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THE MAN WITH THE FINE MIND

By KRIS NEVILLE

Recently newspapers have told of an unusual number of murders without motive. A teen-age girl is shot to death by a total stranger. A young man runs amok, butchering a dozen or more innocent bystanders. An expectant mother is blasted down on a busy street by a man she's never seen before. The police come and take the killer away and the men in the white coats rap his knees with rubber hammers and mutter something about "schizophrenia" and lock him up in a padded cell, and that's the last you hear of it.

*Kris Neville, whose story, *The Opal Necklace*, in the first issue of FANTASTIC, drew a great deal of praise, again takes you through the mystic mazes of the human mind, showing with amazing insight what goes on in the mind of a mad-man moments before his last hold on reason disappears.*

THIS being only the first drink, he was still tense and ill at ease, and the room and the people were still sharply in focus. He had no desire to scream at the discreet group of husbands surrounding Malvernien — an odd name for a woman, he thought detachedly — and call them the idiots they were. He had no desire to collar the first person that passed and cry:

"Why don't you let me alone!" He had no intention of cussing out the hostess for inviting him. Things like that had not yet occurred to him.

The colors were unusually bright, and his ears picked up scraps of conversation even as he listened to Malvernien.

One would imagine, he thought, if one did not know her, that she

was not flirting with the husbands, each in turn. That the smile was distant and impersonal and the attentive way she listened was merely polite.

Malvernien, talking now, had dreamed, she said, that it was necessary to prove she owned a butcher knife before she was permitted to buy groceries in the super market.

Looking at her sprawled over the purple chair, her white legs draped over the arm rest, some of the lower thigh of the right one, fringed by the green lace of her slip, showing seductively, he thought of frog legs on a wine-stained platter garnished with parsley. And thinking of frog legs, he thought especially of the way they kicked and quivered in the frying pan and seemed to quiver in the throat as they were being swallowed.

He rolled the warming brandy in the glass. He wanted to interrupt her monologue and explain the meaning of the dream, so that she might better understand herself and so that the company would realize the depth of his own insight and turn to listen to him as they were not listening to her.

It would, he thought, be pleasant to snub them then: to fade away, withdraw, ignore them, leave them to their own drab worlds, forever excluded from his own radiance.

He formed the sentences in his

mind: It is because you are not married (he fancied himself saying as he leaned toward her) that you have such a dream. You see, the knife is the dream symbol for the male. . . .

At least, he thought, in her case. In such matters it is essential to consider the background of the subject. The knife, to someone else, might indicate a deep-seated complex, might represent a menace to his own masculinity. . . .

Without (he continued his fancied conversation) the husband which the knife represents, which I will be, you are unable to obtain the security of a home, represented by your act of purchasing for that home. You think the key to a man's love is through his stomach, you think if you could cook like mother. . . .

But he said nothing. The company still listened to Malvernien. He squirmed on the sofa. He wanted to draw them away from her and leave her in a silence of inattention alien to her nature, from which she would burst, venting her wrath and affection upon him, her tormentor.

You came with me, Malvernien, he thought. You should pay some attention to the man you will marry. I'm very smart, I have a fine mind, everyone knows that. I can talk, too.

But he was too sober yet. Later, he would become almost garru-

lous, but by then he would have lost the lucidity of the present moment. Things would begin to blur, and ideas so easily felt would be impossible to put into words; the words would come out all wrong.

He fell to reflecting how fortunate some people were — those who, in their supreme ignorance or peace of mind, were able to recount their dreams to others. There are some people, he thought, who never tell their dreams, who insist they never dream at all, thinking it better to be thought a liar than a monster.

I must not throw glasses tonight, he thought; or cry; nor must I curse again. The hangover will be sufficient punishment.

He chuckled to himself and noticed that one of the husbands turned to look at him suspiciously.

What an idiot! he thought.

They're all neurotic, of course, he thought. Only they have no insight.

Now you take me, he thought, I read quite a bit of psychology.

He drained his brandy glass and felt the fumes go to his brain.

Idly, he speculated that it would be nice to kill Malvern; it would be most satisfying.

The husbands had drifted away, and Malvern was alone. "Come over here and talk to me," she invited him.

Of course, there was nothing to do but obey her. But as a small

gesture of defiance, he crossed the room first and poured himself another drink.

She has the marvelous ability to make a man feel impotent, he thought. She does this in defense of the hungry emotion she rouses; she has a father fixation complex, a strong one.

She's a clever devil, he thought. The rest of them think she's in love with me; but I'm not fooled. They never see the subtle rejections.

He came and sat down at her feet and looked up into her face.

They were alone in the study. Suddenly, for a moment, he felt very strange and divorced from himself.

"Don't get drunk," she said.

