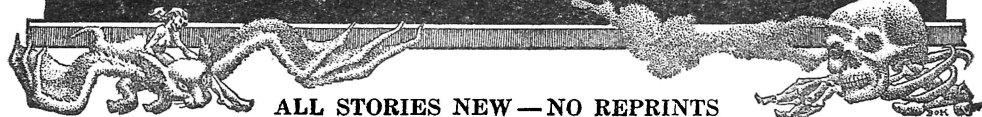


Weird Tales



MARCH, 1945

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NOVELETTE

- LORDS OF THE GHOSTLANDS Seabury Quinn 8
To be jerked out of the quiet restfulness of your grave and shipped across four thousand miles of water . . . but then any mummy might be called unlucky!

SHORT STORIES

- IN THE BEGINNING H. Bedford-Jones 24
Did you ever hear of an office safe that contained a link with the philosophers, magicians and soothsayers of past ages?
- A BIRTHDAY PRESENT FOR TOMMY Charles King 33
The way to conquer horror is to bring your fears out into the open; but you can't bring THEM out into the open. . . .
- THE PERIPATETIC CORPSE Harold Lawlor 38
The funniest part about a corpse walking into the morgue by itself is that it just couldn't happen—could it?
- THE SHONOKINS Manly Wade Wellman 48
Precautions against the Shonokins are not like precautions against anything else in this world or out of it
- PLEASE GO WAY AND LET ME SLEEP Helen W. Kasson 56
The family was gathered just as it would have been gathered in any other room . . . only this was the crypt
- ALANNAH Stephen Grendon 64
Any sensitive, imaginative child lives in a world of make-believe—at least "make-believe" is what the prosaic mind calls it
- THE TOMBSTONE Ray Bradbury 72
"No dead man's going to rest easy with strange folks sleeping right on top of him"
- SECOND CHILDHOOD Jack Snow 76
As one approaches the end of life's long journey memory becomes brilliantly clear and vivid
- A SIP WITH SATAN Roger S. Vreeland 80
Just one old man alone in a place big enough for a hotel. And the THINGS he did, well, what do you think?

VERSE

- QUEST UNHALLOWED Page Cooper 3
- BEWITCHED Willard N. Marsh 32
- WIND WALKS NOT ALONE Dan Kelly 55
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS Irwin J. Weill 63
- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB 93

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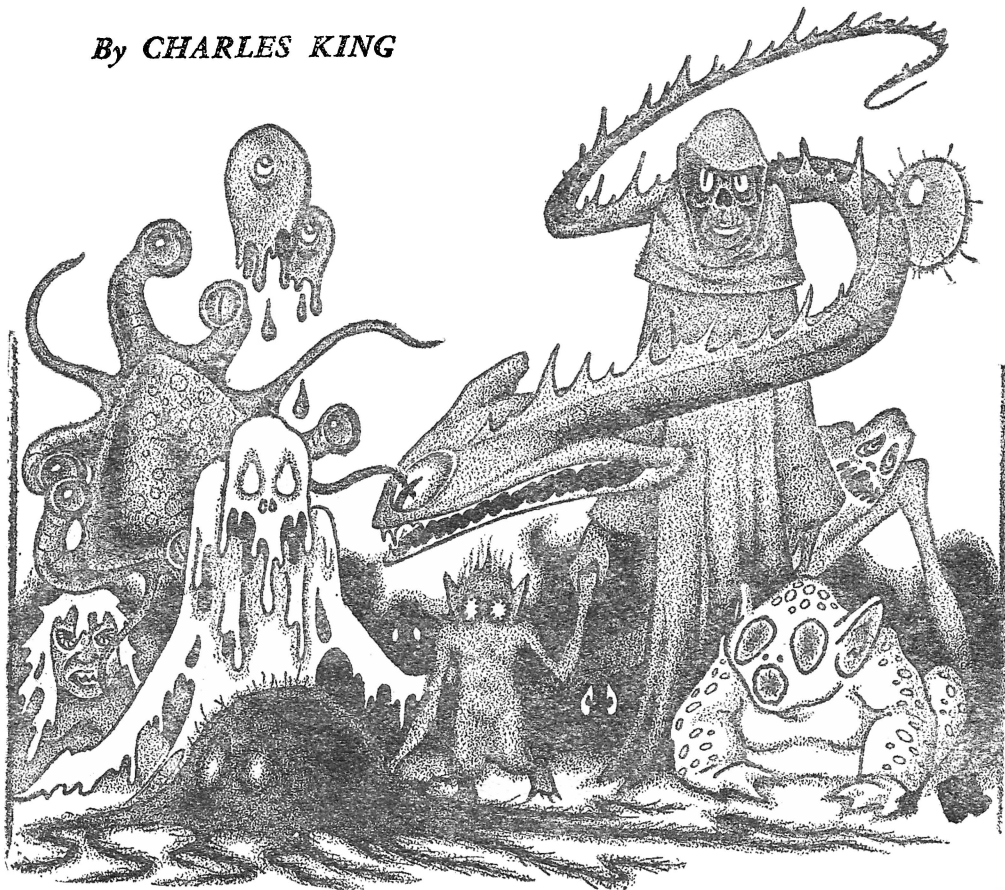
Vol. 38, No. 4

