

# DOLL-FRIEN

## D

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*He had a beautiful wife. But the girl he really loved  
came out of a slot machine — warm and soft and  
clinging and unalive.*

OF ALL the doll-friends Carter had ever danced with, Edie Four was by far his favorite. The mere act of depressing keys E, D, and 4 on the console of the huge juke-doll box gave him a thrill comparable to the thrill Aladdin must have felt when he rubbed his magic lamp; and the mere sight of her when she emerged, all tall and golden in a golden gown, was in itself well worth the half dollar it cost to bring her to life.

It was a truism to say that all doll-friends were beautiful. Man, working with his lathes and his shapers and his plastics and his photoelectric cells, was a creator in his own right, and while unlike God he could not endow his products with souls, he could, and did, endow them with a physical perfection unmatched by any product ever to have come off the celestial production line. However, Carter's preference for Edie did not stem solely from her physical allure: she had personality, too.

When he said something to her, she didn't respond with the cliches the other doll-friends used. For instance, when he made a flattering remark, she didn't come up with an archaic bromide like, "I'll bet you say that to all the girls!" Instead, she'd say something like, "I'm going to write that down in my diary when I get home tonight, and sleep with it under my pillow." Or, if he asked her for a date—jokingly, of course—she didn't quote Paragraph 16 of the Doll-Friend Handbook, the way the others did. Instead, she'd drop her eyes demurely and say something like, "I'd love to Floyd, but you know what people would say," or, "What would your wife think!"

Naturally, Carter knew that the first shift E-D-4 manipulator in the upstairs control room was responsible for everything she said as well as everything she did; but he preferred to pretend that it was Edie, and Edie alone, who danced and talked with him, and spiked his cup of life with the golden spirits of romance.

"Personally," he said one evening, "I don't give a damn what, my wife would think. And if I thought I

could get away with it, I'd sneak you out the backdoor sometime and take you riding in my Cadillac!"

"But what good would that do you, Floyd? My manipulator would simply break contact and call the police. And you'd feel awfully silly being picked up with a rag doll on your hands."

"You're not a rag doll!"

"Without my manipulator I'm the equivalent of one."

Carter looked deep into the blue lenses of her eyes. "Who is your manipulator, anyway?"

"You know I'm forbidden to tell you."

Abruptly he whirled her between two of the booths that bordered the dance floor, and stole a kiss. "Anyway, tomorrow's Saturday," he said. "And my wife works full time Saturdays, but I only work half a day. I'm going to monopolize you all afternoon!"

He whirled her back to the dance floor and they wound deftly in and out among the dancing doll-friends and their partners. It was the last dance of the day that he had time for, and he concentrated on enjoying it. The music became a pink cloud beneath his feet, and Edie turned into a golden-haired goddess.

"You *do* like me the best, don't you?" she said to his shoulder.

"Compared to you, the others are nothing but paper dolls," he whispered to the ribbon in her hair.

But for all his levity he felt depressed when the dance came to an end and he had to escort her back to the juke-doll box. They said good night, and she blew him a kiss over her shoulder as she re-entered the magic portal with her synthetic sisters. Carter headed for the bar straight-away.

He brooded over a beer, staring idly at the door behind the bar that opened on the stairs leading up to the control room, wondering absently why he never saw the manipulators come and go when they changed shifts. Presently he realized that this time when he'd asked Edie for a date, he'd only been *half-joking*. Moreover, Edie — or, more accurately, Ease's manipulator—must have realized it, too. He waited for at least a modicum of embarrassment to apprise him that his infatuation had not quite exceeded the bounds of reality; but all he felt was a poignant regret that the treasured 3:00-7:00 P.M. interval of the day was rapidly drawing to a close.

At five after seven he left the Doll House and walked the three blocks to the corner where he met his wife every week-day night. They took an airbus home —Marcia's Chevrolet was being summerized, and Carter couldn't see exposing his Cadillac to the hazards of city driving—and sat silently in the semi-darkness, gazing idly at the projected photon signs that filled the April sky. Once the airbus flew right through one that said, TRY A CAKE OF CLOUD SOAP AND SMELL LIKE AN ANGEL, and he felt Marcia wince beside him.