She knows the way to get me drunk is to tell me not to, he thought. She wants me drunk, because when I'm drunk I babble at her endlessly like a child crying in the night to his mother.

I have insight, he thought.

He drank the brandy. "I'll stay sober tonight," he said, already feeling himself a little drunk.

"I wish you didn't have to," she said.

"What did you say?" he said, shaking his head.

"I wish you'd told me, then, before we came. You won't mind if I stay, will you?"

"What are you talking about?" he said angrily.

"Well, you'd better hurry," she said. "I'll tell the hostess that you had to run. Good-bye, dear. Be sure to phone me in the morning. Here, I'll go with you to get your coat."

"What are you talking about? I'm not going anywhere!"

Malvernien stood up and stepped over him. She walked toward the door, talking to him, her eyes on a spot slightly above her left shoulder, where his face might be, were he not sitting at the foot of the chair she had just left.

After a moment, he heard people in the den bidding him good-bye.

Sitting quietly on the floor, he thought of how beautiful the red lampshade was. They've gone crazy, he told himself, I'm sitting here on the floor looking at a beautiful red lampshade and they think they're talking to me in the front room.

"Good-bye," they said. There was laughter, a door opening and closing.

For a moment he could not force his mind to concentrate. I have a strong mind, he told himself. The tests at college proved that. I must keep a grip on it now.

And then he nodded his head and laughed deep in his throat.

It's Malvernien's doing, he thought. She arranged it like this; she must have talked to them and made them agree in advance. It's

supposed to make me stop drinking.

Oh, it's very clever, he thought. She's a perfect little actress. You might have thought I really was walking at her side.

He stood up and poured himself a drink. He drank it and poured himself another one.

The party seemed to be moving into the living room. He could hear them leaving the den. He stood alone in the quiet study, smiling at the way parties migrate from room to room. Slowly the colors were beginning to lose some of their brilliance. Only the reds — the reds of the wallpaper, the lampshade, the book jackets, the pillows — were still sharp and clean. The distant conversation was a wordless hum punctuated now and again by laughter. Someone began to play the piano.

Drink in hand, he went to the door of the den. He stood there for a moment. As he started to cross the floor, a couple came in from the living room. They stepped around him as if they were aware of his presence, as if they felt he were there, but they did not look at him.

He stared after them. They stopped to embrace and clung tightly to each other.

They're trying to make it convincing, he thought. To hell with them. He finished the drink quickly and set the glass on an end table.

Smiling sourly, he went into the living room. No one turned to look at him. The colors were dull. The lights were fading. He lit a cigarette. Faces blurred and ran together, and his hands were heavy.

The man at the piano was wearing a red tie.

"Okay," he said. "The joke's over. I'm wise to it."

No one seemed to hear him.

The hostess, smiling sociably, a watered drink in her hand, was listening to Malvern apologize for her fiancé.

He looked at the ring on her finger and for a moment could not remember giving it to her. I must remember to get it back, he thought. I made a horrible mistake. I must do it when I've been drinking, because otherwise she might talk me out of taking it back — no, it's the other way around, he thought: I must do it when I'm sober.

I don't think it's funny, he thought. She shouldn't have arranged this little game. That's a good excuse to get the ring back.

He shook his head and went to the man at the piano. He bent over and said, "Come on, let's cut out this damned nonsense! I know you can see me! Come on, now!"

The man did not turn or answer.

"God damn it!" he said, reaching out for the man's arm. "Enough is enough, do you hear

me!" He took the arm, but his grasp was suddenly nerveless, and he could not even shake the arm. His hand lay upon it, feather light and powerless.

He stepped back, and one of the slightly drunk guests detoured around him without looking directly at him.

"He's getting to be a terrible drunk," the hostess said. "I hate to ask him to parties any more. No telling what he's liable to do. Over at the Johnsons' last week, he —"

He strained to listen, realizing that she was talking about him.

"I know," Malvern said. "It's only been the last couple of months. He's been worried lately. But I can handle him when he gets drunk. He's like a baby."

He moved toward her. "God damn you," he said.

"He's had so much on his mind. His mother dying — he blames himself for not being there — he'll get over it. I'll stick by him."

"He frightens me," the hostess said. "The look in his eyes, sometimes, when he's been drinking."

"He's fine when he's sober," Malvern said.

"Yes, when he's sober."

"He does those things he does when he gets drunk because he feels guilty — he wants us to punish him, to ostracize him, I think — I don't know. He needs sympathy."

Sly, very sly, he thought. Malvern knows I'm still here, she knows I'm listening.

I'll ignore her, he thought, that will be most effective.

He went to the bar and poured himself a drink. He drank it. He waved the bottle at a thin, mousey-looking girl. "You see this!" he cried. "See this, damn you!"

