

How much *is* the impossible worth?



# FEBRUARY STRAWBERRIES



By JIM HARMON

LINTON lay down his steel  
L fork beside the massively  
solid transparency of the res-  
taurant water glass.

"Isn't that Rogers Snead  
at that table?" he heard him-  
self say stupidly.

Howell, the man across the  
table from him, looked em-  
barrassed without looking.  
"Not at all. Somebody who  
looks like him. Twin brother.  
You know how it is. Snead's  
dead, don't you remember?"

Linton remembered. How-  
ell had to know that he would  
remember. What were they  
trying to pull on him? "The  
man who isn't Snead is leav-  
ing," Linton said, describing

the scene over Howell's shoul-  
der. "If that's Snead's broth-  
er, I might catch him to pay  
my respects."

"No," Howell said, "I  
wouldn't do that."

"Snead came to Greta's fu-  
neral. It's the least I could do."

"I wouldn't. Probably no  
relation to Snead at all. Some-  
body who looks like him."

"He's practically running,"  
Linton said. "He almost ran  
out of the restaurant."

"Who? Oh, the man who  
looked like Snead, you mean."

"Yes," Linton said.

A thick-bodied man at the  
next table leaned his groan-  
ing chair back intimately

against Linton's own chair.

"That fellow who just left looked like a friend of yours, huh?" the thick man said.

"Couldn't have been him, though," Linton answered automatically. "My friend's dead."

The thick man rocked forward and came down on all six feet. He threw paper money on the table as if he were disgusted with it. He plodded out of the place quickly.

Howell breathed in deeply and sucked back Linton's attention. "Now you've probably got old Snead into trouble."

"Snead's dead," Linton said.

"Oh, well, 'dead,'" Howell replied.

"What do you say it like that for?" Linton demanded angrily. "The man's dead. Plain dead. He's not Sherlock Holmes or the Frankenstein Monster—there's no doubt or semantic leeway to the thing."

"You know how it is," Howell said.

Linton had thought he had known how death was. He had buried his wife, or rather he had watched the two workmen scoop and shove dirt in on the sawdust-fresh pine box that held the coffin. He had known what he sincerely felt to be a genuine affection for Greta. Even after they had let him out of the asylum as cured, he still secretly be-

lieved he had known a genuine affection for her. But it didn't seem he knew about death at all.

Linton felt that his silence was asking Howell by this time.

"I don't know, mind you," Howell said, puffing out tobacco smoke, "but I suppose he might have been resurrected."

"Who by?" Linton asked, thinking: *God?*

"The Mafia, I guess. Who knows who runs it?"

"You mean, somebody has invented a way to bring dead people back to life?" Linton said.

**H**E knew, of course, that Howell did not mean that. Howell meant that some people had a system of making it appear that a person had died in order to gain some illegal advantage. But by saying something so patently ridiculous, Linton hoped to bring the contradicting truth to the surface immediately.

"An invention? I guess that's how it is," Howell agreed. "I don't know much about people like that. I'm an honest businessman."

"But it's wonderful," Linton said, thinking his immediate thoughts. "Wonderful! Why should a thing like that be illegal? Why don't I know about it?"

"Sh-h," Howell said uneasily. "This is a public place."

"I don't understand," Linton said helplessly.

"Look, Frank, you can't legalize a thing like resurrection," Howell said with feigned patience. "There are strong religious convictions to consider. The undertakers have a lobby. I've heard they got spies right in the White House, ready to assassinate if they have to. Death is their whole life. You got to realize that."

"That's not enough. Not nearly enough."

"Think of all the problems it would cause. Insurance, for one thing. Overpopulation. Birth control is a touchy subject. They'd have to take it up if everybody got resurrected when they died, wouldn't they?"

"But what do they do about it? Against it?"

"There are a lot of fakes and quacks in the resurrection business. When the cops find out about a place, they break in, smash all the equipment and arrest everybody in sight. That's about all they can do. The charges, if any, come under general vice classification."

"I don't understand," Linton complained. "Why haven't I heard about it?"

"They didn't talk much about white slavery in Victorian England. I read an article in *Time* the other day that said 'death' was our dirty word, not sex. You want

to shock somebody, you tell him, 'You're going to be dead someday,' not anything sexual. You know how it is. The opposite of 'live' these days is 'video-taped.'"

"I see," Linton said.