He withheld his usual comment to the effect that it was high time she divested herself of her goddess-ropes of idealism and accepted the *status quo*. He was too worn out from the grueling 9:00 A.M.-5:00 P.M. stint at Brainstorm, Inc. to feel like arguing. Glancing sideways at her and noticing the bluish crescents beneath her dark liquid eyes, it occurred to him that she was probably tired, too.

Well let her be tired! he thought. No one was making her work—no one except her own stubborn self. Lord knew, *he'd* never forced her to go out and get a job. That was her own idea—and like most of her ideas, there was no talking her out of it. He was willing to bet, though, that in another month or so she'd talk herself out of it. Working in an age as subject to psychological pressures as the Age of Mass-Creativity was, could become a pretty rough proposition, even when you had a job as easy as the one she claimed to have.

In their split-level apartment, Marcia slipped out of her coat and went into the kitchen. Carter removed his own coat and turned on the 3V set. Presently Marcia reappeared in the kitchen doorway. "Steak and French fries or ham and scalloped potatoes?" she asked.

"Steak and French fries," Carter said.

She returned to the kitchen to open the appropriate vacuum-pac, and he sat down to watch the seven-thirty edition of the Up To The Second News. Her after-image lingered on his retina: tall and dark of hair; classic of features (except for the too-full lower lip); stately of neck and shoulders; Munroesque of breasts . . . He regarded it wonderingly, trying to understand, as he so often had before, how anyone

could be so promising to look at and yet be so frustrating to live with. At length the after-image faded, and he turned his attention to the news.

One of the roving cameras had just picked up the aftermath of a collision between an aircab and an airbus. The airbus, in falling, had lodged between two apartment buildings, and white faces were protruding from its windows, mouths round with screams which the audio unit was as yet too distant to pick up. Above the scene, a rescue 'copter was hovering in the night sky, blades gleaming in the starlight, and beyond its transparent hull the crew could be seen preparing to lower a huge *magnet*. Carter leaned forward tensely. The best part about live news was its utter unpredictability: not even the producers knew how any given event would come out.

Marcia came into the room. "The table's set, Floyd. Would you like to sit down now?"

"No, not now! Look what's happening, Quick!"

She glanced at the screen, turned away. At that very moment the airbus slipped free and fell the rest of the way down between the two buildings. The audio unit was now in position, and there was the gratifying crunch of metal, the rasp of steel on stone, followed by scream after scream after scream.

"Boy, that was a good one!" Carter said.

"Sounded like a one hundred percenter," Marcia said. She turned down the volume. "Do you want to eat now, or wait and see the blood?"

Carter stood up. "You make it sound like I'm a monster," he said indignantly. "I'm no different from anybody else."

"I know you're not."

The flat tone of voice she used made the statement seem like an accusation. For a moment he was tempted to call her on it; then he shrugged his shoulders and followed her into the kitchen. Her opinion of him had ceased to matter some time ago; it had never mattered very much in the first place.

No, that wasn't quite true, he amended, sitting down and picking up his knife and fork. It had mattered very much when he had married her ten months ago. But that was before he'd had any idea that her high-flown intellectualism had awakened the puritan in her, thereby distorting not only her attitude towards the technological utopia in which she lived, but her attitude towards sex as well.

They ate in silence, till Marcia's Venerian aris flew down from its cage and perched upon her shoulder. "Bread and circuses! Bread and circuses!"

Why don't you teach him to say something funny? Carter nearly said; and then he remembered all the times he really had said it, without result, and went on eating.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel. Let down thy hair!" the aris said, and made three swift blue circles around the room and re-alihted on Marcia's shoulder.

"Hush, Sir Gawain!" she said. "Can't you see we're eating?"

