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SHORT STORY

THE PURSUER

Written for "The Listener"

by
JACK PRESTIDGE



SPIKE DUANE was a very handsome man. He was also a cold-blooded killer. Unknown to the police, he had never been photographed, never fingerprinted. Trusting nobody, he had always been a lone wolf, which accounted for his never having seen the inside of a prison.

A pity, he reflected, as the pilot of the Atlantic City passenger 'plane fed fuel to the powerful motors which burst into a roaring crescendo and dragged the 'plane upward, that he had had to kill Van Weyden. Still, Van Weyden had no one to blame but himself. It was foolish of him to enter the library when he did. It wasn't the actual killing he regretted so much. Killing had become already a trade with him by that time. It was the thought that at last someone had started on his trail—a woman.

Spike Duane racked his brains in a vain attempt to discover where he had slipped. He had carefully wiped the safe clean of fingerprints, and the gun he had thrown into the Hudson, from which it would never be recovered. How, then, had the woman got wise? Who was she—Van Weyden's wife, his fiancée? Spike Duane did not know. But he felt sure that she, whoever she was, was determined to settle accounts in her own way.

HE had first caught sight of her in Muratti's night club, the evening following on the murder. Happening to glance casually across the room, he had seen her watching him closely. For a woman, he thought, the face seemed strangely grim and determined. Then she had picked up her bag and started to walk swiftly towards his table.

Fear, be it said, was not a habit with Spike Duane. Even when he was a child he had been cold to it; nor had he felt it then, even though instinct had warned him that she was carrying a gun in her bag.

Had it been a man, he would have shot it out and taken his chance. But shooting down a woman—well, that was an altogether different proposition. He had always entertained a peculiar respect for the so-called weaker sex, and his whole nature revolted at the thought of harming one of them. He had fled; but he had been unable to lose her. Once, on Fifth Avenue, she had almost caught up with him, and it was only by jumping aboard a moving taxi that he had been able to escape.

There was, he decided, nothing, so far as he could see, but to keep moving in the desperate hope that he would be able to shake her off. Hence his presence aboard the 'plane.

ARRIVED at Atlantic City, Spike Duane booked in at the Seaview hotel and went straight to bed. The next evening, as he was strolling along a brilliantly-lit thoroughfare, some vague sense gave him sudden warning. Spike Duane paused; his dark eyes looked back over his shoulder, coming to rest upon a slender, supple form. With a gasp of dismay, he broke into a run.

Spike Duane thought it unsafe to return to his hotel. He found a room in a second-rate boarding house, where he hid for three days. It was his need of fresh linen that finally made him venture forth again. As he emerged from the shop, he met the woman face to face. For a brief instant he stood rooted to the pavement, just long enough for him to notice that there was a kind of fanaticism in her eyes. Then he dropped his parcel and took to his heels.

He heard her call after him, but he did not stop. Fear had finally caught up with him; and as he ran he felt rivulets of sweat trickle down his back and legs.

He decided to leave Atlantic City, and leave it by stealth. A 'plane was out of the question, as was a train—unless he rode the rods...

SPIKE DUANE had never ridden the rods before, but what others had done he could do himself. Nightfall found him lying hidden in a railway goods yard, waiting for a west-bound freight. When it finally drew out, Spike Duane lay on the rods beneath a truck, along with two professional hoboes.

Three days later, aching in every limb, his clothes ruined, he arrived at Chicago. Having plenty of money on his person, he purchased a complete change of clothing, then booked in at a cheap downtown hotel. After an hour spent in a hot bath, he climbed into bed and slept twelve hours straight.

For two whole days Spike Duane rested. He decided that he liked Chicago, until he caught sight of the woman in a passing taxi. He began sweating again. Would he never be able to shake her off!

He left Chicago that same evening. This time he selected a meat-car, climbed to the roof and stretched out flat hoping that there were no tunnels ahead. An hour later the guard discovered him.

"On your way, hobo," he said.

Before Spike could reach for his gun, rough hands grasped him. He sailed into the air. He struck the sandy embankment, and rolled down it, cursing, to the bottom. For a moment Spike played with the idea of sending a stream of lead after the train, thought better of it, rose to his feet, brushed the sand out of his hair, then walked along the embankment towards the road.

A transport wagon picked him up and carried him a hundred and fifty miles. A week later he reached Prescott, Arizona. From Prescott he made his way by devious routes to Frisco, from which city he intended taking ship to South America. Only there, he thought, would he be free of the woman who had stuck to his trail like glue.

HAVING purchased his ticket, he started to walk back to his hotel. As he was about to cross Third Street at Market, he saw the woman again. She was standing watching from the other side of the street. Then she shouted something which the traffic prevented him from hearing, and started to cross towards him.

(Continued on next page)

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