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MICHAEL ST. JOHN, *Publisher*GERALD ADAMS, *Art Director*JOHN UNDERWOOD, *Editor*JOE SHORE, *Advertising Rep.*J. PROSKE, *Associate Editor*

MANHUNT VOLUME 8, NUMBER 1, February, 1960. Single copies 35 cents. Subscriptions, \$4.00 for 12 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$5.00 (in U. S. Funds) for 12 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at Concord, N. H. and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1959 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U. S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use, without express permission, of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

Raymond was ruthlessly handsome and this girl was so breathlessly innocent. It was a cinch.

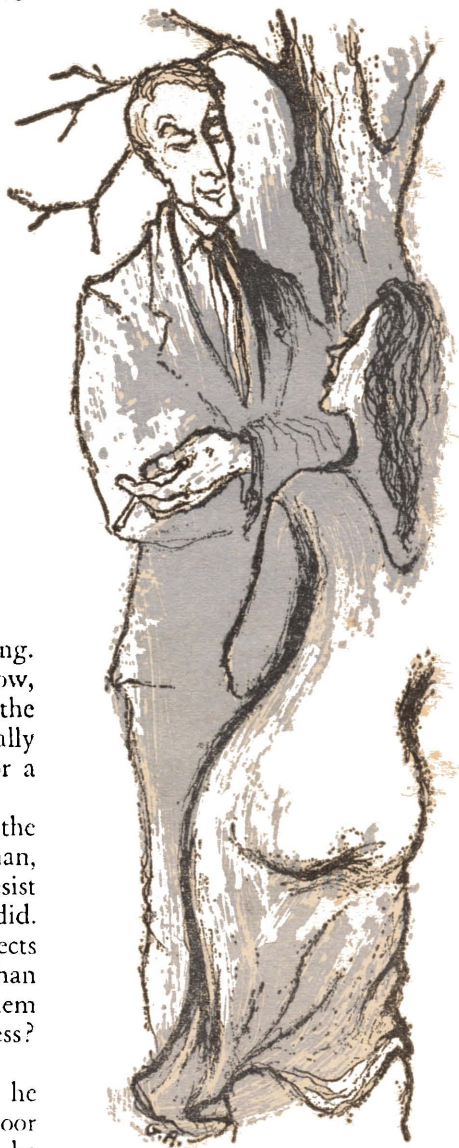
THE LOST KEY

BY
HAL
ELLSON

IT WAS a fine autumn evening. Raymond sat at the window, watching the last red flares of the sun that still tinted the sky. Finally he got up and decided to go for a walk.

But, first, he stopped before the mirror. He was a handsome man, but vain. No woman could resist him, he believed; few actually did. In consequence, they were objects of contempt, victims rather than recipients of love. He used them only to cast them aside. Ruthless? He wouldn't have denied it.

Finished looking at himself, he crossed the room, opened the door and locked it behind him. When he



stepped outside, it was a little darker, slightly cooler. He was in no hurry. The whole night lay ahead of him. He walked leisurely down the quiet street to the avenue. Here, the lights glowed brightly, but it was early yet and he didn't expect much. A little later it would be easy, simply a matter of keeping his eyes open.

And using the proper technique, he thought, lighting a cigarette.

Several blocks away, he stepped into an ice cream parlour. The seats fronting the counter were empty; the younger crowd that ordinarily haunted the booths in the rear hadn't arrived. He sat down and ordered a plate of ice cream.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and a young woman entered. Her heels clicked on the tiled floor with deliberate emphasis. Raymond looked up. At the same moment she met his eyes. She was young, attractive, blonde. Apparently she found him interesting, for he noted her quick look of appraisal. She took a stool beside him, lit a cigarette, greeted the man behind the counter, ordered a cup of coffee, removed her hat and looked at herself in the mirror behind the counter.

Her coffee came, but she preferred her cigarette and conversation. She'd had a hard day at the office, but she laughed about that now, and exchanged quips with the soda-jerk, which Raymond rightly guessed were meant for his own

ears. Several times he saw her regard him in the mirror.

Definitely on the make, he thought, and all right.

Interested, he waited, and finally she finished her coffee, lit another cigarette and began to search for her matches. His lighter was ready. She thanked him for the light, obviously pleased by this attention. After that it was simple enough to engage her in conversation.

When they left the place, they went together. He was going her way, of course, and she didn't mind him walking with her. In fact, she was pleased, and already he knew this would end in the usual way. It would be simple, too, because she wasn't particularly bright. Her conversation revealed that. She was innocent and wide-eyed, taken by his good-looks and attention.

He kept up a steady patter of talk. His line was good. He knew exactly what to say, what she liked to hear. She took it all in.

Still, when he suggested walking her home, she protested. It wasn't at all necessary she told him, but she allowed him to accompany her. She stopped on the corner of the block where she lived and looked up at him.

"Something wrong?" he said.

"Well, good night."

"Don't be silly."

"Really. I have to leave you here."

"But you said I could walk you home, and you don't live on the corner."

Uneasy, she hesitated. "I know," she said awkwardly. "I'm afraid I made a mistake."

"Oh, come on. You're no high school girl, and things just don't end on corners."

She looked at him steadily now and said, "That's just where this is ending. Good night."

She turned to go, but he grasped her wrist.

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"It's early yet. Couldn't we just go somewhere and have a bite or drink?"

