

KEYHOLE MYSTERY

Magazine

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WIFE KILLER

by ROD REED

MACK THE BARTENDER WAS INTENT on the bulldog edition of *The Courier*. But not intent enough to forget business. He noticed Joe's glass was empty and set the paper aside while he drew another one. As he scraped off the excess foam he asked:

"Joe, what'd you do if you caught your old lady cheating?"

"No problem," responded Joe. "I'm not married."

"Just a for-instance," said Mack. "I meant, if you were."

Busy with his brew, Joe couldn't reply at once, so Roarke cut in.

"If I caught *my* woman off base," Roarke bellowed, "I'd beat the be-Jupiter out of her! I wouldn't stand for no nonsense!"

Roarke is a husky truck driver. If any of the boys felt like smiling at what he said, they smiled in-

wardly, for Roarke could truly lick any man in the house. But the inward smiles would be caused by the certainty that within twenty minutes little Mrs. Roarke would be at the door beckoning to her husky husband and that he'd go to her like a lamb—probably leaving a half-full glass of beer on the bar.

Mack's hypothetical question seemed to have intrigued the rest of his customers. Burkel, thoughtfully breaking a wooden stirrer into small splinters, asserted:

"I wouldn't beat Lucy, but I'd sure leave her. I'd get a divorce quicker than you can say 'Reno!'" Burkel swept the splinters off the bar brusquely. "A wife that plays around don't deserve no consideration!"

Probably a stranger would have been impressed by Burkel's firm

A SHORT-SHORT STORY

stand. But I happened to know that his wife Lucy had run away from him at least three times to have a small fling, and each time he'd taken her back with open arms. Burkel thought nobody knew about it. The poor sap! After all these years he hadn't learned that women talk about *everything*.

I slid Mack's newspaper over toward me. One glance showed what had started Mack off with this trend in conversation.

The headline said: MAN SLAYS WIFE, LOVER. The story was brief; apparently it had barely made the edition. Cops had found the bodies of a man and woman, viciously beaten, in a parked car on Old Delaware Road. Due to the hideous brutality of the attack, the pair was unidentified at press time.

But there was a clue. Pinned to the woman's bloody blouse was an unsigned note, evidently quickly scrawled. It read:

This was my wife. She won't cheat again.

As I finished reading, I caught the tail end of Hutton's views on this fascinating subject:

"I'd forgive her," Hutton said. "Nobody's perfect. I've done a little playing around myself. And

a person—even a woman—can't help being human."

Of course, it's possible that in a saloon a man may sometimes say something he doesn't mean, but this mild attitude of Hutton's was a surprise. He's a big wheel, drinks nothing but Scotch, and has a reputation as a tough, hard-headed business man. If he ever forgave anyone *anything*, it's not on the record.

"How about you, Smitty?" asked Mack, pouring a straight rye. "You're very quiet. Let's hear what you'd do if you caught your wife lollying with some other guy."

Smitty downed the shot. "I'd kill her!"

He said it earnestly, fiercely, and the bar rocked with laughter. Everybody howled. And no wonder; Smitty is a small-sized Casper Milquetoast. I was grinning and thinking what funny ideas guys get about themselves after a couple of drinks, when the cops came in.

"Come along, Smith," one cop said.

Smitty mumbled, "Yes, sir."

As they were ushering Smitty out, Mack hollered, "Hey, what'd he do?"

"Killed his wife. Horrible sight. Out on Old Delaware Road." ■ ■

COMPLETE ON THESE PAGES