

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Russell Gray

Table of Contents

<u>THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES</u>	1
<u>Russell Gray</u>	1

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

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As we neared the house, my nerves loosened a bit and I began thinking how decent the Lockman's had been to me and what a heel I must be to do this to them. I said:

"Remember, fellas, take it easy. There's just those two, and the husband has both his legs broken."

Lew Virova, sitting next to Doc who was driving, turned his heavy face around to me. "Scared we'll play rough with the dame, eh, Joey? We got plenty else to worry about."

Sure we had, but that only made it worse. I'd been holed up before, and I knew how fear and boredom started tearing at whatever good sense you had. With the cops of the whole State hunting us, we might have to be cooped in that house for weeks. And that woman would always be around.

I sat in the back seat between Stoop and Babe. The black satchel was between my feet. Stoop had his gun on his lap and was fingering it nervously. Babe was twisted completely around so that he could keep his eyes glued to the back window.

"To hell with dames!" Stoop growled. He was a tall, sour-faced guy who didn't care for anybody in the world except Babe. "I don't like this set-up. Suppose the dame slips away to the coppers? Or suppose somebody comes to the house to visit? And how'll we get food? Like I said before, the hide-out in the hills "

"Would mean our capture within twenty-four hours," Doc May cut in with that soft voice of his. "The cops will begin by fine-combing the hills. They'll never suspect we've taken up residence with a respectable young couple. A poet, didn't you say, Joey ?"

"Yeah," I said. "I guess you got to be a nut like that to live way off by yourself. The house is seven miles from the nearest neighbor and nearly twenty from the village. Once a week, they drive in for mail and food. I was there eight days and nobody ever came to see them."

"That's another thing," Stoop grumbled. "What do we live on dandelions? We can't let her drive in for food and we gotta lay low in the house."

"Relax," Doc May said. "I'll see to it that you are afforded all the comforts of home."

Stoop continued to mumble under his breath, but now he was doing it solely to ease his tense nerves. Doc's answer, which was no answer at all, satisfied him as it did the rest of us. That's how much confidence we had in Doc.

Lew Virova was our nominal leader, but the secret of his success was that he had sense enough to leave the heavy thinking to Doc May. They made a fine team: Lew, big and hard and without a spot of fear in his make-up; Doc, fat and mild and harmless-looking. I don't know of another man who could blueprint a bank job like Doc May, and there wasn't anybody who could carry the plan out like Lew Virova. We'd lifted the dough from the Trevan

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

National Bank so smoothly that I couldn't quite get it out of my head that it hadn't been just another of the many rehearsals Doc had put us through.

"That the place?" Doc asked.

The sun glinted on white walls between tall spruces which covered a knoll on our left. I nodded, and Doc swung the sedan onto the narrow, rutted road which climbed up to the house.

In front of the porch, Doc stopped the car. As Lew was getting out, Kyra Lockman called from a window: "Who are you looking " And abruptly her voice broke off.

"The phone!" Lew yelled. "We gotta stop her!"

His gun fell into his hand. Stoop and Babe each kicked open a back door and tumbled out of the car. The three of them charged up the porch steps and through the front door. There was a short, sharp scream, followed by a jumble of voices.

I picked up the black satchel and got out slowly. Doc May was waiting to take it from me. The folds of his fat face were creased in a smile.

"So you're afraid to face them, Joey ?"

"There's no phone in the house," I said, evading an answer. I didn't want Doc to think I was mushy.

"How come an honest criminal like you demeaned himself by working?" Doc asked as we started toward the house.

"That was last month before I tied up with Lew," I explained apologetically. "I was on my uppers, and I stopped here for a handout. Frank Lockman said he needed his house painted. They let me live with them as if I was one of the family. Lockman was working with me when he fell off the roof and broke his legs. They're nice people. Keep the boys away from Mrs. Lockman, will you, Doc ?"

He glanced sideways at me. "I see. You've fallen for her."

"Wrong this time, Doc. She's one of these quiet, mouselike dames you never bother to look at. Anyway, she doesn't think there's a man living but her husband."

We were mounting the porch steps. Inside, the voices had ceased.

