

No Greater Love

by MICHAEL BITTNER

This tense bit of drama holds the reader breathless—tiptoe with the terror of those unseen dangers that stalk through the jungles of Harlem—and yet there is a love theme here that touches the heart like a lambent flame.

THEY named her Ivy when she was born, and she grew up to be poison to all men. That is, all men except the one. But that is way ahead of the story.

At one time Ivy danced and sang in Lafayette's in the heart of Harlem. And at other times Ivy had trouped around the whole country showing the south, the west, the east and the north the magic and song madness of Harlem.

And now, back again in her dressing room in the Harlem show house she heard a sudden rapping upon the door. She quickly picked up a robe and wrapped it about her undressed self. And then she invited the caller in.

Into the room stepped Baby Lou. And about Baby Lou we must also pause and say a word. Baby Lou was one of those flashes that spring out of Harlem every so often and grip Broadway and the world, and scintillate like a meteor for a while. And, then without any given reason, they suddenly disappear, no one speaks of them—they go back to Harlem and are swallowed up by the turn of events.

Baby Lou had a chassis. Baby Lou was eighteen. Baby Lou sang and danced like a house on fire. Petite and pretty, with a smile that killed them in the nightclubs, she was predicted as the coming Broadway great.

People spoke of Ethel Waters, Florence Mills, Ada Brown and the others in the same breath as the Baby. And all this time, the phenomenal brown dandy had not so much as gotten near Broadway. But great things were expected.

Ivy, to get on with the story, smiled and spoke.

"Hello, Baby . . . what's on your mind?"

The young one seemed all excited, and standing there with the shimmering rhinestones covering the smaller parts of her figure, she was a sight for sore Harlem eyes.

"Ivy, I want to talk to you about Joey Williams . . ."

"Oh," the wise one arched an eyebrow, "I thought I told you to give that rat a clear steer before he gives you a bum steer."

*Baby Lou
had a
chassis*



"But, Ivy, I don't think you know Joey well . . . he . . . he . . ."

"I don't know him well," the older dancer smiled and then turned her memory back to months before. "That's funny, the way you say that, Baby Lou. But go on with his story. What has Joey offered you now?"

"He hasn't offered me anything," Baby Lou seemed offended, "he was just . . ."

“Written a song for me to sing,” Ivy finished suddenly. And the young one stared, her mouth agape.

“How did you know?” she asked, incredulously.

Ivy smiled. Hard, calloused woman of the world who knew the men of the show world and what they wanted, she pursed her lips and said:

“Was the song called, ‘You Are My Own’?”

Baby Lou was more surprised than ever.

“How did you know?”

And Ivy put all the poison she could into her voice.

“Because he wrote that song for me months ago. And before me there were others. That rat has used that song to lure more women to his apartment than you can count.”

“I don’t like you calling him a rat,” Baby Lou offered angrily, “he’s a friend of mine . . .”

“I get it,” Ivy answered quickly, “but answer me, did he ask you to his apartment to *rehearse*?”

“What if he did . . .?”

THERE was such outward juvenile resentment in the Baby’s attitude that Ivy knew that she could gain nothing by being nasty. And liking the kid as she did, and knowing what was in store, she reached out and pulled her toward her. Then, staring into the depths of her eyes, the old trouper spoke softly.

“Listen, Baby, I’m your friend. I’d do anything for you. You’re the first kid that has come my way and attracted me. I want to help you—I want you to reach the top. And you’ve got it in you. But believe me, I know Harlem—I know the show world. And I know Williams . . .”

“You make me think he’s a monster and he . . . he’s not!”

“Listen, dearest,” Ivy pleaded, “you’ve got your name all set for the bright lights. You’ll go to new heights if you walk carefully. But Joey Williams will pull you down—he’ll pull you down. He’s a rat . . .”

“How dare you . . .”

“Please, listen, Baby . . . I’ve had my affair with Joey . . .”

“You’re jealous—that’s it. You’re trying to spoil it for me. Joey Williams is a gentleman and I know it.” By now Baby Lou had gone off into something that resembled a rage, and looking hatefully at Ivy who remained calm, she moved toward the door and shouted:

“Don’t go saying anything about Joey—just because you happen to be *that way* yourself.” She slammed the door and went out.

Ivy sat down. She bit her lip. And buried her head in her hands. The door opened. Ivy looked up. It was Walton, the company manager.

“Hello, Ivy. Blue again?”

“Just a little.”

“Anything wrong. You broke?”

“Not that . . .”

“Well, you got nothing to worry about, Ivy. With Baby Lou heading our show we’ll play every night in the year.”

Ivy nodded. She looked up at Walton and then spoke.