"The sea is calm tonight, the tide is full—"

"Hush!"

"Ah, love, let us be true!—"

Marcia's fork made a little clattering sound against her plate. She laid it down carefully and picked up her coffee. Some of it spilled when she raised the cup to her lips, and she set the cup back down again. She stood up. "Excuse me," she said. "I'm not very hungry." She put Sir Gawain back in his cage and closed the door; then she left the kitchen.

Carter listened to her footsteps on the split-level stairs that led to the bedroom, listened to the bedroom door close. Presently he resumed eating. He was inured to Marcia's moods.

His thoughts shifted back to Sale and his eyes lifted to the kitchen clock. 8:00 P.M. Eighteen hours to go before he could see her again. He grimaced. Not that the hours themselves mattered so much: it was the way in which he must spend them that was distasteful.

First, the long dull evening in the living room, drinking more than was good for him; and then the long, semi-sleepless night in the same room with a physically irresistible woman who considered an act of love detrimental to human dignity; finally, the weekly Saturday morning Mass-Think...

While bringing the salaried employees of a firm together for periodic ideation sessions was not a particularly new practice, enough innovations had been added during the past few decades to lend it a new look. The *modus operandi* at Brainstorm, Inc., was as follows: First, Mr. Morrow, the firm's president, seated the employees around the conference table and passed out two truth tablets to each one. Next, he read Paragraphs 124 and 199 of the section of the revised labor law that dealt with management's right to utilize harmless drugs in the "elicitation of maximum output from salaried employees." (Paragraph 124 said in effect that the user would remember only disconnected fragments of what he said—or, in the case of a group, disconnected fragments of what the members of the group said—while under TT-narcosis; and Paragraph 199 said in effect that any employer who utilized the association words and phrases that emanated from an employee's subconscious during TT-narcosis for any purpose not directly related to the advancement of the firm's economic welfare, was subject to 10 days in jail, or a \$1,000 fine, or both.) Then he told them to take their tablets, and after they had done so, he instructed them to hold hands with the persons sitting on either side of them. Finally, he dimmed the lights, announced the first subject on which he wanted their subconscious reactions, and turned on the 3V cube that rested in the center of the conference table.

The first subject on this particular Saturday morning was "milk," and the first image to appear on the four vertical sides of the cube was a large glass of it. Taped music, in response to the pressure of Mr. Morrow's knee on a switch beneath the tabletop, began flowing from hidden wall-speakers.

For a while the music had the acoustics to itself. Then: "Kidney stones," Harris of Accounts, who sat across the table from Carter, said.

"Old Mother Hubbard," Miss Stokes, who sat on Carter's right, said.

"I got drunk the day of my mother's funeral," Minton of Innovations, who sat on Carter's left, said.

"Prunes," Carter, who was more aware of Miss Stokes' clammy hand in his, and her somewhat sere countenance hovering at the edge of his vision than he was of the image on the 3V cube, said.

The glass of milk transmuted to a mother nursing her child. Brahms' *Lullaby* sounded softly from the wall-speakers.

"Malthus," Miss Stokes said.

"I must remember to get my mother a birthday present," Harris of Accounts said,

"Foam rubber," Miss Brennan, who sat between Harris and Mr. Morrow, said.

Carter glanced across the table at her, instinctively comparing her deftly painted countenance to Miss Stokes' withered one; her full bosom to Miss Stokes' flat one. Once upon a time, before he'd married Marcia, he and Miss Brennan had had many a tentative tete a tete by the drinking fountain, and he toyed momentarily with the idea of resuming them. Miss Brennan, if the yearning looks she leveled at him every now and then could be used as criteria, would be more than willing. Then, as the truth tablets he had taken finally took complete control of his faculties, his thought faded away and his attention wandered back to the cube.

Mother and child had disappeared, and the Horseshoe Palls with water whitened to represent milk, had taken their place. Brahms' *Lullaby* had blended into Beiderbecke's *In a Mist* and Miss Stokes was saying, "I much prefer the Victoria Falls in Southern Rhodesia. They're far more magnificent . . . and cleaner, somehow ..."