"So she's fond of her husband?" Doc said, as if thinking aloud.

"Fond! Say, when he broke his legs, she wouldn't let them take him to a hospital or even have a nurse in. She treats him like he's just been born."

Doc nodded with immense satisfaction. "Splendid!"

The porch door led into a short hallway. To the right was the open doorway to the living room. Lew and Stoop and Babe were lined along one wall. They looked downright silly, confronting a mite of a woman and a cripple with guns in their hands. It was plain that Lew wasn't sure how to go on from here and was waiting for Doc.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

A bed had been fixed up in the living room for Frank Lockman. Both his legs were in casts, held above his head by a complicated arrangement of pulleys and weights. He looked like a poet ought to. His eyes were black and burning, and his hair was a thick black tumble. Those eyes were half scared to death, now. He had both his arms thrown about his wife's waist.

Kyra Lockman was sitting on the bed, leaning toward his head. She was a soft little thing, rather drab, as always, in a faded-gray dress. She made me think of a helpless gray bird, fluttering with fear.

I stopped just inside the door and avoided her eyes.

"Joey Root!" Frank Lockman's bitter voice lashed out at me. "You're one of them?"

"Nothing will happen to you folks if you don't start trouble," I muttered.

"They're going to shoot us!" Kyra wailed. "Joey, don't let them kill us!"

Lew and Stoop and Babe became aware of their drawn guns and sheepishly put them up.

Doc May stepped forward swinging the satchel, "My dear people "

"I knew it!" Kyra burst out. "You're the bandits who held up the Trevan bank this morning. That's the black bag in which you put the forty-seven thousand dollars."

Babe whistled, and we all stared at the satchel as if we were seeing it for the first time. We hadn't had a chance to count our haul. Doc, when he'd cased the bank last week, had figured we'd be lucky if we got twenty grand.

Lew's eyes clouded with suspicion. "How do you know so much?"

"The radio," Frank Lockman said quickly. "We listen to it constantly." He looked at his plastered legs, and his voice went bitter. "That's about all we have to do."

"We intend you no harm," Doc May said gently. "Unfortunately, circumstances force us to intrude on your hospitality. We shall stay only as long as necessary, Perhaps no longer than a week."

"Stay here?" Lockman cried. "I should say not! I order you to leave at once!"

Maybe it was the poet in him that made him foolish. His wife had more sense. She managed to restrain the trembling of her lips to say: "Please be quiet, Frank. Can't you see there's nothing we can do?" She faced Doc. "Have we your word that you will conduct yourself like" a wry ghost smile crossed her pale lips "like gentlemen?"

Doc rubbed his fat jowls. "Let's be realistic. Our word won't satisfy you, nor yours us. We'll treat you well because you'll make us more comfortable if we do. And you won't communicate with the police because you value your husband's life. We are desperate men, as you can readily understand. We will kill your husband if there is the remotest hint that you have betrayed us. He will be, let us say, a hostage for your good behavior."

We looked at Doc with admiration. With a couple of sentences he had assured our safety better than all our guns could have. Turning us over to the police would mean nothing to her, compared with the safety of her husband.

Kyra shuddered and patted her husband's cheek and stood up with her hands folded stiffly in front of her. "I have no choice," she said dully. "As a sign that I'll keep my end of the bargain, I will prepare lunch for you men."

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

She moved past us to the kitchen. Before she was out of the room, her husband fell back on the pillow and burst out crying. Her step faltered; then she tightened her mouth and, without turning, went on.

The living room became hot and close. I went outside and stripped the license plates off the car and ran it into a clump of thick bushes. When I came back, Kyra, frozen-faced, was serving the boys sandwiches which they munched while listening to the radio. News came on, and we heard that the police were closing in on the bank robbers, a hundred miles from where we were. We had a good laugh over that.

Frank Lockman had turned off the tears. He lay in bed like a dead man, with only his eyes, red-rimmed and hate-filled, alive. He gave us the jitters after a while, and all of us except Doc went into the dining room and started a rummy game.

