

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1949

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WEIRD TALES CLUB

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Masher

BY EWEN WHYTE

MISS TIMOTHY, the town's old maid, cackled deliciously and rolled her eyes. "He's a masher, that's what he is! A masher!"

Her crone's face, wrinkled and splotched as an apple left in the sun, took on an unholy light.

"If there's one thing I *hate*," she went on, "it's mashers!"

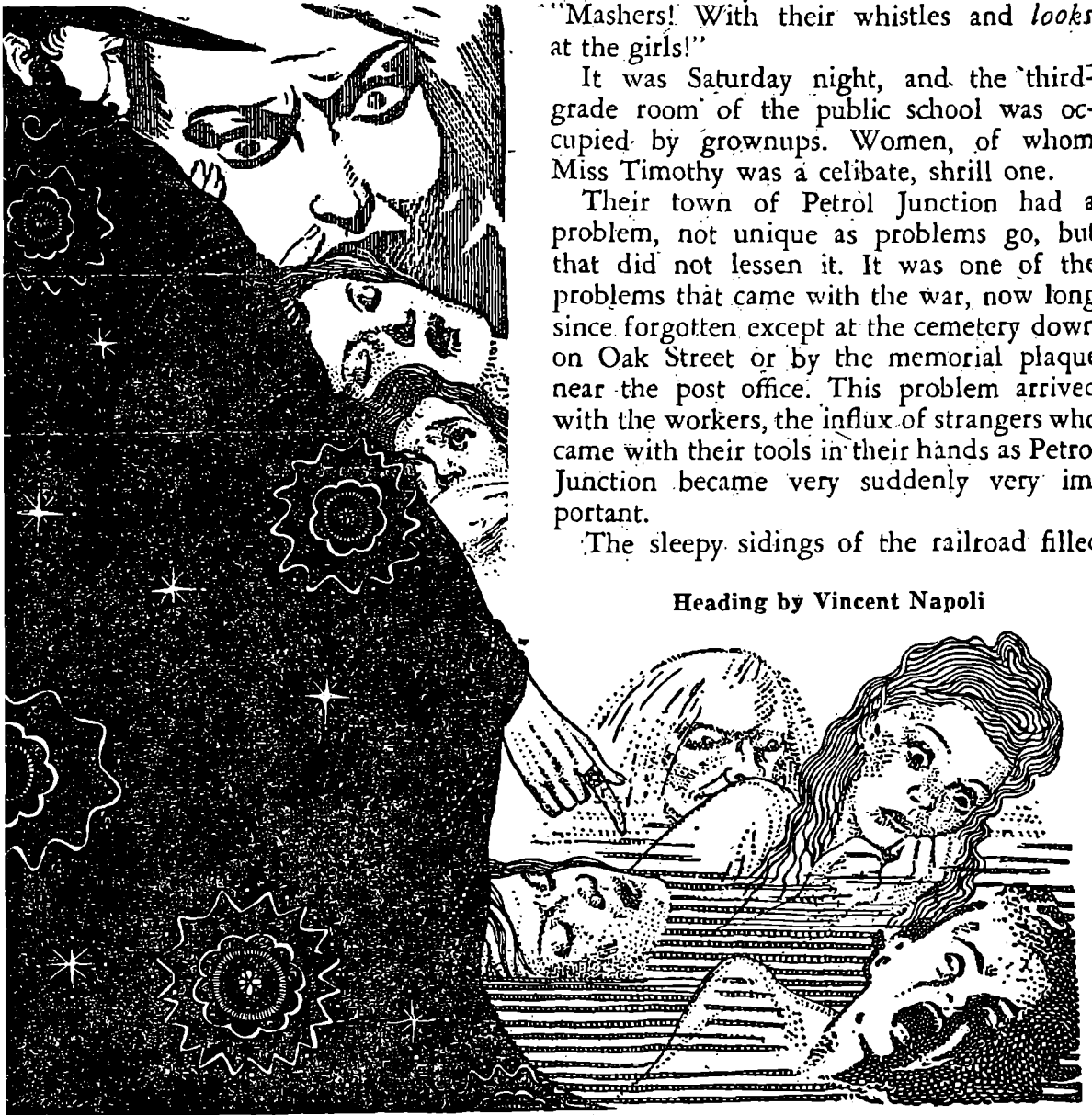
Miss Timothy shuddered thin shoulders. "Mashers! With their whistles and *looks* at the girls!"

It was Saturday night, and the third-grade room of the public school was occupied by grownups. Women, of whom Miss Timothy was a celibate, shrill one.

Their town of Petrol Junction had a problem, not unique as problems go, but that did not lessen it. It was one of the problems that came with the war, now long since forgotten except at the cemetery down on Oak Street or by the memorial plaque near the post office. This problem arrived with the workers, the influx of strangers who came with their tools in their hands as Petrol Junction became very suddenly very important.

The sleepy sidings of the railroad filled

Heading by Vincent Napoli



A strange plague, this; only young and beautiful girls fell victim!

and the once rust-streaked rails shone with use. The home people of the town were lost on its lengthening streets, lost in its enlarging stores, lost in that tidal wave of men and women, but mostly men, who came to work the factories and build new ones.

