

SPRING-FINGERED JACK

Susan Casper

How do you relax after a hard day at work? TV? A drink? A hot bath? Well, some ways might be a bit more unusual than others . . .

Susan Casper started writing in 1983, and in only a few years has become recognized as one of the most talented new writers in the field. Her short fiction has appeared in Playboy, Shadows, The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Midnight, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Whispers, Amazing, The Twilight Zone Magazine, In the Field of Fire, and elsewhere. She is currently at work on her first novel, tentatively entitled The Red Carnival. She lives in Philadelphia.

HE KNEW WHERE HE WAS GOING AS SOON AS HE walked into the arcade. He moved past the rows of busy children, blaring computer voices, flashing lights, and ringing bells. He walked past the line of old-fashioned pinball machines, all of them empty, all flashing and calling like outdated mechanical hookers vainly trying to tempt the passing trade.

The machine he wanted was back in the dimly lit corner, and he breathed a sigh of relief to see it unused. Its mutely staring screen was housed in a yellow body, above a row of levers and buttons. On its side, below the coin slot, was a garish purple drawing of a woman dressed in Victorian high

fashion. Her large and ornate hat sat slightly askew atop her head, and her neatly piled hair was falling artistically down at the sides. She was screaming, eyes wide, the back of her hand almost covering her lovely mouth. And behind her, sketched in faintest white, was just the suggestion of a lurking figure.

He put his briefcase down beside the machine. With unsteady fingers, he reached for a coin, and fumbled it into the coin slot. The screen flashed to life. A sinister man in a deerstalker waved a crimson-tipped knife and faded away behind a row of buildings. The graphics were excellent, and extremely realistic. The screen filled with rows of dark blue instructions against a light blue field, and he scanned them sketchily, impatient for the game to begin.

He pressed a button and the image changed again, becoming a maze of narrow squalid streets lined with decaying buildings. One lone figure, his, stood squarely center screen. A woman in Victorian dress, labeled "Polly," walked toward him. He pushed the lever forward and his man began to move. He remembered to make the man doff his cap; if you didn't, she wouldn't go with you. They fell in step together, and he carefully steered her past the first intersection. Old Montague Street was a trap for beginners, and one he hadn't fallen into for quite some time. The first one had to be taken to Buck's Row.

Off to one side, a bobby was separating a pair of brawling, ragged women. He had to be careful here, for it cost points if he was spotted. He steered the pair down the appropriate alley, noting with satisfaction that it was deserted.

The heartbeat sound became louder as he maneuvered his figure behind that of the woman, and was joined by the sound of harsh, labored breathing. This part of the game was timed and he would be working against the clock. He lifted a knife from inside his coat. Clapping a hand over "Polly's" mouth, he slashed her throat viciously from ear to ear. Lines of bright

red pulsed across the screen, but away from him. Good. He had not been marked by the blood. Now came the hard part. He laid her down and began the disemboweling, carefully cutting her abdomen open almost to the diaphragm, keeping one eye on the clock. He finished with twenty seconds to spare and moved his man triumphantly away from the slowly approaching bobby. Once he had found the public sink to wash in, round one was complete.

Once again his figure was center screen. This time the approaching figure was "Dark Annie," and he took her to Hanbury Street. But this time he forgot to cover her mouth when he struck, and she screamed, a shrill and terrifying scream. Immediately the screen began to flash a brilliant, painful red, pulsing in time to the ear-splitting blasts of a police whistle. Two bobbies materialized on either side of his figure, and grabbed it firmly by the arms. A hangman's noose flashed on the screen as the funeral march roared from the speaker. The screen went dark.

He stared at the jeering screen, trembling, feeling shaken and sick, and cursed himself bitterly. A real beginner's mistake! He'd been too eager. Angrily, he fed another coin into the slot.

This time, he carefully worked himself all the way up to "Kate," piling up bonus points and making no fatal mistakes. He was sweating now, and his mouth was dry. His jaws ached with tension. It was really hard to beat the clock on this one, and took intense concentration. He remembered to nick the eyelids, that was essential, and pulling the intestines out and draping them over the right shoulder wasn't too hard, but cutting out the kidney correctly, *that* was a bitch. At last the clock ran out on him, and he had to leave without the kidney, costing himself a slew of points. He was rattled enough to almost run into a bobby as he threaded through the alleys leading out of Mitre Square. The obstacles became increasingly difficult with every successful round completed,

and from here on in it became particularly hard, with the clock time shortening, swarms of sightseers, reporters, and roving Vigilance Committees to avoid, in addition to a redoubled number of police. He had never yet found the right street for "Black Mary" . . .

A voice called, "Last game," and a little while later his man got caught again. He slapped the machine in frustration; then straightened his suit and tie and picked up his briefcase. He checked his Rolex. Ten-oh-five: it was early yet. The machines winked out in clustered groups as the last stragglers filed through the glass doors. He followed them into the street.

Once outside in the warm night air, he began to think again about the game, to plan his strategy for tomorrow, only peripherally aware of the winos mumbling in doorways, the scantily dressed hookers on the corner. Tawdry neon lights from porno movie houses, "adult" bookstores, and flop-house hotels tracked across his eyes like video displays, and his fingers worked imaginary buttons and levers as he pushed through the sleazy, late-night crowds.

He turned into a narrow alley, followed it deep into the shadows, and then stopped and leaned back against the cool, dank bricks. He spun the three dials of the combination lock, each to its proper number, and then opened the briefcase.

The machine: He had thought of it all day at work, thought of it nearly every second as he waited impatiently for five o'clock, and now another chance had come and gone, and he *still* had not beaten it. He fumbled among the papers in his briefcase, and pulled out a long, heavy knife.

He would practice tonight, and tomorrow he *would* beat the machine.