“And what if you lost Baby Lou?”

“Oh, don’t say that—that little kid is headed for big time or I’m crazy. If Harlem thinks she’s hot, what will Broadway think . . .”

“I see . . .”

“Oh, it was a lucky day for us when you picked that kid up, Ivy. Where was it, in Cincinnati?”

Ivy, belabored with her worries, reflected. It all came back to her.

“It was Kansas, Walt,” she was saying, “and only two years ago. I saw the Baby in an orphanage and took her along. Listen Walt,” she suddenly leaped to her feet, “I . . . I . . .”

“For Pete’s sake, Ivy, what’s wrong?” the manager asked. “You never looked so strange. Is there anything . . .?”

“Listen, Walt, I can’t make the opening number of this show—you won’t mind if I skip out. It’s important as hell . . .”

“What . . . what’s . . .”

“Listen, Walt, if I don’t see someone, things will be bad for all of us. Now, get out while I put some clothes on . . .”

“I don’t like you missing part of the matinee,” Walton remarked, “but, gee, you got me scared.”

He backed out of the door as he spoke, and Ivy let the robe fall from her body. She stood momentarily in front of a large mirror and then quickly pulled some clothing over her. She tucked her hair under a hat and put on a coat. And, locking the door of her dressing room, she dashed out.

She raced to the corner and into a phone booth.

“Hello . . . hello . . . Mr. Williams . . . hello . . . Joey.”

“Who is this?” came the voice over the wire.

“This is Ivy . . .”

"Oh, well, what do you want?" very annoyedly.

"I want to talk to you . . ."

"I thought we were quits."

"It's not me, Joey Williams. I don't want any part of you. But it's a kid named Baby Lou . . ."

"How's that your business?"

"Listen, Joey, I forgave you for what you did to me. But if you pull that kid down, if you lay your dirty hands on her, I'll give your family plenty to be sorry about . . ."

"You threatened me before, Poison, and here I am hale and hearty."

"You heard what I said, Williams. Take it or leave it."

The receiver clicked. The first act was over. The drama of Baby Lou was in the making.

II

TWO weeks had gone by. On Thursday night Walton rushed madly about the stage. Baby Lou had not shown up. The same thing happened Friday night. The management made apologies for this and that. He told them Baby Lou was sick. But at heart he was sick. What could have happened and where was the missing trouper?

On Saturday, right before the matinee, he broke into Ivy's room, without any warning. He was too excited to think about her being undressed; his breath coming in short gasps almost choked him in the effort to speak.

"Ivy, the Baby's back . . ."

The old trouper looked up. She pulled a robe toward her and waited.

"She just went into her dressing room. Oh, she's looking like hell, Ivy. Drunk and—all shot to pieces."

Ivy remained staring silently at the nothingness before her and her silence irked the nervous manager. He swore under his breath and then demanded an answer.

"For God's sake, say something, Ivy. What's up . . . is it . . . is it?"

And the wise one nodded. "Walton," she said, slowly, "it's a . . . a guy . . ."

"Is he . . . is he doing her wrong?" the expression sounded naive but it was the only way of asking it. And Ivy disregarded it and went on.

"I always feared it—I knew the Baby would go off for a sucker. Only I know this one—that makes it hard to swallow."

She finished with such hatred in her voice that Walton flared up furiously.

"Who is it, Ivy? I'll fix the dirty . . ."

"No, you won't," Ivy smiled calmly, "you've got a wife and a child, Walt. Never forget that. I may try . . ."



*"Did he ask
you to his
apartment
to
rehearse?"*

"It's no time for thinking about it, kid. We've got to do something. The Baby isn't herself. I heard her crying when I pressed against the door . . ."

"I guessed so much," there was hidden fury in Ivy's voice. She got up, put her hands on her hips and looked at Walton. Then she went out without saying a word and walked down the corridor to a door. She turned the knob quickly and walked in.

Baby Lou, disheveled and with tear-stained cheeks looked up.

"You . . . you . . . what do you want in here?"

"Hello, Baby . . ."

"Oh, let me alone . . ."

"I've missed you, dear. Where were you?"

"None of your damned business."

"You've been drinking."

"That's none of your business, either."

"You've been seeing Williams . . ."

"Oh, get the hell out."

"Listen, you," Ivy leaped forward and grabbed the smaller woman by the shoulders and shook her like a poodle. "I've got this to say to you and you

better listen. If I catch you drinking again, missing a show or seeing Williams, I'll break your neck . . ."

