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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# A Visitor from Far Away

By LORETTA BURROUGH

*A dreadful horror hung over Mrs. Bowen for twenty years, and then—  
but read this story for yourself*

**T**HE wind was scooping great whining hollows in the air, whirling the snow against windowpanes and frosted roof of Laurel House, piling it deep upon projecting cornices, rolling it into soft white drifts on the unprinted path to the front door. It was very still within the house; the hinges of a loose shutter squealed, groaned, worked up to a terrific bang against the wooden walls, squealed again.

It was so silent that to the woman lying quiet and nervous in the bed, the page she was turning seemed to shout hoarsely as it slipped back against its fellows, although she knew it had only whispered beneath her thumb. She was reading a book on astronomy, but as time passed she found it harder and harder to think about stars, harder to remember that they were shining somewhere beyond this blizzard in all the veiled brightness of their galaxies.

It was the knowledge that she was alone in the house, completely solitary, that frightened her. There were too many rooms beyond whose empty lighted windows (lighted by her as darkness fell, to cheat that dark) the pale white storm dipped and swayed. Ever since the Occurrence—that was how she phrased it to herself, as though it had been an eclipse, or an earthquake—she had taken good care not to be without a friend or servant in her house at night. Solitude was an invitation to those dreadful and oppressive thoughts that would sometimes descend upon her like a dark hawk even in

the midst of a crowd's gayety; but more apt to happen—oh much more!—in solitude. And although the source of those thoughts lay twenty years back, and Mrs. Bowen at forty-five did not look in any way like Mrs. Bowen at twenty-five, they were one and the same and therefore subject to bad dreams and a strange horror of being left alone.

Mrs. Bowen closed her book and threw it aside, lay there a moment listening to the high-pitched voice of the storm, and then turned to look at the pink enameled face of the French clock on her dresser. Since she had last looked, time had crept on, turning the soft ticking into minutes, into half an hour; the small fragile hands pointed to a quarter of twelve. Her heart seemed to sink with depression. What was the matter with those intolerable servants! They knew the way she felt about being left alone. "Sure, ma'am," Nora had said, the rosy Irish brogue thick in her voice, "we'll be back quick as ever. If 'tweren't Mother was so sick——" And she had taken her sister in tow behind her, repeating, "We'll be back by ten-thirty, sure." An hour and fifteen minutes late, and not one word from them!

The doctor said this fright of hers, this horror of being alone, was all nonsense. Well, perhaps so, but it was not toward the doctor that Roger's reptilian head had turned that day in the dark shining courtroom, with the rain falling in thunderous torrents outside the windows. It was not to the doctor that Roger

had said, in the moment of silence after the judge's voice sentencing him to life imprisonment for killing his wife's lover had ended, "I'll get even with you. I'll never stop thinking of how to do it. I'll never forget you—or forgive you." No, it had been to her, his wife, that Roger had pointed his long hand that always made her think of a spider, and spoken his ugly words.

Her dark brows contracting, Mrs. Bowen, forgetting now that it was all over long ago, put her hands to her throat with a curious look of terror. She was thinking of Roger and *that* night, months before his trial, when, the smoking empty gun flung away from him, he came at her, his fingers crooked for her throat, filthy names pouring from his lips.

And then, exhaling a deep relaxing sigh, she got out of bed and went to the window. She had been near, that time twenty years back! It had been touch and go for days after their man-servant had broken in and pulled Roger's fingers from her neck. She had testified at the trial gladly, eager to weave a thick strong rope for Roger's death. But they had only given him life imprisonment.

**T**HE curtains pulled behind her, she looked out at the blizzard. The snow seemed very deep, swirling into queer high shapes along the roof edge, like punch-bowls and cardinals' hats. In the light from the windows downstairs the flakes shone like sugar, rising and dipping; she had an oppressive feeling of the vastness of this billowing frozen movement that filled the night. Could it possibly—she sucked in her breath at the thought—be bad enough to keep the servants in the village? And even as she wondered, one hand pressed against the cold pane, the telephone rang in the room behind her.