"I think it's about time I turned in my Edsel Jr. for a Cadillacette," Harris of Accounts said. "The difference in riding comfort might be just what the doctor ordered."

"Wonder what it would be like to drown in milk," Minton of Innovations said.

"Black coffee," Carter said.

"I have two pairs of them," Miss Brennan said, "and I keep the extra pair hidden in the secret compartment in the bottom drawer of my vanity."

The Horseshoe Falls blurred, became a dairy bar filled with rosy-cheeked children downing tall glasses of milk. Beiderbecke's *In a Mist* became Feurtado's *Milk Bar Romp*.

"Den of Iniquity!" Miss Stokes said.

"Maybe I should turn it in for a Lincolnette," Harris of Accounts said.

"Micromastia," Miss Brennan said.

"Twin beds," Carter said.

The dairy bar was replaced by an endless progression of newly-filled milk bottles issuing from a huge filler. Feurtado's *Milk Bar Romp* gave way to Metz's *Industrial Rhapsody*—

"Bottle babies are the best!" Miss Brennan said suddenly.

"Splendid!" Mr. Morrow said. He brightened the lights. "The very slogan the Dairymen's League was looking for! Nice going, Miss Brennan. An hour from now you won't remember what I'm saying, but there'll be a substantial little bonus included in your paycheck next week to remind you. Now we'll try subject No. 2. Ready, everybody? . . ." He dimmed the lights—

"Toothpaste!"—

Carter was glad when noon came. There was a quality about Mass-Thinks that gave him an unclean feeling, and it was a Pleasure to extricate his hand from Miss Stokes' and walk out of the conference room. She trailed after him all the way to the street: she'd always had a romanticized crush on him, and lately she'd been acting sillier towards him than ever. It was almost as though he'd been encouraging her, though nothing could have been farther from the truth.

He was half-afraid she might suggest their having lunch together, but she did not. Instead, after a simpering good-bye, she hurried off into the noonday crowd. He remembered, then, that like Miss Brennan, she too held down two jobs. He gave a sigh of relief and headed towards his favorite restaurant.

He ate leisurely. The Doll House didn't open till two o'clock, and actually all he gained on Saturdays was an extra hour with Edie; but an hour was an hour. While he ate, a strange word kept popping into his mind, and he occupied his thoughts with trying to figure out what it meant and where he'd heard it. The word was "micromastia."

"Mastia," he was pretty sure, denoted a mammary condition, and the prefix "micro" left little doubt as to the nature of that condition. As to where he'd heard the word, that wasn't hard to figure out: unfamiliar words were always popping into his mind after a Mass-Think. He wondered out of whose subconscious this one had emanated, and immediately Miss Stokes' starry-eyed face rose above the horizon of his intuition. He gave a little shudder.

Halfway through his meal, he looked up and saw Miss Brennan sitting several tables away. He nodded to her, but she went right on eating, and he assumed she hadn't seen him. He returned his attention to his plate, wondering why so attractive a girl should be crowding thirty and still be unmarried, or even engaged; but he didn't pursue his thoughts for any distance, because he didn't really care, and when he looked up again she was gone.

He finished his meal, smoked a cigarette over a second cup of coffee, then paid his check and took a slow walk to the Doll House. The doors were just opening when he got there, and he made a beeline for the juke-doll box. No one was going to beat his time with Edie if he could help it.

"Hi," she said, when the magic portal delivered her into his arms. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," he said, whirling her onto the floor.

After dancing to *Deep Space, Ecstasy* and the *Cadillette Blues*, they sat out a dance in one of the rear booths. Carter ordered a beer. "Well," he said, after the waiter had left, "did you decide to let me take you for a ride yet?"

"I *told* you what would happen if you did. My manipulator would have the police down on your neck in two minutes flat and I'd turn into a rag doll."