She stared through him, a blank expression on her face. She sipped her drink.

He put the bottle down. His hands were shaking. He closed his eyes tightly and shook his head. His hands began to feel lighter, floating, powerful.

He held his hands above his head. "Listen!" he cried. The piano player changed melodies. "I know what you sons of bitches are trying to do!" he cried.

Over in the corner, three people began laughing at a joke.

"Listen!" he pleaded. "Please listen to me."

"Would you hand me a cigarette?" the mousey little girl asked a man in a T-shirt.

He stood still, panting. There was perspiration in his palms and on his forehead. He hunched forward. "I'll show you!" he snarled. "I'll show you! I'll get drunk anyway, damn you!"

He fumbled for the bottle. He drank out of it. The room swam before his eyes when he set it

down. He lurched back against a table.

He wrinkled his forehead, focusing his eyes. Slowly the room was getting fuzzy at the edges. Things moved like disembodied spirits in the outer darkness.

I'll show them, he thought. I'll make them notice me.

He staggered across the room. He propped himself up against the doorway. He stumbled down a dark hallway.

He rested against the stove in the kitchen. Moonlight came into the room from the east window and fell across the linoleum; everything was drab and colorless.

He fumbled at the handle of the butcher knife in the knife rack.

He carried the butcher knife into the living room. His feet were getting heavy now, but his hands were light.

He weaved across the room to the hostess. He waved the butcher knife in front of her face. She did not notice it.

"I could cut your throat!" he said.

The hostess moved leisurely toward a tight group of men who were examining one of the books on the lamp table.

He got a bottle and went to the corner and sat down and began to cry. After three drinks, his mind began to clear. The room was still blurred, but if he closed his eyes and leaned back, he could think

in a quite satisfactory manner.

They don't see me, he thought.

It's Malvern's fault, he thought.

They don't see me!

I have a very powerful mind, he thought. I could walk through walls if I only had the energy when I got drunk enough.

I'm asleep, I'm dreaming. Alcohol induces dreams. People move very slowly to the fox trot music from a piano with a red tie.

I have a powerful desire for the negation of my masculinity, he thought, pleased with the neatness of the sentence.

He repeated it aloud.

"You see," he explained, although no one listened to him, "I created an hallucination with my mind that walked out of the room, that you all said good-bye to,

thinking all the time it was me."

He sat in the corner for what seemed a long time, petting the butcher knife, his eyes closed. Finally he heard Malvern say, "I really have to go."

Her voice cut clearly across the rest of the conversation.

He opened his eyes and frowned. Maybe I've been listening for that, he thought. It would be nice to kill her, he thought. I've thought about it for a long time — for months.

Knowledge is power, he thought. I'm reasoning very clearly. The room is full of fog, but I can see what I want to see. I can see Malvern. She is wearing a red tie. I understand myself.

I would have married her eventually, he thought. She would have got me drunk and trapped me. She has rejected me, but she would marry me for spite.

Mother, he thought, wouldn't like it, not at all. Poor mother fell and broke both legs, which interfered with her heart and killed her. I shouldn't have left the toy on the steps, but I'll make it up to her.

He smiled. My, I'm drunk, he thought, to be able to think so clearly. He sat in the corner of the room, petting his butcher knife.

I am so insignificant, he thought, that they can't even see me. When I am done, I will leave, and they

will never even notice me at all.

He laughed aloud. I'm too smart for it, he thought. "I'm too smart for it," he said. "It's lying down there at the sleeping level of my mind, and I know it's there, and I can use it."

"I really must," Malvern said. "No, thank you, Jack. After all, I'm engaged. I'll just call a cab."

He crept to his feet, clutching the butcher knife. "Wait!" he cried. "Malvern, wait!" He brandished the butcher knife. "I want to kill you! Don't go away!"

He staggered after her, laughing.

She went into the bedroom after her coat, and he followed her, lurching and stumbling.

"I'm going to kill you, do you hear!"

No one turned to watch.

When he finished what he had to do, he swayed unsteadily.

I have done a bad thing, he thought. I will probably regret it when I sober up in the morning. I'll have a horrible hangover.

He picked up his coat from the bed. It had been lying beside Malvern's. He put it on. I will leave now, and they won't even see me, he thought, chuckling drunkenly.

He put the butcher knife in his pocket.

At the doorway he stopped, trying to focus his eyes.

The hostess turned around, smiling. He could scarcely see her face. The smile merged and flowed away. "What are you doing back?" she said into an echo chamber. "I thought you left —"

She stopped talking.

Little by little the room fell silent as the guests all turned, horrified, to stare at him.

He looked down at his brightly colored hands and began to whimper.