

Old Trem had once been an engineer, and he rigged up a . . .

High Tension Tip-off

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OLD TREM clamped trembling fingers upon the knob, and turned off the radio. Nothing new, anyway—the G-men had taken charge at the shipyard, and the announcers were just rehashing the earlier versions of the disaster.

And there was no use torturing Ann with that. Old Trem laid hold of the wheels of his chair, spun himself around so that he could peer into her bedroom. There must be some way to comfort her. . .

But Ann hadn't been listening. She was stretched face-down on the bed, her slim young body racked by her grief.

There'd been a glowing tenderness in her eyes, lately, when she looked at Ray Preston. And now Preston was dead—crushed in the wreckage of the big traveling crane that had collapsed while lifting a chunk of armor plate.

Dead. And there wasn't much an old codger could do to ease the searing finality of that.

It made him feel helpless. And ten years in a wheel chair had fallen short—far short—of teaching Trem Knott to like that feeling. He swung the chair again, and ran smoothly across the carpet and out into the hallway.

The door of Ray's room stood open. Might as well close it now; he'd not be coming home again, to toss his cap onto a

hook and turn eager, worshipping eyes upon Ann.

Old Trem tried to swallow, and couldn't. There'd been a time when he'd considered himself a pretty tough guy, an engineer who could make any construction crew hop around. But when you'd raised a motherless daughter, seen her grow into vibrantly lovely young womanhood, her heartbreak became your heartbreak.

He brushed a hand across his eyes. It was getting pretty dark outside—and he was anxious to hear the lowdown on what had happened at the yards. But Joe Burkey's door stood open, too.

Mr. Werfel appeared suddenly in that doorway. A solid, vigorous man with gray hair that was close-cropped and bristling, and a mouth that old Trem never liked. He'd made it his habit to come to see Joe Burkey two or three times a week—they played chess, sometimes all night.

"Where is Burkey?" Werfel demanded. "Why is he not home?"

"They've had an accident at the yards," old Trem explained. "A traveling crane busted. Four men killed, a dozen or more hurt. But Joe's name wasn't among those announced. So I reckon he'll be along pretty soon."

Werfel made a little, jerky nod. He seemed briskly callous to this thing—but then, you never could tell about his feelings. Not with those thick-lensed glasses of his making his eyes seem unnaturally large and distorted.

"Might as well wait a while longer," old Trem said—you had to cater to your guests' friends, dammit, when you ran a boarding house. "Better turn on the lights in there. Gettin' dark."

Werfel wheeled and went back into Burkey's room. And old Trem wheeled his chair toward the front door, intending to pull the curtain aside and peer out into the street.

He was halfway there when the thing hit him. His big shoulders went rigid, and his clenching hands stopped the chair abruptly.

Werfel—and Joe Burkey. Burkey who sneered at things, and had made passes at Ann until Ray Preston backed him into a corner and came near knocking his head off. Werfel had been here with Burkey, almost all of last night. . . .

And this morning, cleaning up Burkey's room, old Trem had found a crumpled piece of paper in the corner. It carried a rough sketch of a traveling crane.

He'd thought nothing of it, at the time. Burkey had his eye on Ray Preston's job running the crane in the shipyard, probably was trying to learn all about it. Old Trem had stuffed the sketch into his pocket, on the off-chance that Burkey might want to keep it.

But the thing that hit the old-timer now, in the light of what had happened, was the fact that one of the structural members of the crane in that sketch had been marked in red.

And old Trem still was engineer enough to know that that particular member, should it fail, would throw a breaking strain upon the whole shebang.

And it could be sawed *almost* through. The crane would seem okay, till the load hit it. Say a six-ton chunk of armor-plate. Then—collapse.

Old Trem was rigid as stone, here in the chair that was his prison. There had

been no accident at the shipyard today.

There had been murder. And sabotage.

And Mister Werfel was waiting impatiently in Burkey's room. To pay off the killer, of course.

