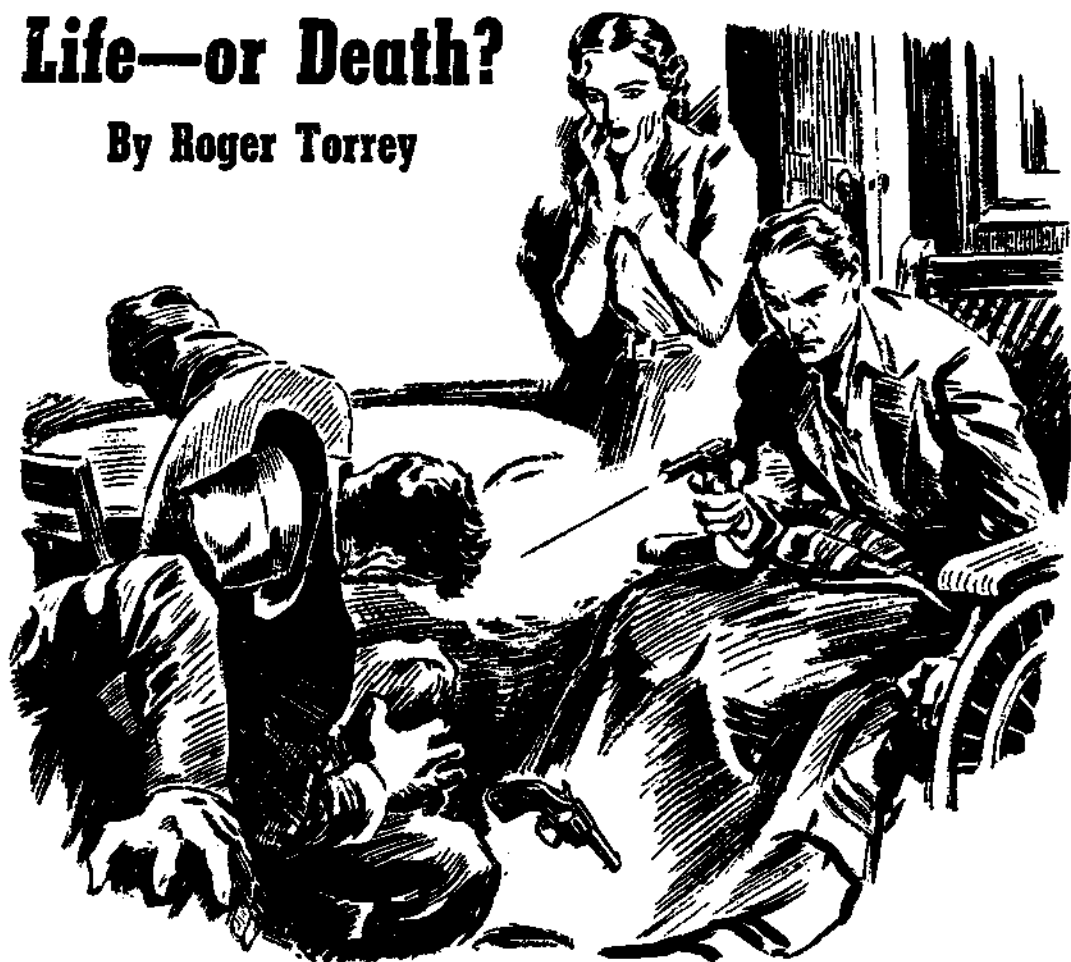


Life—or Death?

By Roger Torrey



Morgan took the gun from under the covers and shot Benny in the stomach

JOHAN MORGAN heard the rustle of paper in the hall and wheeled his chair in that direction. He didn't have any trouble with the chair because he'd been living in it for three months—at least, during his waking hours. He saw flimsy paper pushed under the hall-door, and he navigated around until he was cross-wise with the door and bent to reach it.