"You and your manipulator!" Carter said impulsively. "I'll bet she's an old maid with acute micromastia!"

A silence, softly backgrounded by the music and the susurrus of the dancers' feet, fell between them. Presently: "Perhaps I am," Edie said.

He caught the slip of the tongue, and instantly he was contrite. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that," he said. "It just came out, somehow."

"It's, all right, Floyd."

The music ended. "I've got the next dance," he said.

"All right."

When she re-emerged from the juke-doll box to the strains of a slow waltz, he held her close and pressed his cheek against her hair, in an effort to atone for his remark. He was astonished when, without the slightest warning, she looked up into his eyes and said, "Do you still want me to go for a ride with you?"

"Yes, but your man—"

"She's decided to cooperate."

They moved mutually into a corner, came to a standstill. "But how—" Carter began.

"It's very simple. Tonight, after they close, I'll open the juke-doll box from the inside, go out through the backdoor of the building and meet you in the alley."

Carter swallowed. He realized belatedly why doll-friends were so popular: they provided a hitherto nonexistent outlet for men like himself who only wanted to *half*-cheat on their wives. "Suppose something should *go* wrong," he said. "Suppose—"

"I didn't think *you'd* be afraid!"

"I'm not!"

"All right then. They close at midnight. I'll allow an hour for the bartender to clean up and lock the doors, and then I'll slip outside. You can drive right up to the backdoor—the alley's plenty wide enough. I'll meet you there at one o'clock."

One o'clock, Carter mused. Marcia would be in bed long before then; he could easily leave the apartment and drive the Cadillac into town. And even if she should awake while he was gone, all he had to tell her when he returned was that he hadn't been able to sleep and had gone for a ride in order to relax.

A thought occurred to him: "But won't there be another E-D-4 manipulator on duty then?"

"She goes off at midnight. After she leaves, I'll—my present manipulator will take over again."

Carter took out his handkerchief, blotted his brow. "Well—"

Edie put her arms around his neck and kissed him. "One o'clock, darling," she said. "All right?"

Carter replaced his handkerchief in his pocket. ". . . All right."

"Come on. Let's dance!"

"Chicken and dumplings or chow mein?" Marcia asked.

"Chicken and dumplings," Carter said.

He felt tired. Not even the eight o'clock Up To The Second news interested him, even though there was a good street fight on an excellent three-alarm fire. He hadn't left the Doll House at six, as was his usual custom, but had stayed to see what Edie would be like under the control of the second shift manipulator. He'd been disappointed: she was just as lacklustre and as lackadaisical as the rest of them.

After supper his tiredness turned into stupor, and he dozed off in his 3V chair. When he awoke and glanced at his watch he was startled to see that it was almost midnight.

He checked the bedroom to see if Marcia was asleep, then he went out to the kitchen and washed and shaved, running the water slowly and keeping his razor at low speed. Finally he retied his tie in front of the kitchen mirror, and combed his hair. Sir Gawain, awakened by the light, chortled sleepily to himself in his covered cage, uttering a muffled word now and then, that he had picked up during the day. But Carter didn't pay much attention: he had too much on his mind.

The kitchen clock said 12:29 when he left the apartment and took the lift down to the basement. He walked through the subterranean passage to the parking building, took another lift up to the first level, which was reserved for Cadillacs, and drove his car out into the street. His watch said 12:35 when he turned toward the brightness of the business district.

For a while the unconventional nature of the adventure gave him a feeling of guilt. It wasn't natural, he told himself, for a normal man to crave the purely idealistic companionship which was all any mannequin, either animate or inanimate, could give him; and the fact that he, Carter, did crave it, allowed only two

conclusions: either he was abnormal—or abjectly lonely. However, he was confident of his normalcy—indeed, it was his very averageness that had estranged him from his wife—and by the time he pulled into the alley behind the Doll House, his feeling of guilt had transmuted to one of anticipation.

