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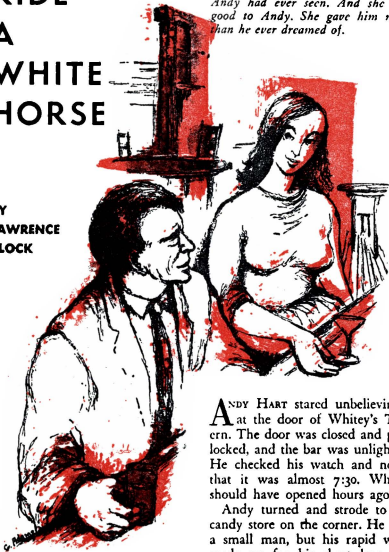
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RIDE A WHITE HORSE

BY
LAWRENCE
BLOCK



The girl had the most beautiful body Andy had ever seen. And she was good to Andy. She gave him more than he ever dreamed of.

ANDY HART stared unbelievably at the door of Whitey's Tavern. The door was closed and padlocked, and the bar was unlighted. He checked his watch and noted that it was almost 7:30. Whitey should have opened hours ago.

Andy turned and strode to the candy store on the corner. He was a small man, but his rapid walk made up for his short legs. He walked as he did everything else—precisely, with no waste motion.

"Hey," he asked the man behind the counter, "how come Whitey didn't open up yet?"

"He's closed down for the next two weeks. Got caught serving minors." Andy thanked him and left.

The news was disturbing. It didn't annoy him tremendously, but it did break up a long-established routine. Ever since he had started working as a book-keeper at Murrow's Department Store, eleven years ago, he had been in the habit of eating a solitary meal at the Five Star Diner and drinking a few beers at Whitey's. He had just finished dinner, and now he found himself with no place to go.

Standing on the streetcorner, staring at the front of the empty bar, he had a vague sensation that he was missing something. Here he was, 37 years old, and there was nowhere in the city for him to go. He had no family, and his only friends were his drinking companions at Whitey's. He could go back to his room, but there he would have only the four walls for company. He momentarily envied the married men who worked in his department. It might be nice to have a wife and kids to come home to.

The thought passed as quickly as it had come. After all, there was no reason to be broken-hearted over a closed bar. There was undoubtedly another bar in the neighborhood where the beer was as good

and the people as friendly. He glanced around, and noticed a bar directly across the street.

There was a large neon sign over the doorway, with the outline of a horse and the words "White Horse Cafe." The door was a bright red, and music from a juke box wafted through it.

Andy hesitated. There was a bar, all right. He had passed it many times in the past, but had never thought to enter it. It seemed a little flashy to him a little bit too high-tone. But tonight, he decided, he'd see how it was on the inside. A change of pace wouldn't hurt him at all.

He crossed the street and entered. A half-dozen men were seated at the bar, and several couples occupied booths on the side. The juke box was playing a song which he had heard before, but he couldn't remember the title. He walked to the rear, hung his coat on a peg, and took the end seat.

He ordered a beer and sat nursing it. He studied his reflection in the mirror. His looks were average—neatly-combed brown hair, brown eyes, and a prominent chin. His smile was pleasant, but he didn't smile too often. He was, all in all, a pretty average guy.

The time passed slowly. Andy finished his beer and ordered another, and then another. Some of the people left the bar and others entered, but he saw no one he recognized. He was beginning to re-

gret coming to the White Horse. The beer was fine and the music was nice enough, but he had no more company than the four walls of his room provided.

Then, while he was drinking his fourth beer, the door opened and she entered. He saw her at once. He had glanced to the door everytime it opened in the hope of seeing an acquaintance, and each time he had turned back to his glass. This time, however, he couldn't turn his eyes away from her.