We didn't see much of Kyra that afternoon, except when she had to pass our table on the way to her husband in the living room beyond. She was such a colorless little thing, and the sneakers she always wore around the house made so little sound, that we were hardly aware of her coming and going. Except Babe. He was a handsome lad of about twenty an age at which all young women appear to have possibilities.

After a while, we heard Doc talking to her in the kitchen. He came out rubbing his pudgy hands.

"Nothing can go wrong, now," he reported to us. "I had a talk with Kyra and learned that poetry doesn't pay well and that her husband's legs aren't healing right and that they need money very badly to have them reset. I promised her a thousand dollars if everything runs smoothly. She was so happy, she nearly kissed me; and to show her appreciation, she's fixing a swell dinner for us."

Doc had done it again. Even Stoop was ready to agree that the arrangement was as good as we could want. Kyra hadn't anything to gain by giving us away, and she had a thousand smackers as well as her husband's life to lose.

I was the only one who didn't join in the enthusiasm. I was looking ahead. After a week of playing rummy and listening to the radio, the walls would close in on us, and we'd start thinking of the woman as a woman.

It happened a lot sooner than I had expected. And it was her own fault.

She had set the table and then had disappeared in her bedroom. We were all sitting in the dining room waiting for dinner when she came in, and we had to look twice at her to make sure she was the same woman.

She had dressed herself as if we were honored and important dinner guests. She had put on the kind of gown which was made to bring out a figure, and I saw for the first time that she was neatly formed. She had put make-up on her face and fixed up her hair, and she'd discarded her sneakers for high-heeled shoes which showed that she wasn't so short after all.

Get me straight. She wasn't an ugly duckling turned suddenly beautiful. She hadn't been bad-looking before, and she wasn't exactly gorgeous, now. But the drab little mouse had turned herself into an attractive woman. Buried away in the sticks, with only her husband to look at her, she'd ceased to bother about her appearance. It was plain why she had gone to all that trouble, now. No matter how much a woman may love her husband, she wants other men to admire her. Whatever she thought of our profession, there was no doubt that we were men.

"The crazy fool!" I thought. "She doesn't realize what she's playing with!"

Something like an electric current ran through us as she distributed a warm smile around the table and took her seat. In a roomful of women, we might have passed her up without more than a glance; but as she was the only woman, she represented all women. So all of us, even fat, brainy Doc and sour-faced Stoop, started acting up to

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

her. Yes, I did, too, for I was as human as any of them.

When we were through eating, there was a scrimmage to help her with the dishes. She selected Lew to clear the table and Stoop to wipe while she washed. A little later we could hear Stoop and her laughing in the kitchen one of the few times in my life I had heard Stoop laugh. I wondered what her husband, listening to them from his bed, was thinking.

We started a pinochle game. Stoop came out, grinning happily, and sat down with us and we made it a four-handed game.

Half an hour later, Stoop said suddenly: "Where's Babe?"

"Don't know," Lew said. "Somewhere in the house. What do you meld, Stoop?"

Without a word, Stoop threw down his hand and left the room. We heard him mounting the stairs. He came down before I'd finished dealing a new hand.

"Babe ain't in the house," Stoop announced. He leaned against the door jamb and added: "Kyra's gone, too."

Lew jumped up. "Where's the dough? Do you think maybe they "

"Take it easy," Doc said. "I have the bag right here under the table. Should we deal you in, Stoop?"

"No!" He went out again.

I didn't feel like playing any more, either, and said so. I took the way out through the living room. The light was out and only enough moonlight came in through the window to show me the humped outline of Frank Lockman on the bed. He didn't move, but I was pretty sure he was lying there wide awake. Kyra hadn't been near him since she'd brought him his food a little while before we had eaten.

I continued out toward the porch and there I saw them. Babe and Kyra were sitting on the other side of the dirt road. Their backs were toward me, but in the half light, you could hardly tell one from the other, they were so close together.

A match flared at my side and I turned my head to see Stoop bringing a match to his pipe. He, too, was watching them.

He said quietly: "Nothing like being young. You know, Joey, I've brought Babe up since he was a kid. His mother was my sister. When she died, there was nobody else to take care of him."

"Let's go in," I said.

