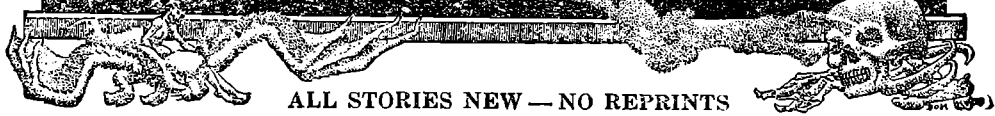


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1948

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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A Death Crown For Mr. Hapworthy

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

JONATHAN HAPWORTHY was not long for this world, four competent doctors had assured him. (A coronary condition.) But, as he was in his seventies, this did not disturb Mr. Hapworthy a great deal. He expected to die sometime; everyone did, and the terrors of hellfire did not frighten him. Mr. Hap-

The death crown was not for sale; it was for saving souls!



Heading by FRED HUMISTON

worthy was an atheist—when he thought of religion at all as anything more than an interesting study in contrasts between, say, what the Buddhists and the Zoroastrians believe. He was a student of all theologies, but privately he did not for a moment believe in the hereafter.

When the body broke down, was his opinion, it simply stopped like a good watch that has ticked its last tick. Sometimes, rather wistfully, he wished that he did believe in a life after death; for it seemed to him that far too many people died before they were half finished living. But he had uncovered no facts in any of his studies with which he could convince himself—and Mr. Hapworthy believed only in the known and proven; though, for amusement, he liked to dabble in the supernatural.

However, disbelief in a system of rewards and punishments after death did not give one the right, he felt, to act like a stinker while one was among the living—if only because it was a damned stupid way to live. He believed in everyone's doing whatever he liked, so long as it did not interfere too irreparably with the rights of others. And by that creed he lived: a tall dignified old gentleman, at the age of seventy-four, with neat mild features, carefully parted white hair, and a pedantic way of speaking that reminded one of an old-school professor. He had never married, was an orphan, had few intimate friends, and seldom fraternized with anyone other than the sad-eyed Labrador retriever that trotted at his heels always. He had but one hobby—collecting amulets and charms; and he had but one ambition—to bequeath said collection to the Smithsonian Institute, and thereby perpetuate the name of Hapworthy in the same way that Mr. Carnegie had left his name for posterity to read above library doors all over the country.

Now, in his neat modest apartment in Washington, he sat gloating delicately over the showcases that lined every wall. It was his habit just before lunch to work up an appetite by looking over his treasures and reminding himself that no other single individual in the world had in his possession so many authentic curios pertaining to ancient, medieval, and modern magic. It did not occur to Mr. Hapworthy to connect the

fact that he had already lived three years longer than the doctors said he could, with the fact that he had in his collection every known health-amulet in existence since the history of man. Nor did it strike him as significant that, the very day he had acquired a certain odd-looking gray rock, purported to be the immemorial "Philosopher's Stone" which could turn all base metals into gold, he had come into a sizable fortune from an uncle he never knew he had. By no means did it occur to him that, ever since his purchase of a peculiar bright gem, said to have been pried from the girdle of Venus, strange women often followed him on the street and were known to smile at him unduly. . . .

NONE of these things occurred to Mr. Hapworthy, and he would have laughed drily, had anyone mentioned such ideas. Like religion, contiguous magic was something other people could believe in if they liked. Jonathan Hapworthy merely collected them.

Putting on his hat at a square angle and taking up his cane, he made one more circle of his apartment living room, flicking dust from a tray of Egyptian scarabs, examining a display of High John the Conqueror roots for signs of rot, and polishing the tarnish from a silver evil-eye charm that dated back to the Borgia era. There was nothing, Mr. Hapworthy thought proudly, that he did not have in the way of talismen purported to draw all good things to, and fend all bad things from, their possessor. One day the name "Jonathan Hapworthy" would be a synonym for knowledge of the supernatural, as one immediately thought "snakes" when one said "Ditmars." With his collection would go the book he was writing on the subject. Perhaps Smithsonian would give him a whole room in the museum, since he planned to endow it himself.

