

Touch of Silver

by Roderick D. Turner

## **Touch of Silver**

When Vince Richards first saw her, she was waiting for a bus. He was across the street, making for the bank, and through the ever-shifting wall of vehicles he caught his first glimpse. A tight white t-shirt and army surplus khaki pants. Red leather boots, and a blue canvas knapsack. These he saw but did not notice: what he noticed was her hair. It was straight and evenly cut, just above the shoulder, a classic bowl-cut but with a big bowl. And it was silver.

He stopped and stared. That hair, he thought, would make anyone pause and take notice. Yet it did not seem to be so. Even those on her side of the road moved past without a glance, intent on their own missions, seemingly oblivious to her presence. The gleaming hair was a statement, a show of self-expression. Most people were conditioned to ignore, either consciously or through practised habit, anything that was out of the ordinary. A sad statement about today's world, Vince thought. He shook his head and smiled slightly.

"I noticed you," he said quietly. And as if in answer, she looked up and her eyes met his. Even from that distance he sensed a sadness in her gaze, in her whole expression, a quiet acceptance and resignation. She smiled, a gentle smile that was in total contradiction to her appearance. Then the bus pulled up and she was gone.

Vince stood rooted to the spot. A full minute at least went by, and he simply watched as

the bus disappeared into the traffic. For an instant he was sure he caught a flash of silver through the tinted glass of the windows. Then it was just him standing there on the sidewalk, on his way to the bank. He felt both bewildered and intrigued, and he was reminded of the line his mother had drilled into him as a kid.

"Stop and look around you," she had said. "Take notice. Observe. Experience. Else someday you'll miss the most important day of your life."

"And what was today?" he asked himself aloud.

With a final look at the empty bus shelter, Vince turned and set off briskly for the crosswalk at the next traffic light. He passed a man in a gray-blue business suit wearing a bright green tie. An older woman with a steely gaze and a tooth missing in the front. Observe, his mother had said. Out of the corner of his eye he saw something that sent a chill down his spine. He stepped quickly into the entranceway of the local pawn shop. The proprietor had placed a horseshoe above the door, point down. How could he be so ignorant? Without even thinking of asking permission, Vince reached up and inverted the shoe, placing it point upwards. He shook his head as he went on his way. Nothing like inviting bad luck, he thought.

He reached the intersection and was about to cross when something glinted at him from the ground. He bent down and picked a brooch out of the muck in the gutter. It was almost palm-sized and covered with dark mud, almost undetectable, yet he had noticed it.

"Still, it's probably worth nothing," he muttered.

Nevertheless, he stuffed it into his jacket pocket before proceeding to the bank. Half an hour later he arrived home and pulled his find out for a closer look. He carefully rinsed it clean, then studied it more carefully. A beautiful silver brooch, in the shape of a stylized star. The metal gleamed and sparkled in his hand, as if newly made. On the back was a name, professionally engraved into the metal. DARLENE SCHWARZ.

Vince pulled out his phone book and scanned the Schwarz's. There were only three, and

the first on the list had the initial D. He dialled the number.

"Hello," said a woman's voice.

"I'm looking for a Darlene Schwarz," Vince said. "Is this the right number?"

"This is Darlene Schwarz," the woman replied. "What is it you want?"

"Have you lost any jewellery recently, Ms. Schwarz?"

"I—what do you mean?"

"I mean that I found something on the street today which may belong to you, and if you can identify it—"

"My brooch! You've found my brooch."

"Could you describe it for me, Ms. Schwarz?"

"A silver star, with two elongated points and my name engraved on the back. Oh, I can't believe it. Can you bring it over here right away?"

"Of course. I'm glad I could be of help to you. I can be there in twenty minutes."

"I don't know how to thank you, Mister—"

"Richards. Vince Richards. There's no need to thank me. I just happen to be observant."

Vince arrived at the Schwarz's modest home, a vast bungalow nestled tastefully into the forest on the ridge overlooking the north end of town. The view was spectacular, and the driveway immense. He parked his rusting Chevette on the street so that he wouldn't drip oil on their lockstone.

Darlene Schwarz was in her thirties, pleasant-featured, and married. Her husband was immaculately dressed, dour and suspicious, his impression clearly not improved by Vince's car, or his jeans and t-shirt.

"Let me get this straight," Mr. Schwartz said, waving the silver brooch at Vince. "You say you found the brooch in a gutter this morning, and you called us right away?"

"That's right."

"So now I suppose you expect us just to cough up the reward money and say thank you very much, have a nice day? I would have thought a thief could come up with a better story than that."

"Now Manny," chimed Darlene. "How can you be so mistrusting? Mister Richards has been quite honest and forthcoming. We should be grateful for his help. I know I am."

"I'll say what I think," her husband retorted. "And I think this thief stole your brooch and has kept it long enough for us to offer a reward before bringing it back. Do you honestly believe that this brooch lay in a gutter for five weeks without anyone finding it?"

"Five weeks!" said Vince. He shook his head in disbelief. "That's amazing. I guess I'd be sceptical too, Mr. Schwarz. But you needn't worry about me being a thief—I didn't even know there was a reward. I've brought the brooch back, and that's all that matters. Have a good day."

