

JUSTICE

VOL. 1, NO. 1
MAY 1955

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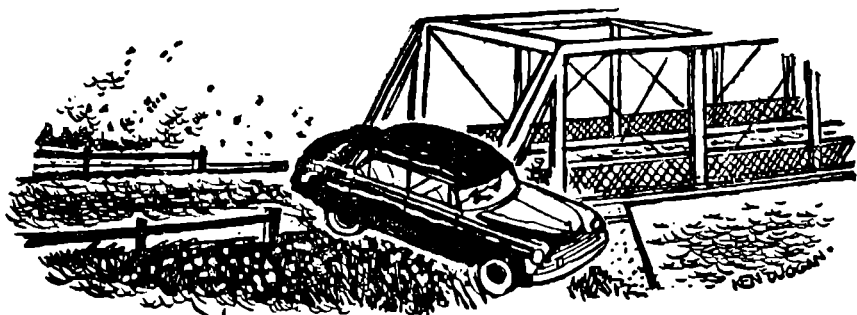
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JUSTICE is published by Non-Pareil Publishing Corp., 655 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y. Application for second-class entry pending at the post office at New York, N.Y. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Clinton, Mass. Published bi-monthly. Copyright 1955 by Non-Pareil Publishing Corp., 655 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y. Vol. 1 No. 1, May 1955 issue. Price 35¢ per copy. Subscription rate \$4.50 for 12 issues including postage. Not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts, and all manuscripts must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelopes. Printed in the U.S.A.

ADVERTISING OFFICES: Sid Kalish, Advertising Director, 655 Madison Avenue, New York 21, N.Y.; William R. Stewart, Midwest, 9 South Clinton Street, Chicago 6, Ill.; Lloyd B. Chappell, West Coast, 810 So. Robertson, Los Angeles 35, Calif.



by JOHN BENDER

YOU HAVE killed her, he thought. That part of it is over . . . your wife is dead—all right, he thought. Now what do you do?

But his mind refused the next

No Margin for Error

**A lonely wife is fair
game for the wolf pack.**

step in the plan. Not there, not in the same room with her. He felt that if he were to rise now, go out and pour himself a drink, he could work it out. How difficult was it, really, for a man of his intellectual level to arrange an accident?

Without undue haste, he adjusted his jacket and ran his hands once through his thinning hair. In the mirror above her bed he caught a glimpse of his face, and he turned away, surprised at the expression which stared back at him. He walked softly to the door, a short man with long arms and big shoulders, the suitcoat tight against them. At the door he looked back to her, slumped on top of the rumpled covers. Her dress had risen high on one of the very fine legs, exposing the thigh above the nylon. Automatically he started back, to close the

window which was pouring cold air in on her . . . until he realized that it didn't matter now.

Like the bedroom, the rest of the house was cold; it bothered his fingers.

He turned up the thermostat and closed the front door, which she had left open, as was her way, when she had come in. In was a stout oaken door, well hung, silently hinged, and he had but to touch it slightly to make it swing fully shut.

"You were too impatient to close it, my dear," he said aloud to no one. "Were you in that much of a hurry to get back to him?"

He went into the living room, poured himself as much as was left in the whiskey bottle. It looked like four, maybe five ounces. He had never had that much liquor in one drink in all his life. He had never needed it, for one thing, and for another, drinking did not help his playing. Now he imagined it appropriate to an occasion.

He sat down in the wing chair from where he could look out through the big picture window to the narrow ribbon of road below, and he turned the glass slowly in his big, strong hands,

thinking about this next part of it.

The body. The body of my wife. The body of the evidence, as the police were apt to put it. A tall, exquisitely fashioned young woman, somewhat taller than he; dark as anger, lovely as a free-running cloud.

He shook his head, frowned at the glass of whiskey and put it down on the table beside him.

Think only of getting rid of a body, he commanded himself. Nothing else. Not of what it was like in the early years of marriage when you were a struggling music student. Not of what your life together might have been. That is finished. Think of how to dispose of a body.

Through the window he could see the first star of evening winking back at him. It would be dark soon, which pleased him. Though there were not too many houses in this area, the darkness would make it doubly certain that he would not be seen carrying the body to the car.

He realized that there was not much thinking to be done, after all. On the quick flight home from Boston he'd let his mind play with darker thoughts, so that now the sequence of imagined events came swiftly to him.

