

Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1952

Cover by Anthony Di Giannurio

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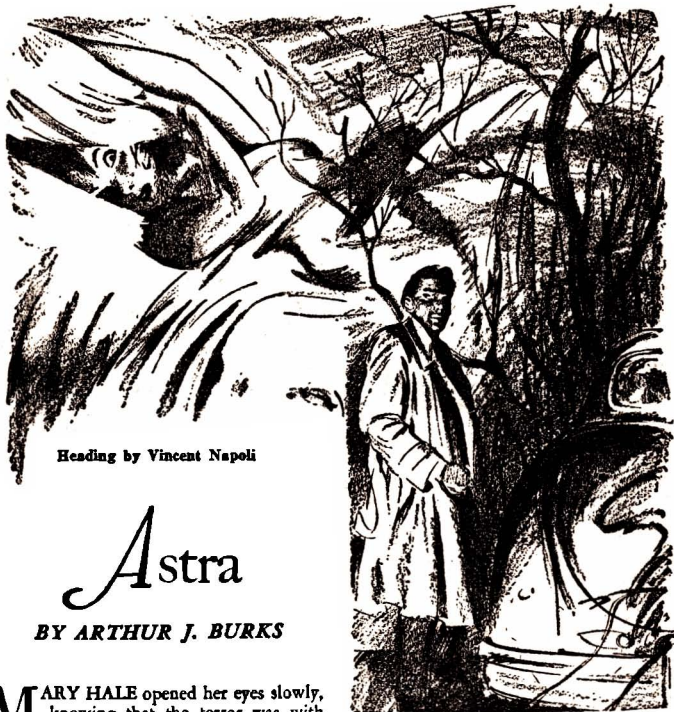
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... it looked like instantaneous transmission of material items; nothing else could explain it.



Heading by Vincent Napoli

Astra

BY ARTHUR J. BURKS

MARY HALE opened her eyes slowly, knowing that the terror was with her again. It dribbled out of her hair in beads of sweat, though the time was winter and the big house always cold at night. Cold sweat made her feel as if all her taut body were a bleeding wound. She was instantly aware that Fred, behind her as she lay on her side, was awake, waiting, perhaps, for her to tell him again.

In her dream, which couldn't possibly be a dream and produce such definitely visible fearsome results, she preferred another man to her husband. Had she ever blurted it out while she slept? Didn't Fred behave strange-

ly toward her? Hadn't he begun eyeing her with questions in his expression since the first of the . . . no, she simply *couldn't* call them dreams. Astral traveling? She simply couldn't believe in such nonsense. She could, of course, be going mad.

She turned to her husband, bursting into tearing sobs as his ready arms came about her, drawing her close.

"Again, Baby?" he asked softly.

"Yes, Fred, and if, when we go down to the kitchen—Fred, *am* I going mad?"

"Of course not, beloved. It isn't anything,

not really, that is; nothing we can't handle. What was it this time?"

"Shopping! I went shopping in a darkened store, after midnight. In fact, Fred, I just returned. It's ten miles from here to the store . . ."

"And if you just came back, I can testify that you haven't left this bed since you tucked yourself in beside me last night!"

"Well, then, this time I did something, Fred. I've tried things before, but nothing ever came of it. This time I put one of my calling cards under a can of kennel ration, well back in the shelf, so that it won't likely be found right away. If we go there, before the store opens . . ."

"We'll do it, Baby," said Fred Hale. "Now, what did you buy last night, or so early this morning?"

Should she, here and now, safe in his arms, tell him about George? George Bannett, who made her forget her husband completely, the instant he walked into her dream, astral travel, whatever it was? Awake, she knew no George Bannett, nor could she find him in any Lancaster-Lititz-Columbia-Ephrate-Elizabethtown-Marietta telephone book. He wasn't there, real. Yet, his *presents were*. At least, up until now they always had been.

"I bought three pounds of coffee, because it's cheaper, you know," said Mary Hale. Fred turned on the light, took down what she told him. "I bought a head of cabbage, a bag of Idaho potatoes, five pounds of sugar, three cans of evaporated milk, two cans of dog-food, our usual kind, three cans of cat-food, again our usual kind, four packages of frozen mixed vegetables, two pounds of sweet potatoes, three bunches of carrots, a bag of spinach, forty cents worth of bananas, altogether, it came to five dollars and twelve cents . . ."

"And you paid cash?"

"Yes, I had to. It's an A & P store, you know."

"That's one thing that gets me," said Fred slowly. "You always pay cash for this stuff you get somehow in the night, but no cash is ever missing from either your purse or mine. And all these stores, all through the

neighborhood, which report, eerie nocturnal visitations, with unexplained cash rung up on their cash registers—and the cash in the dampers to match, and nothing stolen—report exactly the sum total you always tell me. Where does the money come from?"