He tried to assimilate it. Of course he had, he reminded himself, been out of touch for some time. It might be true. Then again, they might be trying to trick him. They used to do that to see if he was really well. But the temptation was too strong.

"Tell me, Howell, where could I find a resurrectionist?"

Howell looked away. "Frank, I don't have anything to do with that kind of people and if you're smart, you'll not either."

Linton's fingers imprinted the linen. "Damn you, Howell, you tell me!"

Howell climbed to his feet hurriedly. "I take you out to dinner to console you over the loss of your wife a half a year ago, and to make you feel welcome back to the society of your fellows after being in the hospital for a nervous breakdown. I do all that, and for thanks, you yell at me and curse me. You kooks are all alike!"

Howell threw money on the table with the same kind of disinterest as the thick-set man and stalked out.

I've got to hurry too, Linton thought. It's Resurrection Day!

THE doctor fluttered his hands and chirped about the office. "Well, well, Mr. Linton, we understand you've been causing disturbances."

"Not really," Linton said modestly.

"Come, come," the doctor chided. "You started riots in two places, attempted to bribe an officer. That's disturbing, Mr. Linton, very disturbing."

"I was only trying to find out something," Linton maintained. "They could have told me. Everybody seems to know but me."

The doctor clucked his tongue. "Let's not think any such thing. People don't know more than you do."

Linton rubbed his shoulder. "That cop knew more about Judo holds than I did."

"A few specific people know a few specific things you don't. But let me ask you, Mr. Linton, could Einstein bake a pie?"

"I don't know. Who the hell ever wasted Einstein's time asking him a thing like that?"

"People who want to know the answers to questions have to ask them. You can find out anything by asking the right questions of the right person at the right time."

Linton stared suspiciously. "Do you know where I can find a resurrectionist?"

"I am a resurrectionist."

"But the policeman brought me to you!"

"Well, that's what you paid

him to do, wasn't it? Did you think a policeman would just steal your money? Cynics—all you young people are cynics."

Linton scooted forward on the insultingly cold metal chair and really looked at the doctor for the first time.

"Doctor, can you *really* resurrect the dead?"

"Will you stop being cynical? Of course I can!"

"Doctor, I'm beginning to believe in you," Linton said, "but tell me, can you resurrect the *long* dead?"

"Size has nothing to do with it."

"No, my wife has been dead a long time. Months."

"Months?" The doctor snapped those weeks away with his fingers. "It could be years. Centuries. It's all mathematics, my boy. I need only one fragment of the body and my computers can compute what the rest of it was like and recreate it. It's infallible. Naturally there is a degree of risk involved."

"Infallible risk, yes," Linton murmured. "Could you go to work right away?"

"First, I must follow an ancient medical practice. I must bleed you."

Linton grasped the situation immediately. "You mean you want money. You realize I've just got out of an institution . . ."

"I've often been in institutions myself, for alcoholism,

narcotics addiction and more.”

“What a wonderful professional career,” Linton said, when he couldn’t care less.

“Oh, yes—yes, indeed. But I didn’t come out broke.”

“Neither did I,” Linton said hastily. “I invested in shifty stocks, faltering bonds, and while I was away they sank to rock bottom.”

“Then—”

“When they hit rock bottom, they bounced up. If I hadn’t found you, I would have been secure for the rest of my lonely, miserable life.”

“All that’s ended now,” the doctor assured him. “Now we must go dig up the corpse. The female corpse, eh?”

Resurrection Day!

“Doctor,” Linton whispered, “my mind is singing with battalions of choirs. I hope that doesn’t sound irreverent to you.”

The doctor stroked his oily palms together. “Oh, but it does. Beautifully.”

THE certificate to allow reburial in Virginia hadn’t been impossible to obtain. The doctor had taken the body and Linton’s fortune and fed them both into the maw of his calculators, and by means of the secret, smuggled formulae, Greta would be cybernetically reborn.

Linton shook his head. It seemed impossible. But Greta opened the olive-drab slab of metal of the door to the doc-

tor’s inner-inner sanctum and walked out into the medicinal cold fluorescent lighting.

It wasn’t fair at all, Linton thought. He should have had some time to prepare himself.

Greta lifted her arms, stretching the white smock over the lines of her body. “Darling!” she said.

“Greta!” he said, feeling a slight revulsion but repressing it. No doubt he would be able to adjust to her once having been dead the same way he had learned to accept the, to him, distasteful duty of kissing her ears the way she enjoyed.