WITH his mighty arms, Trem Knott lifted himself half out of his chair. He wanted to go back in there and choke the truth out of Werfel. But his legs wouldn't work—they hadn't worked since that accidental dynamite blast, ten years ago.

And Werfel would be armed—armed, and dangerous in spite of his near-sightedness.

Old Trem fell back, grating his teeth. The cops? No! He had only one shred of evidence to offer them—and they hadn't had ten years in a wheel chair to sharpen their sensitivity to hunches.

Besides, he had a dark distrust for the law which was so thoughtful about providing loopholes for rats to squirm through.

Old Trem retained a fondness for the simple, direct-action way of getting things done. In the old construction-camp days, now. . . .

His mouth set in a bitter line. Here he sat, with his mind going in circles, while Ann sobbed out her heart. But what could he do? A cripple, against something he could not yet be sure of. Unarmed. . . .

He laughed, then. Laughed suddenly, and softly.

It was not a pleasant laugh.

He yanked open the front door, and rolled his chair out onto the porch and down the inclined planks that he'd had placed to wheel himself over the steps.

On the sidewalk he halted. And waited, a grim, impassive figure in his chair, while the street lights came on and the purring traffic of evening flowed to the pulse of the signals.

Old Pietro, in the DeLuxe Grocery and Market at the end of the block, saw him there and yelled some genial insult—the two of them had been carrying on a half-serious feud for years.

But the man in the chair paid no attention.

He just sat there. And he stiffened, imperceptibly, when at last he saw Joe Burkey swing down from the bus and come toward the house.

Joe Burkey, with his mouth a little more sneering than before, perhaps to conceal the fear that haunted his eyes. And the nervous tip of his tongue wetting his lips as he glanced up and down the street.

Small things. You learned to read their significance, when you spent all your waking hours in a wheel chair. You had to.

Burkey said: “Hey, Knott. Is a guy waitin’ to see me?”

Old Trem grinned up at him. “No,” he lied. “Say, wait here a minute, will you? Want you to help me. Back in a shake.”

Burkey stared after him—wondering, probably, over the fact that old Trem had asked no questions about the affair in the shipyard—while Knott wheeled his chair rapidly to Pietro’s market.

The day had been hot—and so old Trem grabbed a tinfoil-wrapped caramel bar from the candy counter.

And when Pietro came forward, rubbing his hands in his dirty apron, old Trem grinned and suddenly butted the wheel chair against the counter.

It toppled, spilling candy and gum to the floor. And it struck the slanting glass front of the refrigerator showcase which held the meats. Glass shattered, made a sparkling cascade.

Pietro’s eyes bulged, his mouth worked like that of a stranded fish. And when he found his voice, he started yelling.

“Look-a here! You old-a fool, w’at you think you do, ha? The case, she’s a cos’—”

“You go to hell,” Trem Knott said, softly and very distinctly.

Then he spun his chair around and rolled it out of there and along the sidewalk.

Pietro’s outraged yells rose to new eights, and then stopped abruptly. Pietro had gotten an idea. . . .

“DANG hands slipped on the wheels,” old Trem said to Burkey, when he reached the gate.

“Now I’ll be years payin’ for that meat case. Push me up to the porch, eh? Something wrong with the lights in the downstairs bathroom. Think it’s a blown fuse on that circuit. But I can’t get up to the box to see.”

Burkey didn’t want to help. His every movement, catlike and tense and impatient, testified to that—but he couldn’t afford suspicion now. And the fuse box was handy, right here on the front porch.

Old Trem had counted upon that.

He sat in his chair, fumbling with the candy bar he’d stolen, while Burkey pulled open the box and laid hold of the master switch.

“No!” old Trem said suddenly. “Don’t douse the lights. Ann’s got the mixer running, making a cake. Just see if you can tell which fuse is blown. That bathroom line is the bottom one—”

Burkey couldn’t see. He tried to strike a match—and broke four of them before he got one going.

