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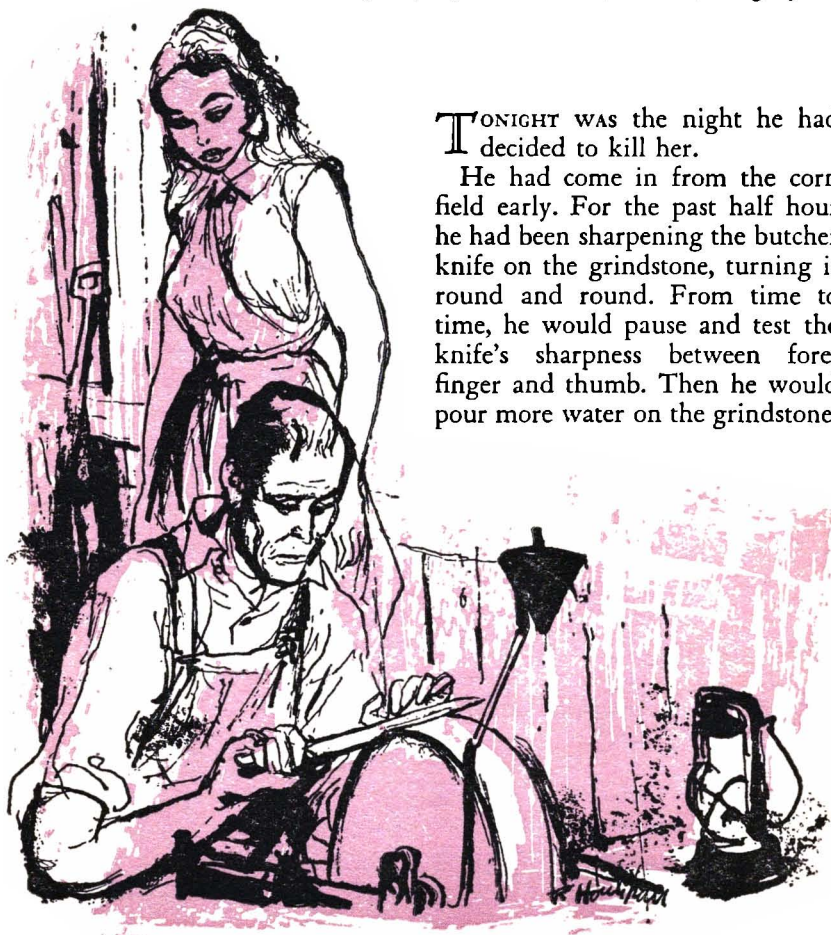
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# The Earrings

BY KERMIT SHELBY

*Always dangling, they were, like a promise.  
Luke's eyes followed them, and her, hungrily . . .*



TONIGHT WAS the night he had decided to kill her.

He had come in from the corn field early. For the past half hour he had been sharpening the butcher knife on the grindstone, turning it round and round. From time to time, he would pause and test the knife's sharpness between fore-finger and thumb. Then he would pour more water on the grindstone.

When she came to call him to supper, the knife was ground down to a thin shining sliver. The setting sun fell across it. The fire-red glints blinded her. The same fire-red gleamed in the roots of her gold-red hair. It looked like banked fire hiding there as she tossed her head, jangling the crescent-moon gold earrings in her pierced ears, making the little gold star beneath it bobble.

"What you doing with my good butcher knife?" she asked, looking at the knife uneasily.

He turned the grindstone another round. He puckered his lips, shifting the chew of tobacco, and let go with a mouth full of tobacco juice at a young bird dog sniffing at his heels. He hit it squarely in the eye. The pup tucked its tail between its legs and ran down the path, yelping, toward the shanty a short distance down the sandy road.

"That'll learn you." He laughed with satisfaction.

She gave him a studied look of veiled hatred. "It don't know you give it away," she said indignantly. "It was born here. Lived here—till you shot its poor ma for having pups."

"I ort to killed it along with the rest of the litter," he grunted. "Crazy fool dogs multiplying like rabbits. I'm gonna tell Dave if he don't want that pup killed he'd better tie him up." He wiped the knife on his overall leg. Her eyes went back to it.

"I said what you doing with my good butcher knife?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. Then he said, "Sharpenin' it."

The evening meal that night was more silent than usual. Eating preoccupied him fully. He ate with his legs wide apart, with both elbows on the table, as if bracing himself. He wolfed his food with gustatory liquid sounds.

She stared at her plate, eating scarcely at all.

"What's a matter?" he demanded. "You been hoeing in your garden too much?"

"I'm not hungry." She fiddled with the coffee pot.

"Maybe you in a family way?" He grinned, slyly hopeful.

"You're bragging," she said. Her lips curled.

They had been married not quite six months. It hadn't worked out. Both of them knew this now.

He arose, wiping away butter-milk with the back of his hand, and went toward the nail which held his old felt hat. To her look of inquiry, he said, "Got to fix that gray mare's harness."

She tossed her head in an uncaring manner.

He came toward her. "Them earrings," he said.

"What about my earrings?" She lifted one hand, protectively, as if to stay his approach.

