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NOVELETS

IN THE DAYS OF KING ARSGRAT	16
<i>By John Jakes</i>	
THE MAN NEXT DOOR (Fantasy Classic)	
<i>By Paul Ernst</i>	75

SHORT STORIES

NEITHER STAIRS NOR DOOR	
<i>By Robert F. Young</i>	8
THE LEECH	
<i>By Jack Sharkey</i>	56
THREE TALES FOR THE HORRID AT HEART	
<i>By Brad Steiger</i>	69
THE FORELIFE MYTH	
<i>By Albert Teichner</i>	96
3RD SISTER	
<i>By Arthur Porges</i>	110
ON THE ROAD TO SPLENOBA	
<i>By Roger Zelazny</i>	115

FEATURES

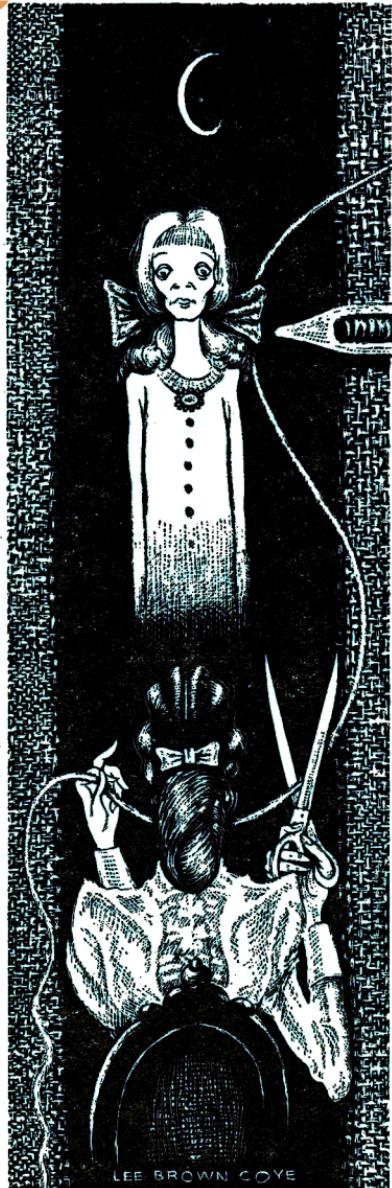
ACCORDING TO YOU	6
EDITORIAL	7
GHOST AND GHOUL, by T.C. Lethbridge	48
COMING NEXT MONTH	68
FANTASY BOOKS	123

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Lord SISTER

By ARTHUR PORGES

There is a tide in the affairs of men... and it is as crucial to catch the ebb as the flow.

I REMEMBER being eight when it happened . . . Judging from old photographs, I was an extremely attractive child, with perfect features and enormous dark eyes that sparkled with animation. That is hardly surprising, when you consider my parents. They were both actors, the descendants of distinguished theatrical

families going back several generations, all members of which were notable for looks and talent. After a hundred years, there must be a kind of evolutionary selection among such lines, since leading men and women of the stage, given a modicum of ability, prosper according to their profiles.

My father died when I was six, and mother didn't marry again, although there was a succession of men known to me as 'uncles', who shared our life together for a time. They said I took after her, at least in appearance. She was reputed to be one of the most beautiful and witty women of her generation, a Mrs. Pat Campbell—Jane Cowl sort of amalgam.

Not that we spent much time together in those early days. To be sure, she often took me away on her tours; but what with rehearsals, and plays that ran until eleven at night, or even later, we didn't have many hours alone. Yet I loved her passionately: her smile; her warm, lilt-ing voice; the delicate scent she wore; the way she mischievously tugged my hair, or kissed my nose. Beautiful, feminine, fascinating mother. To think she was only thirty when it happened.

I was eight, but like most children of professional people, unusually mature in many ways. We were at home for a change.

Home to mother was the small town in Illinois where her parents' house still stood. She came there perhaps once a year for a few weeks, to rest or study a new, more exacting role. This time an "Uncle Carey" was with us in the old, ramshackle building. I remember him as a tall, ironic sophisticate, who tried to amuse me with dry humor that I couldn't possibly understand until years later. But he was an improvement over "Uncle Calvin," a dark, moody type, who ignored me completely.

I THINK that mother was studying the part of *Candida*, in Shaw's play—a role to enchant any discerning actress. She and Uncle Carey were reading together; I enjoyed their dulcet tones without following much of the dialog. Just as my bedtime came along, mother's voice faltered suddenly; her face became oddly pale; and in a matter of moments, it seemed, there was panic in the old house, as she collapsed. There had been some illness in the little town; probably typhoid, a terrible scourge in those days. Before we knew it, this gay, lovely creature, apparently in the best of health, was fighting for survival.

The over-worked doctor came, and did what he could. With no anti-biotics, it was a matter of anti-toxin and good nursing. Un-

cle Carey found a competent woman, one of the brisk, no nonsense type, who promptly took over the household. But the serum was not sufficiently potent mother refused to mend, and wavered precariously between life and death.

I went about in a daze. Too young to really believe in death, I had some instinctive knowledge that my mother could somehow be taken from me forever, an intolerable vision. I must have prayed very hard. The others—Uncle Carey, and the servants—were too busy to bother with a child, so I wandered about, pale and distraught, and was usually ordered to go out and play.