"Let me go . . . let me go . . . you can't talk that way to me . . . who do you think I am . . . you dirty—"

The hand of Ivy rose and fell. It slapped the Baby so violently that it toppled her from her stool and sent her sprawling against the floor. Dazed and in agony, she lay like a frightened house pet. Ivy, crouched over her like a wounded leopard, raised her hand again to strike, her eyes ablaze with fury. And Baby Lou pleaded for mercy.

"Help . . . help . . . stop . . . do you hear?"

But Ivy had long taken the law into her hands.

"Shut your mug before I crush it. You little whimpering devil. You move and you'll never see light again. I told you I want you to stay away from Williams . . ."

"You can't tell me . . ."

"No?" Ivy raised her hand again. "I'm telling you, get me? Joey Williams is mine, and if you try playing around you've got me to deal with . . ."

"That's a lie . . . that's a lie," Baby Lou screamed, "you're not his. He told me you were nothing but a dirty old . . ."

Before she could finish, Ivy had slapped her again; and, inwardly aware of what Joey had told the youngster, she was about to turn and leave to square things forever with Williams, when Walton and most of the cast broke into the room.

"For Pete's sake," Walton took the scene in at once, tearing Ivy away from the Baby who lay crying upon the floor of the dressing room, "what are you doing, Ivy?"

THE young whimpering kid cried aloud her sorrow. She told how Ivy had beat her because Williams had preferred her to the older girl and she repeated every word Williams had said about Ivy. Finishing she cried:

"So she beat me—she beat me because she is jealous."

And while all eyes fastened themselves upon her, Ivy went cold inside. She almost reeled; dizzily she saw Walton look scornfully at her. And into her heart a murderous urge raced; it found no peace. It left her no moment of rest.

And thus sacrificed to both the cause of Baby Lou and exposed to the scorn of the troupe, Ivy sank to lowest depths. And Walton, taking a hand in the matter, spoke his mind.

"Ivy, you're through. You can't strike a show girl and get away with it in my shows. And you, Baby Lou, get up."

While Ivy sulked in the corner near the door Walton tore into the kid.

"You know you missed two shows. And you've been drinking?"

"I wasn't feeling well," Baby Lou sobbed, "and that devil beat me . . . she almost killed me. And me so sick . . ."

She cried so talentedly that the tears melted themselves into the heart of all who heard. And having discounted Ivy's story, Walton turned to Baby Lou and told her to get ready for the next show. And then he turned to his assistant manager.

"Evans, call up the agency and get another dancer for the dressing room down the hall." And so saying, everyone understood. Ivy, not hearing any longer, blinded by her hatred for the man who had besmirched her, and drugged by her love for the little actress, reached for the doorknob. While all watched her, she turned, went over to Walton and fighting to hide her tears, placed her hands on his lapels.

"Walt," she bit her lips to remain composed, "you've been so good to me. I'll never stop trying to show you how much I appreciate it. On the level—you're an ace."

She dropped her head, looked bravely at all about her in a silence that was tense, and avoiding the sight of Baby Lou she tramped out of her old dressing room.

She rushed quickly back to her own, spilled everything on the floor in her hurry. Dressing in civilian clothes, she heard the overture strike up and a mad desire to rush out on the stage gripped her. It was all so strange—not going on at the sound of the music.

But no longer master of her destiny, Ivy Lee tore out of the dressing room, concealed a long blade under her coat and rushed out of the theatre. Coming through the stage door she said a final farewell to the doorman and as the fresh air met her nostrils, it failed to dislodge her original intention—her promise to get Williams for all time.

And so determined, she went to her apartment. She smoked and smoked. She took an opiate for her nerves, a harmless tablet that sobered her jumping nerves, and paced the hours away in her apartment. Night fall and the hours stealing toward midnight . . .

Toward midnight. And the final act in the

tragedy of Baby Lou about to be written.

For at the hour of midnight, strange things are known to happen, but none so strange as those which happen in Harlem.

III

IVY LEE, her face concealed in a heavy fur collar, stole softly up the steps in the direction of the apartment of Joey Williams. Months before, she reflected as she went softly up the stairs, she had come to see Joey in an entirely different mission. She remembered his warm, intoxicating embrace, the lies and the vulture-like heart of the man. His dark ebony skin—his thin moustache, his villainous yet irresistible smile.

And she thought of the lies he had told her, of how he had betrayed her. And then she thought of Baby Lou . . . of the lies he had told her. Of the tragedy that was sure to come. And onward she went.

Tired, finding no peace in a world that had never given her a break—that was Ivy Lee. Game old trouper to the end.

She stole softly out on the fire-escape and looked down through a small transom. Below she could see the window of Joey's apartment—she could see his robed figure lying upon a chaise longue. Breathlessly, the long cruel knife in her hand, she waited.