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

A Birthday Present for Tommy

By CHARLES KING



*Here's a little girl . . . no parents, no home, not really; such a strange little girl.
Aren't you curious. . . . ?*

I AM a little girl. People say that I am small, even for my age. Sometimes when I walk in the park nearby to my house, well-meaning strangers will ask me if I am not afraid to be alone. I always answer "No," and it is the truth.

Maybe it isn't the complete truth because I am sometimes afraid at night. That is, unless I have company. I live by myself and the house does get kind of scary without company. I like company very much. . . .

"Hello, little girl."

"How do you do, sir."

"Dear me. But you *are* a polite little girl. . . ."

"Thank you, sir."

"How old are you, my dear?"

"How old do I look, sir?"

"Ha! Ha! Bears out my contention that a woman's a coquette no matter what her age. To please you, child, I'd say you were about twelve. And very pretty."

I made believe that I saw a friend of mine and went away. It is always about this time

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

that they start talking about my parents. That makes me very uneasy because I have no parents. And I just know that if I told that to a grownup there would be trouble. There would be more questions. And if they ever found out that I live alone . . . well, I just know they would take me away from my house. I would not like that. It does scare me when I am alone, but sometimes I have company. And that is nice. I remember Tommy. He was *very* nice. I will tell you about him. . . .

IT WAS about a month ago. I think it was a month. Time is funny. It is not always easy to remember.

I was walking along one of my favorite paths in the park. On a sunny day you can always find children there. It is fun to play with them. I can forget so many, many things when I play with them. But, even at my happiest, it is always saddening to know that I will see some of them for so very short a time. Even so, I must not depress myself. I promised to tell about Tommy, and I will. A ball came rolling along the walk. . . .

"Here is your ball, little boy. . . ."

"Huh. I'm not so little!"

"I'm sorry. I guess you're a pretty big boy."

"Sure, I am. And I'm strong, too."

"You must be. You threw that ball very far."

"I bet that girls can't throw like that."

"No . . . we can't. We learn different things. . . ."

"What kind of things?"

This would have been a very hard question to answer. There are many things you can tell little boys; there are so many things that one cannot. I have known many of them . . . very many . . . and yet each one thinks a little bit differently. That is where the danger lies. One cannot give the wrong answer because then they never trust you again. And yet one must have company. It is all quite tiring . . . and confusing. . . .

I was wondering just how to answer Tommy, when his governess ran up. She seemed most worried. And then she saw us together. She smiled, I suppose in relief, and then grew quite angry.

"Tommy! You are a bad, bad boy!"

"Why?"

"Because you ran away and I didn't see you."

"But I only was chasing my ball. . . ."

"Don't you know that there are bad people who steal little boys?"

"B-but I was only . . ."

"That will be enough, Tommy. On top of making me worry myself sick, you give me silly excuses. Little boys should always tell the truth."

"I am *not* little! I am almost seven years old, and . . ."

". . . and you are being very nasty to me. You . . . you are making me very unhappy. . . ."

You must agree that grownups are peculiar. Tommy's governess was worried about him. She said so. But when she found him she became angry. This has always been a grownup sort of reaction that has been very hard to understand . . . for a long, long time. . . .

Do you see what I mean?

"Who is this little girl?"

"She gave me back my ball."

"That was very kind of you, my dear."

"Thank you. I like to do nice things for other people . . . like Tommy."

"Oh, you know his name?"

"Not till now. You just mentioned it."

"What is *your* name?"

IT WAS a simple enough question. And yet, sometimes the simplest of questions are the hardest to answer. Haven't you found it so? Things that are hard you can somehow fight through, but, unless something warns you, it is the simple word that causes the most worry; makes you press your hands against your ears and pretend that you never heard the question. Bless little Tommy. He spoke up bravely as he could:

"She is my friend!"

"Of course, she is, Tommy. Let's all go back together and have her meet the rest of the children."

