

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 317 Baldwin Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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He Scoffed at the Signs in his Horoscope

An Arc of Direction

An Astrological Tale

By JUNIUS B. SMITH

Author of "The Man Who Dared to Know"

THE younger man cast the stub of his cigarette from the open window and laughed. "Your theories are absurd, my dear Elton. If a man could always tell when to sow and when to reap, his fortune would be assured."

"Exactly," Elton agreed, fingering the pages of a book on astrology, which he evidently had been perusing when the other came in. After a moment he continued: "Naturally you don't believe one may look into the future."

"If you want my candid opinion . . . I do not. I may say I will have *coffee and* for breakfast, but I am not certain of it . . . I may be dead when breakfast time comes." He rolled another cigarette and set it alight. "I may not even finish the smoke in my mouth," he added, as he tossed the still blazing match out of the window.

Elton viewed the act with a little frown upon his face. "I'm afraid, friend Hall, that to you fate will be fate indeed, for you act without due thinking. For instance, how do you know where that cigarette stub went, or the match that followed it? For all you know, it may have struck tinder and I may be seeking accommodations elsewhere tonight."

"Tut, tut! There's nothing outside but some vines running up the wall, as they do over at my place, and some flowers and grass on either side the

cement walk. I saw all that the last time you showed me your horticultural skill."

"You assume there has been no change . . . you do not really know. And one who trusts in chance has his destiny fixed by the stars. Just when and where were you born?"

Hall took the cigarette from his lips as Elton reached for a sheet of paper on which to make the notation.

"You're really not serious, old dear? Surely you don't take any stock in that exploded thing! Let us talk about something worth while."

"We are doing just that. I am curious as to the date of your demise."

Hall shrugged his shoulders. "Poppycock! If I didn't know you as a successful business man I'd think something was wrong with your head. I don't know but that there is anyway. A doctor once told me that everybody was crazy on at least one subject. Nobody ever told me what subject I'm bugs on and I suppose no one knows his pet failing nor believes anyone who tells him. So you think *you* can tell when *I* am going to *die*! That's rich . . . I don't know myself."

"You will, if you give me the information I ask."

"By cracky! I believe you *believe* you can tell. I'll bet you a quart of pink lemonade against that one-lunged flivver of yours, that I outwear your dilapidated tires."

"Maybe so, maybe so . . . I can't tell when you are going to die if you don't tell me where and when you were born."

In the end, Hall gave the information asked.

"And now what?" asked the younger man. "Shall I wait while you diagnose my case, or shall I return at some later date?"

"Just as you like," Elton replied. "It involves considerable work, so perhaps you'd better call around in a week from now."

IT WAS a month before Hall again visited his friend. When he did, it was with no intention of learning his fate as foretold by the stars, but rather upon another matter. Nor was the subject brought up by him, though what he said directly opened the question:

"I'm going to be married in September."

Elton considered the statement for a moment but said nothing.

"Sweetest girl you ever saw," Hall amplified.

Still no comment.

"You're to stand up with me, if you will. It was that which brought me here today."

"I am glad you came," Elton at last broke his silence. "I was about to set forth and find you. Your announcement does not come as a surprise to me, for such an attachment is shown in your horoscope for this time. But" (and he weighed his words carefully) "if you really want the girl, you had better marry her . . . immediately. Of course, she might object to being left a widow so soon. . ."

"Shall I call a doctor for you, Elton? You talk as if you're sick."

"I'm not sick and I don't need a doctor. But in all seriousness, friend Hall, you need a nurse or at least a

bodyguard in the very near future, for according to my calculations, on the tenth of next month, unless you do something to prevent it, you will most assuredly be . . . *hanged*."

Hall looked at Elton for a full half minute, then spoke: "You surely don't believe that bunk! If you are joshing, I think you have gone far enough."

"I was never more serious in my life. According to my calculated arcs of direction. . ."

"Arcs of . . . what?" Hall involuntarily exclaimed.

"Arcs of direction . . . planetary angulations we astrologers calculate to tell when a designated result will materialize."

"Oh, I see . . . First you tell what is going to happen to a fellow . . . and then . . . when. So I'm going to be hanged on the tenth of next month. Quick work! I haven't killed anybody yet . . . and they don't hang them that soon, even if I should go out and kill somebody between now and then."

"Oh, there are lots of ways you might get hanged. Some overenthusiastic citizens, for instance, might string you up to the nearest telegraph pole or convenient limb. You wouldn't be the first man who had suffered a vicarious death."

"Quit it, Elton . . . you're making my nerves jumpy." He moved toward the window and looked out.

"I'll miss you greatly," Elton replied. "Let me tell the girl all about it . . . maybe she'll marry you at once to take care of you. Get a bodyguard or do *something*. Believe me a fool, if you like, but don't take a chance. Fate has an unkind way of pulling mean little tricks."