And found that, try as he might, it was an impossible thing to do. After all, he was completely paralyzed from the waist down, and when you can only move your arms and upper body you can't do gymnastic tricks

like picking up paper from the floor.

He stared down at it sullenly, knowing it meant trouble—trouble for either Michael Garrity, or for Norah, Michael's wife.

Norah was out, and Morgan didn't want her to come back and find him in the hall looking at trouble. He backed his unwieldy contrivance into the apartment's front room and waited for her—and said a small prayer—as any good Irishman should in time of trouble.

A bullet stood between the happiness of his two friends and his own death. John Morgan, being the sort of a man he was, made the only choice possible

And the prayer wasn't for himself but for Michael and Norah, though Morgan knew he'd be very likely to be in the thick of the mess. He

heard Norah's light steps in the outer hall, heard her key in the door, and when she came in, dark haired, blue eyed, and smiling, he smiled back. She said:

"Guess, John, what for dinner! The neighbors may not like to smell cabbage cooking, but it's going to be corned beef and cabbage just the same."

Morgan said: "That'll be swell, kid," and prayed she hadn't noticed what had been on the floor. But Norah headed for the kitchen, saying:

"There's an ad been stuck under the door but my arms are too full to pick it up. Been reading?"

Morgan nodded and held up the sheaf of police bulletins that had been in his lap. He said:

"Yeah! Mike brought 'em home last night—he knows I like to keep up with what's going on."

She went out in the kitchen and put down her bundles, then back to the hall. He heard paper rustle, and then she came back in the room, looking puzzled, and saying:

"This is funny!"

Morgan held out his hand with: "Let's see it."

It was short and to the point, even if unsigned. To Morgan, no signature was necessary. It read: QUIT SNOOPING YOU DOPE. THERE'S WAYS OF GETTING AT YOU.

Norah changed her puzzled look to one of worry and said "It's meant for Mike. He's working on something dangerous and somebody's threatening him. Gee, I wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"When he's coming home."

Morgan laughed confidently and said: "That guy! Lord, Norah, he'll smell that cabbage and he'll be home five minutes after the other shift takes over. I *know* the guy."

Norah said, unconvinced: "Maybe I should call him and tell him about it. Maybe he'd be more careful."

"You ought to know by this time, kid, that a cop gets things like that every now and then. If you make a pinch the guy

always gives you a tough talk. Forget it—he'll be home on time."

"It's the first time we ever had a note shoved under the door," said Norah. "Well, I'll start dinner, anyway. But if he isn't home right at the usual time I'm certainly going to call the station."

"You do that," Morgan said, and watched her into the kitchen. Then he cautiously wheeled his chair to the stand table at the side of the room.

All his things were kept where he could reach them from the chair—and his big service gun was in its allotted place. He picked it out of the drawer and started to slide it under the blanket that covered his legs, and then he looked up to see Norah staring at him accusingly, from the kitchen door. She said:

"And you were trying to laugh it off, John. What's it all about? What's Mike working on that's so dangerous?"

Morgan lied like a gentleman—and knew he wasn't getting over with it. "Why, Norah, you're crazy. I just happened to wonder whether I'd cleaned Old Betsy before she was put away, and I thought I'd look."

Norah said, very quietly: "All right, John. Mike will tell me about it."

And then she went back in the kitchen, leaving Morgan staring after her with a sick look in his eyes.

MICHAEL GARRITY came home at his regular hour—but it was a very subdued looking Michael Garrity. He put his hat carefully down on the table, instead of tossing it in a corner as he usually did, kissed his wife, and said:

"Hi, Johnny! A good day?"

"Why not?" said Morgan.

Norah said, her voice shaking a little: "Mike, there was a note. A threatening note. Under the door."

Garrity caught Morgan's warning look over her shoulder—and patted the shoulder. He said: "*Them* things! They come all the time. They usually come down to the station, is all. Ain't that right, Johnny?"

Morgan said: "I was trying to tell her that."