And that was when it started, those words said by mothers and sisters and girlfriends and fathers: "A girl just isn't safe around anymore!"

They meant, of course, the roustabouts and the factory workers and the oil men and the railroad men and the construction men. All of them whistling and catcalling, looking at a girl and undressing her with their eyes. It's a peculiar talent men have, that kind of look when they look at the short ones and the tall ones, the fat ones and the skinny ones; the ones who say they don't like it but really do, and the ones who just don't like it; most of them girls who came home to families who clucked and shook their heads and talked about the good days before the war and how nice Petrol Junction had been then.

There were the usual appendages of an expanding war town—the shanty villages, the red-light districts, the drunken brawls, and the small police force taxed beyond its strength.

IT WAS the first post-war Christmas when it happened. The town was still full to brimming, but it was Christmas and people wore the bright look of the season as though they were playing so hard at believing in Santa Claus that now they did, along with their hand-tugging youngsters. The stores were filled with people, and the people's pockets were filled with money, and if the spirit of the town that had once been the small village of Petrol Junction groaned at its added weight, nobody could hear above the bustling of the three-days-before-Christmas crowds.

The car was gray, a gray sedan, noted irrelevantly among the other traffic, but it pulled out of line, careened into the wrong lane, sputtered up Main Street and slammed to a stop in front of the grimy, two-story brick square that said, "Police." The driver got out and went inside. He came back in an instant with the Chief of

Police, a perpetually worried-looking man in his fifties, frightened at what this town had done around him. The driver threw open the back door of the sedan, and the police officer looked in.

Some school children dressed in red cowls with silver-tasseled ropes around their middles, were singing, "Good King Wencelaus" in front of Gay's Dry Goods Store. A passer-by stopped, and the two looking into the sedan became three, and then there were other people. Another policeman came out of headquarters. After a while, somebody appeared with two long poles with loose canvas between. A discerning voice from the crowd whispered over a pyramid of gift packages:

"It's a stretcher! Somebody must be hurt!"

From Gay's Dry Goods Store a block or so away, you could see that somebody, or something, was being carried into the Police Station. That was all. The children by then were singing, "Silent Night."

The paper the next day emblazoned the news: "*Police Baffled by Brutal Murder.*" The town was outraged. The victim was young and pretty Jane Abbott by name, a Sunday school teacher.

What with the season of the year and a certain official reluctance, the word "brutal" was used in connection with the killing without any enlargement of detail. But Sergeant Moffett who'd been on duty that night when what was left of Jane Abbott had been brought from the sedan, told his wife, after cautioning her to secrecy: "Terrible, it was! Somebody must've beat her arm and shoulder and head until they was pulp! You couldn't believe it about the head without seein' it! Not round like a human, but almost like a pancake. . . ."

Mrs. Moffett, nodding her head to the secrecy pledge, thrilled to the story and felt the ice at her spine even as she imagined how Mrs. Cooper, her next-door neighbor, would receive this inside news. That's the way it got around.

Jane Abbott

IT WAS a lonely two blocks after one left Railroad Avenue. There was a street-lamp at the corner, but that was all. Jane

hurried, and as she did, the leather briefcase initialed "J. A." that she held in her right hand, bumped against her leg. It was Tuesday, and at Sunday school two days ago the children had written brief compositions. She'd been busy all day yesterday helping Mother sew the new dining-room curtains. She'd yet to correct the children's papers. Jane had picked them up tonight to bring them home with her.

There was snow in the air, she thought, and the last lighted house that she passed had a red paper bell hanging over the door. There was a wreath in the window. Jane walked on, her thoughts on the approaching Christmas.

And then from behind her and away to the side, as though someone stood off the sidewalk in the shadows, she heard a whistle. It was the kind girls hear many times in their lives—insinuating, appreciative and insulting, all at once. It was low and meaningful.

Jane's steps quickened and she did not look around. But through her mind flashed the stories that filled the ice cream parlors, and the hairdressers, the post office and the sewing circles. These fresh, fresh men! A masher, that's what he was!

Her heels clicked on the pavement, and then unmistakably, there came steps behind her. A girl like Jane Abbott does not turn, for that is encouragement. It is inviting. She was only a few short minutes from home, and these . . . these creatures were discouraged if you just minded your own business and kept going. All he would ever know of her, she thought with a righteous, smug satisfaction, would be the back of her trim, silk-clad ankles, her neat-fitting polo coat, and the brown curls that spilled out from under her tiny hat onto the tan collar.

The whistle came again. It was more urgent, and nearer. Jane was a religious girl, and this made her feel some sympathy for the misguided masher who followed her. She supposed he wasn't to blame. There were men, many men, drifters, shiftless no-goods, who went from place to place seeking to lure women with looks and whistles.

The steps behind her were very close now. My, but this one was persistent! She supposed. . . Oh, how had it gone the time

she'd been up at the State Capital, a year ago when the two fresh young men had come up and said, "Pardon us, Miss, but don't we know you?" Some tired, stupid line like that

Her mouth was dry from walking so fast, and she swallowed to stop the small acorn of fear that rolled around her throat. She heard his breathing, the masher's. And then surprisingly, shockingly—for this she did not expect and could not believe—she felt his hands as they seized her. They were brutally strong. Inhuman hands!

