

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 6, No. 3

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 6, No. 3, March, 1954. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1954, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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There's no need by now to introduce John, the wandering ballad-singer and spell-breaker of Manly Wade Wellman's stories. This is the fifth of his adventures that we've published; a few more, and we hope some perceptive publisher will collect the series in permanent book form. For, as you all know, the genuine folklore and poetry of folk-prose in these stories has raised the tale of supernatural evil to a new (and authentically American) high level.

Call Me From the Valley

by MANLY WADE WELLMAN

DOWN IT RAINED, on hill and hollow, the way you'd think the sky was too heavy to hold it back. It fell so thick and hard fish could have swum in it, all around where we sat holed up under the low wide porch of the country store — five of us. A leather-coated deputy sheriff with a pickup truck. A farmer, who'd sheltered his mule wagon in a shed behind. The old storekeeper, and us two strangers in that part of the hills, a quiet old gentleman and me with my silver-strung guitar.

The storekeeper hung a lantern to the porch rafters as it got dark. The farmer bought us all a bottle of soda, and the storekeeper broke us open a box of cookies. "Gentlemen, you'll all be here for a spell, so sit comfortable," he said. "Friend," he said to me, "did I ask your name?"

"John," I named myself.

"Well, John, do you play that there guitar you're a-toting?"

I played and sang for them, that old song about the hunter's true love:

*Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill. . . .*

Then there was talk about old things and thoughts. I recollect what some of them said:

Such as, you can't win solitaire by cheating just once, you've got to keep cheating; some animals are smarter than folks; who were the ancients who

dug mine-holes in the Toe River country, and what were they after, and did they find it; nobody knows what makes the lights come and go like giant fireflies every night on Brown Mountain; you'll never see a man exactly six feet tall, because that was the height of the Lord Jesus.

And the farmer, who next to me was the youngest there, mentioned love and courting, and how when you true-love someone and need your eyes and thoughts clearest, they mist up and maybe make you trouble. That led to how you step down a mullein stalk toward your true love's house, and if it grows up again she loves you; and how the girls used to have dumb suppers, setting plates and knives and forks on the table at night and each girl standing behind a chair put ready, till at midnight the candles blew out and a girl saw, or she thought she saw, a ghostly-looking somebody in the chair before her, that was the appearance of the somebody she'd marry.

"Knew of dumb suppers when I was just a chap," allowed the storekeeper, "but most of the old folks then, they didn't relish the notion. Said it was a devil-made idea, and you might call in something better left outside."

"Ain't no such goings-on in this day and time," nodded the farmer. "I don't take stock in them crazy sayings and doings."

Back where I was born and raised, in the Drowning Creek country, I'd heard tell of dumb suppers but I'd never seen one, so I held my tongue. But the deputy grinned his teeth at the farmer.

"You plant by the moon, don't you?" he asked. "Above-ground things like corn at the full, and underground things like 'taters in the dark?"

"That ain't foolishness, that's the true way," the farmer said back. "Ask anybody's got a lick of sense about farming."

Then a big wiggling three-forked flash of lightning struck, it didn't seem more than arm's-length off, and the thunder was like the falling in of the hills.

"Law me," said the old gentleman, whose name seemed to be Mr. Jay. "That was a hooter."

"Sure God was," the farmer agreed him. "Old Forney Meechum wants us to remember he makes the rain around here."

My ears upped like a rabbit's. "I did hear this is the old Meechum-Donovant feud country," I said. "I've always been wanting to hear the true tale of that. And what about Forney Meechum making the rain—isn't he dead?"

"Deader than hell," the storekeeper told me. "Though folks never thought he could die, thought he'd just ugly away. But him and all the Meechum and Donovan men got killed. Both the names plumb died out, I reckon, yonder in the valley so low where you see the rain a-falling the lavishest. I used to hear about it when I was just a chap."