Norah took her arms from around her husband and again headed for the kitchen and the smell of cooking cabbage. She said, over her shoulder: "I'll know about it. Neither of you are fooling me one bit."

And Garrity and Morgan watched her leave, in silence.

They had a chance to talk it over while Norah washed the dishes. Garrity said: "I picked up Lazzeri again this morning—and he was out in half an hour. Just laughed at me. The guy's got me down."

"He's got me down," said Morgan, waving at the blanket over his legs. "I'll swear on the Bible that he was the guy that fired that shot."

"It isn't proof," said Garrity. "No jury would convict on what we've got—no Grand Jury would indict. What d'ya think of the note?"

"He's sore because you picked him up again. It's a cinch."

"Think he'll do anything?"

Morgan said earnestly: "Look, Mike. Don't tell Norah what it's all about, but have her stay in the house all the time. Let her telephone for what she needs."

Garrity said: "She'd go to pieces then, John. She'd think I was in danger and she'd just blow up. She'd go crazy. We haven't told you but we're going to need a nursery. I can't have her upset now."

John Morgan thought of many things that night—and some of them with bitterness. He'd known Norah before Garrity, had introduced them. He remembered the flaming attraction between them at that first meeting, and there was no bitterness in that thought. He thought of how, after the shooting that had crippled him, they'd insisted on taking him in. Of course, as Garrity's partner, he and Mike had been very close, and his police pension paid his way—but yet no young married couple likes a third to share their home.

This brought his mind to the shooting that had put him where he was. To the man who had done the shooting. Lazzeri, for a certainty.

It had started as a routine arrest. He and Garrity had been on night duty—just prowling down the street. They'd heard the row in the dance hall and had run in—and the battle had started in the doorway. There'd been a dozen in it. It ended with himself lying on the sidewalk—Mike Garrity kneeling over him and with an empty gun—and with the hoodlums running down the street. All but two, who rode to the morgue, while he, Morgan, rode to the hospital.

There'd been evidence but not strong enough to hold. Lazzeri's gun had been found there where he dropped it. It had been a gift from his political associates—Lazzeri was a ward leader—and was so engraved that identification of it had been easy. The prints on it checked it as the gun given him without possibility of mistake.

But the bullet it had fired; the bullet that without question would convict Lazzeri of attempted murder—and by doing so bring his empire crashing around his ears—was in his, Morgan's, back. Nestling against his spine and paralyzing him. So close to the spine that the doctors had shaken their heads and told him an operation would in all probability be fatal.

They'd given him one chance in ten—they'd told him that if the thing worked out he'd walk again—but he hadn't taken it. He'd always said he'd rather be dead than crippled, but when faced with almost certain death, he'd changed his ideas on the subject. He knew, now, that life wasn't anything to be thrown away.

And then again, he'd found that being crippled had its compensations. At least, of a sort. He could read the things he'd wanted to and had never had time for before. He was surprised to find the many friends he had—people came calling that he hadn't thought of in years. He was more tolerant—and recognized the change in himself. And more than anything else was his living with Mike and Norah.

Norah had meant more to him than Mike had ever known. He'd even made plans that included her. Naturally he'd

stepped aside when Mike met Norah; there was nothing else to do in the face of the blaze between them. But now, living with them, it was like being brother and sister. He was still awake when Mike, in the morning, lifted him from bed and put him in the wheel chair for the day.

And he'd made his plans.

MIKE was on the eight o'clock shift and it took Norah until ten to clean the apartment. He said then, according to his thought:

"You going to stick around today, kid?"

Norah asked: "Why?"

"Maybe it was the corned beef and cabbage, but I feel rotten. You know, just sickish."

Norah said anxiously: "Oh, John! Should I call the doctor? Maybe there's something I can get you?"

"Not a thing—it'll probably wear off."

"I know just the thing. Bismuth," said Norah, hurrying for the bathroom. She went from there to her bedroom and came out buttoning a coat. She said:

"It's all gone—I should have remembered. I'll just run down to the corner."