"Ah, well. Come along, Trevo," he called to his dog. "Lunch!"

Humming cheerfully to himself, Mr. Hapworthy strolled to the elevator and walked in. The cage did not descend at once, and he frowned in slight annoyance at the gawky hillbilly who had been hired during the illness of the regular operator.

"Well? Come, come, my good lad," Mr.

Hapworthy prodded gently. "If I'm late to lunch, I shan't get a seat. . . ."

The boy turned, flushing in apology, and fumbled with a small candybox he had been peering into with such absorption that he did not see his passenger enter. Now, clumsily, he tried to shut the box and start the elevator with one gesture—the result being that box and contents tumbled to the floor at Mr. Hapworthy's feet. Being a polite man, he bent to retrieve it . . . and was startled to see a large round ball of white feathers, packed tight, each feather overlapping the whole as smoothly as a bird's wing. He reached for it, curious, but the boy cried out sharply:

"Don't! D-don't tech that, mister! Not afore ye say 'Matthew, Mark, Luke, John' . . . I seen a man drap dead that-a-way, when I was a young'n . . . !"

MR. HAPWORTHY withdrew his hand, amused; and allowed the boy to pick up his own belongings. His bored blue eyes had brightened visibly at the other's words, as the sad-eyed hunting dog at his leg might have perked up at the faraway honk of a mallard.

"What on earth is that thing?" he asked eagerly. "Some sort of hoodoo?"

The boy looked pained. "Nawsuh. Hoodoos is for niggers! This-heah's a holy sign, belongin' to my Granny. She sont it to me to carry home to my maw when I go. . . . Ain't no mail de-livery closer'n ten mile from our cabin, and Maw she's down in her back, cain't walk hardly no piece. . . ."

Mr. Hapworthy, who was not versed in backwoods dialect, translated this with some difficulty. "Yes, but . . . what is it?" he persisted. "How did those feathers get packed together like that? Are they glued?"

"Nawsuh!" The boy looked actively shocked. "You ever try to glue ary bunch o' feathers together? . . . The angels done this. Mean you ain't got nary death-crown in your fambly? I swannee!" He clucked his tongue in sympathy, eyeing Mr. Hapworthy with pity not unmixed with disapproval. "I reckon," he commented, "none o' yore folks ever got to Glory. Hit ain't many of our'n." he admitted kindly. "Jest Grand-paw. Pap, being as he died drunk in a ditch, never had his head on nary pillow. Don't

reckon it'd a-done no good if he had, him bein' a sinner all his born days."

Mr. Hapworthy choked, but managed to keep a straight face as the elevator sank smoothly downward. "I'm afraid I still don't understand," he murmured. "Where do you get these . . . er . . . death crowns? Where do they come from?"

"Out'n the pillow where a good soul lays his head when he dies," the mountain boy said simply. "I reckon the angels ball up the feathers that-a-way, makin' a set o' wings in a hurry for the sperrit to fly to Heaven. When there's one in the pillow, it's sure a comfort to the fambly, knowin' their kin got to Glory all right. . . ."

Only by faking a fit of coughing was Mr. Hapworthy able to cover his mirth this time. He mopped his eyes with a silk handkerchief, polished his pince-nez, and set it firmly back on his nose. Then a canny gleam came into his eye.

"I don't suppose," he asked cautiously, "that you'd care to sell that . . . er . . . death-crown of yours? For, say, fifty dollars?"

He saw the boy's eyes widen at the sum mentioned, perhaps more money than he had ever owned in his life. But the square chin came up, lips set in stubborn defense.

"Nawsuh. I don't reckon *anybuddy'd* sell ary death-crown out'n their fambly. Why, it's be like . . . like sellin' the gravestone off'n a grave!"