"Me, too," nodded the deputy. "Way I got it, Forney Meechum went somewheres west when he was young. Was with the James boys or the Younger boys, or maybe somebody not quite that respectable."

"And when he come back," took up the storekeeper again, "he could make it rain whenever it suited him."

"How?" I asked, and old Mr. Jay was listening, too.

"Ain't rightly certain how," said the farmer. "They tell he used to mix up mud in a hole, and sing a certain song. Ever hear such a song as that, John?"

I shook my head *no*, and he went on:

"Forney Meechum done scarier things than that. He witched wells dry. And he raised up dead ghosts to show him where treasure was hid. Even his own kinfolks was scared of him, and all the Meechums took orders from him. So when he fell out with Captain Sam Donovan over a property line, he made them break with all the Donovants."

"Fact," said the storekeeper, who wanted to tell part of the tale. "And them Meechums did what he told them, saving only his cousin's oldest girl, Miss Lute Meechum, and she'd swore eternal love with Captain Ben Donovan's second boy Jeremiah."

Another lightning flash, another thunder growl. Old Mr. Jay hunched his thin shoulders under his jeans coat, and allowed he'd pay for some cheese and crackers if the storekeeper'd fetch it out to us.

"Law me," said the farmer. "I ain't even now wanting to talk against Forney Meechum. But they tell he'd put his eye on Lute himself, and he'd quarreled with his own son Derwood about who'd have her. But next court day at the county seat, was a fight betwixt Jeremiah Donovan and Derwood Meechum, and Jeremiah stuck a knife in Derwood and killed him dead."

Mr. Jay leaned forward in the lantern light. It showed the gray stubble on his gentle old face. "Who drew the first knife?" he asked.

"I've heard tell Derwood drew the knife, and Jeremiah took it away and stuck it into him," said the farmer. "Anyway, Jeremiah Donovan had to run from the law, and down in the valley yonder the Meechums and the Donovants began a-shooting at each other."

"Fact," the storekeeper took it up again as he fetched out the cheese and crackers. "That was 50 years back, the last fight of all. Ary man on both sides was killed, down to boys of ten-twelve years. Old Forney called for rain, but somebody shot him just as he got it started."

"And it falls a right much to this day," said the farmer, gazing at the pour from the porch eaves. "That valley below us is so rainy it's a swamp like. And the widows and orphans that was left alive, both families, they was purely rained out and went other places to live."

"What about Miss Lute Meechum?" I asked next.

"I wondered about her, too," said Mr. Jay.

"Died," said the storekeeper. "Some folks say it was pure down grief killed her, that and lonesomeness for that run-off Jeremiah Donovan. I likewise heard tell old Forney shot her when she said for once and all she wouldn't have him."

The deputy sipped his soda. "All done and past now," he said. "Looks like we're rained in here for all night, gentlemen."

But we weren't. It slacked off while we ate our cheese, and then it was just a drip from the branches. The clouds shredded, and a moon poked through a moment, shy, like a girl at her first play-party. The deputy got up from the slab bench where he'd been sitting.

"Hope my truck'll wallow up that muddy road to town," he said. "Who can I carry with me?"

"I got my mule," added the farmer. "I'll follow along and snake you out when you get stuck in one of them mud holes. John, you better ride with me, you and Mr. Jay."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to town, thank you kindly. I'm going down that valley trail. Swore to an old friend I'd be at his family reunion, up in the hills on the yonder side, by supper time tomorrow."

Mr. Jay said he'd be going that way, too. The storekeeper offered to let us sleep in his feed shed, but I said I'd better start. "Coming, sir?" I asked old Mr. Jay.

"After while," he told me, so I went on alone. Three minutes down trail between those wet dark trees, and the lantern light under the porch was gone as if it had never shone.

