

THE STAR PARTY

BY ROBERT LORY

I feel bad about the killing, especially since it wouldn't have happened if I'd listened to Vicki. We should stay away from Hadley's party, she said. She had reasons—none of them the right one, but she had reasons.

“These things are always such bores,” she complained as she put up her long blonde hair.

“I can't stand your Madison Avenue beetle-brains playing their character roles,” was her reason as I started the car.

“They're all a bunch of mashers,” she said as we entered the elevator in Hadley's building.

“And Hadley’s a lush,” she snapped when the elevator arrived at the ninth floor.

I was pressing Hadley’s buzzer when Vicki sounded her last, pouting argument. “His breath is repulsive too.”

I nodded agreement, just as I had nodded agreement with everything else she had said. I pointed out in rebuttal that to get established on the Avenue such things were necessary—the parties, the mashers and Hadley’s bad breath. I didn’t say anything about Isvara. Though Vicki didn’t know him, Isvara was why we were showing at this particular party.

The door opened and sounds of loud good fellowship flooded the hallway. A

fat and drooling Hadley blocked the view of the goings-on inside.

“George, old man! And lovely, lovely, *lovely* Vicki!” We stepped in and Hadley stumbled his way to the closet, dropping Vicki’s coat before making it. He was loaded already.

“My, and how beautiful you certainly do look,” he said, returning to Vicki’s side. The slob was right, of course. He had one lone talent, but it was enough to make him a high-salaried art director. He could judge beauty. And Vicki—tall, blonde and shapely in her silver gown—was female beauty itself tonight

“Hey kids, look who’s here—it’s Georgie Bond. Ho there, wonder boy!”

These words bubbled forth from the

most loudmouthed account executive in New York. How Breem ever got along with clients was beyond my understanding. He did have a way with words, though—so I grimaced, waiting for the sequel to the

“wonder boy” he’d just tagged me with.

It came, with a sickening guffaw: “Yes sir, we all *wonder, boy*, how you ever got yourself a woman like that. Haw ha ha.”

We haw-ha-ha’d our way through Hadley’s living room and dining room, receiving greetings ranging from halfhearted smiles to stinging slaps on the back. Every woman in the place seemed bent on seeing how close to me

they could thrust their breasts.

I don't know what most men think, but it's my opinion that breasts are great—in their place. Which is *not* trussed up so far that they look like deformed shoulders. The whole human race disgusts me sometimes. Vicki gets disgusted too, especially at parties.

“Enjoying yourself?” she asked sourly.

I was preparing a flip answer when an ugly copywriter named Pitcorn grabbed my arm and shoved a potato chip into my face. “Try one, George? The dip is excellent. Marcia made it”

The dip he referred to was a vile shade of cream. I swallowed hard and managed a smile. “No thanks, Pit. Diet,

you know,” I told him and give his back a hearty thump. It was as hearty as I could make it Pitcorn coughed up at least three potato chips.

My sadistic joy was interrupted by a tug on the sleeve from Vicki. When we were out of Pitcorn’s hearing, she said, “I’m glad you did that. I think he had designs on me.”

“Never fear,” I said. “You’d be the death of him and he knows it. Let’s get something to drink.”

As we headed for the mahogany bar in Hadley’s large living room, my eyes wandered across the giggling and frothing faces that were jabbering, singing and leering round us. The party had reached the stage where men’s

jackets were off, ties were loose, and the women's gowns were showing effects of that unmentionable subject, perspiration.

My mind took all this in matter-of-factly while I tried to spot the person whose presence at this orgy was the only reason for mine.

“Who is it?” Vicki said as I poured her a martini. “The one you’re looking for—who is it?”

I smiled. It was a smile of pride. How superior Vicki was to the clownish creatures here. What other woman in the place could know, instinctively, exactly what her man was thinking? “Who?” she repeated.

“Him,” I said, relieved that I’d found

the tall, lean man who was now coming through the frosted glass door separating the room from a balcony outside. “The one in the turban. Name is Isvara.”

“Interesting name. Is it really his?”

Someone who has studied deeply in man’s religious beliefs would recognize—as Vicki did—Isvara as one of the titles of the Hindu’s boss god. Whether our Isvara was born with that name or had substituted it for Ali Baba or Sam O’Rourke I didn’t know, and I told Vicki that.

We watched as a plump redhead I didn’t recognize offered Isvara a drink of some kind. He declined with the slightest nod of his head and, leaving the redhead staring in indignation, he

squatted on the backs of his heels in an isolated corner of the room.