"Oh. . . . Oh, I see." Mr. Hapworthy looked dashed, but he had by no means given up. He had only begun to fight! He was off on the quest of a new rare amulet, surely one that Smithsonian had never even heard of; a brand new one indigenous to the Southern mountains, though possibly having its origin—like many of the old hillbilly ballads and expressions—in Old English tradition. This was a real treasure, one he must not let escape his collection. Everyone had scarabs, fertility charms, health-amulets; but nowhere before in the learned tomes had he ever read about a death crown! A discovery of this sort could make him famous as a collector and a student of the supernatural. Mr. Hapworthy took a deep breath.

"A hundred dollars?"

The boy gasped, but set his jaw even more stubbornly. "Nawsuh. Not that we

couldn't use the money, with Maw ailin' and all the young'ns to feed through the wintertime. . . ." He hesitated, then shook his head positively. "Nawsuh. Granny wouldn't like it a-tall. Nor Maw neither."

"Two hundred dollars?" murmured Mr. Hapworthy insidiously.

THE youth cast a look at him, almost frightened. He clutched the box with its weird contents to his hollow chest, and shook his head violently. Then, as his temper started to speak again, he darted out of the elevator and vanished from sight through the service entrance, out of earshot and out of range of any further offers.

"Oh, *drat!* These superstitious numbskulls!" Mr. Hapworthy exploded.

The dog whined softly at his ankle, looking up anxiously to make sure his master's anger was not directed at him. Mr. Hapworthy patted him absently, thinking in rapid circles.

"I must have that thing, Trevo," he muttered furiously. "I simply *must!* It's a real find. Genuine Americana—while most of my talismen are of foreign origin. I've *got* to get that thing. By hook or by crook!"

But frustration was his lot that afternoon, for on his return from lunch he found the old elevator man had risen from his sickbed and resumed his work. The young hillbilly, of course, had been discharged.

"Oh DRAT!" cursed Mr. Hapworthy. "Where did he go? Can you give me his local address?"

The elevator man shrugged. "Sorry, sir. He was living here, in the basement with the janitor. Maybe I can get you his home address. He did say something about catching a bus back to the farm. . . ."

Hours later, accompanied by the doleful-looking retriever in a carrying-case with his luggage, Mr. Hapworthy was on a cross-country bus headed for a little hilltown, just barely on the map at all, called Big Thickety Creek. He alighted at a filling station—which turned out to be the bus station, business section, and residential district of Big Thickety. With some difficulty, he managed to check his luggage and hire a guide, who promised to take him over the mountain to the Turney's sharecropped farm, and come back after him in

two hours. During that period, he was confident, he could effect the purchase of the white-feathered "death crown" he coveted.

His hopes soared when the rickety Model-T deposited him at his goal—a sagging two-room cabin in the center of a sparsely-grown cornfield. There was an open "dogtrot," or hallway, connecting the two rooms. Outside in the packed-clay yard was a rundown well, a gourd-pole for martins (insurance against chicken-hawks, although there were no chickens now clucking around the impoverished-looking place), and a corncrib whose roof had fallen in.

Mr. Hapworthy knocked. At once a flock of perhaps nine ragged children swarmed about him out of nowhere, giggling, pulling at his neat knife-creased trousers, or merely staring. One screeched something, and a thin slattern of a woman came out of the kitchen-room, a bunch of turnip greens which she had been picking over held in one hand like an awkward bouquet. She ducked her head shyly, smoothed back her hair, and said formally:

"Howdy. Come in and set." Then: "You sellin' funeral in-surance? We don't want none. . . ."

MR. HAPWORTHY cleared his throat, said he was not selling funeral insurance, and made his way gingerly into the kitchen through a mass of giggling children. The poverty of the place struck him like a blow, though he could see the woman's pitiful attempts to keep her crowded little home clean and cheerful. The board floor was freshly scrubbed, and there were magazine pictures cut out and tacked on the wall everywhere. All the little girls' hair had been carefully braided with bows of red calico, and all the little boys' overalls had been neatly patched.