She felt herself lifted into the air by his strength. She felt herself lost in a mighty embrace, and there was no air left in her with which to scream. She realized with a remote part of her consciousness that she was struggling furiously. And then a cruel arm around her throat tightened suddenly, and she blacked out.

When Jane Abbott regained her senses, they told her it was very dark, else she had lost her sight. And they told her she was lying on ground that was both hard and rough. In her was very little strength, and the weakness and restriction she felt might have been from within or without. For a time she did not know. Then she heard something, and she was taken with puzzling what it was. There was light then, of a kind, and more noise.

In those last seconds as bits of realization came to her, Jane Abbott prayed with all the fervent strength of her twenty-four years, for this was an armageddon of almost biblical starkness. Thankfully, before it reached her in its full might and terror, she swam back, down, deep into unconsciousness again.

Ellen Lockwood

ELLEN LOCKWOOD hated this last hour before closing. She came on at one p.m., but the hours went fast, all save the last one from nine to ten. Business at the diner then slowed down, and even Old Man Jessup made less trips out to the gas pump to fill up the late cars. There was a trucker eating crullers and drinking coffee at the end of the counter. She made a swipe

with her cloth at the spigot of the coffee urn. The trucker finished. He put down a nickel and a dime for his supper, a quarter for her.

"So long, Beautiful! See ya!"

She gave him her smile. These truckers! Every time they tipped you good.

The wire screen door banged. It was getting warmer, and Old Man Jessup had the screens on already. He never heard anything, half deaf the way he was, but the banging annoyed her. She looked at her reflection in a half-sized mirror back of the counter. Beautiful, the trucker'd said. Well, she wasn't bad. A calendar saying it was April cut off her hair. She ducked and shook her head. Naturally blonde, too!

The battered chimes clock over the sign, "You Keep Coming—We'll Keep Smiling!" said three to ten. She started putting things away. Then she saw the headlights of a car out near the gas pump. Must be a stranger, she thought. No honking for Pop Jessup. And everyone around these parts knew he was a deafie; they really leaned on the horn when they wanted service.

Ellen shrugged out of her apron, took her low heels off and put on her high-heeled pumps. She smoothed her dress and gave her hair a final pat and took her purse out of the little locker in back.

The three minutes were gone, and it was ten. She turned the lights out and left the diner. Maybe Pop was over there by that car. She'd walk over and see. Sometimes if it were someone from around here, she got a lift home, which Old Man Jessup didn't mind; otherwise, he had to get his car out which wheezed and groaned almost as much as he did.

The lights blinded her, and she went around to the side. Was that shadow in the back Pop pumping gas or just one of the pumps? The door opened on her side, and she heard a little whistle. The way a man makes through his teeth. An arm went around her waist, strong and *man!*

"Puleeze!" she protested.

And then a hand went over her mouth, and she felt herself being drawn into the car. She fought as a girl who accepts rides from strange men on occasion but who expects certain rules to be followed will fight

when they are violated. The rough stuff was out. She bit, and the hand went away but the arm around her body tightened. She yelled at him and reached for the door to fight her way out.

"You fresh masher! Who do ya think you're playin' your rough tricks on!"

But the hand came back again, this time at her throat before she had time to let out more than one good yelp—and Pop Jessup was deaf anyway.

The car rolled to life, pulled away from the gas pump past the now dark diner, and headed along the road leading out of town.

SOMEWHERE on her trip to a black nowhere, Ellen fought herself sick and faint. She'd done her share of wrestling with men, but this one was a hellion. His one arm, hooked around her neck despite all her efforts, made her head spin, and the knot of sickness at her stomach grew. She finally slumped weakly. At another time she might have divined the direction they were taking, but now with her head spinning so and the car taking so many turns, she gripped her hands tightly and tried to hold onto what was left of consciousness.

After an immeasurable time, the car stopped. She was pulled roughly from it. In the moment before her assailant switched off his headlights, she saw something that struck a reminiscent chord. She knew where she was. And she also glanced at him, and that drove the other recognition from her mind. What she saw of him was darkened by the blackness of the night, hooded by shadow, and of his features and face, there was nothing that stood out as much as one single impression. He was looking forward to something. In a maniacal, beyond-normal way, there was sport to be had, and she was it!

Ellen turned then, and with a last galvanic spurt of strength from her young body, broke her freedom, but he was on her almost instantly, and his fist clubbing at the side of her head drove her into the ground and a blackness deeper than the night.

When she came to, it was with a feeling of weight upon her legs. Her hand felt

something in reaching out that defied identification. She knew she must get up. She knew that whatever might have happened, there would be worse to come, and for the moment she was alone with the whisper of the wind in the spring night. She wondered if Pop Jessup had heard her scream, or finding her gone, would he do anything about it or just surmise she'd gone off with some "fella?"