Dared she tell her adored but inclined-to-be-jealous husband, that George Bannett always paid the bills? He was looking at her strangely now, preparing to answer himself somehow.

"Baby, in your dreams, where does the money come from?"

She would have been caught, flatly, if she hadn't been expecting the question.

"That's the mystery," she said. "I always know *then*, but never know *here*. I just know that the bill is always paid, in cash, and rung up on the cash register . . ."

"Maybe," said Fred softly, "there is something you're not telling?"

"Fred!"

"No need to disturb yourself about it—*is there?*" he asked.

She was flustered, of course, who wouldn't have been, for in the dream, or astral journey, whatever it always was, George Bannett wasn't her husband; he was something just as intimate, though, half of a relationship that the world frowned, or affected to frown, upon. Yet that part of her weird life with George Bannett was only implied; no slightest part of it came into her nightly experience—*so be remembered, anyway*.

"Well," Fred was saying, "which basket did you use?"

"I apparently forgot to take a market basket," she answered quickly, "so I selected a box . . ."

"What was in the box?"

"It had held, according to the legend outside, evaporated milk . . ."

Together they rose, noted the time, two a.m., and walked downstairs to the kitchen table. Atop the kitchen table was a fiber box, on the outside of which was splashed the name of a popular brand of evaporated milk. Inside the box a careful check indicated exactly the items Mary Hale had enumerated for Fred Hale on waking, just prior to two a.m.

MARY was an exquisite woman of twenty-five; in her nightgown she was exquisite plus, even when, as now, her cheeks were deathly pale.

"They weren't here when we went to bed," she said flatly.

"No."

"And I wasn't out of bed."

"No."

Even the sales slip, showing a total of five dollars and twelve cents, was tucked in among the mysterious items. Only, there was nothing mysterious about the items. They were real. The Hale family would eat everything here except the cat- and dog-food.

"The doors were all locked?" said Mary dully.

"All locked!"

"Fred, let's sell out! Let's go far, far away from here! Unless you think, as I'm beginning to, that I'm going mad."

"We can't run away," said Fred Hale.

"Nobody ever runs away from the feared, successfully. Besides, my business is here . . ."

"But for *me*, Fred! You love me, don't you? I'm more important to you than your business?"

"Darling, you are all my life, everything I want, am, hope to have or be, but don't you see that we have to fight this thing out, right here where it started?"

"But none of it is possible, no matter what outlandish stuff one might believe in!"

"No, it isn't possible, but take a gander at that box of stuff from the A & P! That's real, Baby, and if we find your calling card, this morning . . ."

"And when it began, the necklace was real," whispered Mary. "So were the three dozen stockings, the half dozen pairs of shoes that just fitted me. So were the dresses for each social occasion, the coats, jackets, ensembles . . ."

"For a total of eleven hundred forty-seven dollars, to date, and thirty-nine cents! And none of it came out of my pocketbook or bank account, nor out of yours."

They were back in bed, with the alarm clock wound and set to waken them in time to drive the ten miles to the big store and hunt for the calling card, when Mary

remembered something and just did manage to forbear gasping. Just before she wakened, perspiring in terror, George Bannett had said, almost casually:

"I'm coming to wherever you spend your days, and take you away! I'm coming sometime today! You might as well get set. Will you come with me, Mary?"

"I'll come, of course, George, you know that. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth!"

"If you knew where the ends are," he had smiled at her, "you wouldn't wonder nearly so much, what all this nocturnal prowling means. If people just knew how *active* they are, in what they call dreams, if they had the remotest notion of what *dreams are intended to hide*, a vast lot of time in human life would be conserved. Well, it is conserved now, but the dreaming sleepers would *know* it!"

Of course she could never tell Fred any of that.

JUST before they slept they checked on all the other stuff that had weirdly materialized after one of Mary's "dreams"—rather the total that all her scavenging dreams added up to. They still bore the price tags. Mary had been afraid to wear them, lest someone from wherever she had got each item—and *George had paid for it!*—should recognize it and start yelling "thief! thief!" She hadn't stolen anything, but surely she—and George Bannett—had broken and entered. But *had* they? While the strange facts of cash in cash registers had been reported to police, and eventually had got into the newspapers, so that a public avid for mysteries awaited each new, and brief report with eagerness, no "breaking and entering" report had been given to the police or the newspapers. It was presumed that the "prowler or prowlers" possessed keys. Mary Hale—and George—had returned at least three times to three scenes of their "crimes," while policemen stood guard at all locked entrances and exits, but no policeman, though each one had been tremendously chagrined, had seen anything unusual, or heard anybody, or *anything!*

The newspapers had built up quite a case of negligence against the local police in Lancaster and several neighboring cities.