Morgan saw his plan working entirely oppositely. He said: "Oh no, kid! Let it go. I'm not that sick."

"It'll only take a minute," she said, and went out the door, and Morgan watched her go, heart-sick, but hoping that, even if Lazzeri had meant his threat, he wouldn't be going into action that early in the morning. He'd thought he'd be able to keep Norah in the house that day, with his story of not feeling well—and his bright idea had back-fired.

Norah came back in the apartment without the bismuth, but with two men in place of it. She came in, white-faced and trembling, and the man directly behind her shoved her in the back so hard she stumbled half across the room. He said to Morgan:

"Who're you, chum?"

The man with him said: "That's the crippled cop that lives with 'em. I know him. He's harmless."

Norah had turned, and now she said: "Yes! He's crippled! You leave him alone."

The first man said: "But you, sister, we're going to beat within an inch of your life. Walked right into us, didn't you? Your old man will know what it's all about."

Morgan said: "Hey, Benny!" and the second of the two turned toward him again. And then Morgan took the big gun from under the covers and shot Benny in the stomach.

Benny took two backward steps and ran into the couch. It caught him in back of the knees and he sat down, moving jerkily and staring at Morgan with an unbelieving look on his face. He had a gun in one hand, but now he dropped this and put both hands to his middle.

The first man turned and ran for the door and Morgan shot him in the back of the neck. He pitched ahead out of sight into the hall. The racket the gun had made in that small room was tremendous and rolling echoes prolonged it. Norah put both hands to her ears and screamed and fainted, and Morgan said to Benny, still sitting stupidly on the couch:

"Now you see, louse."

Benny tipped over on his side, then slid to the floor, and Morgan looked at him with a pleased grin showing and started wheeling his chair toward the phone.

Of course there were plenty of police and Michael Garrity was among them. But he stayed when the others had left. Morgan said apologetically:

"Look, Mike! I had a notion I could keep Norah at home until I worked out an arrangement I'm going to make. But no—it didn't work. Now will you take a couple of days off and take her to her mother's? And stay with her so Lazzeri don't take another whirl at the same thing?"

"This is a hell of a thing to have happen," growled Garrity. "I'm going to take Lazzeri apart with my bare hands."

"Will you take her away?"

"Hell yes," Garrity said. "She'd go crazy

around here with people being killed right in front of her. I'll take her away and I'll come back and kill Lazzeri on sight."

"And go up for murder? Don't be a sap. I've got a better plan."

"What?"

"Well, it isn't quite worked out yet. I'll tell you when you get back."

Garrity said: "I can't move her, in the state she's in, until this evening. We'll go then. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon."

"I'll have everything worked out by then," Morgan said thoughtfully. "We'll have Mr. Lazzeri where we want him, and there'll be no more trouble for Norah."

THE surgeon came out of the operating room scratching at a nose that had itched all through the operation. He extended a bullet to the horse-faced, dignified looking head nurse, said:

"Well, nurse, this was a new one. The

man wanted an operation when he knew there wasn't one chance in a hundred that he'd live through it. I told him that. He insisted on it though, but asked me to do one thing. I'm to give the bullet I took out of his back to some policemen, and I'm to take particular care that it can be identified as the very bullet I removed. I'm to make an affidavit to that effect. Very odd, isn't it?"

"The man knew he wouldn't live, though, doctor. I suppose he had some reason for asking it."

"Very odd—I don't understand it."

"You're going to do it, aren't you?"

The doctor said, in a surprised voice: "I'm going to give it to the man himself! He's pulling through—he's going to make it. And there's *another* funny thing about it. Just as he went under he said—it was very clear, there could be no mistake—

"I bet they name the baby Johnny."

"I Want You to Kill a Man!"

Those were the words the mysterious woman used when Carey Dole, investigator, answered her call. What followed his refusal was as startling and mysterious a murder plot as her first words.

DON'T MISS

MURDER ME HIM!

by HUGH B. CAVE

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