You simply put the body in the seat beside you, then you drive the short mile or so to the bridge, where you have noticed a dangerous gap between the road fence and the beginning of the bridge itself. A space barely wider than your car. But if a car were to skid, going fast in that ten-mile-an-hour-zone—the way she liked to drive—it is just possible a car would go through that gap, off the road and into the river below.

He was amused by the fact that there was some danger to himself attached to the maneuver. He would have to skid the car around at a pretty good rate of speed, to make the tire marks convincing, and there was the chance that he might miscalculate and strike either the bridge entry or the last upright of the fence. Even if he didn't, there was the further challenge which his memory told him lay behind the gap. The proverbial stop on a dime, after which—if there was any after which—he got out, propped her body behind the wheel and sent the car on over.

He sat sipping the raw whiskey, wondering now about himself. His hands were strong and sure. They could break a woman's neck, or fashion the finest music his concert pianist mind directed

. . . or guide an automobile with infinite precision. He hoped so.

The phone rang, shattering the silence of the room. He went over and picked up the instrument.

"Yes?" he said.

He caught the not-quite buried note of surprise from the other end. A man's voice asked, "May I speak to Mrs. Porter, please?"

"No," he said, "I don't believe you can. Is this Paul?"

Hesitation and doubt hummed through the silent wire.

"Is this Paul, or isn't it?"

"Why—er, I'll call back," the man said.

"You'd better not. You'd really better not." He found himself smiling. "This is her husband. Would you like to leave a message? Would you like to tell me that you want her to come to your place? Or were you going to spend the evening here?"

The connection cut off abruptly.

He put down the phone and had the rest of his drink. Paul Stanton. What in the name of God had she ever seen in him? A thin, ill-dressed hack of a writer who wrote books that never sold and tried to persuade people that he was a liberal intellectual.

He'd never thought much about the fellow, until recently, on the

tour, when he'd happened to run into some rumors. He had discounted them at first, but then he had begun to worry. Several times he had called home—both to the city apartment and here—without getting his wife; and her explanations, when he finally talked to her, furthered his doubt. The tour did not go well; his playing showed the effects of his worry, so finally he cancelled and came back.

He did not tell her he was coming.

She did not know of his arrival until she walked into the bedroom, twenty minutes ago, and found him sitting there.

"Why, Max! Max, dear! This is a surprise—"

"Isn't it?" He did not hold out his arms to her, did not make any move at all. "Is he with you?" he asked simply, and watched the surprise give way to alarm within her dark eyes.

"Paul," he said. "Paul Stanton."

For a long moment he prayed she would deny it, give her lips to a lie, even. But he saw her shoulders wilt, her face go white and he knew he had struck her with the truth.

"Your lover," he said. "Is he waiting for you?"

"Max, please—"

He came slowly forward. "Tell me of him, good wife."

"Max!" She cowered. "Max, listen to me—"

He slapped her heavily across the mouth. Once, twice; she did not cry out. His big hand became a fist and he hammered her down.

He went into the bedroom and bent over her on the bed, hesitating for just a moment. Without touching her, his hand moved slightly, framing the curve of her dark hair against the pillow, then he shook his head and seized her roughly.

She struggled to move away.

"Are you awake?" He had thought the blow would have kept her unconscious for much longer. He had struck her with all his strength, all his anger; and it had been that sight of her, lying unconscious, that had given him the first persuasion to think of her as dead, to plan of her as dead.

"Yes, I'm awake." She pushed herself to a sitting position among the tangled blankets. "I heard you talking on the phone. It was Paul, wasn't it?"

He said nothing.

"I don't want to see him again, Max. Can you ever believe that?"

She touched the growing bruise along her jawline. "You should have killed me, Max, for the fool I am . . ."

More than the sight of her battered face, the dark eyes pleading for his forgiveness, it was her tears that tortured him. In this moment of her naked grief and shame, his heart urged him to comfort her, to clutch her tightly and admit his own failure, too. Somewhere in the pattern of their lives he had created a loneliness for her—his world of music which

he had never let her enter; his tours that left her alone for such diversion as she had sought. He felt everything that they had ever meant to each other pleading with him now, and he gripped the car keys harder in his hand, squeezing, squeezing, until they cut into his fingers.

He stepped away from the bed.

Her eyes, glistening with doubt, searched his own. "Max—?"

He smiled. "I'll be right back," he said. "I just want to put the car away."