Vince was half way down the drive when Mr. Schwarz caught up with him. He handed him a sealed envelope.

"I'm sorry I was so suspicious, Mr. Richards," he said. "That brooch is my wife's favourite piece, and she's been fretting over it ever since it disappeared. Even if you did—well, we have it back now and as you say, that is the important thing."

He turned and walked back to the house. Vince pocketed the envelope and drove home. That night he celebrated. The envelope had contained a thousand dollars in crisp one hundred dollar bills.

It was several months later, and Vince had all but forgotten the silver-haired girl when he saw her again. He was in the mall, heading for the record shop. Through the crowd ahead he saw a glint of silver, and the memory of the girl came rushing back like a wave. He ran, pushing through the throng of shoppers, trying to catch a clear glimpse of that mysterious woman. She was there, ahead of him, her hair sparkling in the sun that poured in through the mall's huge central skylight. Her bright yellow spring dress was radiant against the drab tones of the mall

decor.

"Wait," he called. At that distance he was sure his words were lost in the din of other voices. Yet, just as before she had responded as if hearing his cry, she paused and looked back. The same face, sad and contemplative. Again, the same gentle smile. Then she turned and rounded a corner. This time Vince did not stand still, but sprinted after her as though his life depended on it. He swept round the corner, scattering shoppers in all directions, and screeched to a perilous halt just before passing under a ladder. The Mercantile Shoe Shop was upgrading its signs. With a shudder Vince skirted the ladder, thanking his stars that he had stopped in time. But the girl was nowhere in sight.

Frantically he sped down the mall's indoor street, glancing quickly into each shop he passed, searching for the silver hair. By the time he reached the Information booth near the main entrance, he knew he'd lost her.

Vince thumped a fist on the desk in frustration and distress.

"Not again," he said. "Not again."

"May I help you, sir?"

He looked up to see the Information clerk eyeing him sceptically, his expression one of definite distaste.

"Did you see a girl with silver hair go by here?" Vince asked hopefully.

"I see a lot of people go by," the clerk replied.

"Yeah, I guess you do," Vince muttered, "but do you **see** any of them?"

"I beg your pardon? Excuse me, sir, but if you don't need anything could you please move aside? There are others waiting."

"OK, OK," Vince said. His gaze fell on the countertop he was leaning against. There were lottery tickets of all kinds, but one caught his attention. It had a large silver star at its center. He pointed at it.

"I'll buy that," he told the clerk.

The man dutifully retrieved the ticket from under the plastic counter, accepted Vince's two dollars, and handed it to him.

"Good luck, sir," he sneered. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

The next day Vince Richards was a million dollars richer. His ticket had won.

Less than three weeks later, the now affluent Vince Richards was jaywalking across the main street of town on a busy Saturday. He was stuck in the center of the road, unable to get to the other side due to solidly flowing traffic. He saw her as she came out of a florist shop. She wore a black blouse and skirt, the broad golden belt buckled with a large silver star. Her bright silver hair jutted beneath a broad-brimmed black hat. On her arm was a large bunch of colourful cut flowers.

"Wait!" he shouted. "I need to talk to you."

Vince vaulted over the back of a speeding green sedan, causing heads to turn and tires to squeal. He kept his eyes fixed on his target, and this time she did not disappear. He arrived at the side of the road a little dishevelled, but otherwise elated. At last, he would meet the mysterious silver-haired woman who he was sure had led him to such good fortune.

She did not even turn or move as he strode up to her. Her eyes were swollen from weeping. Fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Who are you?" he asked breathlessly.

She looked up at him, her red eyes harsh against the brilliance of her silver hair. But she did not reply.

"You've brought me luck, ever since I first saw you. You're—" Her appearance suddenly registered with him. She was dressed as for a funeral. "Why are you crying?"

She reached out and touched him gently on the cheek. Vince felt a thrill run through him at the warm softness of her caress. He wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. Instead, he

gazed steadily into her huge silver-gray eyes.

"What can I do to help you?" he said. "You've done so much for me. I want to do something in return."

Instead of replying she turned and walked slowly away down the sidewalk. Vince could see that her shoulders shook with sobbing, and he was convinced that he could help her. She was crossing at the next intersection. He had no time to lose. With a sigh of determined resignation, he sped after her.

"Wait," he called once more. "Silver hair. Wait for me. I know I can help you."

He ran down the crowded sidewalk to the corner, dodging people as he went. A small brown dog yapped at his ankles, and he skirted it deftly. A mangy black cat trotted out in front of him, and he vaulted it in mid-stride. He leaped off the curb and out into the road. Just ahead now and he would have her, never let her go again....

There was a bright flash to his right, and he turned in time to see a silver star streak towards him, carry him up, and then down, down into oblivion.

The ambulance crew declared him dead at the scene. And the driver of the silver Cadillac was absolved of all responsibility. None of the witnesses could explain why the young man had bounded out in front of the speeding car. And none could explain his words just before he jumped. But they all remembered one thing: silver hair. What could he possibly have meant by that?