He tagged after me and went up to his room. There was a double bed in there which he was to share with Babe. I'd helped Kyra open a cot in that room for myself. Doc and Lew would sleep in the twin beds in the Lockman's bedroom. That didn't put the Lockmans out any because Kyra had been sleeping on the living-room couch since her husband's accident.

Doc and I were talking in the dining room when Babe came in. Stoop and Lew had already gone to bed.

I said: "You better wipe that lipstick off your face before you go upstairs."

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Babe used his handkerchief and grinned. "Boy, what a dame! Those quiet ones are my meat."

"Shut up!" I whispered. "Her husband might hear you!"

"Don't boast to Stoop about your conquest," Doc said. "He feels bad."

"Stoop?" Babe laughed. "Stoop's an all-right guy. But him and women? You trying to be funny? Well, nighty-night, fellas. It's been a trying day."

When he was gone, I said: "It's starting already, Doc."

Doc was amused. "What are you beefing about, now? The lady has turned out to be a tramp, so you don't have to worry about protecting her virtue."

"I guess that's right," I admitted. "But I still don't like the set-up."

The next morning, it was once again Stoop. When I came down to the dining room, I could see through the open kitchen door. Stoop was sitting on a stool and worshipping Kyra as she prepared breakfast. She wore slacks and a thin white blouse which were as effective as her gown had been last night.

In a little while, Babe appeared and sailed right into the kitchen and handed her an ardent good morning. She nodded briefly and then ignored him, concentrating her attention and smile on Stoop as if Babe weren't there at all. Babe hung around for a few minutes, then came out to join me at the table. He was sore and at the same time bewildered. He couldn't understand how any woman could prefer Stoop to him, especially after last night.

For the rest of the morning Stoop hovered around Kyra like a faithful dog and even gave her a hand with the house cleaning. It was funny and, at the same time, a little pathetic a hard-bitten, mirthless man like Stoop, acting like a kid in his first romance. Babe joined Doc and Lew at flinging wisecracks at him, but I could see Babe wasn't any too happy about it.

And all the time, the crippled, helpless poet lay alone in the living room. Kyra went in only when necessary, to attend to him or bring him food, and even then I heard little conversation between them.

The rest of us stayed out altogether, because somehow it was as if a dead man were lying on that bed. Once, I glanced in and saw Frank Lockman as motionless as a wax figure and staring at the ceiling. He was no fool; he knew what was going on.

After lunch, Kyra announced that she had to drive into town for food. This would be the test; we couldn't be sure of her. Lew sent me up to the roof where I could get a clear view for a mile or two miles in every direction.

When, a couple of hours later, I saw her battered coupé returning with only her inside it, I knew that we were set. If she had given us away, the cops would have come before her, for a gun fight would have been inevitable.

Doc commented later: "She's not only making money on us, but we're supplying her with men to play around with." Because that evening it was Babe who helped her with the dishes and Stoop sulked.

I went up to the attic room early that night. Kyra had brought us a pile of newspapers and magazines, and I like to read in bed. Voices sounded below my window Kyra and Babe whispering to each other. I lay listening to them, although I couldn't distinguish the words, and suddenly I felt lonely. I wasn't such a bad-looking guy. Why was she ignoring me completely?

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Suddenly, Kyra screamed. Her voice rose and fell, jagged and frightened, And through it I heard Babe say: "What the hell?" Then somebody else shouted: "Damn you! Take your hands off her!"

There was a shot!

By that time, I was poking my head out the window. The sloping roof of the kitchen blocked my view. I got into my shoes and pants. As I tore down the stairs, I heard Frank Lockman wailing in the living room: "Kyra! Kyra!"

I went out through the back door, and by the light streaming out through the two kitchen windows, I saw the scene. Babe was a dark, sprawling shadow. Stoop was standing over him, his gun dangling limply from his hand.

Kyra had backed against the house. Her blouse was ripped at the shoulder, and she held it together with one hand; her other hand was at her throat. Doc and Lew had come out ahead of me. Doc moved forward quickly and dropped down on his knees beside Babe and then looked up at Stoop.

