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The Birthday Present

EVERY Thursday night Henry kept his antique shop open late and enjoyed a constant flow of people browsing—and buying. Now, the day's take in his wallet, he shepherded his last two customers to the door as a clock was striking 11. As he locked up they bade him good night. "Remember us to your wife," they said. "I certainly will," Henry answered and set off toward the car park.

He and Mildred had married very young. They were still young. But years of familiarity had chipped and dulled the crisp, bright edges of their marriage. When they had first started dating, way back in high school, Henry had been a track star, a campus hero. His athletic prowess had shed its light on Mildred, made her talked about enviously as Henry's girl.

Looking back to the early days of their marriage, Henry remembered Mildred as all sparkle. But there seemed little of that left now. Not that they were unhappy. At least, Henry wasn't. Mildred was a wonderful wife, Henry Junior was a fine kid, and the business was modestly profitable.

If only something would happen to change the endless pattern!

Tomorrow was his birthday, and he could describe in advance the day's whole sequence. Junior's present would come with breakfast—a couple of ties chosen by Mildred. Innocuous and featureless; respectable; just plain dull.

Henry sighed. That was the trouble. Life had grown dull and colorless for both of them, without the sudden, sharp prick of the unexpected. Deep down he suspected that Mildred sometimes longed to be the center of attention again, was disappointed he no longer brought her little moments of glory.

"I guess I've become a dull guy," he told himself, "a dull guy who's lucky to be married to such a swell girl."

Then he felt it, hard and unmistakable in the small of his back. He'd seen no one, heard nothing. The voice in his ear was soft, almost pleasant in tone.

"I'll relieve you of your cash."

"What makes you think . . . ?" Henry began to protest.

"I visited your store earlier. You've been doing pretty well. As a matter of fact I bought a trifle."

"I'll be darned!"

The stranger chuckled. "Don't turn around. Now . . . the money, please."

Henry took out his wallet and extracted some bills. Leaning over his shoulder the stranger said, "All of it."

Henry removed the last bills. The man snatched them. "Thanks," he said.

"Now, I'm going to walk right behind you to the corner. When you turn, don't look back. And don't make trouble."

At the corner Henry felt a gentle, almost friendly, jab in the back. "Good night," the voice said. "On your way."

Henry looked despairingly around. Not a cop in sight.

AT THE entrance to the parking lot, realization struck him. He'd been cleaned out. He couldn't even redeem his car.

Cold rage gripped him. Defiantly he retraced his steps to the corner, his rubber-soled shoes making no sound. If only he could get his hands on that soft-spoken . . . But at the corner all he saw was a shortish man across the street walking away from him with a slight limp. That, Henry decided, was not his assailant. If only there were a patrol car about. "There would have been one on my tail soon enough if I'd gone through a light," he grumbled.

Suddenly he saw a figure emerge from a doorway and follow the man

with the limp. There was something faintly familiar about him. Henry was sure he had seen the man before.

In the store! That was it! He remembered now. There'd been several other customers. The man had bought something insignificant. Henry had been too busy to pay much attention.

This was the guy, all right. "Please, please let there be a cop," Henry prayed as he set off in pursuit on his own side of the street.

The man's air was casual, but to Henry there was menace in the stealthy tread. Already he was closing the distance between himself and his unsuspecting victim. At the intersection the latter halted while a bus rumbled up the avenue. A taxi and a couple of cars sped by. The pursuer dawdled. Henry shrank close against the buildings.

Then the pursuit was resumed—furtive, deliberate. Ahead was a vacant lot where kids played during the day. It was dark now. There, Henry figured, the holdup would take place. Excitement filled him. At last he had a chance to do something.

He slipped between two parked cars, then raced diagonally across the road into a doorway.

Peering out, he saw that he had not been observed. He gained a few more yards, then dodged into hiding. The gaps between pursuers and pursued were closing.