“Nothin’ wrong here,” he said, turning. “I—”

Then he heard it. The sudden—and to him, nerve-shattering – rising snarl of the police-car siren.

The car, with spotlights gleaming like malignant, accusing red eyes, screeched around the corner.

You had to hand it to that police radio system for speed. Pietro had no more than hung up his phone when the call went out to the car cruising the neighborhood.

But Joe Burkey didn't know about that. He knew that there'd been an "accident" in the market, and that Trem had mentioned having to pay plenty—nothing about that to require a police alarm. Burkey didn't know that a state of feud existed between old Trem Knott and Pietro.

But Joe Burkey did know that he was a murderer, and that his chances weren't worth a plugged nickel if he were caught.

And he didn't wait to see where that police car stopped. He whirled, shoved Trem's chair out of his way.

Trem lifted his hands, as if to protect himself—but his chair banged back against the porch rail, and he saw Burkey dive into the house.

Old Trem acted, then. The mighty muscles of his shoulders went into motion, sending the wheel chair darting forward. And he reached up, caught hold of the bottom of the fuse box, and with a straining effort lifted himself so that he could get hold of the master switch.

Instantly, the house was plunged into darkness.

But it was darkness shot through with ugly, red flashes, and the rapid crashing of a gun, and the gurgling, agonized scream of a man.

Then—the thump of a falling body.

Old Trem's face was grim, as he swung to face the doorway. He saw Mr. Werfel come out, darting and furtive now, with a gun in his hand.

Werfel didn't even see the man in the wheel chair. What he saw was the police patrol car, with its ominous red spotlights,

which had stopped at Pietro's and now was coming down the street with the angry market proprietor running alongside and making gestures toward this house.

He saw the car—and he swung back, to dart back into the house.

But old Trem Knott had wheeled his chair to block the doorway.

Werfel snarled, like a cornered rat. He struck at Knott with a gun.

Knott's powerful arms warded off the blow, flung the man across the porch and down the steps.

And the harness bulls were coming in the gate. They'd heard the shots—they saw the gun in Werfel's hand.

And when he tried to shoot it out he made his last tactical error.

The man was pinioned there, a twitching, lifeless dummy impaled on the darting flames that came from the police guns. And when their ugly echoes died away, he lay on the walk.

The impacts of the bullets had shaken something from his pockets. A neat roll of bills, a railroad ticket. Spattered with blood, now.

Malone, the big redheaded cop, stared up toward Trem Knott. But old Trem wheeled into the house.

And Joe Burkey was here, sprawled in his own blood, and very still. On his jacket was the bright, tinfoil wrapper of the candy bar which old Trem had stolen. The caramel was sticky, after the heat of the day—and old Trem had slapped it against Burkey's jacket just as the murderer turned to flee.

Burkey had been too concerned about his own guilty hide to notice.

But Werfel, alarmed by the siren and by the failure of the lights and by Burkey's sudden rush into the house, had seen that glittering foil.

In the half-dark it was about all his nearsighted eyes *could* see. And he'd

mistaken it for a badge—a police badge.

He'd thought he was cornered, and he'd blazed away.

And the thing was over. Trem Knott saw Ann standing there in the doorway of the living room, the back of her hand tight against her teeth. He rolled his chair toward her—and his face was tender once more.

And when the cops demanded an explanation, he told them plenty.

"This one here, he wrecked that crane at the shipyard today. The one outside was here to pay him off."

Malone scratched his head, noisily. "Now look, if you can prove that—"

Trem Knott tossed him the crumpled drawing of the crane. "That's all I had—to start with. But what these guys did when they thought the pressure was on 'em ought to be enough for *you* to start with."

Malone whistled softly, and nodded. "What I found in the pockets of that guy out there will make the G-men sit up and take notice. And this one—" He looked down at Burkey's body. "He got paid off, all right."