"You got him through the heart," he said softly,

Stoop looked around at us like somebody who has just awakened from a bad dream. "Why didn't he leave her alone?" he muttered. "I didn't want to kill him. I swear I didn't. Listen, Doc! He was like my own son. But he was tearing her clothes, and all of a sudden my gun was in my hand."

"Don't let it get you down, Stoop," Lew said gently.

Stoop turned and walked around the side of the house with the gun still swinging along his thigh.

"You're murderers, all of you!" Kyra burst out. "Why couldn't you let me alone?"

Doc looked at her without a word. Then he said to me: "Get a pick and shovel, Joey. We'll have to bury him."

I went down to the cellar where I knew the tools were. We dug the grave a short distance from the house.

As Lew and I were wrapping the body in a sheet, Doc mused: "I guess she's the first good-looking woman who ever paid any attention to Stoop. It was too much for him. I think I'll wring her neck."

"I told you something was bound to happen," I pointed out. "She didn't ask us to barge in on her."

"He's right, Doc." Lew said. "Don't spoil a good thing by getting sore at her. You take the feet, Joey."

We filled the grave, then started back to the house. We were halfway there when the second shot rang out. It came from the house. We dropped the tools and ran. Both Lew and I had our guns out.

The first thing we heard when we crashed through the back door was Frank Lockman shrieking. "Kyra! What is it now? Kyra, where are you?"

She was at the foot of the stairs, Her hands were gripping the banister to keep herself from falling.

"Upstairs!" she gasped. "There was a shot."

We found Stoop stretched out on his cot. His gun was still in his hand. The hole in his temple was tinged with blue and didn't bleed much.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

"Killed himself!" Lew gasped.

"He had a heart after all," Doc whispered. "He thought a lot of Babe."

There was a stir of feet behind us and we turned to see Kyra in the doorway, Her eyes misted with tears as she stared at the dead man.

Doc's mouth twisted. "How do you like Babe and Stoop now?" he said.

She flinched before his words. A moment later, she was gone. We could hear her running down the stairs, and we could hear her husband stilling calling to her,

"Looks like we'll have to do some more digging," Lew said. Then he added reflectively: "Anyway, now our split of the dough will be a lot bigger."

So we buried Stoop next to Babe, and then I went back to bed.

I didn't do much sleeping. Whenever I opened my eyes, moonlight showed me the emptiness of the double bed next to my cot. After a while, I started thinking of the woman downstairs for whom a guy like Stoop had murdered. She seemed to be coming closer and closer until part of her was in the room with me, and I forgot all about Babe and Stoop and I kept tossing in bed for hours before I finally fell asleep.

Laughter floated up to me when I awoke. It was Lew Virova outside the house, and I knew, somehow, that it wasn't Doc with him. I found that I hated him because he had beaten me down— stairs to her.

Through the window of the front door, I saw Kyra and Lew out on the porch. They were leaning against the railing, and she was smiling at something he was whispering, and every now and then he would burst into laughter. I eased away.

When I passed the living-room door, I saw Frank Lockman lying in the same position as yesterday and the day before. His eyes were closed, now, but it was plain that he was listening to them outside.

Doc was playing solitaire on the dining-room table. "So it's Lew, now?" he said dryly. "What do you guys see in her? There are a lot prettier women in the world."

"I told you how it would be," I said, "She's the only one available."

Doc raised his head. "You're pretty smart, aren't you, Joey?"

"No," I said. "If I were, I'd be able to figure out what she could see in a kid like Babe or a pill like Stoop or a mug like Lew."

"So she's got under your skin, too?"

"I'm human."

Doc sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid you are. But don't start up with Lew. We're sitting pretty in this place. We've got nearly fifty grand and only a three-way split."

"Don't worry about me," I mumbled.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

That afternoon I came across Lew shaving himself for the first time in three days and plaster— ing his hair with something he'd found in the medicine chest. When he saw me in the bathroom doorway, he grinned sheepishly,

"Me and Kyra are gonna pick berries for supper," he explained.

"I had an idea you were going to a fancy ball," I said.