"You gloomy old cuss . . . you've scared me out of a year's growth. You look as if you were attending my funeral already."

THE tenth of the following month came and Hall had taken no precautionary measures. Every time he thought of what Elton told him, he felt sorry for Elton. His mind was undoubtedly slipping—pity, too! Genius and insanity were very close together.

He lay in bed and looked up at the ceiling and pondered about what his friend had told him. This was the day he was to be hanged. He never felt any farther from death than he did that very minute. Of course, he might walk out on the street and something unforeseen befall him. All in all, perhaps it were better to remain in his home all day. . . in bed, even . . . only that seemed plumb foolish. On second thought, he *would* remain indoors. There was no use taking chances, as Elton had pointed out. There was nothing he had to do, so he might as well do it at home as elsewhere. Of course Elton had wanted him to provide a bodyguard . . . some sort of a companion, who could cut him down, perhaps . . . but that was beside the question. What need did he have of a bodyguard? . . . the bodyguard might hang him. His mind began all sorts of queer gymnastics. He was nervous in spite of himself.

He crawled out of bed when the sun, shining through the open window, drove him to it. After a shower, he slowly dressed. Suddenly an idea hit him. "Elton's so cocksure I'm going to die today, I believe I'll 'phone him and tell him to come over. That's killing two birds with one stone. . . He'd make an excellent bodyguard . . . that is, if he isn't crazy . . . and we can play chess, which will while the hours away. Yep, I'll get him on the 'phone immediately."

And he did.

"Was just coming over anyway," Elton told him.

Hall made some toast and poached an egg. His appetite wasn't very keen. Living alone in a two-story house and doing his own cooking, when not eating at a cafeteria, was getting monotonous, to say the least. He was glad he was to be married in September. It would be different when he had a wife to take charge of the home which had been left him by his parents.

His frugal meal finished, he ran upstairs to get his chess-board and men. The sunlight was pouring through the window in added volume. It was too beautiful a day to be cooped up. But he'd forget about all that when he and Elton got to playing chess. He decided he might as well make his bed while waiting for Elton, and busied himself in that occupation.

Then he went to the open window and looked out. Elton should be coming any minute now. Speeding autos flashed to and fro. The honk of an occasional horn sounded warning. An old horse, pulling a still older express wagon, rattled past, the driver hunched on his seat. A bicycle or two added variety, and men, women and children sauntered, hurried or ran along the walks, according to what each was intent upon doing. Hall wondered if any of those down upon whom he was looking would turn aside long enough to hang him. His face lighted with rather an amused smile. He'd have to talk to the doctor about Elton . . . it wasn't good for a man to get such crazy notions into his head.

His eyes drifted to his immediate yard. A bird cooed and scolded its fledglings in the evergreen tree not a dozen feet away. He watched it feed its young. A humming-bird whizzed past his face, its invisible wings fanning the air with great rapidity. From flower to flower it darted on the creeping vines beside the house. He watched it lazily, fascinated by its beauty, its daintiness, the music of its flight. Was it possible that he, in the

midst of life, was on the threshold of death?

Into his reverie broke the hum of a motor strangely familiar to his ears. It was Elton's car, he had no doubt. He strained his eyes to catch sight of it and confirm his guess.

Then he turned to go downstairs and let Elton in.

ON THE morning of the tenth, Elton became very uneasy. He was sincere in what he had told his friend Hall. He feared, however, that Hall would disregard the warning and come to disaster. Since, in most likelihood, Hall would not provide himself with a bodyguard, why not be that bodyguard himself? So Elton reasoned. It was precisely at the time when he made up his mind to attend Hall all that day, that Hall telephoned him.

He got his car from the garage and inspected the right front tire, concerning which Hall had been kidding him on more than one occasion. It was about ready to go out, but this was no time to change it. He could do that when he got to Hall's place, or later, or let it go until it *did* blow out.

He was just slowing as he drew close to Hall's residence, to make the turn into the driveway on the north

of the house, when the tire went out with a loud bang.

He turned into the driveway on the rim, stopped and quickly changed tires. He might as well get it over with before going into the house, so he could wash up when he did go in.

The tire changed, he went to the front door and pushed the bell. No answer came. He knocked long and loudly. Still no answer. Worried at the silence, he started along the cement path that led to the rear around the south side of the house and paused to stand aghast at what he saw as he turned the corner.

AS HALL turned with intention of leaving the open window to admit his friend, the latter's tire had exploded. Hall, whose nerves were jumpy as a result of his friend's dire foreboding, started, lost his balance and fell backward out of the window. He clutched at the vines held to the side of the wall by the metal netting, but they gave and tore away and let him continue to fall. And then one, more tenacious than the rest, held, but it wrapped its sinuous length around his neck. He fought and clutched at the wirelike fiber, but the noose slipped only tighter.

He was *almost* dead when Elton cut him down.