She was tall, very pretty, with long blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. She took off her coat and hung it up and Andy could see that she was more than just pretty. Her skirt clung to her hips and hugged her thighs, and her breasts threatened to break through the tight film of her sweater. Andy couldn't stop looking at her. He knew that he was staring, but he couldn't help himself. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

He was surprised when she walked over and sat down on the stool beside him. Actually, it was natural enough. There were only two other empty stools at the bar. But to Andy it seemed like the rarest of coincidences.

He was glad that she was sitting next to him but at the same time he was embarrassed. He felt a desire for her which was stronger than anything he had experienced in years. He had neither needed nor wanted a woman in a long

while, but now he felt an instantaneous physical craving for her.

The girl ordered a sidecar and sipped at it, and Andy forced himself to drink his beer. He wanted desperately to start a conversation with her but couldn't think of a way to begin. He waited, listening to the music, until she finished her drink.

"Miss," he said nervously, "could I buy you another?"

She turned and looked at him for a long moment, and he felt himself flush. "Yes," she said at last. "Thank you."

He ordered a sidecar for her and another beer for himself, and they began talking. He was amazed to discover that he was able to talk freely and easily to her, and that she in turn seemed interested in everything that he had to say. He had wanted to talk to anybody in the world, and talking to her was almost the answer to a prayer.

He told her everything about himself—his name, his job, and the sort of life he led. She didn't have much to say about herself. Her name was Sara Malone and she was 24, but that was all she volunteered.

From that point on the time flew by, and Andy was thankful that Whitey's had been closed. He wanted the evening to pass more slowly. He was happy, and he dreaded returning to his empty bed in his tiny room.

Finally she glanced at her watch,

then smiled up at him. "I have to go," she said. "It's getting late."

"One more drink," he suggested.

"No," she said. "We've had enough. Let's go."

He helped her on with her coat and walked outside with her. He stood there on the sidewalk, awkwardly. "Sara," he said, "when can I see you again?"

She smiled, and it was a warm, easy smile. "You could come home with me. If you'd like to."

They walked quickly, with the blackness of the night around them like a blanket. And when they reached her apartment they kissed and they held each other. He took her, and lying there in her arms, with her firm breasts warm against his chest, he felt complete and whole again.

When he woke up the next morning she was already awake, and he smelled food cooking. He washed and dressed, then went into the kitchen for breakfast. It was a fine breakfast, and so very much better than toast and coffee at the Five Star Diner. He had to keep looking across the table at her to make sure that he was really awake and that she was really there. He couldn't believe what had happened, but the memory of last night was too vivid to leave room for doubt.

They didn't talk much during breakfast. He couldn't talk, afraid that he might do something to spoil it all. When he finished his

second cup of coffee, he stood up regretfully.

"I have to go now," he said. "I have to be at work by 9."

"When will you be home? I'll have dinner ready."

"Right after work," he said. "About 5:15 or so. Don't you have to work?" He remembered that she hadn't mentioned it last night.

"No. I have enough money for a while, so I don't work." She smiled. "Would you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"I checked a package at the Public Library yesterday and forgot to pick it up on the way out. You work across the street from the library, don't you?"

He nodded.

"Here," she said. She took a ticket from her purse and handed it to him. "Will you get it for me?"

"Sure." He put the ticket in his pocket and slipped on his overcoat. He walked slowly to the door, and when he turned she was in his arms suddenly, kissing him. "I love you," he said. He walked lightly down the street, and she closed the door softly behind him.

His work went easily and quickly that day. He was anxious for five o'clock to roll around, but the memory of last night and the promise of the coming one made the time pass. At noon he picked up her parcel at the library, a small box wrapped in brown wrapping paper.

He brought it home to her that night, and she put it on the top shelf in the closet.

Sara cooked him a good dinner, and he helped her with the dishes. They sat in the living-room, listening to records, until it was time for bed. Then they made love, and he knew that he could never live without her again, that he could never sleep without her beside him.

Days passed and the nights. Andy had never been so happy and contented in his life. He settled into a routine once again, but it was a groove rather than a rut. His life before had lacked only a woman like Sara to make it complete, and now nothing was missing.