He stood leering down at her, but did not touch her. "Always

danglin’,” he said. “Like a promise.” He walked toward the barn, calling over his shoulder, “Like a promise with nothin’ back of it.” He laughed cynically.

She turned her back swiftly. The five-pointed star swung resentfully on its tiny gold chain. In the lamp-light her golden-red hair gleamed like banked fire. She cleared the table.

Sunset smeared the sky with evening colors, lighting up the butcher knife as Luke reached the grindstone. The knife was really sharp enough now. He was stalling for time.

His eyes followed hungrily as she came from the house, ignoring him. She picked up a hoe from the fence and walked leisurely toward the vegetable garden at the edge of the corn field, perhaps a hundred yards away. The expectancy in her movements was a challenge and a torment to him because he knew now the expectancy was for somebody else.

The pup had come back. When Luke saw it sneaking past the corner of the barn, he threw rocks at it till it turned tail and ran off into a thicket of high jimson weeds. “Maybe I ort to slit its throat with this butcher knife,” he thought. But it was too hot to chase a pup. And Luke had other things on his mind.

He stood in the shadow of the barn, out of sight, watching the blue dress as she chopped rhythmically in the vegetable garden.

Once she glanced back toward the house. Luke flattened himself against the side of the barn. She looked toward the shanty where the pup lived, across the corn field. Her attitude was one of listening.

When a bob-white sound came from the corn field, she dropped the hoe and ran toward it. Luke’s fingers gripped tighter on the knife. He waited until the long dark blades of the corn hid the blue dot of her dress in the twilight, before he started walking toward the vegetable garden. He did not hurry. His step was slow, deliberate, like a blind man walking. He had forgotten the pup entirely. It came out of the jimson weeds and followed, slinkingly. As Luke walked, the butcher knife caught the last fading red of the sunset. Its glitter fascinated the pup.

Even after Luke reached the black-green opening of the corn row where she had disappeared, he waited longer. Dark was deepening the dusk as his shoulders parted the corn blades. They closed behind him like black water. The pup watched cautiously.

There was movement in the corn field. The tassled tops showered pollen like a rainstorm. And then it was as if a whirlwind struck. Violent agitation seized the corn stalks. Some of them went down, leaving a hole in the darkness. Now only a few tassels quivered. The last bits of pollen drifted, soft as snowflakes. The corn field was

quiet. No breeze moved the long blades. They stood as if painted.

Then the corn blades parted.

Luke dragged their bodies on the old quilt. The load was heavy, but by knotting the corners of the quilt he was able to drag it to a cleared space.

He went to work methodically with the shovel. It made gritty sounds as he dug in the sand. He dumped the two bodies into the hole together with his blood-soaked clothes and shoes and the knife and quilt. He covered them over, leaving the surface flat. The leftover dirt he scattered carefully.

The place looked like he wanted it to look, like any man's place looked who had been cleaning up his fence rows.

Luke walked to the quiet house, naked, and washed all the blood off. As he moved about the kitchen he could hear the clock tick noisily. Without bothering to turn off the light, he climbed into bed.

Then he saw her dresses, hanging there in a row at the foot of the bed. Empty, they looked.

When he closed his eyes, he could still hear her voice, pleading there in the corn field, before he'd slashed at her with the knife, "Luke, don't! For God's sake—don't . . . !"

But they needed killing, he told himself. They'd been asking for it. It started that day he gave Dave Lynn the pup. When Dave took the pup from her, and their hands

touched, that's when he had lost her. When Dave stood there looking down at her earrings bobbling, and that sort of look passed between them.

"You might as well take it," she had said. "Luke's going to shoot the rest of the litter. Luke can't stand dogs."

Luke knew no one would ever look for their bodies when he told the neighbors how Dave Lynn had run off with his wife.

After about two weeks he could get Mamie Stover to come keep house for him. Mamie had big legs. She wasn't stand-offish. Mamie had liked him a lot before he got married to Red.

Outside all was quiet. A late breeze had sprung up. The rising moon covered everything with its greenish silver.

In the green-black opening between the corn rows, where the corn had been trampled down, the corn blades rustled softly in the night wind. Now and then a blade would brush harshly against its neighbor. When it did, it made a dry rasping sound, like the rattle of dry paper.

Across the sandy road in the shade of the shanty, in the scratched-out hole of the mulberry tree, the pup lay sleeping fitfully. It had gone home after all because that was where its feeding pan was. And because Dave's wife was the one who always fed it.

Inside the shanty, Dave's wife

stirred restlessly, wondering what could be keeping Dave? Two hours now since he had gone to borrow the monkey wrench from a neighbor.

On the back doorstep, where she would see it the moment she opened the door, lay something the pup had dragged in from the corn field. Beside the old bone it had dragged in yesterday, near the old

shoe it had found last week, lay this new object.

The object was a human ear, a feminine ear. Fastened in its pierced lobe was a gold half-crescent earring, a five-pointed star dangling from its tiny chain. And in the tufted skin above it, like a badge of identity, flauntingly-gleamed a dozen or more long strands of red-gold hair.