It was characteristic that Ellen accepted her aloneness. She rose up slowly on elbows that ached. There was a sound from in the night that gave her at first a great and leaping hope, but then she felt the poor, weak imprisonment of herself, and waves of sickness suddenly flooded her whole being. She became conscious of her swollen body and touched it irrelevantly with fingers that shook.

Even then it was hard to correlate what was going on.

Was there a light in the blackness, or was he coming again? There was a sound with the other noise, and the last one, she realized, was from her own lips. Her face was wet with stinging tears and she cried out to the darkness that was now not quite so dark. There could be nothing but the sky and the ground to know as Ellen Lockwood *knew*. And if the scream that she screamed then would not continue for all eternity in that dark place, expending its terror against all of time as she *sensed* and *saw* and *guessed* and then *felt* . . .

Hester Greene

HESTER GREENE did a shiver, a shimmy, and a bump-and-grind routine at the Patio, a place a couple of miles outside of Petrol Junction where Western Highway runs into a new fork made by Route 73 under construction.

She was fighting a losing battle with the thirties. On her side was makeup and foundation garments and clothes cut to minimize her broadening figure and more time spent in the selection and application of these. Against her was the inexorable advance of the years. Hester Greene had never known the real bright lights, but she had played some of the better back alleys and by-

ways from New York to L. A. The war had sent her into a USO group where the always-appreciative soldier audiences bolstered her morale.

She tried to tell herself that the Patio was a "comer" and that Petrol Junction, even if not known too well outside of the state, was a place not to be sneezed at. Why, even Al, the owner himself, talked about what that new Route 73 would do for business when it was completed.

Sometimes the routine got her. She sang "Slow Boat to China" and then circulated among the tables where the customers were guzzling beer or cheap liquor. Then she'd sing an oldie like "Some of These Days" and circulate some more, and then one like "Here I'll Stay" which was a laugh, and ain't it the truth, she'd say to herself on bitter nights.

Her arrangement called for a room in the cottage in back, and in the beginning Al, the owner, had come in and pawed at her half-heartedly, but he was an easy one to discourage and, God, how she hated men who were easy to discourage!

The faces at the tables came and went. Jobbers, salesmen, truckers, an occasional couple or fellow and girl out here after the moving-picture show. She got so she could scream. It was a year and a half now she'd been at the Patio, and she thought, Hell, I ought to move! But fear tugged at her and tied her down. She didn't need to spend much here.

Where else would she go, and fifty bucks a week was fifty bucks.

In the early summer she took to walking down the road evenings before she had to be back. There was a path that paralleled Western Highway. It was lonely out here except for the strip of concrete. The path curved away through bushes and trees, declined into a valley where construction machines stood soundless at the head of advancing new Route 73 pushing its grading and road-bed laying and concrete-mixing activities before it. She liked it out here at this time of night. The country was wild except for this scar that men had made with their machines. Soon the focus of the road work would push beyond her and be lost in the hills and valleys to the west.

But now the derricks and the steamshovels and the fill trucks and the steamrollers stood as though forever signalled into this twilight retreat by each five o'clock.

This particular evening the inexpensive watch on Hester's wrist showed it was time to turn back, and she had taken the first step homeward towards the Patio three-quarters of a mile distant when she heard the whistle. It came out of the woods, and it was the complimentary kind a man pays to a woman. Hester Greene quickened her steps. None of these bush-wacky old codgers for me! she thought. Even in her time here at the Patio—yes, she often thought of it like a jail sentence—she'd heard of some of the old recluses that lived in these hills. Loneliness kind of touches you, doesn't it? You ought to know, Hester, she'd say to the mirror at night.

The whistle came again and the crackle of twigs and underbrush. And then, so abruptly that she had either miscalculated his distance from her when she first heard the sound, or his speed in approaching her, he stood before the girl. Hester started to speak, and that message to the brain was caught and passed by the inclination and desperate need to scream. His powerful blow caught her squarely on the mouth and drove the scream from her as it bruised and tore her lips against her own teeth and felled her to the ground. She lay unable to move, tasting the tartness of her own blood and watching fascinatedly as the floating apparition of a gigantic club-like foot drove at her head.

HESTER GREENE came to in a tomb. The sides and top were made of impenetrable blackness. Through the hurt and sickness of her bruises, she had enough awareness left to worry petulantly about what time it was. Her wrist watch was intact. It had not been robbery, then. She was annoyed that the tiny dial was not radium-lit. But it must be well past the time for her appearances at the Patio. What would Al think, and was he looking for her?

She thought then, of the stories told in Petrol Junction. Things happened to girls here. Well, didn't they anywhere? But

here in Petrol Junction just recently there'd been that young Sunday school teacher, beaten to death, they said it was. But there were stories more awful than that. Then several girls had disappeared. Al talked about one who'd worked down at old Man Jessup's gas station diner. There'd been a couple since then. You never went into Petrol Junction proper but that old ladies didn't buttonhole you in the dry goods store and talk about all the fresh young men around—the mashers.

These thoughts going through Hester's mind took up the time it has taken to relay them. And then she was all attention on something outside of herself. Her legs were encased strangely, her struggles to free them of little avail. Her hands in the impenetrable gloom reached blindly, fumbling.