His watch said 1:02, but his headlights picked up nothing but bare brick walls and empty doorsteps. He switched them off and sat in the darkness, waiting. He smoked one cigarette after another; his heart thudded in his throat. He looked at his watch again: 1:23. It occurred to him that it might be fast, but then he remembered that he'd checked it with the kitchen clock before he'd left. He was beginning to wish that the old custom of adorning steeples and domes with timepieces still prevailed so that he could check it again, when he heard the sound of a door opening and closing. Presently a familiar shape separated itself from the building shadows and slipped into the seat beside him. "Hope you didn't have to wait long, darling," Edie said. He backed out of the alley, swung down the street. Soon they were on the highway. "Drive fast, darling," Edie said, the April wind in her hair.

Aircabs and airbuses had done much towards eliminating highway congestion, but there was still enough traffic to make fast driving precarious. So when the speedometer needle reached 75, Carter held it there. But Edie was far from satisfied. "Faster," she urged. "Faster!"

"What's the hurry?"

"No hurry, darling, I just love to go fast, that's all."

It wouldn't hurt to humor her a little, he decided. He let the needle creep up to 85 . . . 90. Far down the highway a tractor trailer truck, its headlights blazing, rounded a curve.

"Put your arm around me"" Edie said.

He did so, after a moment's hesitation.

"Faster," she said. "Faster!"

"We're going fast enough. What's the matter with you Edie?"

"I've got micromastia. I'm an old maid with acute micromastia!" Abruptly she giggled. "Kiss me, darling!"

Shocked, Carter tried to push her away; but she put her arms around his neck and, with surprising strength, pulled his face down toward hers. The headlights of the tri-trailer were much closer now, and approaching with meteor-like swiftness. He tried to apply the brake, found his leg interlocked with hers. "No, Edie. Stop!"

"I won't stop."

"You'll get us killed!"

"Not us. You."

He saw her then. Not Edie, but the embittered spinster who was Edie's soul; sitting grimly in the manipulation room back in the city, still smarting from the unintended allusion to her shame, setting her lover up like a tenpin for the tri-trailer to send caroming. He had heard rumors about the manipulators, rumors that he hadn't believed till now: about how they were old maids who found vicarious pleasure in dancing through their mannequins with other women's husbands, flirting with them, holding hands with them; kissing them . . . And all the while he saw her, he was seeing the tri-trailer, too, with its vehement headlights flashing on and off in wild warning, and hearing the insistent trumpeting of its horn. By now, Edie had managed to pinion his one free arm to his side, and the Cadillacette, out of control, was drifting over into the path of the tri-trailer's trajectory. In a moment he would be guts and gristle scattered on the highway, the bloodied remnants of what once had been a man—

And then, an instant before collision was inevitable, Edie gave an anguished cry and grabbed the wheel. She turned it savagely. There was the rush and roar of the tri-trailer's passing, and a wild careening. Finally there was the gradual return to sanity, as Carter, once again in control, slowed to a shaken stop.

Edie was limp in the seat beside him. He shook her furiously. He slapped her plastic face. Her blue eyes regarded him glassily. Her lovely head lolled on her foam rubber shoulders.

Presently he let her slip from his hands and slide to the floor. He U-turned and started back to the

Doll House.

He parked the Cadillacette in the alley, got out and tried the backdoor. It was still unlocked. He returned to the Cadillacette, picked up the rag doll lying on the floor, carried it inside and propped it in a sitting position against the juke-doll box. Then he headed for the door behind the bar that opened upon the stairs leading to the control room.

He ascended them slowly. Riser-lights bathed his feet in rose-colored light; a plush stair-carpet swallowed his footsteps. In the second-floor hallway, brighter lights burned. It was a long hallway, stretching into the next building; through it and into the next. No wonder he had never seen a manipulator enter through the bar: they had their own entrance.

The control room, however, was directly above the bar, just as he had always imagined it to be. A sign on the door informed him that only licensed manipulators were allowed inside, but a light burned within, and the door was ajar, and he shouldered it aside and stepped brazenly into the sanctum sanctorum.

