

Skyscraper

*The Story of How a Name Affected
Frank's Nerves*

By JAMES McNITT



ALL began when Dan Tully tried to get his son in our work. Dan Tully was one of our steel-workers, and one of the best in the game. Frank, his son, was the apple of his father's eye, and I won't deny he was worth it. Built tough, like a Fifth Ward kid has to be. I guess he could hold his own down there in any street fight. But underneath he was a gentleman, shy and reserved. His father had made him finish high school, and he had picked up a sort of polish there. Didn't talk like a kid from the Fifth Ward, when he talked at all.

Well, anyway, old Dan called at my office early one morning. We call him old, although he's only 45. Steel-workers are usually washed-out at 40, but Danny held his nerves well.

"Kelly," he said. (Kelly's my name.) "I've a boy at home that's the very image of me. He wants to become a steel worker like his dad. Eighteen years old, and he's got steel nerves. Any places open?"

That's how Frank started working for the Southern Construction Company.

And what a worker! Within six months he was the best of the gang. The boys all liked him, because he was so carefree and gay. There was never a time during his work that he wasn't whistling or singing. But he never got careless. He had seen a man plunge about two hundred feet to the pavement, when he was about ten. Landed right near where he was standing, watching his dad. He never forgot.

During the lunch hours I got to know him pretty well. Some of the men read or played checkers, one foot dangling

from a girder, and gazing contemptuously at the ant-people beneath. The majority, however, just talked. The younger men talked about their girlfriends and their dates; the older and wiser men spun yarns and told jokes. Frank kept pretty well apart from the others, staying with his dad. Having been a working-companion of his father's for over five years, I ate with them. I engaged the boy in conversation and attempted to draw him out.

One day I said to him. "Doesn't your mother ever object to your working like this?"

He shrugged. "She's dead."

"Who keeps up the house?"

"Oh, Sis does that."

This was a surprise to me. I had not known he had a sister.

"Sister, eh? How old is she?"

"A year younger than myself."

Someone on another girder called him away a minute. Turning to his father I said, "Has he ever gone with a girl?"

"Oh, no," his father replied. "He thinks the world of his sister, but any other girl makes him run and hide. He sort of feels that he's his sister's guardian angel."

As time went on, I became more intimate with the two, with the result that they invited me to supper one night. I could see why Frank was so fond of his sister. Patricia, as she was called, seemed more shy than he was, if possible. A mass of black, curly hair fell around her shoulders, and big dark eyes declared her fear of the world. She seemed equally as fond of her brother as he was of her.

It was just as well that he stayed away from the girls. He was a type which would have fallen hard had he

fallen. When they fall in love hard, they become absent-minded, and when a steel-worker becomes absent-minded—well, draw your own conclusions.

One day I hired two brothers, Jimmy and Mike Doherty, for work in that gang. Bill Crosley missed a bolt and was knocked off the girder. The man who threw the bolt lost his nerve because of Crosley's death. Washed-out, completely.

For some strange reason, Frank seemed attracted to the two new men and they became fast friends. It was a queer thing, too. Mike had been born in the Fifth Ward and was one of the gang leaders as a boy. He had some respect for right and wrong, however, and when, for lack of excitement, he felt himself being drawn into the racketeering game, he quit the Fifth Ward entirely and had come to work for Southern, bringing his brother. The latter idolized his brother, just as Frank did his sister. They were competent and soon made a name for themselves.

During the lunch hours, Mike regaled his listeners with tales of his girlfriends. Frank never was around during these sessions, but he heard enough to know that Mike frequented the Lucky Star Dance Hall. The place had been raided more than once, and gambling equipment and liquor confiscated. Although Frank attempted to dissuade him from going there, Mike objected that he never drank. A steel-worker couldn't.

The workers were pouring from the building one evening. Laughing and joking, they were folding pay-checks into worn bill-folds. Frank and his father walked slowly home.

Here they found Patricia putting the last touches to the evening meal. They ate, and Dan sat down to read the newspaper. This had been the family routine for a good many years. But tonight Patricia was restless. When nine o'clock struck she turned to her father and said, "Papa, may I go over to Elizabeth's tonight? She's giving a party

and wants me to be there."

When her father consented, she added, "Thanks, papa. You're a dear," and ran to change her dress.

The next morning her father looked rather sharply at her.

"Out rather late, weren't you?"

"A little," she admitted yawning. "It lasted rather longer than I thought."

When the two men (for Frank was a man now) arrived at work, they began their job with vigor. I set Mike at work catching bolts, Frank at throwing them, and Jim to help Frank.

"I'm gonna cut out the late life," yelled Mike to Frank, catching a red-hot bolt in his bucket. "Too hard on a guy. Gee, I had to laugh last night. I had a girl by the name of Patricia soused, and what a fool she made of herself. Patricia Muller or Tuller or somethin' like that."

"Couldn't have been Tully, could it, Mike?" asked Jim. "Hey, look out, you'll—" This last was addressed to Frank. He had thrown a bolt while Mike was still bent over. It caught the latter on the temple and he toppled from the girder. Jim in trying to prevent it, had hit Frank's foot with a bolt, but had failed in his object. It is almost girder with a strong wind blowing, impossible to stand on one foot on a. Naturally, when Frank lifted his foot—well, anyway, he landed near Mike.

I was working with Dan at the time and we had been watching the boys. He was stunned by his bereavement.

"Are you going to say anything about what happened?" I asked. He shook his head. "We'll call it an accident. What's done can't be undone. Frank must have thought Mike meant his sister. He didn't know that Patricia Muller, the butcher's daughter, hangs around down there. He didn't even know Muller had a daughter. I know our Patricia was at Elizabeth's because I phoned."

We turned to go down where the still, mangled forms lay.