“He plays the mystic very well,” Vicki observed. “Where did Hadley latch onto him?”

“The agency. Isvara is posing for some cigaret ads. He’s also probably here to entertain us tonight. He reads people’s characters.”

Vicki sipped her martini. “A crystal bailer, or does he use tea leaves?” she asked sourly.

“Neither. Stars—a kind of astrology. Pitcorn told me about it. Isvara watches somebody’s actions closely and from these he determines the person’s ruling planet or the stars that influenced his birth. The rest of his deductions are

supposed to follow logically.”

“And you believe it?”

“Pitcorn does. Isvara told him that his big problem in life was never adjusting to his step-mother’s death, and that if he ever marries it better be to an elderly librarian.”

Vicki laughed at the image of Pitcorn’s future bride, but her face abruptly became serious. “Did you see that? He was looking in our direction. At me.”

A heavy clap on the shoulder stopped whatever comment I might have made. “Have fun, Georgie—hey!” Hadley roared and lunged for Vicki. She side-stepped his poised-for-pinch talons and our host staggered off to the divan where

he flopped into the lap of a blue-haired matron who had been wildly defending her personal theory of great literature.

“I think I’m afraid of that man,” Vicki said.

“He’s harmless. Just fancies himself a great lover, that’s all.”

“I’m not talking about Hadley. *Him.*” She was looking at Isvara. “He makes me feel creepy. I’m certain he’s been watching me.”

“Sure,” I said, mocking her anxious tone. “He’s probably quite smitten with you. After all, he has a great affinity toward stars, and to any discerning man you’re the star of this party.”

Vicki murmured something about not liking it just the same, when I realized to

my horror that my glass was empty. I learned at my first agency party that the only way to get through them with your sanity intact was to get completely smashed. “ ‘Nuther?” I asked Vicki.

She said no, so I had to wade along through the weaving bodies that danced—if you could call it that—to the rhythms of some bad jazz.

At the bar I traded my regulation-size martini glass for an eight-ounce water tumbler. Gin and vermouth tumbled around the ice and had reached the top of the glass when I noticed that an agency artist named Goddard had cornered Vicki near a potted palm.

Goddard the Dullard, I called him. A dunce. Whenever I reflected that the

reason for my wanting to work in advertising was to be near people like Goddard, Pitcorn and the rest, I had to question my intelligence. Intelligence was at the heart of the matter. Artists and writers—creative men—I figured would be more intelligent than other men, would be closer to understanding the meaning of life. I was wrong.

Yet, there was Isvara, now standing in a corner of the room. Maybe he ... I decided to put him to the test.

He answered my hello with, “Your wife is a most charming person.”

I agreed, thinking that I could discuss my wife’s attributes with anybody at any time and that right now I wanted to talk astrology with somebody who claimed

to know something about it.

“Most charming,” he repeated, “but odd.”

My conscious mind swam through the gin and vermouth and snapped to attention. “Odd?”

“Yes,” he said. “You know of my abilities, Mr.—?”

“Bond—George Bond.”

“Mr. Bond—you have heard, I think, of my ability to analyze people’s characters from their actions. You have, have you not, been waiting all evening for an opportunity to discuss this subject with me?”

“The deduction was not hard, Mr. Bond—based on mere surface observations. It’s your wife I’ve been

concentrating on, as she has told you already.”

Vicki was right, then. He had been watching her. “I’ll be interested in your analysis,” I said.

Isvara shook his head. “There is no analysis. Your wife is . . . unfathomable, and I do not say that lightly. Because, Mr. Bond, when my talents cannot take me inside a person’s very soul, that person is—unfathomable. Do you understand?”

“No, I don’t,” I admitted.

“I do.” The voice was Vicki’s. She evidently had managed to brush Goddard aside. “I understand perfectly. Mr.—Isvara?—Mr. Isvara is telling you, George, that when his infallible system

fails, it cannot be that the failure lies with his system or with himself. The fault, obviously, must lie with the subject.” Vicki winked at me and smiled. “In other words, I’m a very naughty girl.”

If I was the sort who blushes easily, I would have then. Isvara—the one person in the place I was beginning to have some respect for—and Vicki acting her nastiest. I started to apologize, but I was cut off short

“Mrs. Bond is quite right, even though she spoke in Jest. The fault does indeed lie with her.” He said it calmly, like a teacher explaining to a grade school class that hydrogen and oxygen combine to make water. I laughed. It served Vicki

right. I would have laughed more, but Isvara continued.