Then there was a fire, a small flickering, steaming fire through the tunnel of night. It grew brighter and larger, and the sound-accompanying it grew apace.

She saw and recognized then, with unusual agility of a mind that had gone to waste as a third-rate chanteuse, what was to happen to her.

They said up at the Patio—Al with his hands folded over his big stomach with the Mason's emblem hanging from the chain—they said, Hester's a crooner, a noodler type. Give it to her soft and lilting. That's what she carries the best.

They should have heard her then, the men of the four-piece combo who chewed gum as they riffed out "Slow Boat to China." They should have heard her voice, the sound it made for the night and the valley and the hills.

The combos of all ages would have wondered.

When she was eleven, Hester had dreamed of singing at the Met, and a small-town teacher to this small-time small fry had said, "But Hester, you have a *little* voice, a *delicate* voice, of some quality but no size!" Wherever you are, Singing Teacher, listen to Hester now! What is a woman's scream? Is it high C, or something unwritten in melody and music? But listen, Singing Teacher, to Hester Greene tonight!

Judith Moran

JUDITH, with her red hair that shone so under the sun, came from one of the—as they like to call themselves—good families of Petrol Junction. She'd had advantages, which mainly consisted of things like not having to live in Petrol Junction all the time, going away to college, and being able to talk about things, at least for a time, other than men and clothes.

The Morans had a modernistic white stucco house out towards the valley. There were a hundred acres of Moran-owned property. There was a swimming pool and a couple of riding horses and two new cars in the garage, one of which, the open convertible, Judith enjoyed driving at great speed through the countryside. Judith had a figure, and she liked to show it. She used to drive to the country club for tennis in her shorts, and often, despite Mrs. Moran's objections, she would stop in town for the paper or some magazines or something else, still in her shorts, pleasing the old men and drawing whistles from the younger ones and scathing remarks from other women who were jealous of her splendid, generous figure and showed it by disapproval.

Judith was a restless girl, and that restlessness came out in different ways. The men, some of them most attractive and well-positioned who pursued her for her looks or her money or both, never, somehow, focussed into one, *the man*.

Her mother had long since resigned herself to seeing Judy, stimulated by an article in a travel magazine, on the spur of the moment decide to go south or north or east or west. Old Mr. Moran, who had made all that money in canned goods, had no strength left to fight his daughter. And Mrs. Moran's fluttering objections never stayed the determination of this only child.

But there was something else now, and as an enthusiastic reader of detective stories and horror fiction, Judith gloated over such things. The brutal killing of Jane Abbott, whom Judith had known as that "sweet-faced, smug Sunday school teacher-at the West Street Church," the disappearance of other girls in town—always girls, mind you—most recently Ellen Lockwood and Hester

Greene, these things piqued Judith's curiosity. It was as if in a twenty-three-year-old lifetime of uselessness, Judith felt a sudden compelling urge. Somebody, something, had it in for the girls of Petrol Junction.

With the war boom, the town had taken on a lusty, profane character, and with the war and its boom forgotten now in the world's uneasy peace and the individual's leveling-off salary, the noisy, boisterous, dangerous part of the town that people had said and shrugged, "Well, c'est la guerre!" was still with them.

Petrol Junction was a dangerous place for young, pretty girls. Judy liked that idea, and it was the one thing that cancelled a trip to Bermuda or Placid or Sun Valley or Catalina, and again, the discomfort of her parents in a town where girls walked now at night with escorts if they could or swiftly if they couldn't, with eyes over their shoulders, was discounted.

Judy took to hanging around Police Headquarters. Sergeant Moffett, married man and all that he was, was her pet foil. He all but melted in the attentions of this red-headed girl and compared her in his mind's eye, and most unfavorably, with his mid-forties wife. Even Police Chief James, a worried man who knew well that politics and the support of the right people kept the likes of him in as police chief, did his best to be civil.

From the files when nobody was around but Sergeant Moffett, Judith started on what meager facts the Petrol Junction authorities had on Jane Abbott's killing and the disappearances of those other girls down through Lockwood and Greene.

"People don't just vanish!" she opined once to Sergeant Moffett. She'd read the line in a criminology book from the library.

THE Sergeant seemed impressed and waggled his head in agreement. Judith talked about it at home, and her interest in the whole affair continued longer than she'd ever before been able to stay enthusiastic over water colors or piano lessons or archery or any of the thousand and one hobbies and arts she'd fussed with.

Judy may have been petulant, spoiled, and somewhat ill-mannered, with her family's money behind her to smooth over the consequences, but she was not a fool. She came to have, after a while, some theories of her own about what it was in Petrol Junction that threatened womankind. The theories were numerous, just as the people she considered were numerous. She would walk in the streets at evening and look at men's faces; she'd become considerably enchanted with a book on criminal physiology.

There were workers from the factories that had been converted from war to peace purposes. There were store clerks, construction men from the new road out in the valley. She looked at them, and many of them looked back and smiled, as what man wouldn't when a ravishing redhead gives him the eye?