From time to time he thought of asking her to marry him. But, for some reason, he was afraid to. Everything was so perfect that he was hesitant to chance changing the arrangement. He let things remain as they were.

He knew very little about her, really. She seemed reluctant to talk about her past life. She didn't say how she was able to afford the luxurious apartment they lived in, or what she did during the days while he was at the office. He didn't press her. Nothing mattered, just so long as she was there for him when he arrived home.

She had him pick up packages frequently—about twice a week or so. They were always the same type—small boxes wrapped in brown wrapping paper. Sometimes they

were in a locker at the bus depot, sometimes at the library, sometimes in a safety deposit box at the bank. He wondered idly what the boxes contained, but she wouldn't tell him, and he suspected it was some sort of medicine which she didn't want to mention. The question nagged at him, though. It bothered her persistently. He didn't care about her earlier life, for that was beyond her now. But he wanted to know everything about her as she was now, wanted to share all of her life.

Inevitably, one evening he brought home a package and she was not home. He sat waiting for her, the package in his lap. He stared at the package, turning it over and over in his hands, as though he were trying to burn a hole in the wrapping paper with his eyes. Five, ten minutes passed, and he couldn't stand it any longer. He untied the string, removed the wrapping paper, and opened the box.

The box was filled with a white powder. He looked at it, smelled it, and tasted a flake of it. It was nothing that he could recognize. He was wondering what the devil it could be when he heard a key in the lock, and he began guiltily to re-wrap the package. Sara entered the room while he was still fussing with the string.

"Andy!" she cried. "What are you doing?"

"The package came undone," he

said lamely. "I was re-wrapping it for you."

She looked at him accusingly. "Did you see what was inside?"

"Yes," he said. "What was it, Sara?"

She took the box from him. "Never mind," she said. "Just some powder."

But this time he would not be put off. He had to know. "What is it? I'll find out anyway."

She let out a sigh. "I guess you had to find out. I . . ."

He waited.

"It's . . . horse, Andy."

"What!"

"Horse. Heroin."

"I know what 'horse' is," he said. "But what are you doing with it? You're not an addict, are you?" He couldn't believe what she had told him, but he knew from the expression on her face that she was telling the truth. Still, it was hard to believe, and he did not want to believe it.

"No," she said. "I'm not an addict. I'm what they call a pusher, Andy. I sell the heroin to addicts."

For a moment he could not speak. Finally he managed to say, "Why?"

She hesitated. "Money," she said. "I make lots of money. And it costs money for an apartment like this, and for good clothes and steak for dinner."

"You'll stop. I'm making enough money for us both, and you'll stop before you get caught. We'll get a

smaller place somewhere and . . ."

"No," she cut in. "I won't get caught, Andy. And I want to keep on like this. I like steak, Andy. I like this place."

He stared at her. His mouth dropped open and he shook his head from side to side. "No! Sara, I won't let you!"

"I'm going to."

"I . . . I can't pick up any more packages for you."

She smiled. "Yes, you can. And you will, because you need me." She threw back her shoulders so that her breasts strained against the front of her dress. "We need each other, don't we?"

He stood up, and the package fell to the floor. He reached for her and lifted her in his arms, carrying her to the bedroom. And they came together fitfully and fiercely, as though the force of their bodies could erase everything else.

Later, when he was lying still beside her, she said, "In a way, it's better that you know. I'll need help with the business, and you can quit your job and help me. I guess it's better this way."

At that moment Andy began to distrust her. His love slowly dissolved eventually to be replaced by an ever-increasing hatred.

The following morning he quit his job. It had never been an especially exciting job, but he had liked it. He liked the office and the people he worked with. He hadn't wanted to quit.

But he could never give up Sara. He couldn't live without her, couldn't sleep again in an empty bed. She had become a habit, a part of his routine, and he had to have her no matter what.