"Now," he told himself and sprang forward. Right opposite the vacant lot he closed. He flung an arm round his quarry's neck and forced his head back. Taken by surprise, the man hesitated; and in that moment Henry put all of his strength into his efforts.

Unaware of the silent struggle behind him, the man ahead limped on and vanished around the corner. Not until too late did Henry think of shouting.

Now a sense of dread gripped him.

He knew he couldn't keep up the strain much longer, and his one hope of help had vanished. He had to concentrate on keeping his opponent's gun arm pinioned while he tried desperately to increase pressure on the arm locked around the man's neck.

Suddenly there was a numbing ache in his shoulder and he loosed his hold. "Okay, break it up!" There was no mistaking the night stick, the armed solidity of the policeman.

"Thanks, officer. You got here just in time," Henry's opponent murmured, rubbing his throat.

"Saw him come after you," said the policeman. "You okay? Then we'll be on our way."

"But . . ." Henry began.

"Get going," the policeman ordered. "This guy took all my money," Henry burst out furiously.

"Not the way I saw it. You can tell them that at the station."

"It's true, I tell you. He's got a gun."

The other laughed. "We can soon prove the truth of his statements." He held up his arms. "Search me, please."

"It's in his pocket, the right-hand pocket," Henry said desperately.

The policeman's expert hand went briskly about its business and produced a cut-glass decanter stopper which Henry immediately recognized.

"Trying to match up one I broke," the other said ruefully.

Henry exploded, "I tell you he took my money. I'll prove it!"

"You're going to find that difficult, aren't you?" his adversary replied.

The policeman gripped Henry's arm. "You can talk at the station when I've booked you."

"Booked me!"

"That's what I said."

"I suppose you'll be wanting me to come along, too, officer."

"Sure will. Need your story."



They began to walk along the street. Presently the affable voice said, "Say, officer, let's give him a break. I'm willing to forget the whole thing."

The man's effrontery astounded Henry. Before he could shape a reply the

policeman answered. "You crazy?" "Maybe he's got a wife and kids." "That's his worry. I'm paid to keep the city clear of his kind."

THEY continued in silence as far as the precinct house. Its grimy facade was forbidding. The policeman urged Henry up the stoop and began to follow. Then the quiet voice spoke again. "Let him go. I haven't lost a thing." The man was hanging back, as though he was reluctant to enter the building.

It dawned on Henry that the man was pleading. For all his seeming composure he was afraid. Suddenly Henry realized he was in a better position to figure out the truth than the cop. The thug dared not reveal his identity. He had to get Henry off and keep himself out of the station. He probably had a police record.

"Nothing doing," Henry answered firmly. "You're coming inside."

Surprised, the policeman turned toward Henry. In that moment the other swung around, darted between the parked cars, and ran to the corner.

Thrusting the policeman aside, Henry leaped down the steps. "I'll get him," he yelled and sped in pursuit. He heard the shrill of a whistle behind him and

raced, jubilant and determined. There was no gun to fear. He had the measure of his man.

Around the corner and across the avenue. An approaching bus gave the man a momentary advantage, hiding him from view. Then Henry caught sight of him ducking behind a parked station wagon and resumed the chase.

He was aware of the powerful piston-ing of his limbs, of the need to force that last extra effort. It was like the old days with Mildred jumping up and down, eyes sparkling as she cheered him on to victory.

The police arrived to find a triumphant Henry sitting astride the stranger's back. He looked at them with a broad grin. "Who's paid to keep the city clear of my kind?" he asked sarcastically.

"Looks like I made a mistake."

"You sure did," Henry panted. "But I'll forgive you." He bounced up and down on the recumbent figure. "This guy's given me the best birthday present I've had in years." He stood up. "I do have a wife and kid."

What a birthday he'd have, after all! Mildred would be so proud of him . . . And Junior . . . well, Junior wouldn't be able to get to school fast enough to boast about his dad . . .



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