And after a while, she became depressed and a little fearful that so many of the faces she studied were animal and brutal, capable, she thought, of almost any act of violence. It made her task harder. But then, she found with some redeeming satisfaction, that the women's faces were as bad. The rouge and the powder and red painting the thick, cruel lips. The sharp or pudgy or sagging features hiding the smallness of their souls and the bigness of their hatreds underneath the facade of womanhood. Faces, if you study them too hard, Judith decided, were, well, not to be studied too hard!

ON THIS Saturday night the streets were empty of even the last stragglers turned out from the eleven o'clock movie as Judith walked to where she'd left her convertible. She'd had some small tasks to do after supper and then she'd sat longer than she'd meant to at the icecream parlor looking at the young faces of the high-school crowd as they came in with their dates for sundaes and sodas. These faces were more crude and open. Because of their youth, life had done less to them, and they were not yet marked by the stamp of bitterness that comes with the passing of time.

When she left the store, it was nearing midnight. The streets were dark and

deserted and she felt uncomfortably conspicuous as her high heels clicked down the lonely pavements. She was two blocks away from her car when she heard quick steps behind her. Judith Moran knew as much as anyone in Petrol Junction, what the authorities, what any human agency knew about those other girls. Her heart and steps quickened, and she felt the cold hand of fear touch her spine with thrilling fingers.

The streets ahead of her, as far as she could see, were devoid of people, with here and there a small pool of light where a lamppost stood sentinel. The store fronts were black now. With great control, she kept herself from breaking into a run. The steps behind her quickened even more, and she could hear, yes, she could hear the quick breath of her pursuer.

All at once she realized that the steps were not those of a man, and at the same time, a quavering voice hailed her and with recognition Judith stopped and turned, feeling very foolish, the pounding of her heart slowing as she said:

"Why, Miss Timothy! It's you!"

The spinster came up, her sharp features pinched in the gloom.

"Judith Moran! Child, what are you doing roaming the streets at this hour?"

Judith made a small excuse about her errands. The old woman at her side bobbed her head.

"Now, now, that's ridiculous! You know the things that happen to young girls in this town! You'll want to know we've just had a meeting up at the school about that . . . that masher! Just because it's been a little time since the last girl disappeared . . ." and Miss Timothy wagged her head, and her smile, Judith thought, was unpleasant like her skin and her features and her bent form.

"With that masher around, nobody's safe!" The spinster chattered on as the two walked the rest of the way to Judith's car. They reached it, Judy unlocked it and slid onto the seat.

"How about you, Miss Timothy? Can't I give you a lift home?"

The old woman clucked, "I'm just a little piece away from home."

"But you oughtn't to be out with this masher around." It was a small compliment Judy paid.

Miss Timothy grew serious. "I know. I know. None of us are safe, child. But I'd like to see that monster try anything on me!"

She leaned over the door of the car and hissed at Judith. "We're going to get him! At the meeting tonight, we found out there are some special agents from the State Capital down here investigating!"

The spinster looked around as if the masher, himself, might intercept this news or the streets might have interest in it.

"Nobody's supposed to know that!"

"Oh," said Judith, a little nettled that her good friend, Sergeant Moffett, hadn't revealed such a choice bit of news.

Miss Timothy's claw-like hand gripped the car, and her face screwed up as it did when she talked. Judith wondered if it was being unloved that made old spinsters like Miss Timothy so unattractive.

"Now go right home, child. You don't want to have happen to you what happened to those other girls!"

Judith drove off into the night out of town. The cool air felt good against her cheek, and she accelerated into the tunnel of brilliance her headlights cut in the dark. For a while, as she approached her house, she thought of pushing on into the valley, but a small feeling of doubt pursued this inclination. She turned into the driveway of her stucco home.

So people up at the State Capital were worried about what was going on at Petrol Junction! Special agents, huh!

THE next day was Sunday, a morning by Judith's ritual to spend sleeping in bed. But not this Sunday. She startled the maid by eight-thirty breakfast, and she had her convertible out of the garage and on the road by nine.

It was a glorious day of brightness and blue sky and soft, fragrant breeze. She drove deep into the valley and out along Western Highway. She had passed Pop Jessup's and then ahead a ways was the Patio. It struck her that the Abbott girl's body, partially crushed flatter than a pancake, as Sergeant

Moffett, big-eyed, had told her, had been found hereabouts.

She took a side road, ran for a mile or so into the woods and parked the car on a shelf of grass off the road. She had on low-heeled shoes, and it was such a day for walking! She took a stout walking-stick out of the back seat and started out. Judith was not ordinarily an enthusiastic outdoors girl, but this time a sense of adventure pervaded her.

A footpath that she remembered having taken some years ago led from the crown of the road across the hill to the right. She set out upon it and soon came to a ridge that looked down on the right to the sweep of Western Highway disappearing across the plainland ahead, and to the left the new Route 73, still under construction, in the valley's lap.

From here the machines of road construction looked small. It was Sunday, and they were unused, untended, save for a watchman she could make out down below there in the valley. She would talk to him.

The path was circuitous, and it took her some time. When she emerged on the valley floor, she was somewhere below the head of the construction advance. The road here was laid in neat pattern, the concrete poured into its iron beds, and Judith, as she walked forward to where she supposed the watchman to be, thought that it would be fun to drive through here in her convertible.