Greta swirled across the room and folded her arms across his shoulders. She kissed his cheek. “It’s so wonderful to be back. This calls for a celebration. We must see Nancy, Oscar, Johnny, all our old friends.”

“Yes,” he said, his heart lurching for her sad ignorance. “But tell me—how was it being *away*?”

The curves and angles of her flesh changed their positions against his Ivy dacron. Her attitude altered.

“I can’t remember,” she said. “I can’t really remember anything. Not really. My memories are ghosts . . .”

“Now, now,” Linton said, “we mustn’t get excited. You’ve been through a trial.”

She accepted the verdict. She pulled away and touched

at her hair. It was the same hair, black as evil, contrasting with her inner purity. Of course it would be; it hadn't changed even in the grave. He remembered the snaky tendrils of it growing out of the water-logged casket.

"I must see all our old friends," Greta persisted. "Helen and Johnny . . ."

"My darling," he said gently, "about Johnny—"

Her fine black brows made Gothic arches. "Yes? What about Johnny?"

"It was a terrible accident right after—that is, about five months ago. He was killed."

"Killed?" Greta repeated blankly. "Johnny Gorman was killed?"

"Traffic accident. Killed instantly."

"But Johnny was your friend, your best friend. Why didn't you have him resurrected the same way you did me?"

"Darling, resurrection is a risky business and an expensive one. You have to pay premium prices for strawberries in February. I no longer have the money to pay for a resurrection of Johnny."

Greta turned her back to him. "It's just as well. You shouldn't bring back Johnny to this dream of life, give him a ghost of mind and the photograph of a soul. It's monstrous. No one should do that. No one. But you're *sure* you

haven't the money to do it?"

"No," Linton said. "I'm sold out. I've borrowed on my insurance to the hilt. It won't pay any more until I'm buried, and then, of course, you can resurrect me."

"Of course," Greta said. She sighed. "Poor Johnny. He was such a good friend of yours. You must miss him. I'm so sorry for you."

"I have you," he said with great simplicity.

"Frank," she said, "you should see that place in there. There are foaming acid baths, great whale-toothed disposals, barrels of chemicals to quench death and smother decay. It's *perfect*."

"It sounds carnal," he said uneasily.

"No, dear, it's perfect for some things that have to be done."

Her eyes flashed around the doctor's office and settled somewhere, on something.

Linton followed the direction of Greta's gaze and found only an ashtray stand, looking vaguely like a fanatic's idol to a heathen religion on a pedestal.

Greta pounced on the stand, hefted it at the base and ran toward him with it over her head.

Linton leaped aside and Greta hit the edge of the desk instead of him.

Brain damage, he concluded nervously. Cell deterioration.

**G**RETA raised it again and he caught her wrists high over her head. She writhed against him provocatively. "Frank, I'm sorry, dear, but I have to have that insurance money. It's hell!"

Linton understood immediately. He felt foolish, humiliated. All that money! He had resurrected a gold ring that had turned his knuckles green. No one must ever know.

Linton twisted the stand away from his wife and watched her face in some appalled form of satisfaction as it registered horror and acceptance of the crumpled metal disk falling toward it.

He split her head open and watched her float to the floor.

Linton was surprised at the fine wire mesh just below the skin and those shiny little tabs that looked like pictures of transistors in institutional advertising.

He knelt beside the body and poked into the bleeding, smoldering wreckage.

Yes, it seemed they had to automate and modify the bodies somewhat in resurrection. They couldn't chemically revive the old corpse like pouring water on a wilted geranium.

Or—

Did they use the old bodies at all? What were all those

acid baths for if the bodies were used? Didn't the resurrectionists just destroy the old corpses and make androids, synthetic creatures, to take their place?

But it didn't matter. Not a bit.

She had thought she was his wife, sharing her viewpoint down to the finest detail, and he had thought she was his wife.

It was what you thought was real that made it so, not the other way around.

"I've killed my wife!" Linton called, rising from his knees, stretching his hands out to something.

The pain stung him to sleep—a pain in his neck like a needle that left a hole big enough for a camel to pass through and big enough for him to follow the camel in his turn.

**H**E opened his eyes to the doctor's spotless, well-ordered office. The doctor looked down at him consolingly. "You'll have to go back, Mr. Linton. But they'll cure you. You'll be cured of ever thinking your wife was brought back to life and that you killed her all over again."

"Do you *really* think so, Doctor?" Linton asked hopefully.

**END**