“It’s true. Whether or not you realize it, Mr. Bond, your wife is trying very hard to be something she’s not. She’s putting on a very special act.”

“Act?” I stared at Vicki.

“Act,” he said. “A variety of characteristics tell me she is a Capricorn. Her charm, her type of sensual attraction, certain marks left by experience—they all point to that sign ruled by Saturn. But she lacks the dignity and reservation found in Capricorns. She smiles too eagerly, and even an amateur psychologist can spot a ... a phony smile. Notice, Mr. Bond, that she is not smiling now.”

He couldn't have been more correct there. Vicki's face was placid, but inside she was a volcano about two seconds before eruption time. I was her husband and I could tell. And so could Isvara.

She had followed my thoughts, I knew. I'll handle this, her eyes said. She began to try.

"Mr. Isvara, perhaps you have me dead to rights. Maybe I do put on some kind of front to be sociable at these gatherings which I cannot stand. So what?

Many people put on the same kind of front. You say I'm a Capricorn, under the influence of—Saturn, was it? Well, why not let it go at that?"

Isvara smiled. It wasn't a pleasant smile. "Because you defy analysis under Saturn's sign. You dress like a Taurus, behave publicly like an Aries, and think like a Libra. While I have nothing but contempt for popular astrology, any practitioner will tell you that both Aries and Libra are incompatible with Capricorn."

"Which means?" Vicki said icily.

"Which means that either you have a multiple-personality neurosis—which you do not—or you are consciously living a very large lie."

"*I beg your pardon!*" I said, making an effort to sound gruff. The effort failed miserably, but I had to try.

"That was *not* meant as an insult, Mr.

Bond.” Isvara now was looking square into my eyes. “What I say is fact. The stars are fact. Their positions, although capable of a variety of influences, are nonetheless fact. And these influences are observable to those who know how to read them.”

“And he sure can read them,” a new voice chimed in. Of all the times when Pitcorn’s face seemed repulsive, it was now. “Is he doing you, George?”

I smiled weakly. “Not me. Vicki.”

Pitcorn said oh and pointed to the glass in my hand. “About ready for a refill? I’ll stroll over with you.”

“Yes, George—do go,” Vicki said, handing me her glass. “And go easy on the vermouth.” Her laugh sounded

sincere, but it wasn't.

“Relax man,” Pitcorn told me as we crossed to the bar. “You look as jumpy as a—a pole-vaulter.” He chuckled at his joke.

“Too much to drink,” I grumbled and latched onto a full gin bottle.

I downed a glass of the stuff straight before filling our glasses with semi-respectable martinis. When I looked across the room to where I'd left Vicki and Isvara, my pulse quickened.

They were gone.

“Hey, where are you going?” Pitcorn asked as I brushed by him in panic. In the kitchen and dining room, several low-cut gowns winked at me, but no Vicki. Back in the living room, I spotted

her. She was closing the frosted glass door to the balcony.

“Quick, Isvara’s outside,” she whispered. Her panic was greater than mine.

I followed her to where Isvara stood, cold as stone, near the edge of the balcony. His eyes were blank, his heart was still. He was dead. Vicki had iced him.

“Did he know?” I asked.

“He was beginning to guess.” She looked in nervously at the party. “We’ve got to hurry.”

I made Isvara’s body limp and lifted it up on the balcony ledge. “Get ready to scream,” I told Vicki.

Nine floors above concrete, I pushed

the body into the air. Vicki screamed.

“He said that . . . that he was trying to defy gravity,” Vicki sobbed when Hadley and the others questioned us. We repeated the story when the police arrived.

“Ha just stepped off and . . . and—” Vicki cried hysterically.

“He was kind of a nut, and I guess he was loaded like the rest of us,” I added.

Everybody accepted our explanation. A character like Isvara—a mystic screwball, the police sergeant called him—would be very likely to test his powers by walking off a balcony. “We see a lot of this land of thing,” the sergeant assured Vicki, who shuddered convincingly. Nobody suspected us. We

had no motive.

Of course, nobody knew what Isvara had told Vicki before she suggested they get a breath of fresh air. “But,” he’d said, “the stars would be in different patterns if . . . they were viewed from . . . from somewhere else.”

He was on to us—or he would have been soon. War is war, but I still feel bad about his death. The man’s intelligence, and the fact that he was so right about Vicki! She *is* a Capricorn—at least, Saturn is her ruling planet. It’ll be everybody’s after our troops arrive.