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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. 178



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Her other hand suddenly caught the puppet in a crushing grip."



“Not Both!”

By FRANCES GARFIELD

A brief weird story about a wax image, and a flaming jealousy that over-reached itself

MARGARET TERRILL bent over her typewriter and stared at the envelope she was addressing, but her eyes did not focus. It would never do, she told herself desperately, to let fear choke her like this—not at the office, anyway. Better wait until she got back to her little room-and-a-half flat in the East End, and then collapse. But now——

She opened the top drawer of the desk. There it lay, a folded gray sheet, as she had drawn it from the envelope that morning:

Miss Terrill,

I have given you a week. Three days of it are gone. I hate you.

She lifted her right hand and shakily ruffled her wheat-blond curls, that gave her a false appearance of shallow gaiety. The first note, day before yesterday, she'd thought a practical joke. It said that some unsigned enemy had made a waxen image of her, would burn it a trifle each day, inflict slow pin-stabs of torture. She, too, would know burning, stabbing pains. And on the last day of the week, as flames consumed the wax to the final atom, Margaret Terrill, also, would perish.

The second letter was three words: *I hate you.*

Margaret shuddered. The new throbbing ache, that made her left arm almost

helpless, seemed to find and explore her shoulder and chest. It was all foolish, of course, but she must tell someone. Would Gene Hilton, her employer and lover, understand if she told him? Or would he laugh? She felt she could not endure it if he laughed.

"Are you ill, Miss Terrill?"

The voice came from the desk opposite where sat Truda Fitzner, Gene Hilton's other secretary. She was slender, dark, mousy, of indeterminate age. Behind their thick lenses, her eyes were knowing and concerned.

"I'll?" repeated Margaret. "I—well, I don't know, Miss Fitzner——"

"Tell me." The almost spider-thin figure of the other woman rose from behind the desk and came forward. Truda Fitzner looked very efficient, cool, wise. Would she understand? Margaret began to talk, tremblingly but trustfully. She told everything about the three strange letters. "I know you'll laugh," she finished in almost a wail, "and you'll think I'm making it all up——"

"I won't laugh," said Truda Fitzner gravely. She was perching on the edge of Margaret's desk. With one thin brown hand she felt in a pocket of her neat tailored jacket. She exhibited for a moment an envelope—square, gray, with upon it a scrawled address in a hand that Margaret knew.

"What's that?" Margaret gasped. "Where did you get it? It looks like——"

Truda Fitzner thrust the letter back out of sight. "Yes, it looks like the notes you've received. You see, I've been getting them, too."

But she did not sound upset, only grave and gentle. Her spectacled eyes concentrated assurance as they stared into Margaret's wide blue ones. "Now," Truda Fitzner was continuing, "I would rationalize it like this: Someone hates you, and knows only that you work in this office. So,

to make sure of frightening you, that person learns both our names and addresses——"

"Wait," interrupted Margaret, her voice steadier than it had been. "Someone hates me, you think, without knowing how I look? Doesn't what you just said prove that it may be you who are being hated?"

Truda Fitzner shook her mousy head. "Do I look like someone who would be hated?" she asked. "Am I dangerous? Would I make anyone jealous?"

Margaret felt the throb in her half-paralyzed left arm growing stronger and faster again. "You think, then, that somebody is jealous of me?"

"Undoubtedly," nodded Truda Fitzner. "And I can guess, perhaps, who that somebody is." She paused, as if to gather effect. "Mrs. Hilton!"

"Why," choked Margaret, "why——"

"I can't help but know," the other woman told her. "I've been a secretary, and a good one, to Gene Hilton for the past five years. It follows that I must know that his wife bores him, and that he turned to you when you brought all this beauty into the office."

"It's true," decided Margaret at once. "Aline Hilton is doing this—black magic—against me. She must be crazy."

"She must be," agreed Truda Fitzner. "Nobody believes that pain can be transferred from a wax puppet to a living enemy, except someone whose mind is all awry." Margaret started to speak, but Truda Fitzner stopped her with a lifted hand, as small and slender as a doll's. "I know what you're going to say. Your arm hurts—yes, I've seen you rubbing and favoring it."