On the way downstairs, I met Kyra coming up. We had to squeeze past each other, and I got a strong whiff of tantalizing perfume. I was still a little giddy, when I joined Doc in the living room. He had yesterday's racing page spread out on the table and was figuring out what he would have lost if he had been near a bookie.

"Now they're going to pick berries," I said hollowly.

Doc didn't bother to comment. I leaned against a chair and heard Kyra come down and go into the living room. There were low voices, and her husband shouted out a single name which, I suppose, fitted her. She laughed at him and went out to the hall and called up the stairs: "Are you ready, Lew?"

"I'll be right down, baby."

Doc wrote a few more numbers and said: "That poor guy in there."

Then we heard a crash and a heavy weight bumping down the stairs and two voices screaming. Wood splintered, and then there was only one voice and it was whimpering.

I beat Doc out to the hall. Lew Virova lay on the floor. His face was a shambles of blood. An arm thrashed feebly and a leg jerked once and was still. I dropped down to the floor and reached my hands out for his shoulders. Then I noticed the odd position of his head, and I knew that he was past anybody's help.

Frank Lockman was crying: "Kyra, are you hurt? Kyra, answer me!"

She was huddled at the foot of the stairs. Her whimpers had stopped, but her mouth was still working. I looked away from her to where the banister was broken, halfway up, where Lew's heavy body had crashed through it. One of the splintered edges of the banister had done things to his face, but the real damage was the result of the fall itself.

Doc was down at my side. "Neck broken," he said and stood up again, Kyra found her voice. "You've got to get him to a hospital at once."

"We're hardly in a position to do that," Doc said bitterly.

"Do you mean to say you'll let him die?"

"He'll die, anyway. Best we can do is make him comfortable in bed. I hope he doesn't recover consciousness"

Doc and I picked him up, I doubt if Lew could have stood being moved if he had been conscious; but, this way, he was only a heavy, inert bundle. Kyra rushed up ahead of us to straighten out his bed.

Doc May wasn't an M.D., of course, but he knew something about everything and managed to keep Lew doped up. There was plenty of stuff in the house which doctors had prescribed for Frank Lockman. About all we could do after that was wait.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

Kyra brought supper up to us. As she was leaving, Doc caught her arm.

"You haven't told us yet how it happened."

She shuddered, "It was over so quickly. I was waiting downstairs for him. He must have tripped, and suddenly he was falling. Then !" She buried her face in her hands.

Doc's mouth thinned out. "Playing around with you appears to be fatal."

She burst into tears and ran out of the room.

"Why can't you let her alone?" I demanded savagely.

He looked me over with his mild blue eyes. "I can see why you have nothing to kick about. The field is clear for you, Joey, and our share of the money is getting bigger and bigger."

I told him I didn't think it was funny. For the next couple of hours, we didn't say much.

At about eleven that night Lew Virova died. Mercifully, he'd never recovered consciousness.

I went downstairs. Kyra wasn't with her husband or in any of the other rooms. I found her, finally, sitting on the back stairs.

"He's dead," I said.

Her shoulders hunched over and her head drooped. I sat down beside her and put my arm about her. For the last couple of days, I'd been wanting to do that.

"Doc's right," she whispered. "I bring bad luck to everybody even Frank."

"That's silly."

She turned her body to me, and I'd never felt a woman so soft in my arms.

"You're sweet, Joey. You must think I'm pretty wicked, but it's been so lonely here until you boys came. I liked you best of all, but I was afraid of you because you were so different. You didn't come near me."

"I'm near you, now," I said, and I kissed her.

The back door opened. "Sorry to break it up, Joey," Doc said. "We've important business to talk over upstairs."

"Tomorrow's time," I growled.

"No right now."

Kyra squeezed my hand, which meant that we had plenty of days ahead of us. Doc's presence kept me from kissing her again, so I patted her shoulder and followed Doc upstairs,

Doc ducked under the bed on which Lew's body lay and pulled out the black satchel.

"I didn't want to count the dough without you," he said.

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

"What's the idea?"

"You'll see."

We counted it, and it was all there. Doc looked surprised. He shoved the valise back under the bed and then whipped the blanket off Lew. While I'd been gone, Doc had pulled off his shoes and socks and had rolled up the pants.