The days that followed were hell for him. Sara taught him the business step-by-step, from pick-ups and deliveries to actual sales. He learned how to contact an addict and take his money from him. He watched feverish men cook the heroin on a spoon and shoot it into a vein. And he watched Sara refuse a shot to an addict without money, and watched the man beg and plead while his hands twitched and his knees shook.

He thought he would lose his mind. He argued with Sara, telling her what a rotten thing she was doing, but he couldn't sway her. He saw her for what she was—cold, mercenary, and ruthless. And in her arms at night, he couldn't believe that she was the same woman.

Bit by bit, piece by piece, he learned the business. It became a routine after awhile, but it was a routine which he hated. He settled into it, but he had trouble sleeping nights. Time after time he tried to leave her, but it was impossible.

One night he was sitting in the livingroom, trying to read a magazine. She came over and sat beside him taking the magazine from his hands. She handed him a brown cigarette, loosely-packed. "Here,"

she said, smiling. "Smoke this."
"What! This is marijuana, isn't it?"

"That's right. Smoke it."

"Are you crazy?"

She smiled slowly and ran her hand up and down his thigh. "Don't be silly. I've been smoking pot for a long time now, and it doesn't hurt you. It makes you feel real fine. Try it?"

He drew away from her, his eyes searching hers. "I don't want to become an addict, Sara. I've seen the poor fish suffer, and I don't want it."

She laughed. "It's not habit forming. I've been smoking since I was 17, and I just have a joint whenever I want one. You want to stay clear of horse, but this won't hurt you."

He drew a deep breath. "No," he said, firmly. "I don't want it."

Her hand worked on his thigh, and with her other hand she toyed with the buttons on her blouse. "You want me, though," she said, huskily. "Don't you, Andy?"

She put the cigarette between his lips and lit it, and made him smoke it quickly, drawing the pungent, acrid smoke deep into his lungs. At first he was dizzy; then his stomach churned and he was sick. But she only made him smoke another, and this time the smoke took hold of him and held him, and the room grew large and small and large again, and he made love to her with a thousand voices shriek-

ing warnings inside his brain.

And so marijuana, too, became a part of Andy's routine. He smoked as an alcoholic drank, losing his worries in the smoke. It was more a habit with him than it was with Sara. He grew to depend upon it, mentally if not physically.

And he learned things, too. He learned to smoke the joint down to a "roach," or butt, in order to get the maximum charge from it. He learned to hold as much smoke as he could in his lungs for as long as possible, in order to intensify the effect. He learned to smoke two or three joints in a row.

At the same time, he learned his business from start to finish. He bargained with contacts and squeezed the last cent from customers, burying his conscience completely. He gained an understanding of the operations of the narcotics racket, from the Big Man to the small-time pusher. Everything he did became part of him, and part of his routine.

He sat alone in the apartment one day, just after selling a cap of heroine to an addict. He opened a glassine envelope and idly poked the powder with the point of a pencil.

Horse, he thought. White Horse, the same as the bar where they had met. Valuable stuff. People killed for it, went through hell for it.

He sat looking at it for a long time, and then he folded a slip of

paper and poured some of the powder on it. He raised the paper to his nose, closed his eyes, and sniffed deeply. He drew the flakes through his nostrils and into his lungs, and the heroin hit home.

It was a new sensation, a much bigger charge than marijuana had given him. He liked it. He threw away the slip of paper, put the heroin away, and leaned back to relax. Everything was pink and fuzzy, soft and smooth and cool.

He started sniffing heroin daily, and soon he noticed that he was physically aware of it when it was time for a fix. He began increasing the dosage, as his body began to demand more of the drug. And he didn't tell Sara anything about it.

His hate for her had grown, but it too became habitual. He learned to live with it. However, when they had a disagreement over the business, he realized that she was standing in the way.

Andy wanted to expand operations. He saw that, with a little effort and a little muscle, he and Sara could move up a notch and have a crowd of pushers under them. He explained it to her, step by step. It couldn't miss.