The figure stirred; she could almost discern the smile upon the face of the devil. She strained her eyes. From out of the further corner of the room something staggered. Ivy stared; her eyes rolled for an instant. And then, when the sheer negligee of a woman made itself plain, something in Ivy went hot. It was maddening. The sight of this woman. And the knowledge that Joey had not only betrayed her, but Baby Lou as well. And how many others?

Softly, slowly, entrancedly, like a long distance movie, she watched the procedure. Greedily, she saw Williams arise from his chaise longue, lift the young creature into his arms and lay her down upon something near the lounge.

Breathlessly, she saw the young girl struggle from his embrace; the look of disappointment that crept over his features was almost visible where she stood. And at one time she almost caught a sound of his rowdy voice.

And successfully hating him, she waited. She would give them leeway. She would let them know

the bliss of each other and then surprise them. She would avenge herself and—she had almost forgotten Baby Lou.

And so waiting, she saw Williams chase the fleeing figure about the room. Twice he toppled and fell, once as his arms encircled the fleeing figure. Ivy leaped to new activity. The blood raced madly in her veins. Impatiently she watched—watched and waited.



"What if he did?"

The drama must soon reach its climax. Once again she saw the chase and the result. Williams, staggering about, lunged across the room. He seized the frail figure in his arms, lifted her high. And a soft protest, high and shrill reached the very height of the fire-escape. It came through the transom and maddened Ivy. She watched—

THE conquest complete. Williams, drunk with power and desire, had clasped his arms in a vice about the lithe figure of the girl. And slowly but determinedly, his strength was bending her will and her resistance.

And then, as she stared wide-eyed almost expecting the ghoulish climax, Ivy gaped. Something unknown—some quick motion which she had not seen, occurred. She knew only, by the terrible, blood-curdling scream that had taken place

that something had happened. She stared, unbelievably, and the form of Williams fell to the floor with a dull thud.

And Ivy Lee, blade in hand raced toward his door.

She flung it open with a savage lunge and coming into the room she almost knocked over the unclad figure of the trembling girl. Her throat constricted—her eyes blazed; she trembled from head to foot . . .

“Baby Lou,” she gasped.

Crying, sobbing, panicky with fear, the showgirl from Kansas, the new toast of Harlem, fell crying to the floor.

“Ivy . . . Ivy . . . save me. I had to . . . I had to . . . He was driving me out of my mind . . . oh, save me . . .”

Hysterically rolling about the floor, the spectacle of her deed almost at her fingertips, Baby Lou implored for a mercy that only a love greater than any could give. And Ivy Lee, hurt anew by the turn of events, looked in momentary horror at the turn of events.

There was Williams—there was Baby Lou . . . Baby Lou, where she herself might have been had it not been for Williams dragging her down. Wasn't it enough that she had suffered—was it to be the fate of this child?

No, no . . . she remembered her promise to herself. A mysterious love for the youngster warmed in her anew—she quickly lifted her to her feet and dressed the sobbing girl. And quickly pushing her toward the door, while tears streaked down her eyes, Ivy stopped. She pulled Baby Lou to her bosom.

“Go, dearest, out of Harlem. Away . . . anywhere. Then come back . . . you will find the world waiting . . .”

“But, but,” Baby Lou was sobbing, “what about

you . . . what about . . .” she glared uneasily at the corpse at her feet and sobbed anew, “the police will get you . . .”

Ivy Lee smiled. Her eyes no longer seemed uneasy—her glance was pure and calm and resolved.

“Go, my dear, and don't worry about me. Only, remember what I have said. Come back some day. Harlem will welcome you. But you must be careful who you welcome in Harlem . . .”

She pressed the younger girl close to her bosom; the tears streaked endlessly down her cheeks. The heart of Ivy Lee had gone out to this waif whom she had recruited for the stage months and months before.

And now, suddenly aware that the police would arrive at any moment, she bade Baby Lou a final farewell, kissed the weeping girl and led her out of the apartment.

The night was still. Ivy Lee was strangely at peace. She went over to the phone. She lifted the receiver. She said, very steadily.

“Headquarters—I have murdered Joey Williams. I am at his apartment.”

She hung up. She went over to the closet in which Joey kept his collection of sheer negligees for his lady guests. Quickly but calmly she undressed. Smiling at the prone figure upon the floor, she gazed at the negligee. Joey had bought it for their first meeting. She then slipped it on and glanced at the lounge upon which she had first come to know the man now upon the floor.

And, wrapping the negligee about her and lighting a cigarette, Ivy Lee stretched, took the bloodstained knife from the body of Joey Williams and held it in her hand. And so arranged, she remained calmly watching the door before her.

Outside the lights of Harlem twinkled brightly . . .