She marveled at the miracle of the roadworkers, for these things were alien to her sheltered life, and though she had traveled and experienced a lot, there was much that as the daughter of a rich man who did little but clip coupons, was beyond her ken. It did her credit that she was stimulated by them and not merely bored with the supercilious superiority of many of her age and bringing-up. But Judith was no fool. It pleased her the neat way the concrete was laid out, the pattern of lines in it caused by the adhesive tar runs.

It was because her eyes were running along ahead of her that she saw the small thing. It was so small that she would not see it again in a million years, and then with her stick, she began to worry at it, to pry it out of its cement tomb.

She was so busily engaged that she didn't hear him come up. Then she looked up and said, "Oh!"

He was a massive figure in blue denim, and his face was mild and a bit reproachful, so she wanted to apologize and tell him she was up to no harm. Judith fixed the watchman with her very nicest smile.

MR. MORAN, at his fluttering wife's insistence, called Police Chief James at a few minutes past nine. It was last night that they were upset about. Judith had come home well after midnight, with the explanation to her waiting-up parents that she'd simply been sitting in an icecream parlor watching the after-movie crowd.

"That's not right, Judith," her mother had complained.

Judy, making no answer, had gone up to bed.

"She seems to be brooding these days. The doctor says she's not sick! Charles," Mrs. Moran said to her husband, "I don't think that girl should be fussing around with those policemen down there, concerning herself with the unfortunate troubles some of those poor, poor girls have had. It's . . . it's unnatural! She goes down and sits there in that place with that middle-aged Sergeant—what's his name—Roberts, or Moffett? Moffett, that's it! And he's a married man, too! Now, Charles, you tell Police Chief James not to humor her. Why I really think the girl has listened to too many of these detective programs!"

Mr. Moran dutifully called up, and as the town's most influential and moneyed citizen, Police Chief James dutifully listened and oh'ed and agreed at the right times.

During the conversation, Mrs. Moran disappeared and reappeared in the library from whence her husband was phoning. She was fluttering even more.

"You know what, Charles? Judith has already had breakfast and taken her car and gone somewhere! That girl's up to something and I'm worried!"

Mr. Moran, seeking surcease from his wife's nagging, relayed this information even down to the state of his wife's mind, to Police Chief James.

At Headquarters, that worthy hung up the phone with a sigh. He had enough troubles in Petrol Junction without having to worry about young-lady daughters of wealthy residents who became infatuated with police work. It isn't as though these amateurs ever did any damn good! And now these two investigators down from the State Capital were on his hands.

ONE of them was sitting across from his desk now grinning at him. This man's name was Savage, and he couldn't look more bland, was Police Chief James' thought. His partner, Turner, was an equally smooth-looking article. These men were products of big-town scientific police work. James could just bet they'd never wielded any night sticks at a berserk criminal in their lives! They wore neat-fitting, double-breasted suits and packed thin .32 automatics instead of a good man-sized revolver. They talked psychology and sociology and things like that.

Sergeant Moffett came in, Turner with him, and Police Chief James put the question to his righthand man.

"Moffett, Old Man Moran's down on my ears about that daughter of his. Just see to it she doesn't hang around here anymore! That's an order!"

Moffett yes-sirred, but disappointment stuck out all over him. She was such a pretty one!

"You don't have any ideas where she's skidded off to this morning? What did she say to you the last time—I suppose it was yesterday—" the Police Chief put in sarcastically, "the last time you saw her?"

Moffett, with three pairs of eyes on him, colored and mumbled what he could remember.

James snorted, "These amateurs! And a chit of a girl at that! They've got no right . . ."

"I don't know," Turner said. "They often get a fresh slant on things. By instinct, luck, or intuition, occasionally they stumble on things the rest of us miss. I've seen it happen."

Savage nodded corroboration. James looked crest-fallen and fiddled with a paper on his desk.

"Anyway, now we've got to find Miss Moran!" He emphasized the name sarcastically.

"Let's go down that way," Savage said, suddenly rising.

James, thinking of the next election, lifted himself to his feet. "Okay, Sergeant, get the car!"

The three met Moffett at the front of the Police Station, and as they started to pile in, James was accosted by Miss Timothy, who hailed him in a shrill voice.

"You've got a clew, Chief! I can just tell!" The spinster cackled. "And I hope it's a good one because it's just about time . . ." her voice lowered and her face lit up simultaneously. ". . . it's just about time for another one of our girls to be taken! And I'll tell you one thing, Chief. I'm athinkin' it might be someone like that too-pretty Judith Moran!"

The Chief stopped at that.

"Whaddya mean?"

Savage and Turner were listening now, too.

"Well . . . said Miss Timothy, surprised and pleased at the reaction her words had had.

Savage took command now.

"Why not get in the car with us, madam? We're going out towards the Morans."

Miss Timothy was only too glad. It was probably the first time in her life she'd been the center of attraction of four men.

"IT'S a bobby pin!" Judith announced, having freed the small piece of metal from the road cement. "Look!" She held it up triumphantly.