I was a bit worried. There were bound to be grownups as well as children, and grownups always get around to asking one's age. And though I have been answering that question for a long, long time, I am always thinking that some day I will be called a liar . . . and that somebody will start to in-

investigate. The truth? Oh, no. I could never tell *that*.

There were little babies in carriages, and that also worried me. Babies are always frightened when they see me. Even those very new ones, that cannot see as yet, thrash their little limbs about when I am near. Sometimes they go into convulsions. Maybe it is because they have come only recently. Perhaps, in the world they left, they had much knowledge; and they haven't been in *this* world long enough to forget everything. They are dangerous. . . .

I left quickly, as soon as the first baby began to wail. But I promised Tommy I would play with him tomorrow.

AS I walked up the steps to my house I began to feel afraid. It is hard for me to describe this fear. It isn't just what grownups call an emotion. It is . . . it is . . . like something solid. I can feel this fear. I always have. I kept hoping that, this time, *they* would let me alone.

It was no use. As I walked into the house *they* all started talking at once.

"Where is our food?"

"You know we are hungry!"

"We haven't eaten in *weeks!*"

I was frightened. I always am because *they* have so much power. I tried not to look at them as I answered:

"It is very dangerous to feed you so often. The last time I nearly got caught."

They began again—but not talking this time. It was much more horrible. I will call it "laughing", even though it didn't sound at all like any of the different kinds of laughter you have ever heard. *They* do not know what laughter means. In fact, *they* have no idea of most of your emotions. *They* once knew, of course, but that was a long time ago. Now *they* just regard others as being useful. Like myself.

"Behold! The Little One is frightened."

"She is always frightened."

"I am hungry!"

One of them uncoiled from the high chandelier and dropped to the floor. The floor was uncarpeted but the great body made no sound. I have seen this happen thousands of times but I never get used to it.

I closed my eyes; but had to open them

at once. *They* can make me do anything. The scaly, three-cornered head was swaying close to mine. Some of the eyes on the ends of the wobly tentacles were closed; but enough of them remained open, blinking at me. Enough, I mean, to keep me from moving.

"What are you afraid of, Little One?"

"Of people finding out about . . . about *me*."

"Ah! You almost expressed fear that people would find out about *us!*"

FROM behind a picture hanging crookedly on the wall, a lot of thick, grayish liquid dripped down to the floor. It shivered a little bit and then changed into a hairy, ropy, horrible thing. It scuttled soundlessly across the floor and joined us. I tried not to look at it. I kept silent while *they* talked.

"Is the Little One becoming dangerous?"

"No. She cannot. You know that."

"We built her so long ago that sometimes I forget."

"We built her well—for our purpose."

"But have we blocked ourselves by our own cleverness? The Little One is a weak vessel at times."

"That is because we made her so. If she is to mingle with humans then she must appear to them as such. She must share their weaknesses."

I tried not to listen. *They* had talked this way many, many times. My eyes kept sliding to a pile of dirt in the corner. I should be used to it, by now; but my heart jumped with fright as a huge, red eye, dragging some disgusting threads of flesh, suddenly rolled out of the dirt. It joined the others. I could get used to the way they constantly change their shapes; it is just that *they* are so *quiet*.

Even with a whole roomful of them talking at once, their voices cannot be heard by anyone but me. That is the truth. And now the three of them were speaking in their soundless voices.

"It is too bad that we must depend upon the Little One for food. . . ."

"But we must. It is part of the agreement with *him*."

"Yes—I know. And sometimes I think *he* got the best of the bargain."

"How can you tell? After all, the agreement is but a few thousand years old."

"You are right."

"And you must remember—in justice to *him*—that our method of eating gives us wondrous enjoyment. *He* tacked that on to the agreement."

"True. The vivid ecstasy of tasting food, while somebody else eats, is a never-ending source of new pleasures. . . ."

"And do not forget that the Little One, who eats for us, not only transfers the delightful sensations to us . . . but enhances our gratification with *her* sensations!"

"Hm-m. Perhaps we did get the best of the bargain."

"All this talk has made me hungrier than ever. . . ."

I wanted so badly to run away. Wanted it more than anything. Because I knew what was coming.

"Listen well, Little One."

"I listen. . . ."

"And?"

". . . obey!"

"Good. You will feed us tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Yes. There must be no failure on your part."

"But. . . ."

"Yes?"

"N-nothing. I was just thinking. I met someone today. . . ."

"Excellent, Little One. That will make your task so much the easier."