It was a room of many rooms. Dozens of narrow doors lined its walls, and above each door was a metal plate with a euphonious combination of letters and numerals stamped upon it. He walked along, reading them, till he came to the one he wanted. The door beneath it was open, and he stepped into a brightly lit cubicle.

The cubicle was empty. He had expected it to be: the open doors and the still-burning lights were unmistakable testimony to the flight of the soul of E-D-4. But, while the cubicle was empty of Edie's soul, it was far from being empty of her soul's equipment.

Wires of all sizes ran singly and in groups from the walls, ceiling and even the floor, to the arms, base, back and footrest of a large reclining-chair. Above the chair, a metallic helmet, reminiscent of a twentieth century hair-dryer, was suspended in such a way that the chair's occupant could raise or lower it to whatever level was desired. Metal contact straps lay open on the arms and footrest, waiting to be closed.

He felt the seat. It was still warm. He wondered suddenly what it would be like to be a doll-friend.

He sat down, raised his feet upon the footrest and closed the contact straps around his ankles. He leaned back and lowered the helmet over his head. He discovered that he could close and open the other set of contact straps by a slight downward pressure of his wrists. He closed them and felt with the fingers of his right hand for the switch that should logically be within their reach. He found it presently, and pressed it—

Semi-darkness suddenly enveloped him. He found himself sitting in a cramped position, his back propped against a cold metallic object. Tentatively he stood up . . . and found himself standing on the edge of a dance floor beside the juke-doll box. He was wearing a golden gown. His hair fell to his shoulders. He was Edie.

He took a step. Another. He felt the floor beneath his feet. Her feet. He raised his . . . her hand, touched his . . . her face. He felt the pressure of his . . . her fingers on his . . . her cheek.

He danced. All alone. In that half-darkness. Through the puddles of neon light that seeped through the front window from the street. He ran upstairs into the control room and looked at himself reclining in the chair in the E-D-4 cubicle. He ran back down again.

He had never dreamed that manipulator and mannequin were so completely one. But then, he had never dreamed, either, that a manipulator would, attempt to kill him through her mannequin merely because he had called her an old maid with acute micromastia.

The fact was still difficult to digest. It was almost impossible to imagine a woman, even an embittered spinster, whom he had never even seen, wanting to kill him because of a chance remark. But he was only assuming he had never seen her. Perhaps he *had* seen her—

Perhaps he *knew* her . . .

He had been walking aimlessly around the dance floor. Now he came to a dead standstill. He felt Edie's gown billow coolly against Edie's thighs. He felt Edie's fingers digging painfully into Edie's palms. He heard his words, distilled through Edie's mechanical larynx, issue incongruously from Edie's lips—

"Miss Stokes!—"



But it *couldn't* be Miss Stokes! Miss Stokes was kind and gentle. Miss Stokes was totally incapable of murder!

Yes, but so was Edie's manipulator.

But Miss Stokes Worked for Brainstorm, Inc.—

Yes, from nine to three weekdays and from nine to twelve Saturdays—and it was common knowledge that she held down two jobs. She could easily work a part time afternoon shift at the Doll House during the week, and a full one on Saturday. It was possible.

But Miss Stokes *liked* him. In her silly way, she *loved* him—

Yes, but might not her loving him encouraged her to become a licensed manipulator on the chance that some day have her love returned vicariously?

But Miss Stokes was an ineffectual old maid!—

Yes. An old maid with acute micromastia . . .

Carter returned Edie to the juke-doll box and left the Doll House. He drove home, hardly aware of the turns he took or the buildings he passed. In the apartment the first thing he did was to go out in the kitchen and open a bottle of brandy.

He took a long pull, and sat down at the kitchen table. He noticed that his hands were trembling. He wasn't surprised: finding out that someone you'd known for years had tried to murder you just because you'd called her an old maid with acute micromastia was enough to unnerve anyone.

