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W. W. Scott — Editor

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WOMAN AND THE AXE

It was fun to make his wife think he was sick mentally

by C. B. GILFORD

THE clock struck eleven.

Automatically both of them began the ritual of going to bed. He did not allow himself his customary luxury of watching her undress, for this new game was vastly more entertaining. She crawled shivering into her nightgown and slipped into the bed beside him. They did not kiss. They did not even say good-night.

And then the clock began again. It could be heard all the way from the living room, alive, ticking. They lay perfectly still, not touching each other. He was aware that her body was trembling. The bed could not warm her. Hours passed. He counted them, midnight, one, two. Then finally, from exhaustion perhaps, she fell asleep.

Released at last, he moved. He got out of bed, but he did it slowly, with infinite pa-



tience, a fraction of an inch at a time. The springs remained silent, the bedclothes were scarcely disturbed. She did not awaken.

On the floor, barefooted, he could proceed with absolute quiet. Moonlight was streaming through the windows. He had already selected his place to stand, where the pale beams would outline him starkly, slanting across his face to lend it a graven, mask-like quality. He went to that spot now and took up his position, close beside her, looking down at her. He set his features into an enigmatic frown...and waited.

He knew that she would awake. He knew that her tortured mind could not be completely at rest, that it would respond eventually to the psychic pressure of his riveted, concentrated stare. Actually, it took only five minutes.

She opened her eyes, not sleepily, but suddenly, into full awareness. She did not look first to see if he were still lying beside her. Rather, she seemed to know immediately where he would be, standing over her. She screamed, piercingly, in pure, awful terror.

She sprang in the direction away from him, out of the bed, and ran. Stumbling and crashing into objects in her path, she ran to the bathroom. The lock clicked behind her.

He pursued slowly, at his leisure. He went to the bathroom door and stood there, listening to the pathetic sobbing from within.

It was there that he suffered what was probably his last attack of conscience. He was of half a mind to call to her, "Marcia, come out now. I was only fooling. Playing a game. It's a nasty, cruel game, and I'm sorry. The game is over now though, and it won't happen again."

And then later, when she would have been calmer, and nestled in his arms perhaps, he would have offered the rather lame excuse he had so carefully prepared, to soothe both her and his own guilty feelings. He would have said, "Well, you know, Marcia, it really could happen. I could go suddenly, dangerously insane. People ought to be prepared for that, you know. For an emergency, like appendicitis or anything else. Well, now you've seen

what insanity looks like. Maybe now you'd know what to do."

But he didn't say either of these things somehow. He liked this too much. He had liked the look of utter fear that had ravaged her face. He had liked the sound of her scream. A sweet sound, sweeter even than the sound of her voice when she had first said, a couple of years ago, "I love you, George. Of course I'll marry you." And now... now this moment... he liked the sound of her sobbing in the darkness behind the locked door.

No, he wouldn't stop it. He couldn't, because he was enjoying himself so much. And besides, it was her own fault, in a way. He had mentioned it so casually that morning... that any husband might go suddenly berserk and murder his wife... and Marcia had been afraid... so temptingly afraid...

IN the days that passed, he became something of a virtuoso in his role. He was constantly discovering new facets of it, new avenues to explore. In only one way was he con-

sistent. He never at any time pretended to notice her reactions to his antics.

Whether she tried to assume that he was behaving normally, or cringed away from him in terror, or merely, as she often did, wept quietly and helplessly, or whether she fled home to her mother, as she did once for three days—, never did he give any hint that he was aware there was anything unusual in her response to him. Thus too, he was better able to maintain his own characterization—eccentric, strange lunatic, maniacal—in turns—, never the same two days in a row.

It was the very variety of possibilities which most interested him. He discovered the highest delight of all dedicated tormentors, that of devising constantly new and ever more exquisite instruments of torture. She was a willing victim because of her persevering love for him, and his only limitation was the inventiveness of his own mind.

One of the never-failing methods at his disposal and one of the easiest, he found, was also the simplest. Long

periods of brooding silence. Silence that would last a whole evening. Silence that would endure for days at a stretch, until their house seemed a tomb, inhabited by walking corpses.

They would eat together, facing each other across the table, wordless, the clicking of cutlery on plates embarrassingly, nerve-shatteringly loud. Or he would go to his book, always to the same book, always to the same page. Or sometimes he preferred to stare at her, in the midst of an awful quiet, never lowering his eyes, watching her as she occasionally tried to stare back, watching the twitching in her face, the trembling of her hands, the shivers that now and then traversed the length of her, as if icicle fingers were caressing her body.

