sit here and talk to you through no closed door."

She watched him enter the bedroom, leaving the door open. *Lousy little pants presser* she thought, *what had she married him for?* She knew why she had married him—to get out of that damn sweatshop of a bag factory on East Thirty-Second street. In those days she had been a voluptuous woman with a fine figure. She had married Herman two weeks after she met him on the Brighton Beach express to Coney Island.

But only a year after they were married, something had happened to her. She started to grow. For thirteen years she had been growing and spreading like a gross, malignant plant, until she became so large that she could no longer leave the apartment. She was still growing, still spreading, getting bigger all the time.

She lived religiously on gin and cheap chocolate candy, and hadn't had a regular meal in ten years. Her only interest in life was to sit by the window and watch the activity within the rooms of the towering hotel across the street. She knew everything that had happened in that hotel for thirteen years and planned that if she ever got her old voluptuous shape back, she would get rid of the lousy little pants-presser and get herself a guy with dough. She liked what went on in that hotel. That's where she was going to live if she ever got her shape back.

The bedroom was dark when Herman entered. It had one grimy window opening on the air-shaft, but in sixty years no occupant of the flat had ever been able to pry it open. Herman hesitated a moment. He wanted to feel just right when he looked at *her*. Then he snapped on the light switch.

In the center of the room was a scarred work table. On the table stood a ship. It

was a replica of a graceful, old-time sailing ship, a detailed, scale model of the United States frigate *Congress*. Thirteen years ago, Herman had found her plans in an old naval book he had picked up in a second hand shop. For thirteen years he had labored to build her and now she was finished. That is, she was almost finished.

He sat down on the stool and placed the gold epaulet on the table. He carefully separated the strands from the shoulder board and laid them in orderly rows. Then he opened a bottle of clear cement and began to work. As he worked, the steady familiar monotone came through the open door.

"Sittin' here all the time . . . all the guys with dough I could of married . . . look at them swells goin' in the hotel . . . a lousy little pants presser . . . stuck in a joint like this . . . wastin' your life over a lousy hunk of wood . . . never gettin' nowhere. . . ."

The droning, petulant voice reached Herman's ears but he did not hear it. He hummed softly to himself as he worked. The hours slipped by and finally there were no gold strands left on the table. He stood up and walked around the work table, inspecting his little ship critically. Then he slapped the sides of his trousers in delight. The *Congress* was finished. Finished. He knew the minute he had seen the epaulets on Mr. Streech's shoul-

ders that those gold strands were the answer.

Waves of pure rapture swept over him as he studied the model. The strands of Mr. Streech's epaulet were now worked into an intricate gold scrollwork around the stern cabins, the quarter coaches, and the trailboards. Herman suddenly realized that he was hungry, but he couldn't leave, couldn't tear his eyes from the table. The little ship stood in regal dignity, gleaming with paint and varnish and gold. She was lovely, graceful.

Finally, he sighed and went to the kitchen to eat his supper. Rosie immediately pounced upon him.

"At last you're goin' to eat," she shrilled. "Four hours you been workin' on that hunk of wood, leaving me to sit here alone. Never no regard for me or my feelin's. If Myron was here, things would be different. If Myron—"

Herman stopped suddenly and his pale little face became even whiter. "Rosie, please. Don't talk about Myron."

"Don't talk about Myron," mimicked his wife. "And why don't talk about Myron? Because *you* don't want to talk about him. Because *you* sent him where he is. It's your fault that Myron—"

Herman went into the kitchen and slammed the door. Rosie stared with unbelieving eyes. He had never dared do that before! That lousy little pants

(Please continue on page 96)

(Continued from page 31)

presser had slammed the door right in her face! Slowly and ponderously she put into motion the machinery that would get her to her feet. Poisonous hatred gleamed in her little pig eyes.

HERMAN finished his supper and was washing the few dishes, when he heard a noise in the street that sounded like an auto crash. He walked into the front room and saw Rosie leaning out the window. She turned her head as he entered.

“So we don’t talk about Myron?” she cried. “My boy Myron, by my first marriage, who watched you workin’ on that hunk of wood and went off to the Navy. He ain’t never comin’ back now, so you don’t need to work on that lousy hunk of

NIGHTMARE MAN

wood no more." She began to laugh. "Take a look. It's down there, down there in the street—what's left of it." She laughed until every layer of fat was undulating, flowing, rolling.

Herman stared at her, then went into the bedroom. The work table was empty. He searched the bedroom carefully; he examined the living room, and opened the door to the hall.

"Down there I tell you!" His wife was laughing until the tears rolled from her eyes. "Down there, in the street!"

The newspapers said later Herman went temporarily nuts. He didn't. He simply pushed Rosie through the window. It took him a long time. He had to gather the fat and stuff it through the frame. Rosie was not laughing now. She was screaming at the top of her lungs. The hotel across the street became a blaze of lights as people watched Herman push his wife through the window. Passersby on the street looked up, curious, horrified, silent.

She was half-way out, her arms and legs flailing the air like a huge beetle turned upon its back. Herman placed his shoulders against her bulk and shoved with all his might. Rosie's screaming rose to a high crescendo. It reached the pitch of high C as she suddenly shot out of the window, like a gigantic, ripe fruit being pared from its skin. The crescendo of her screaming curved downward with her body and died suddenly as she hit the street.

She fell in the street, a great barrel of lard, her blood splattering into the lobby of the hotel. It was all of Rosie Willis that ever managed to reach the hotel of her dreams.

When the police cars arrived, they found Herman down on his knees in the street, carefully picking up the pieces of his little ship.
