

THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

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pardon my

TERROR

IRVING BURSTINER

Remarkable, as any editor will tell you, is the way submitted stories often run in trends. One month it will be wife murders or ghost yarns; another, vampire doings. This past few weeks it has been practically nothing but "fiend tales." Of the many which flooded us, this Burstiner story and the Abbott one following it were chosen strictly on merit. But they serve to emphasize the vast differences writers can bring to the same theme. While in both cases the motivation is compelling—abortive and fiend-born fear—actually the two stories are as far apart as the poles in plot, treatment and setting.

Thus does talent ever rejuvenate the arts, perpetually lending fresh faces to the old, essential themes.

THE TALL, angular fellow at the table shivered as wisps of cold fog floated in through the restaurant's open front. He huddled deeper into the brown tweed jacket hanging sacklike over his gaunt frame. His pale gray eyes were fixed on the girl outside. She was a natural blonde, attractive and slim in a tailored mauve suit. The fellow in tweed saw her peel a bill from a thick roll of currency to pay Toni's outside man. He watched her put the roll back into her mauve shoulder bag.

He dropped his check and a dime

by the register. The coin rolled off the counter. Grunting with annoyance, the fat proprietor slid from his stool and stooped over to pick it up. The tall man shot a hand over the counter, palmed a pack of cigarettes, and left.

Outside, he approached Toni's boardwalk counter. "One 'burger, without," he wheezed. He drummed bony white fingers on the counter until the hamburger was shoved at him. "Getting chilly, isn't it?" he then mumbled to the girl beside him.

Her face flushed. She set down her

empty glass, tilted her chin higher.

"Come to the Island much?" he asked.

"No."

"By yourself?"

She hesitated. "Yes—I wanted to get away for a while."

He finished his hamburger. "So you came to Coney? Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Probably because I've been reading so much about this place lately."

"Oh." He smiled, but his eyes remained impersonal. "I guess you've been following those boardwalk murders. Strange, but business here is really booming with all that publicity!"

The girl laughed. "That's human nature for you. I guess there's a morbid streak in all of us."

"How about some company today?" he asked casually. "Wouldn't want you to miss anything while you're here."

She laughed. "And you're the official guide, I suppose. Well, lead on, MacDuff."

He shook his head. "No, not MacDuff. The name's Benson—Peter Benson."

"Hello, Peter! Mine's Rosalie."

The banner over the Wax Museum announced in scarlet letters: See our new display—*The Boardwalk Murders*. Benson and the girl followed the crowd inside. In semi-darkness, they shuffled past display after macabre display, pausing momentarily before each one. When they came to the last setting, Rosalie's fingernails dug into Benson's arm.

"Ooooh! The boardwalk murders!" she whispered hoarsely.

Benson's eyes, which had been on her mauve bag, shot to the display. A dim bulb bathed the cubicle in a ghastly green glow that heightened the corpse-like effect of the two wax figures it contained.

One figure—tall, faceless, draped in black velvet—stood poised on tiptoes behind a bench. In its claw of a hand it clutched an oversized hypodermic which it was about to plunge into the second mannikin—the figure of a red-haired woman.

Benson looked at the girl. She was staring fixedly at the display, her bosom rising and falling rapidly. Her thin lips, recast in purple by the dim glow, were slightly parted.

Benson's hand crept to her purse. His long, usually nimble fingers were trembling. For a moment they fumbled unsuccessfully with the catch. Then Rosalie sighed, and he withdrew his hand quickly.

"Please take me out of here," she asked huskily. "It's too morbid."

It was after nine when they left the parachute jump. Their merriment had begun to dissipate in the thick fog, and they strolled back along the boardwalk in silence.

"Lovely night for murder," Benson remarked abruptly.

The girl laughed. "Brrr! How your thoughts do wander, Peter!" she jested. "Anyway, it's been swell—at least for me. And for you, too."

"Never had a better time." He hesitated, then added, "Care to look over our big ocean?" He steered her

to a bench. He felt slightly chilled.

The lights along the boardwalk were ghostly spheres of yellow-orange suspended in fog. The amusement park noises seemed miles away. Only the crashing surf could be heard.

"No wonder you spoke of murder," the girl said. She set her shoulder-bag down between them. "On a night like this, all sorts of things pass through your mind." She stared moodily out over the ocean. "I wonder if there will be another one tonight."

"A murder?" Benson shrugged. "Could be," he said. "Three Saturday nights in a row—three young women . . ."

"Funny. I could be a fourth, couldn't I?" she whispered.

Benson smiled. "Not with me here." Then—"Say, you don't think I'm the boardwalk killer, do you?"

"Of course not, silly!" She looked pensive. "Still, who knows who the killer is? The only thing anyone knows is that he stabs his victims with some kind of poisoned needle."

"Come now, Rosalie," said Benson, laughing. "I've no designs on you."

"Didn't think you had, Peter."

"Besides," he added, "the three victims had red hair. You're blonde."

"A fine detective you'd make, Peter," she scoffed. "Couldn't that be sheer coincidence?"

"I doubt it," he said. "The murderer is probably someone with a grudge against red-heads. Maybe he was jilted by a girl with red hair—"

She looked disdainfully at him. "Oh, pooh! For all anybody knows

the murderer might not even be a man."

"But the papers say . . ."

"Oh, the newspapers! Sensationalism, pure and simple! Don't forget that poison is a woman's weapon."

"But the victims were all women!"

"And just what does that prove?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose."

It grew even more chilly, and they huddled closer. Rosalie stared broodingly out over the black water. Benson coughed. The girl didn't move. She seemed oblivious to everything but the wild ocean. Humming softly to cover his movements, he succeeded in opening the catch of her purse. Anxiously, his fingers explored the interior until their tips touched the roll of money. Elated, he thrust down his hand to grasp it. He gave a cry of pain. Whipping his hand from the purse, he ogled the bleeding puncture in his palm.

"Peter!" Rosalie's voice had a sharp edge. "What were you doing in my bag?"

Benson's breath came faster. A warm flush drove the chill of the fog from his body. He stood up, gasping for breath. His head spun.

"You! You're the—the . . ." He choked and fell back on the bench. There was a roaring in his ears that grew louder with every moment. As if from a great distance, he thought he heard the girl's hysterical laughter. . . .

The police office was small, poorly lit, and reeked of tobacco. The detective struck another match and sucked

at his pipe. He was sympathetic.

"Look, Miss Farris," he told the blonde girl. "I don't want you blaming yourself for what's happened. Benson was a petty thief. We've had him here in the station house a dozen times, mostly for lifting money from girls like yourself. Claimed he couldn't hold a job on account of his heart. He did have a bad heart, you know . . . never was drafted because of it."

The detective's face became grim. He picked up the hatpin on his desk. "Strange . . . a little thing like this, plus some imagination—and poof!"

He dragged at his pipe. "Too bad Benson didn't see the evening papers," he added. "We found the boardwalk killer this morning. He was an interne over at the Island Hospital. Went crazy when this red-headed nurse eloped with one of the doctors."