And then, always suddenly and unexpectedly, he would change. He would talk to her. But what he said was never as it had been in the normal days of the past. His orations were concocted out of the material of nightmares, erotic, or morbid, or sadistic, but never the same. He possessed a vivid imagination and he let it work.

The tales he told her were not those of a meek, mild, nine-to-five office man, but rather more those of a dope addict who could put into language the fancies of his maddest dreams. How could she answer him, make conversation with him, when he talked like this? She couldn't. It left her dangling, helpless, more on edge than even his silences.

Sometimes he made love to her. But here again his techniques varied, till all she knew to expect was the unexpected. His was the gamut from the most violent to the most gentle. Occasionally he would seize her as a criminal stranger might. He would be in a frenzy, and he was a strong man. These encounters left her bruised and sobbing. Then again he would be tender with her and for a few moments—precious to her—things were as they had been in older, gladder days. But he was not one to grant too long a reprieve. When her happiness, her anticipation, her relief at his apparent return to normalcy, were at their peaks, he would break it off, leave her, aban-

don her to a pit of despair deeper than before. The bruises he inflicted at these times were on her soul.

It was inevitable perhaps that she should eventually think of a doctor. She found the courage to mention the subject out of the depths of her misery. With an ease that amazed her he consented.

"All right, Marcia, I'll go to see the doctor...if it will make you feel any better."

And he kept his promise. Three times he visited the renowned psychiatrist in his plush office high in the city's most imposing skyscraper. On the last visit Marcia accompanied him. They sat together facing the bespectacled, distinguished mind specialist.

"Mrs. Kasten," the man began, toward Marcia, "it was your idea, of course, that your husband come to see me."

"Yes," Marcia quavered.

"You told me a number of rather amazing stories of his odd behavior."

"Yes..." Her confidence was dwindling fast.

"Your husband denies eve-

rything, everything you say."

"But it's true! It's true!"

Her voice rose just a little out of control. She was on the edge of her chair, gripping the arms of it till her knuckles gleamed whitely.

"Please, Mrs. Kasten." The famous man was calm, soothing. "There's no need to get excited... But I must tell you. I'm more inclined to believe your husband than you."

"Oh..." It was a low, soft moan, escaping from her involuntarily.

"After repeated psychiatric examination of your husband, I am of the opinion that he is completely normal, as sane as a man could be. Sanity, of course, being only a comparative thing..."

All she could do was to shake her head, negatively, in mute, helpless protest.

"Now," the doctor pursued, "what I am curious about is the motive that prompted you to libel your husband in the way you did, to tell me all those elaborate fictions about the way he was acting. Fictions, I repeat, Mrs. Kasten. Now why? Why? Don't you love your husband?"

HE had her now. She would not question his power over her again. She would not question his right to torment her. She was his chattel now, his property, his special plaything. She would never again seek outside assistance. Whatever he wanted to do to her, he could do. She would respond meekly to whatever string he pulled. She would weep, sob, shudder, tremble, cry out, scream—whichever he preferred.

This was their agreement. It was reached silently, without discussion, without argument. A mutual understanding between torturer and tortured.

It was this new state of things—this feeling he had now of absolute dominion over another human being—which gave him new ideas. He'd been getting bored with the old ways of playing the game anyway. He would introduce one more variation, more awful than what had gone before. And then, he told himself, he would stop.

He brought the package home from work with him one evening. It was done up in

enough brown wrapping paper to blur any telltale outline of it. He offered no immediate explanation to his wife, but took the package down to the basement. She didn't follow him.

So he came upstairs and ate his dinner almost like a gentleman. He was gay. He talked of his achievements at the office, of a promotion he expected to receive shortly. She listened to him dully, pre-occupied. Exactly as he knew it would be. She was thinking of the package in the basement.

Right after dinner he went down there again. He placed the package conspicuously on his work table, but he did not unwrap it. Instead he sat down to wait, staring at the package, waiting...patiently. From overhead he could hear noises his wife was making, and could track her movements. She cleared away the dinner dishes, and then she washed them. Once there was a crash, as one of the dishes fell and broke. He smiled with satisfaction. She was nervous. She hadn't forgotten about the package, or the fact that he was down here, with the package.

Nevertheless, it was almost

eight o'clock before her curiosity got the better of her. He had been listening to her footsteps pacing over him. Now the footsteps changed pattern, hurried, crossed determinedly to the basement door, and came down the steps.

She found him sitting motionless, gazing fixedly at the brown-wrapped, unidentified object. "George," she whispered.