I tried to go. But I couldn't. It meant *they* were not through talking to me. I always feel funny when I hear their voices. It is because their voices do not make any sound.

"Do not forget what we enjoy best, Little One."

"I . . . I will not forget."

"That is well. You once made a mistake. . . ."

"But that was long ago. So very long ago."

"We have not forgotten. Remember that!"

This time *they* let me go. As I turned, my eye caught a pretty shaft of moonlight coming through the window. *They* knew, immediately, that I enjoyed what I saw. So I

was not surprised when the moonray was cut off. *They* simply blotted it out.

I suppose the reason is to save my emotions for the feasts. *All* my emotions are wanted then; for, at those times, *they* relish and savor my thoughts and feelings as much as the food I eat. You would find it very unpleasant to watch them the times that I eat. I think that you would go quite mad.

NEXT day I walked to the same spot in the park. Tommy was very happy to see me. And I was happy to see him.

"Hello, Tommy."

"Hello . . . gosh . . . gee!"

Tommy was so excited that he kept hopping from one foot to the other. He just couldn't keep his little body still. He tried to speak again, but spilled his words out so fast that it was impossible to understand him. So I spoke to him. I had to, anyway. There was so little time until tonight; and I had so much to do.

"What are you so excited about, Tommy?"

He couldn't help himself. He kept wiggling and wiggling. He hopped up and down. Then, finally he blurted:

"I'm seven years old!"

"No. Really?"

"Honest. It's my birthday today. I'm every bit seven years old."

I had to think very hard. This would make things much more difficult. But I knew I daren't fail. No. *They* wouldn't like it. Even thinking of it made me feel weak.

"Let's play catch, Tommy. I want to learn how to throw like you do."

"Sure, I'll show you. It's easy."

"Thank you, Tommy."

"Aw shucks. You're my friend, aren't you?"

"Yes, Tommy."

"Then why shouldn't I help you?"

I kept throwing the ball in such a way that we drifted apart from the other children and grownups. It was important. Dear little Tommy was very patient. He kept showing me what I was doing wrong. Over and over. When we were far enough away from the others I whispered to him:

"Do you know what's most fun to do on birthdays?"

"No. What?"

"Surprising people."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean playing tricks. Suppose we take a little walk and then come back to them from another direction."

"Oh boy! They wouldn't know *where* we came from. . . ."

"That's right. Wouldn't that be fun?"

His face fell. "My Mummy wouldn't like it. She always tells me never to go far away from my nurse. . . ."

"But, Tommy, you're not a little boy anymore. You're seven years old. And besides we won't go very far."

"You promise?"

"Of course. And then I've got my own surprise for you—"

"A present?"

I didn't answer him because it wasn't necessary. His mind was completely occupied with thinking about what I was going to give him.

AND now time was getting short. I knew that in a few minutes Tommy would be missed; and they would begin looking for him. By this time we were on the lane that leads out of the park and onto the avenue. A light breeze carried along a frightening message. Someone was already calling for Tommy.

As we left the park Tommy started to hang back.

"We're going too far."

"No, Tommy. We're only going to get your present. My house is very near."

"And then we'll go right back?"

"Right back"

"Good. I wouldn't want nurse to worry about me." His face was all lit up with eagerness as he trotted along next to me.

"Why are you walking so fast?"

"So that we can get back quickly."

At the house Tommy stopped. He bent his neck to one side. Then to the other. He was peering so hard that his eyes squinted up.

"What's the matter, Tommy?"

"I don't like this house. It's funny."

"But I live here. It's a pretty house."

"I don't care. It's funny."

In another minute Tommy would go chasing pell-mell down the street, back to the park. I quickly looked up and down the quiet side-street. It was absolutely deserted.

It came so fast that Tommy was only capable of an astonished squawk. I twisted one of his arms behind him and shot him up the steps and into the room.

And then he saw them.

His mouth opened. Shocked surprise left his eyes to be replaced by blank, unreasoning terror. A pulse in his temple began beating like a tiny hammer. Saliva started running out one corner of his mouth.

And then *they* were on him.

The room was filled with their shoutings and gigglings. But I knew that nobody outside could hear them. Only I can hear them.

Tommy was going fast. He was now in a corner, one hand held up before his eyes. His body was jerking faster and faster and a thin, steady whimpering fell from his wide-open mouth. Suddenly he fell. It was all over.

I knew what I had to do.

I hauled him to the center of the floor. Then *they* gathered around me in a circle. The room was filled with their noisy, hungry yelling. And yet the room was absolutely soundless. *They* were now ready to enjoy Tommy through me.

It was for me to begin the feast. . . .