"You must be a detective!" cried Margaret, but Truda Fitzner laughed and shook her head again.

"No, Miss Terrill—only a good secretary who keeps her near-sighted eyes open. But let me go on. Don't connect that sore

arm with threats of supernatural revenge. It's probably only a sprain, something you wouldn't notice if you weren't upset."

"You make me feel better, Miss Fitzner," Margaret confessed. "Shall we keep this a secret?"

"If you like, unless you want to tell Mr. Hilton."

"I thought of that. And, if his wife is really doing such an insane thing——"

"Yes," agreed Truda Fitzner, and rose from her perch on the edge of the desk. "He ought to be warned about his wife."

"I'll tell him," said Margaret, "this very day."

MARGARET and Gene Hilton were at tea, but they did not eat or drink. Hilton, his usually cheerful face gone stern, was glaring at the gray letter.

"It doesn't look like Aline's hand," he remarked, "but she'd disguise that, of course." He tore the sheet across, then tore it again. He crumpled the pieces savagely on the table beside his teacup.

"You're right," he told Margaret. "Only Aline would have the cause to make such wild threats—and such idiocy. Well, I'm going to take steps right now."

"What will you do?" asked Margaret.

"I'll talk to Aline." They rose from the table. "Is Truda gone from the office? Then go back and wait for me. I won't be long."

"Gene!" She put her right hand on his arm. Her left arm was hurting almost unbearably. "Do be careful."

"What about?" he demanded. "We're not in hiding any more, sweetheart. Aline knows about us, and her idea of reprisal—of spoiling our love story—is this fantastic voodooism." The waiter came with the check, and Hilton put a bill on the table. "Good-bye for the moment, Margaret."

They separated outside. She walked down the street to the office. He got into his car, touched the starter and shifted gears

purposefully, then sped away to the uptown apartment building where he lived.

He grated his key in the lock of his home apartment. Inside, the parlor was dim and spacious. His wife looked up from the divan where she sat painting her nails the color of stale blood. She was babyishly pretty, over-coiffured and over-dressed, with too much make-up on.

"Home so soon?" she smiled.

"Yes—for the last time." He strode in and towered above her. "I've found out what you're doing."

"What I'm doing?" Her plucked eyebrows lifted in mystified arches. "You sound mad, Gene."

"It's you who's mad—mad as a hatter." He pointed a forefinger, with the fierce triumph of an attorney who has confused a witness. "This witchcraft, Aline—this torturing of a wax doll to hurt Margaret——"

"Margaret?" she echoed, childishly. "Who's Margaret?"

"Don't be crafty, Aline," he stormed suddenly. "It's mighty unconvincing. You know who she is, you know what you're trying to do." His eyes blazed. "I don't fear such hocus-pocus in the least, and I never did. But I consider you a cruel, murderous enemy to a sweet and honest girl, exactly as though there were real power in the thing you're trying."

Aline rose to her feet. She was suddenly as dignified as such a woman could be.

"I've suspected that you had a sweetheart, Gene," she said, "and I knew that we wouldn't make a go of it much longer. But I haven't tried to do anything——"

"That's a lie," he cut her off savagely. "You know it, and I know it, and there's nothing more to be said or done."

He swung around and almost ran into the bedroom. Dragging a suitcase from the closet he began throwing clothes and toilet articles into it. His wife came to the threshold.

"You're leaving?" she asked stupidly.

"I am," he assured her, and snapped the case shut. Brushing past her, he walked to the front door, then paused with his hand on the knob. "Communicate with Davis at his law office," he told her. "He'll arrange about the money and property. And if you don't start divorce action, I will."

Aline was as pale as a corpse beneath her make-up. "You're mistaken about something, Gene," she said in a low, deadly tone. "Somebody else is doing whatever you accuse me of doing. Go ahead and leave. I knew you would, one of these days. And I hope that—that whatever you think will happen, does happen, and to both of you!"

He did not answer, but hurried out and slammed the door behind him. He, too, was pale, and trembling in every ounce of his substance. His hands were unsteady as he drove back to the office.