Mr. Hapworthy cleared his throat again. He was ill at ease and, never a man to mince words, came directly to the point.

"Your son Lute," he began. "I happened to see a . . . a death crown he was bringing from your . . . ah . . . your mother? I wondered if . . . ah . . . you'd cared to sell it. For inclusion in my collection of amulets and charms, to be displayed in the Smithsonian museum after my death. Ah . . . My last off was two hundred dollars. I'll make

that three hundred, madam, and that's my last word. What do you say?"

THE mountain woman was staring at him, trying hard, he saw, to follow his words few of which she could understand. But she did comprehend the words "death crown" and "three hundred dollars." Light blazed in her thin tired face all at once, and Mr. Hapworthy saw her eyes sweep over the gaunt brood of children clustered about her, now quiet with wonder as he spoke.

"Lord help my time! Three hundred dollars?" the woman whispered. "I never seen more than a hundred, time I got my man's insurance money, poor soul," she added piously. "Some say he wasn't no count, but he suited *me* all right and the chillun. . . . But. . . . Why, I couldn't *sell* you no death crown, mister!" she said quietly and with a wistful regret that made Mr. Hapworthy feel more uncomfortable than ever. "Why, nawsuah. I don't say we don't need the money, right bad. But. . . . Paw's death crown? It wouldn't be right to sell nothing like that. . . ." She laughed lightly, scattering one of the younger children away from the hot wood stove. "Lutie come by and brung it a while ago, fore he tuck off to git him another job. In the cotton mill, if he's lucky. He tole me some feller offered to buy it. We had us a good laugh about that," she smiled at her guest in complete friendliness. "I reckon," she murmured kindly, "you jest didn't know what hit *was*, likely."

"Er . . . no. No, I guess I didn't," muttered Mr. Hapworthy, completely chastened by the gentle reproof in this starved weary mountain-woman's eyes. Faced even though she was with a winter of starvation for herself and her children, she evidently had her own standards, and clove to them with a simple integrity.

He fumbled with his hat; looked here and there to avoid that steady gaze. His eye fell on a large daguerrotype portrait of an old man with a gray beard and warm humorous eyes. It was hanging over the stove.

"That's . . . ah . . . that's your father?" he mumbled. "The one who . . . ?" He floundered, making conversation to bridge the silence. "You resemble him a great deal. And your son, Lute. The same eyes. . . ."

The woman's expression changed abruptly, all reproof gone. She beamed up at the portrait, then back at Mr. Hapworthy.

"Yessuh. That's Paw. He was a circuit rider. Preached all over these mountings, come rain or shine. A better man never lived—though he like to've got hisself unchurched, account of his notions. He had some idee that good souls could leave Heab'in and come back to earth, if there was something you tuck a fancy to do, to help them that was still livin'. Said you didn' *have* to set around and play the harp. . . . My! he talked real crazy. But he saved many a soul in his day. Anybuddy could talk to him, he was that homey. We knowed there'd be a death crown in *his* pillow when he passed on. . . ."

"Er . . . yes. Yes. Naturally." Mr. Hapworthy choked, looking up at the kindly face of the old man in the picture.

The light was not good—or perhaps it was only smoke from the wood stove that made it hazy. But he could have sworn one of those humorous eyes winked at him a split-second before he glanced away. He kept looking back at the portrait, warmed in a strange way, a little feeling of loneliness that had always haunted him vanishing at sight of it. Where had he seen such a face before? Oh yes—the Biblical beard; that was it. It reminded him of the pictures of the Disciples on Sunday School cards he had seen as a child. Long ago—when he had believed in a number of things he knew now could not possibly exist. Santa Claus, fairies, angels beside one's bed. . . .

All at once Mr. Hapworthy did an impulsive thing, for him.

Sidling over to a crude kitchen table, he fumbled in his pocket for a moment, took out a wad of bills, and stuffed them behind a coffee can. He moved quickly, and no eyes in the room, except the pictured eyes over the stove, saw his gesture.