"Look there," Doc said.

Just above each ankle, there was a thin red line bitten into the flesh. Suddenly, my heart started pumping violently.

"You mean he tripped over a wire?" I asked,

"That's right. It was stretched across the head of the stairs. It's dim there, even during the daytime, so he didn't see it."

I started toward the door.

"Don't bother," Doc said. "Remember how she ran up ahead of us? That was so she could remove the wire before we came up carrying Lew." His teeth ground. "And you were afraid we'd hurt her!"

I dropped into a chair and stared at Doc with disbelief. "That's crazy. Why would she do that?"

Doc laughed through his nostrils. "She hates us. She fought to save her husband and her— self, and she used a woman's way to fight. Why would Babe have wanted to tear her clothes? He had thought he was getting places with her without that. She worked on Stoop, who'd never been worked on before by a woman, and she timed it right. We should have guessed that Stoop's suicide was phony. He wasn't the kind to take his own life. Remember, we were burying Babe, and she was in the house when the bullet entered Stoop's head."

"That's just guesswork," I said dully. "Her husband wasn't acting. He was really suffering."

"Maybe she didn't let him in on it to make it more convincing. You told me yourself that she was crazy about her husband. Look back and see how she carefully planned out each step. We were just five armed men, but she was a woman. You're to be the next victim, or perhaps her idea is to make you kill me first. She'll do it, too, if we don't stop her."

I looked up at him, "What are you going to do?"

"This!" He pulled a knife out of his pocket and pressed a spring. A six-inch blade snapped out. The mildness had left his face. His eyes were hard blue marbles.

He waddled to the door and closed it behind him. I listened, but I couldn't hear him moving down the stairs. In a minute or two, the girl I had kissed on the back steps would be dead. That kiss had been the realest thing that had ever happened to me. There could be more kisses. It didn't have to end this way not if I did something about it right now!

I was on my feet and going to the door, I was a rich man, now. I could persuade her to leave her husband and go away with me. If she agreed to that, Doc would let her go. I'd make him. I'd kill him if necessary!

THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

There was a dim light at the head of the stairs. Doc wasn't in sight. I ran down the stairs and I was thinking: "Isn't that what she wants me to do kill Doc?"

I didn't care. Then all the money would be mine and she, too.

When I reached the part of the staircase where the banister was broken, I saw Doc. He was a shadow picked out by the feeble light coming down from the stairhead. He stood in the living-room doorway, peering in. There was no light downstairs; no sound. Kyra must have gone to sleep.

I took two more steps down; then another shadow appeared from the side of the staircase. She held a double-barrel shotgun which she must have hidden immediately after we had arrived.

"Doc!" I yelled.

He swung around and saw her. He lifted his knife. The shotgun blasted, and Doc's face vanished!

I was at the foot of the stairs, now, staring at the bloody thing on the floor. My gun was in my shoulder clip, but I didn't think of it. For long moments, my mind was a blur of horror before I realized my own danger.

I jumped. Buckshot cut into my right shoulder and spun me against the wall! Through a mist of pain, I saw her reloading.

I still do not know whether I would have gone for my own gun and shot her down if I had the use of my right arm. Maybe I would have run, anyway, for I was suddenly more afraid of that woman than of the most ruthless male killer.

I crashed through the front door. While I was jumping down the porch steps, the shotgun roared again! Miraculously, none of the shots hit me. I kept running.

Once a day, a pal of mine brings food and newspapers to my hide-out while I'm recovering from my shoulder wound. The papers are making a big fuss over the heroism of Kyra Lockman. And the cops are making a terrific effort to find me. They want the stolen money even more than they want me.

That's a laugh. All I took out of that house was my life and about thirty bucks which I had in my pocket. The money had been in the black satchel under the bed but not by the time the police got there.

I know, now, that she could have killed me in the hall instead of just wounding me, and I know that there had been no miracle in her second shot having missed me. It had been important to her that I get away alive, so that she could say I had escaped with the money.

Maybe she'd planned it that way from the first, when she'd learned that we had brought so much cash with us. I wouldn't put anything past her.