MMARGARET was sitting at her desk when he entered. She sprang up and ran to him, and they kissed, winning fresh calm and strength from the touch of each other.

"I wish we could go somewhere among friends," he murmured. "We need some understanding companionship. But who?"

"Maybe Miss Fitzner," she said slowly. "Gene, I hope you don't mind, but she knows about us, and about this wax-doll mystery, and she's so kind and understanding——"

He laughed suddenly. "Of course I don't mind," he cried. "Why, Truda's a peach, solid as a sod house and level-headed as a washstand!" His hand slipped under her elbow. "Let's go to her place and let her reason us out of this lousy mood."

They walked out together, and got into Hilton's car. "If Truda can calm us down," said Hilton, as he drew away from the curb, "I'll give her a raise in salary."

"I think she can," smiled Margaret. The ache was subdued in her left arm.

A little later she said, "Aren't you going a bit fast, Gene?"

"Not too fast," he replied easily. "Over here on the West End it's pretty open and trafficless. And the car only seems to be light and happy."

"You must be exceeding the speed limit," she persisted.

"Am I? No, you're only nervous. Look, I think that's Truda's place in the next block . . . hey! It's the steering-gear, gone wrong!"

He wrenched at the wheel. The car plunged forward suddenly. People on the sidewalks turned to stare and shout.

"Stop it!" screamed Margaret. "We'll be wrecked!"

"The brake!" Hilton was crying. "It won't work, either!"

IT WAS bitterly hot in the shade-drawn room of Truda Fitzner. Fire danced in the open grate, but no light seemed to come from those dark, thick flames. Truda Fitzner, sitting in a straight wooden chair, was muttering aloud.

"You won't get him, Margaret Terrill," she said softly, but with exultant assurance. "You won't win him out of my hands."

She had taken off her thick glasses, and her eyes shone like beads of amber, almost feline in their brilliance. One thin hand dangled something before her—a crude little wax image of a woman, carved from a candle, a loop of thread around the neck. It was partially collapsed and melted, as though it had hung in heat, and through one waxen arm was thrust a straight pin.

"You'll never know I did it," chanted Truda Fitzner. "You even confided in me—and I was able to make you my trusting friend, to put the blame on someone else. You're comforted now, Margaret Terrill, but you're going to die. You're as one al-

ready dead. And Gene—Gene, whom I love and have loved since the day I saw him—will turn to me!” Her voice trembled, but grew louder and suddenly shrill. “I know the spell that will bring him on his knees to me, as soon as you’re in the ground and forgotten.”

The image quivered, as though alive and terrified; but it must have been Truda Fitzner’s hand that trembled.

“In three days more—but why wait three days? Why not kill you now?”

Her other hand suddenly caught the puppet in a crushing grip. The wax collapsed and crumpled in her fingers. “All right, Margaret Terrill, Margaret Manstealer!” she cawed. “You die—now!”

The fragments she hurled into the fire. The flames glowed fatly around them, and Truda Fitzner shouted a peal of laughter—a peal suddenly dominated by a great, crashing explosion of sound from without.

The lean little woman drew herself tense in the chair. She gazed quickly around, as though expecting invasion and attack. Then she sprang up and scurried, almost like a mouse, to the front window. She pulled aside a corner of the blind.

A car had struck a lamp-post in front of the house, had turned over. People were crowding around it, prying into it. Two men tugged and heaved, then brought into view a female form. It sagged motionlessly in their arms.

Truda Fitzner emitted a little whinnying cry, something like a laugh.

“It’s you!” she mumbled through lips that seemed to swell and sweat with emotion. “You came here and died at my feet, Margaret Terrill! You’re dead, dead, and I killed you—oh!”

She fell silent, and swayed. Her eyes blurred, but still she could see that other figure that the rescuers were dragging from the wrecked car—could see and recognize. A man this time, slack and broken, his face and clothes almost gloriously bright with blood—Gene Hilton!

“But—but——”

She staggered back from the window. The curtain slipped down and blotted out the scene.

She spoke, as though to a companion who had erred.

“I didn’t mean for both to die!” she quavered. “*Not both!*”