The disease finally reached its crisis, and everybody knew that by the next morning mother would be either mending or dead. They were too involved with her to notice my own flushed face, or the over-brightness of my eyes. Late in the afternoon I slipped from the house, and headed down the dusty street. Always a sensitive child, my own illness, with the attendant high fever, had somehow put me in tune with occult forces, and I sought, unknowingly, a source of evil. At least, that was how I judged it at the age of eight, that stifling summer in Illinois, when mother lay dying.

I walked along, between those wonderful old elms, towards the

edge of town, coming unerringly to an ancient, sun-dried house, its yard overgrown with weeds and great glowing sunflowers. A few doors away, I met a chubby, tow-headed boy of my own age, whom I knew slightly. In a sing-song voice, half delirious, I asked him who lived there.

"Just some ole ladies," he replied contemptuously. "Better stay away; they're crazy, Maw says."

I felt that his mother was wise, for the house seemed a focus of evil. Ignoring the boy, I went up on the sagging porch, and peered through a dusty window. There were three women inside, sharing an old fashioned parlor. They were elderly, but I knew it more by intuition than from their looks, for the three faces, plainly showing some blood relationship among the women, were unlined, even beautiful in a stern, classical way.

Two of them were working with some queer weaving mechanism. Their product was exquisite: a strange, shimmering cloth with a treble-shot, fantastic texture. As the first woman selected certain colored yarn, passing it to the second, the latter wove it dexterously into a pattern, which she apparently improvised with great artistic ingenuity. The third, who merely watched, held a large, golden pair of scissors.

EVEN as I gazed in wonder at the disturbing scene, this woman spoke.

"It is time to cut the thread," she said, her voice like a silver bell, lacking all human overtones.

The other two paused.

"The pattern is not complete; there are many more fine designs to come," said the woman who was choosing the yarn.

"Yes, I have plans for them," the weaver added.

"It is time to cut the thread," the first speaker insisted. "I know, my sisters. I always know."

I knew, too. By some means, never to become clear to me, I was certain that the pattern, so fine and glittering, was my mother's; and that her thread of life was to be severed. Ordinarily a timid child, I found in my delirium courage far beyond my normal capacity. I sprang to the door, wrenched it open, and faced the awesome trio.

They were surprised. Whoever or whatever they were, my sudden descent upon them was something unexpected. They had enormous, overwhelming presence, but under it I sensed their amazement. An alien had invaded their world. They fixed wide-set grey eyes on me in silence for a moment, then the one choosing threads said quietly: "How did this child get here?"

The weaver replied: "I do not know, sister. It should not have happened."

The one with the golden shears—she whom I feared and hated—said: "Love and innocence can tear the veil. She loves her mother."

"I love her!" I sobbed. "You must not cut the thread! I won't let you."

Their severe, classic features were devoid of pity. Passionless, unmoved, terrible, they sat there. Only the golden scissors in the third woman's exquisite, long fingers opened and closed like the jaws of a wild beast.

Finally the one who held it said: "The thread must be cut. I know. I always know the right time."

I stepped towards her, my tiny fists clenched.

"No! I won't let you. You nasty old women. I'll tell Sheriff Bill. He'll lock you up in his jail." I was threatening these immortals with an old, ineffectual sot. I could weep now at the irony of it.

"We have delayed long enough," the weaver said. "If you must cut, Atropos, do it now."

The long thread, glowing in the light of the setting sun that streamed through the window, was extended, and the shears moved forward.

"No!" I screamed. "No!" And I stood directly between them,

my breast almost touching the sharp, open points.

"Cut!" the thread-chooser cried.

"Cut now, sister!" the weaver echoed. "Quickly, or we will be too late."

The chill grey eyes of the woman called Atropos found my own, feverish and glowing with fanatic determination.

"Stand aside, child. You don't know what you are doing."

"You can't have my mother. I love her. I don't want to live without her!"

"Cut the thread!"

"Cut immediately; the sand runs out; the moment passes. Cut, cut!"

"I cannot," Atropos said. "She is too strong. The power of love and innocence prevails. Her illness has given her strength to pass the forbidden veil. Sisters, I cannot sever the golden thread."

"Too late," said the one choosing yarn, as she reached for fresh strands.

"Too late," the weaver agreed. "I must find a new pattern, and go on after all."

"Foolish child," Atropos said in her level, brightly-metallic voice. "What have you done?"

"You won't cut it?" You won't

cut my mother's thread?"

"I cannot; the time has passed. There will come another proper moment, but who can say when, now? I might pity you, if I could. Leave us, child, the damage is done."

I STUMBLED out of that room, into the hot, sultry street, past the wide-eyed boy, who shrank away from me. Somehow I got home, where my incoherent story was ascribed to delirium—an explanation that cannot be disproved. I spent ten days in bed, but when I recovered, my mother, laughing and beautiful once more, was there beside me.

She is still there, right across the room. A blind, drooling woman of ninety-eight. There is nothing left of the wit and beauty that entranced two continents. It all vanished nearly fifty years ago. And I—I am a barren spinster of seventy-nine, still fastened, as I have been for so long, to that dying animal across the room. I have spent my life caring for her who should have died young, lovely, and adored, as the Third Sister would have ordained. Fool that I was to meddle! Atropos, of the golden shears, wherever you are, pity me, and cut two threads today.

THE END