She smiled at his persistence. He remained serious, still holding her wrist. "Now I know a quiet little place just out of the neighborhood."

"Where you've taken the others?"

He managed a look of pain. "True," he admitted, "but only because I'd never met you."

She smiled again, pleased by his flattery. Nevertheless, she couldn't resist another dig. "Isn't that what you tell all of them?" she asked.

This time he only squeezed her wrist and said, "Must I hold you here all night?"

It was, as he said, a quiet little place and very dark. One could easily pass it by. There were booths to seclude the diners, candles flickering on the table, quiet waiters.

"Like it?" he asked.

She smiled across the candle-

light, lowered the glass from her lips and nodded.

"I knew you would."

"It's so private. Almost like being alone," she whispered and her eyes sparkled.

"You know, you're very lovely," he whispered back and reached for her hand.

She allowed him to hold it and nodded her head slowly, pouting just a bit.

"You shouldn't say such things, and I shouldn't be here," she said.

"Sorry you came?"

"In a way."

He smiled. Their waiter passed. "John," he said quietly.

The waiter wheeled about, caught the signal, took their glasses and had them back in a twinkling.

"I really must hurry," she said.

"But it's still early."

"That has nothing to do with it."

"All right, if you insist." He released her hand, placed a bill on the table and escorted her to the street.

"We'll say Good night here," she said.

"Oh, no. I'm holding you to your word and walking you to your door."

"But don't you understand? I really am married."

He smiled. "The more you say it, the less I believe it."

"But I am," she insisted.

"You couldn't possibly be. You

haven't that awful harried, married look."

"You're sweet, but absolutely impossible," she told him and couldn't help smiling.

"And you're just sweet."

"Oh, god, if my husband ever heard you."

"Oh, yes, please tell me about him," he said in mock seriousness.

"Well . . . he's exceedingly jealous."

"He should be of you."

"And he has a gun."

"To protect you from me of course."

"Not exactly. He belongs to a gun club."

"You're such a lovely little liar," he said. "Come on. We're going home."

It was still early when they reached her house and they stopped under a tree where he tried to take her hand.

"Please don't," she said. "The neighbors are awful rubbernecks."

It was not a warning, but a veiled invitation. "Then why stand out here?" he said, and she pretended to be shocked, but her eyes were smiling.

"Can't I come in?" he went on. You couldn't possibly send me away now."

"Oh, but I can't" she replied "We haven't even been introduced. Anyhow, don't you think this too sudden?"

It was the old formula which all of them used. She still wanted to dally a bit, make a game of it, but he knew she was as anxious as he was. He had to be on his toes now, insistent, demanding. It was what they liked. He continued to play his part, she hers. He persisted, she remained stubborn. After all, she'd never invited any one in on such short notice before, she said. It wasn't proper. She'd have to know him better. All that and more, but he felt her weakening, and for every objection he had an answer.

At last she agreed to let him in. "But just for a while," she said.

"I understand," he said assuringly. "I don't intend to eat you—yet."

She smiled, sent him a provocative look.

"Well, are you ready?" he said.

She nodded, then suddenly stamped her foot, "Goodness, I've forgotten my key."

He was taken back, but this had happened before. She was playing cute, trying to make it difficult for him. He was equal to the moment.

"If you haven't your key, how are you getting in?" he calmly asked.

"I don't really know," she replied.

"Live on the ground floor?"

She nodded in answer.

"In that case, with your permission, of course, I'd be glad to go through the window."

"Oh, would you?" She sounded relieved. "But go through the back.

I wouldn't want the neighbors seeing you crawling through a front window. God knows what they'd think."

He had to smile because he'd trapped her. She had the key, of course, but was still playing cute. Let her, he thought, but he had her now. She couldn't back out.

"Give me a minute," he said, leaving her standing there. And he walked through the driveway to the back of the house. Once there, he selected an easy window, removed the screen and lifted himself to the sill.

Some seconds later the young woman on the sidewalk heard a shot and a cry of terror. Then another shot. A moment of silence followed. Then a light went on in front of the house. Neighbors came running. There was a great commotion under the tree where the young woman stood. She didn't know what had happened, no one did, nor did anyone venture into the dark driveway.

As the hubbub grew and others came running to see what had happened, the front door opened and a man appeared. The young woman and the crowd moved toward him, asking questions, but he refused to answer.

"I'm waiting for the police," he said, and they soon arrived in a patrol car that screamed around the corner with siren wide open.

They cleared the crowd, mounted the stoop, and the man said, "I'm the one who called you. If you'll look in the back yard. Someone tried to climb through the window while I was asleep and I shot him. I think he's dead."

Later, when the police had taken care of everything and left, the young woman put her arms around her husband. He kissed her and she looked up at him, eyes wide-open and innocent.

"But I didn't know you were home," she said.

He laughed. "I cut out early from work. Lucky I did, too, or you might have walked right in on that fellow. No telling what would have happened."

"Don't even say that. I don't want to think of it," she said, shuddering in his arms.

"Well, it's done with. You needn't be afraid." He held her away from him now. Then said, "How about some beer? I need something after that."

"Well, if you like."

Quickly, he put on his shirt, started for the door, then turned and patted his pockets. "Have you the key?" he asked. "I left mine in my other trousers."

In answer, she unsnapped her bag, found the key and tossed it across the room to him.