A FEW hours later, riding back toward Washington on the bus, Mr. Hapworthy was annoyed with himself. He had not only failed to acquire the object that he coveted most in the world, but he had given way to a maudlin impulse to help some stupid ignorant people he had never seen before and would certainly never see again.

There was no good reason, other than sloppy sentiment, why that woman would not sell her treasured "holy sign" for the edification of the American public! Why had he not insisted? He might, indeed, have given her a smooth sales talk about its being her "religious duty," or some such rot. An illiterate sharecropper would have been easy prey to his collecting ability. But instead . . . !

Mr. Hapworthy glared down at his feet, where the retriever lay curled up uncomfortably in his carrying-case. He lifted the lid, patted the silky head fondly to soothe his irritation . . . and a moment later toppled forward on his face.

Dimly, through the clutching pain around his heart, he was aware of excited fellow-passengers hovering over him; of the bus screeching to a stop in some nameless little town; of his being carried into a small dingy hotel. A fat rather pompous doctor was located, who examined him with a great show of concern.

"Mr. . . . er . . . Hapworthy? Yes. Are your affairs in order, sir? You were aware of your condition, of course. . . . Who is your next of kin? I'm afraid . . . ah . . . this is it."

"Oh *drat!*" said Mr. Hapworthy, thoroughly annoyed. Then he shrugged. "Well—I suppose everyone must die sometime. . . . Yes, my affairs are in order. No relatives. Though you might notify my landlord as soon as possible," he added thoughtfully. "He'll want to be arranging for a new tenant. Oh, and I wish you'd ship my dog to him, if you will. He's very fond of duck-shooting, and Trevo here is a splendid hunter. Myself, I detest killing things.

"Er . . . yes." The doctor fumbled for words for a moment, then: "What is your faith, sir? You'll want a pastor, of course. . . . Or a priest? There's also a rabbi here in town. I'm a Methodist, myself," he added stiffly. "But my aunt is a Christian Scientist, if you . . . ?"

"Really?" whispered Mr. Hapworthy, drowsily interested through his sedative. "Remarkable creed—that all matter is merely a figment of mortal mind. Ridiculous, of course," he added chattily. "Though if it's any comfort to anyone, I'm the very

last man to try and arouse logical doubts. . . . No, no," he waved airily. "The Supreme Deity—if there is one, as all theologies seem to contend—doesn't know about my sins already, I don't see why recounting them to some poor overworked clergyman would change anything. Damned embarrassing custom, anyhow . . . !"

THE doctor gasped, and compressed his lips. "Sir," he said severely, "this is hardly the time for blasphemy. You're *dying*, man! Don't you *care* what happens to your immortal soul after . . . ?"

"Poppycock," murmured Mr. Hapworthy pleasantly. "But I would like to have lived a bit longer. My collection isn't complete . . . !"

He sighed crossly, and closed his eyes. He never opened them again.

Lifting him up in readiness to draw the sheet over his face, it was the doctor who felt that peculiar lump in the pillow under the dead man's head. Assuming that the old fellow had hurriedly hidden his wallet there in his illness, as many travelers are wont to do, the physician ripped open the striped ticking and dug among the musty gray chicken-feathers with which the pillow was stuffed.

But what his hand brought out was not a wallet, but a large round ball of feathers, so compactly put together that a pin could scarcely pierce its center nor fumbling fingers tear it apart. Each feather overlaid its mate as neatly as though they had grown that way. . . . But they were not gray feathers like the rest of those in the hotel pillow.

They were white, pure white, like the feathers of a goose or a Leghorn pullet. Mr. Hapworthy would have recognized that particular ball of downy white, since he had unsuccessfully tried to purchase it for his collection as a curio. He would have understood how, miraculously, it had got in among the dirty Plymouth Rock feathers under his very irreligious head. He also would have understood *why*. . . .

And perhaps, lying there in death—quite chastened and amused and happy at being proven so wrong, by someone who had ignored his mind and looked into his ~~heart~~—perhaps he did understand.