The watchman in blue denim stepped closer and reached out a huge hand to take it from her, looking at it wonderingly. He threw it away then and spat as though that was his opinion of construction workers who wore bobby pins.

"How do you suppose it got there?" Judith said curiously.

He wagged his head. "Dunno."

My, you're a big one, she thought with secret female admiration. Whatever you're watching I'll bet gets watched good!

"Is it all right if I walk up front with you?"

He didn't seem to mind, and the two of them walked along the roadbed, Judith chattering.

"How do you suppose that bobby pin got there?" she went on.

They passed a steamshovel, and she marveled at its giant metal teeth.

"Have you ever run one of those?"

He grinned and said, "Sure!"

"I'll bet," she breathed and flashed him another smile.

They'd come to the head of the construction work now. There were trucks parked by the side waiting for the Monday humans who would make them live and work again; another steamshovel, a steamroller and a derrick. Judith thought of something and stamped her foot petulantly the way she did with her father at home.

"Why did you throw that bobby pin away? You know that might have been some sort of evidence. I mean . . . you know, these girls that've been disappearing. You don't have girls working on this road, Mister Watchman!"

He smiled at her and shook his head.

"Well, I think that should've been taken back to Police Chief James. How do we know it didn't belong to one of those poor girls!"

Excitement grew in her, and she started thinking of just where he'd thrown it to the ground.

"Maybe I could find it again," she thought aloud.

That was a stupid thing for him to have done, but she didn't suppose a workman would be a workman or an old watchman if he were very smart, and anyway he was so big and so cute, with blond, blond hair and those light eyes!

"I'm going back to find that bobby pin!" Judith said firmly, "and I want you to help me!"

She looked up at him appealingly.

Oh, you're lazy, she thought to herself. He isn't going to help me.

She turned to go, thinking that that would arouse some chivalry, but instead, he caught her by the wrist.

"Now look .

His hands were awfully strong on her. She looked up at him, still more coy,

than angry. She'd been handling men since she was twelve years old. He pulled her closer, and his hands around her waist hurt her back.

"Wait a minute!" She struggled now. "What's the matter with you! You stop it right this instant!"

He grinned at her, and his big, strong teeth looked something like the teeth on the steamshovel. He was so much bigger than she was. Anger was mounting in her now, and she had enough freedom of her right arm to swing her walking stick at his side. She hit him once with it, an ineffectual blow, but the lightness seemed to go out of his blue eyes and they turned abruptly like a summer sky with thunder storm.

His hands were around her throat suddenly, and she felt for the longest time her small feet bouncing off his steel-like shins as she kicked and kicked and kicked; she didn't know how many times but with endless futility, until finally it was as though she'd kicked herself deep into the ground where everything was a roaring black.

It couldn't have been very long when she came to, because he was tying her hands to iron fixtures in the road and she was nearly flat on her back and there was a strange gray blanket drawn up to her waist. The beginnings of knowing were in Judith now and she wondered as one does at such times with a remote and terrible detachment what instinct had driven her to this dreadful rendezvous.

He finished with his task and walked a little piece away. When she saw what he was doing and what he was about to do, the whole thing fell into place, from the bobby pin to the now. She screamed and prayed that it was as she had thought at the beginning when they had begun to struggle, that he was a ruthless man bent on her dishonor.

But now she knew, and with the tree-sided slopes of the valley watching bleakly, she knew there was no chance for deliverance.

She prayed that she would die, prayed that she would faint before this thing could happen.

THEY had stopped briefly at the Moran's stucco house and then had gone on, spurred by Mrs. Moran's growing uneasiness and Mr. Moran's orders to "do something! James, you're Police Chief!"

They had taken Western Highway, for that was the way the maid had seen Judith's convertible head, and then by some chance they'd taken the right turn-off.

They found her car, and it was only seconds after that as they poured from their own vehicle, that they heard the faraway screams carried on the lonely country air. Savage and Turner ran ahead along the narrow path. James and Moffett pushed along as best they could with Miss Timothy still chattering, bringing up the rear. They took the path as it twisted and wound and finally came out on the ridge looking down on Route 73, and there they stood, hundreds of yards away.

But the sun, reaching down a broad, yellow finger, pointed out the scene for them, picking out and highlighting Judith Moran's red, red hair as she lay in the still semi-nude steel roadbed of the new construction, highlighted the figure in blue denim crouched in his machine.

The men, even as they reached for their guns, felt horror numb their fingers and blanch their faces. Miss Timothy leaned forward, her far-sighted eyes squinting to take in every detail of the tableau.

The only sound was the putt, putt and rumble of the steamroller as it drove forward. The figure in blue denim hunched over the controls and the spat of the men fixing their little revolvers was lost in the vastness of the valley, just as their far-flung bullets tapped and poked misdirected lead futilely.

The steam-driven roller moved on with inexorable speed, and even as the men tore down the valley side, the redness of Judith Moran's hair was gone, and there was nothing, nothing as the steamroller finally reversed and backed rumblingly up, but another gray concrete square neatly in its steel bed, and Miss Timothy, left behind on the ridge, shrieking at the top of her old voice:

"It's the masher, I tell you! *It's the masher!*"