"Yes?" He did not turn to her but went on staring.

"What is it, George?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes..."

"You might regret knowing...if you knew."

She hesitated. She was standing just at his elbow, and he could watch her out of the corner of his eye. She was pale, her bosom rising and falling rapidly, as if she could scarcely find air to breathe.

"I want to know," she said finally.

So he unwrapped the package. He did it slowly, savoring to the fullest the painful suspense he was causing her. At last, with a flourish, like a magician unveiling the hidden

rabbit, he revealed his purchase. New, gleaming, sparkling wickedly. A long-handled, razor-sharp woodsman's axe.

She did not even breathe. He knew the questions that were racing through her mind to her lips, questions she could not speak. He answered them with a careless nonchalance.

"I decided I was getting flabby. I need some exercise. They tell me the best exercise is chopping wood. So I thought I'd chop up some wood for the fireplace."

There were other things, of course, which he did not bother to explain, but which would have their own incongruous, insane explanations. For there was no wood anywhere about to be chopped. True, he might order some. But on the other hand, their house had no fireplace.

He left the axe nestling in its torn sheaths of brown paper, turned away from her, and went back upstairs. As if to escape from the dreadful presence of that shining metal, she tagged closely at his heels.

He went to his easy chair. He took up his book. The

same book. He turned to the marked page. The same page. He sat down to read.

He didn't have to watch her to guess the mischief he had wrought in her. She was approaching a state of panic. She tried to sit down, but she couldn't remain seated for very long. Once in a while she paced to the window to look out. Strangely, it didn't seem to occur to her that she might leap through that window, and so escape. Or simpler still, unbolt the door and run out into the street. She was in a prison of the mind, pent up with a maniacal killer. The tempo of her movements about the room quickened...sofa...to window...to door...sofa to window to door...lurching, stumbling over familiar objects...caroming from one unfriendly wall to another, like a billiard ball in perpetual motion...

But quite suddenly she broke the rhythm. She was gone out of the room almost before he realized it. He laid aside his book, stood up. He could hear the clatter of her heels as she descended the basement stairs. He strode swiftly through the kitchen, to

the door leading to the stairs.

HE saw her at the bottom of the steps. She had the axe, holding it in front of her and away from her, staring at the blade as she might have stared at a deadly snake whose head she gripped to keep it from biting her. She started to climb the stairs, and looking up for an instant, she saw him.

He read the look she gave him. She was bringing the axe to him and she was mutely pleading, "You're going to kill me with this, George. I know you are. So I beg you, do it now. Do it quickly. Because I can't stand this any more...I can't stand it..."

But she'd have to endure it just a little longer, he decided. This was joy, this abject terror of hers, this absolute submission, bringing him the axe, bringing him her suffering, trembling body to carve upon. This was what he had waited for, and it had been worthwhile...just a few more seconds, Marcia...bring it to me...that's a good girl...bring me the axe...and then tell me what you want me to do with it...bare your throat...tell

me to hit you there because there one blow will be enough ...tell me...scream for the mercy of that one blow...and then your eyes will pop open, because I'll be laughing at you ...laughing and telling you this has all been a joke...and how silly you look standing there holding that axe...

Perhaps he waited too long, kept his secret from her just a fraction of a second too long. He saw his mistake, saw it in the way she shifted the weapon in her grasp. Saw it in her eyes, where a sudden wild hatred exploded into being.

He backed away, not daring to remove his gaze from her. She came up the rest of the stairs with the speed and agility of a cat. In the kitchen she paused, seemed to be searching, experimenting with the proper way to wield the thing she carried. He turned and fled.

He headed for the front door, reached it, tore at the bolt with frantic fingers. But she was right behind him. He heard her there, felt her presence. He whirled to face her, putting his back against the door and keeping her at bay

for a moment with his own fierce terror. One hand behind him tried to work the bolt again.

He managed to dodge away from the first blow.

He would have tried a window next. He would have dived through the glass, wouldn't have cared about cuts and blood. But he dared not turn his back on her. So he tried to protect himself with a chair, holding it up in front of him like a trainer of wild beasts might. The second blow of the axe splintered and demolished it. He found himself holding only useless sticks.

Then he screamed to her, just after she'd swung the axe again, close enough to rip his shirtsleeve. "Marcia, listen. It was all a joke. A game. Understand?...a joke...a game..."

She could not hear him. There was no mind to receive the message. Now he knew what he had accomplished.

He retreated from her again, and his back came in contact with a wall...

THE END