"Madame Blavatsky could have explained it perhaps," said one imaginative reporter. "She knew how to make earth spirits, kobalds, leprechauns, gremlins, pixies, catch and carry for her; it looked like instantaneous transmission of material items; nothing else seems to explain the cash in the registers, exactly totaling missing goods, in some instances! In other instances it couldn't have been checked but *may* have been merely pay for goods taken mysteriously in the night."

WHEN the store opened, Mary Hale and her husband were the first inside. Mary led the way to the kennel ration section, looked swiftly around to make sure she wasn't observed—and came up with the calling card!

By the time Mary and Fred reached home again, Mary was fit to be tied. She didn't believe in gremlins. Or kobalds, or leprechauns.

Inside her own home, Mary had hysterics. No telling where it might have ended had not Fred spoken out at last:

"Darling, I might as well confess. It's been a gag, understand? I got all this stuff at the different places, and planted it. I hoped I'd never have to tell you, but I thought I was in love, for a little while, with a woman named Georgia Bannett. I thought if I pulled a bit of stuff on you, and sent you off your rocker, maybe I could get a divorce . . ."

Mary stared at Fred in horror, her mouth hanging open.

"But, *Fred*, I have always told you the details of my dreams just before we found the stuff I dreamed I bought! You *couldn't* have . . ."

Then it struck her: "*Georgia Bannett!*"

Could she even ask a question about "*Georgia*" without telling something about "*George!*"

The doorbell chimed. Fred went to answer, returned almost at once with a queer expression on his face.

"A man to see you, Mary," he said. "It's the darndest coincidence . . ."

"Coincidence, Fred?" she heard herself asking.

"Yes. His name seems to be *George Bannett!*"

Fred trailed Mary as his wife, marching as if to the guillotine, went to the door, opened, looked out into the smiling face of—the man in her dreams, every last one of her dreams, her *prowling* dreams.

"*George!*" she managed.

"Bannett!" he snapped briskly, scarcely friendly at all. "Look, sister, this bill has been running long enough. Eleven hundred forty-seven dollars and thirty-nine cents. I never expected to have to spend so much money to get such a little way with any woman. I've come for either the money or the stuff!"

"Then you're not here for, that is, you didn't come to take . . ."

"The stuff? Yes, I did, if you don't pay up!"

"Mr. Bannett," said Mary, vast relief bubbling up in her, "is your wife's name *Georgia?*"

"Got no wife. That's my sister's name. She lives out in California. Not married, either. Why?"

"Never mind, and say, you can take back all that stuff, even today's vegetables and canned goods. Fred, if you'll just fetch it . . ."

"Never mind, Fred," said George Bannett, "my men'll get the things!"

NO SOONER had George Bannett spoken than every last one of the dream-propelled items piled themselves on the porch at his feet. Mary gasped. Fred Hale gasp, too.

George Bannett checked the items against his list, nodded.

"All of it seems to be here," he said. "Now, take it out to the car!"

Instantly the stuff was gone. George Bannett grinned.

"Gremlins today leprechauns yesterday, kobalds tomorrow!" he said, thumping the brim of his hat. "Want to go to my car and check?"

"Don't need to," said Fred. "There are garments on hangers in the tonneau now. There weren't any a second or two ago. No doors opened, no windows. How was it done?"

"I just told you. Well, so long."

"Before you go," said Fred, "what's the sense of all this? What were you trying to prove?"

"Why did you tell your wife you had thought yourself in love with Georgia Bannett, when she was out in California, and has been, for years?"

"Maybe," said Mary, looking queerly at Fred, "*he's* been dreaming true, too!"

"Dream?" said George. "Nobody dreams. Everybody thinks he does. What actually happens is this . . ."

George Bannett was gone, *in a flash*. The next instant he stuck his head out the window of his car, clear across the highway and yelled:

"I almost forgot, Mary! I really came for you. You coming?"

Instantly, as if there were no need to think about it, and just as she was, Mary started running toward George. She hadn't taken two steps before she found herself sitting beside him, quite comfortably, too. As the car started smoothly away she was aware of all the small voices, all around them, in the car, under it, on the roof, blending in what sounded like a single small, *very* small, voice, which said:

"If more people knew how much fun it is, a lot more would be going in for it!"

Mary Hale laughed, happily, and George Bannett grinned at her.

"There'll be no more *daydreaming*, Mary, understand?"