Awakened by the kitchen light. Sir Gawain commenced to chortle in his cage. "Mi—mi—"

Carter shook his head. He still could hardly believe it. Miss Stokes. Poor starry-eyed Miss Stokes; sitting beside him every Saturday morning at the Mass-Think, holding his hand; giving him a monogrammed tie clasp for Christmas; making eyes at him like a schoolgirl whenever he passed her desk—

"Micromastia," Sir Gawain said. "Micromastia!"

Carter had raised the brandy bottle halfway to his lips. He lowered it slowly back to the table. His hands were trembling so badly now that it nearly slipped from his fingers.

He thought back: he couldn't remember having spoken the word aloud. In fact, he *knew* he hadn't spoken it aloud. And Sir Gawain wasn't telepathic. For all his mimical abilities he was still nothing but a bird.

Then Carter got up and tore the cloth cover off the cage. Sir Gawain blinked up at him reproachfully. "Micromastia," Carter said.

"Micromastia," Sir Gawain repeated. "*Acute* micromastia!"

Carter shivered. He let the cover fall to the floor. He walked through the living room and up the split level stairs to the bedroom. He looked inside.

Marcia's bed was empty.

In the living room he dialed the operator and asked what time it was. The hour she gave him was a half hour in arrears of the hour registered on his watch.

He returned to the kitchen. To the bottle of brandy. Why? he asked himself. Then: How?

He took the second question in his stride: Any woman could become a manipulator. Any woman could neglect to tell her husband where she worked, especially if her husband wasn't even interested enough to ask. And any woman could slip a mild soporific into her husband's coffee to insure his sleeping sound enough and long enough for her to set his watch and the kitchen clock half an hour back so that she could keep a vicarious date with him without his catching on.

But the first question threw him—

*Why?*

And then he made a discovery: an act without apparent motivation automatically threw the person who had performed it into a different perspective and permitted insights that might otherwise have been impossible—

Suddenly he saw his wife for the first time—her emotions seeking expression and her mind steadfastly denying them expression; her highly-sexed body craving his body the way his body craved

hers, and her intellect simultaneously repelled by his gross appetite for gory news, bewildered by his passion for doll-friends . . .

Suddenly he realized that only as a doll-friend herself—as Edie —could Marcia become unself-conscious of the sex her real body was overcharged with, and which she was afraid of, and thereby become her own natural, charming self.

As Edie, he had fallen in love with her.

Had she fallen in love with him?

And had his remark about Edie's manipulator being an old maid with acute micromastia had turned her love to hate?

But why should it have? A remark like that should have evoked amusement in a woman with Marcia's Munroesque qualities. *Marcia* wasn't an old maid with acute micromastia.

Wasn't she?

Wasn't she really—in a figurative sense—far more of an old maid than Miss Stokes was? Miss Stokes would have welcomed love at least, had it ever come her way; but it never had. It must have come Marcia's way many times, but she had never welcomed it. She had repelled it, instead, or at best endured it. So wasn't she afflicted with an acute micromastia all of her own, and wouldn't his having thrown her shame into her face have antagonized her beyond the bounds of reason because, While the remark wasn't remotely true in the sense intended, it was overwhelmingly true in a sense that hurt far more?

There was the sound of footsteps in the hall. Marcia, driving wildly through the streets of the city and the suburbs, shocked by what she had tried—and failed—to do; shocked, perhaps, into a new awareness of herself. Coming home now; repentant, frightened—

How much of her unhappiness could have been averted if he had only tried to understand her before? How much of her real love could have been his if he had only made some concession to her intellectual idealism, had even *half*-tried to attain the impossible nobility she wanted in a man? Perhaps it wasn't too late. Perhaps he could still help her. If she would only let him. If—

A key turned in the hall door. He went into the living room and stood in the darkness, waiting. The door opened slowly. She hesitated on the threshold for a moment, silhouetted by the hall light, looking searchingly into his eyes. And then she was in his arms, sobbing.

"It's all right, Marcia," he said. "It's all right, darling."

**THE END**