The sound of the bell was like a gleam

of light brightening her dreary thoughts; it suddenly made her again the middle-aged Mrs. Bowen whom everybody imagined a respectable widow, retired, occasionally taking a quiet part in the life of the near-by town, of whom nobody would have believed a connection with murder. Her steps quick across the thick rug, she hastened to answer.

"Ma'am?" That was Nora, her rich Irish voice coming faintly across the crackling wires; the connection was poor. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am, but we can't get out tonight. The snow's that deep! I tried the garage and Haley's taxi stand, everywhere—nobody'd take us—they said 'twas suicide."

Mrs. Bowen was silent for a dark moment before she burst out, "But you girls can't, *can't* leave me alone here all night. It'd be different if George was home." George was her chauffeur, away on a two-weeks' vacation; it would be days before George even bought the return ticket that would bring him ultimately to Laurel House again.

Behind her back, she felt the empty place listening as though it were sardonically amused, the wind drawing away and returning to batter at the walls with a vigorous shout of renewal, the shutter at its unending cycle of squeal and bang. From the corner of her eye, she could see the white face of the snow peering in at her.

"You've got to come," she said, her voice rising. "You've got to come! Walk, if it's necessary."

"Ma'am!" Nora's voice was exasperated beneath its coating of servility. "We couldn't get two feet, ma'am. If you'll just look out the winder—the drifts is terrible. There ain't a car on the roads. Sure God himself couldn't walk it! Maybe tomorrow morning—we'll try hard then."

"Oh, Nora——" she said, despising

herself for pleading, yet unable to stop. She had never been alone all night since *it* had happened twenty years ago; deep in her was this fixation, black with pain—not to be alone with the darkness and the unforgotten past. "Nora," she stum- bled on, "I'll double your wages, if you start now and get out here!"

"Ma'am, we couldn't. We couldn't for a million dollars." The voice at the other end sounded protesting and cold. "Nobody can get out of town tonight, ma'am. Why don't you just turn on the radio nice and loud, fix up a little snack to eat, and then go to bed?"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Bowen, dropping the receiver back on the hook with a choked groan. It seemed to her that in the few moments she had been talking, the storm had grown worse. The wild sleety rattle of the snow against the windows sounded like unhappy voices complaining of something strange and terrible, beginning to speak of it far away in the white hills, and coming closer and closer until they shouted it against the shingled walls of Laurel House.

"Now," she suddenly said aloud, standing in the middle of the room with her fingers pressed against her forehead, "I'm not going to be an idiot. There's nothing to harm me here; certainly *he* can't harm me here, and that's all I'm afraid of, isn't it?" Disliking the foolish sound of her voice speaking in the emptiness, she stopped. What had Nora said? Turn on the radio, fix herself something to eat, go to bed. But——

The lights flickered; for a moment, the small glowing filaments in the bulbs failed and faded before they burned brightly again; somewhere, distant in the storm, a line had gone down, there had been some trouble.

Mrs. Bowen looked, her mouth quivering, at the room now bright again. That wouldn't do, would it? It wouldn't be

very nice if the lights, all the lights, should go out; that would leave her alone in the dark. But there was, she was sure, a candle wrapped in the lower drawer of her dresser. She had it out in a moment, a bright yellow candle, set it in a holder on her dresser and lighted it. *Now* if the current went off—— She saw that her hands trembled.

I'm a fool, she thought, looking at herself in the mirror; it showed a middle-aged woman with a fair, quiet face. It was all because Roger was not, somehow, an ordinary man. The threats of an ordinary man you could meet with laughter, but Roger's threats—his narrow gray eyes, with the look one moment so drowsy, the next so intense, the sharp cruel curving lines of his mouth, the long narrow hands that had always reminded her, because they were dark, crooked, brown and covered with hair, of two spiders crawling—all of Roger made it seem too sure that he had the power to make *his* threats come true.

It gave her pain to remember his face or his words or anything about him; memory of him was like a hand at her throat. She picked up the small French clock from her dresser and began to wind its delicate key, telling herself that when the hands touched twelve again it would be tomorrow and the sun would be shining.

And just as the slight little clicking sounds ceased within the mechanism and she set the clock back in its place, she heard a door open, and close, in the house.