"No," she said, flatly. "We're doing fine right where we are. We make good money and nobody will want us out of the way."

"We could make more money," he said. "Lots more. The cops wouldn't be able to touch us."

"It's a risk."

He shrugged. "Everything's a risk. Walking across the street is a risk, but you can't stay on your own block forever. It's a chance we've got to take."

She refused, and once again she used her body as a bargaining point. At last he gave in, as always, but the hate was beginning to boil in him.

A few days later an addict came whining for a shot. Andy saw the way he trembled and twitched, but the spectacle didn't bother him any longer. He had seen it time and time again, until it was just a part of the day's work.

"Sorry, junkie," he said. "Come back when you raise the dough."

The man begged, and Andy started to push him out the door when a thought came to him. He opened the door and let the man in.

"C'mere," he said. "You got a spike?"

The addict nodded dumbly and pulled a hypodermic needle from his pocket. Andy took it from him and inspected it, turning it over and over in his hand. "Okay," he said at length. "A shot for your spike."

The man sighed with relief, then demanded, "How am I gonna take the shot without a spike?"

"Take it first; then get out."

Andy followed the addict into the bathroom and watched him heat the powder on a spoon. Then he filled the syringe and shot it into the vein in his arm. It hit imme-

diately, and he relaxed.

"Thanks," he said. He handed the syringe to Andy. "Thanks."

"Get out." The addict left, and Andy closed the door after him.

He washed the syringe in hot water, then put some heroin on a spoon. He deftly filled the syringe and gave himself a shot in the fleshy part of his arm.

It was far more satisfying than sniffing the powder. It was stronger and faster. He felt good.

As the heroin became more and more a part of his life, he switched to the mainline, shooting it directly into the vein. It was necessary to him now, and he itched to build up his trade until he controlled narcotics in the town. He knew he could handle it. Already, he had virtually replaced Sara. She was the messenger now, while he handled the important end. But she still called the shots, for she still held the trump card. And no matter how he argued, she would simply rub herself up against him and kiss him, and the argument would be finished. So he could do nothing but wait.

And, at last, he was one day ready.

He took a long, sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and walked slowly to the bedroom, where she lay reading. She looked up from the magazine and smiled at him, stretching languorously.

"Hi," she said. "What's up?"

He returned the smile, keeping

the knife behind his back. "I have news for you," he said. "We're expanding, like I suggested. No more small-time stuff, Sara."

She sighed. "Not again, Andy. I told you before . . ."

"This time *I'm* telling you."

"Oh," she said, amused. "Do you think you can get along without me?"

"I know I can."

"Really?" She threw back the bedcovers and smiled up at him. "You need me, Andy."

He forced himself to look at her. He ran his eyes over the firm breasts, the soft curves of her hips. He looked at her carefully, waiting for the familiar stir within him. It didn't come.

"I don't need you," he said, slowly. "Look."

He held out his right hand, the hand that held the knife. He unbuttoned the sleeve and rolled it down slowly, showing her the marks of the needle. "See? I'm a junkie, Sara. I only care about one thing, baby, and it isn't you. You don't show me a thing."

But her eyes were not on the marks on his arm. They were on

the knife in his hand, and they were wide with fear.

"I don't need you at all," he went on. "I don't need liquor, I don't need sex, I don't need you. You're just dead wood, Sara."

She rose from the bed and moved toward him. "Andy," she cooed. "Andy, honey." Her whole body seemed to reach out for him, hungrily.

He shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "It just won't work any more. I don't care about it. Just the horse is all that matters."

She looked into his eyes, and they were flat and uncaring. "Wait," she said. "We'll play it your way, Andy. We'll expand, like you said. Anything you say."

"You don't understand. I don't need you."

"Please!" she moaned. "Please!" "Sorry. It's time for my shot." And he lowered the knife.

He moved toward her and she tried to back away, but he kept coming, the knife pointed at her. "No!" she shrieked. And she started to say something else, but before she could get the words out the knife was in her heart.