FOR a moment she stood there, an imperceptible flash of time while her heart did not beat or air move in her lungs, and then she said suddenly, very loud, "Who's that? Is that you, Nora? Katie?" But of course it could not be Nora or Katie because she had been

speaking to Nora only a few minutes ago, and she had said they could not come out. Besides, they could not have reached here from the village in so short a time; even on a fair night in an automobile they could not have made it. Nevertheless—her fingernails dug sharply into her palms, and her head turned slowly, listening—she was no longer alone in the house.

It had not been the wind that had opened and shut that door; although she was hungry to believe it, she knew it had not been the wind. The house was too sound, too solid. No, there was someone else within these walls and she must be sure at once whether it was friend or enemy. Her mouth was a little open; she could hear her breath coming between her lips with a small whistling sound—she could not help thinking that in the intervals when the wind outside sprang up blasting snow against the ringing windows, someone, anyone, could be coming slowly nearer and nearer to her while she could not hear him.

Spasms of cold seemed to sweep over her body as she moved to the dresser, jerked open the top drawer and took up the small revolver she always kept there. With it in her hand, she went to the bedroom door and paused with her fingers on the knob. Suddenly, a feeling of relief came hot and strong into her heart. Of course, of *course!* That was it. In the letter she had received from her chauffeur this morning, he had said he would be back Thursday, and this was only Monday—but he must have changed his plans. This was good sensible George who had come in downstairs, probably half numb with the bitter cold. She would give him the key to the cellaret in the library, and tell him to take some whisky to prevent his getting a chill. She twisted the door-knob.

Puzzled, she stared at the complete

darkness beyond the door. Why had he turned out all the lights that she had left so brightly burning downstairs? The sound of sleety snow rattling on the long windows of the hall landing came up to her out of the blackness; an apprehension, formless and vague, seized her heart.

"Is that you, George?" she called. "Did you just come in a moment ago? Answer me, please!"

She waited, breathing quickly, listening to the noise of the storm and the silence of the dark lower house that seemed to be listening too, and then slammed the door shut and locked it quickly. She had just realized that if there were no cars on the road, no foot travelers, because of the blizzard, neither could there have been a George. A few words turned slowly in her mind as she looked at the blank panels: *But it was not the wind! There is someone here; yes, there is someone here.*

And there was nowhere to look for help. Outside the house was nothing but the whirling wastes of drifted snow and the wind that came rushing from the hills. Her eyes, turning here, there, and back again, touched the telephone. The police! They would surely try to come, to one in need.

SHE hurried across the room, the pearl-handled revolver clutched in her fingers, her ears intent, listening behind her. As she stooped to pick up the instrument, it rang with a sharp jangle beneath her hand.

"Hello, hello!" she cried into the mouthpiece. "Please, will you get the police for me? I want the police—I am all alone in my house and someone has broken in. This is Mrs. Bowen, Mrs. Bowen—Laurel House—please——"

A small voice, distinct and cool, came back. "I'm sorry, the connection is very

bad—they are having trouble with the line. I cannot hear you. I want Mrs. Bowen, I have a telegram for her. Is this Mrs. Bowen? Will you speak louder, please?"

"Yes, yes," she groaned. "But please, I want——"

"I will read your telegram now," the voice went on. "'Mrs. Roger Bowen, Laurel House, Galeville, Connecticut. Regret to inform you Roger Bowen died suddenly here today. Please wire disposition of body.' Signed Henry Adams, Warden San Marco Penitentiary. This connection is so poor, I'm afraid—there it goes!"

A series of sharp, sputtering clicks and

the line went dead, as though it had suddenly frozen under the long piling weight of the snow. And almost as the telephone connection went, the electric lights faded, brightened, dimmed out at last to dark bulbs, and slowly the lighted candle on her dresser seemed to grow stronger in the dimness.

But Mrs. Roger Bowen was not aware of the telephone or the lights. She was watching the candle from the corners of her eyes. It seemed to her that two thin crooked brown hands were slowly descending out of the darkness toward the flaring flame.

The hands made her think—yes, they made her think of two spiders.