Gentlemen, it was lonesome dark and damp going. I felt my muddy way along, with my brogan shoes squashy-full of water. And yet, sometimes, it wasn't as lonesome as you might call for. There were soft noises, like whispers or crawlings; and once there was a howl, not too far away, like a dog, or a man trying to sound like a dog, or maybe the neither of them. For my own comfort I began to pick the guitar and sing to myself; but the wrong tune had come unbidden:

*In the pines, in the pines,
Where the sun never shines,
And I shiver where the wind blows cold! . . .*

I stopped when I got that far, it was too much the truth. And it came on to rain again.

I hauled off my old coat to wrap my guitar from it. Not much to see ahead,

but I knew I kept going down slope and down slope, and no way of telling how far down it went before it would start up to go to the hills where my friend's kinfolks would gather tomorrow. I told myself I was a gone gump not to stay at the store, the way I was so kindly bid. I hoped that that old Mr. Jay had the sense to stay under cover. But it was too far to go back. And I'd better find some place out of the wet, for my guitar more than me.

Must have been a bend to that trail, because I came all at once in view of the light in the cabin's glass window, before I notioned there was any living place around. The light looked warm yellow through the rain, and I hastened my wet feet. Close enough in, I could judge it was an old-made log house, the corners notch-locked and the logs clay-chinked, and the wide eaves with thick-split shakes on them, but I couldn't really see. "Hello, the house!" I yelled out.

No sound back. Maybe the rain was keeping them from hearing me. I felt my way to the flat door-stone and knocked. No stir inside.

Groping for a knob, I found none, only a leather latch string, old style. And, old style, it was out. In my grandsire's day, a latch string out meant come in. I pulled, and a wooden latch lifted inside and the door swung in before me.

The room was lit from a fireplace full of red coals, and from a candle stuck on a dish on a table middleway of the puncheon floor. That table took my eye as I stepped in. A cloth on it, and a plate of old white china with knife and fork at the sides, and a cup and saucer, yes and a folded napkin. But no food on the table, no coffee in the cup. A chair was set to the plate, and behind the chair, her hands crossed on its back, stood a woman, young and tall and proud-standing.

She didn't move. Nothing moved, except the candle flame in the stir of air from the open door. She might have been cut from wood and put up there to fool folks. I closed the door against the hard drum of the rain, and tracked wet marks on the puncheons as I came toward the table. I took off my old hat, and the water fell from it.

"Good evening, ma'am," I said.

Then her dark eyes moved in her pale face, her sweet, firm-jawed face. Her short, sad mouth opened, slow and shaky.

"You're not —" she started to mumble, half to herself. "I didn't mean —"

There was a copper light moving in her hair as she bent her head and looked down into the empty plate, and then I remembered that talk under the store porch.

"Dumb supper," I said. "I'm right sorry. The rain drove me in here. I reckon this is the only house around, and when nobody answered I walked in. I didn't mean to bother you."

And I couldn't help but look at how she'd set the dumb supper out. Knowing how such things weren't done any more, and hearing that very thing said that night, I was wondered to find it. Through my mind kept running how some scholar-men say it's a way of doing that came over from the Old Country, where dumb suppers were set clear back to the beginning of time. Things that old don't die easy after all, I reckoned.

"He'll still come and sit down," she said to me in her soft voice, like a low-playing flute heard far off. "I've called him and he'll come."

I hung my wet coat by the fireplace, and she saw my guitar.

"Sing to help guide him," she said to me.

I looked at her, so proudly tall behind the chair. She wore a long green dress, and her eyes were darker than her copper hair, that was all in curly ringlets.

"Sing," she said again. "Tole him here."

I felt like doing whatever she told me. I swung the guitar in front of me, and began the song I'd given them at the store:

*Oh, call me sweetheart, call me dear,
Call me what you will,
Call me from the valley low,
Call me from the hill.*

*I hear you as the turtle dove
That flies from bough to bough,
And as she softly calls her mate,
You call me softly now. . . .*

One long hand waved me to stop, and I stopped with the silver strings still whispering to both of us. I felt my ears close up tight, the way they feel when you've climbed high, high on a mountain top.

"There's a power working here," I said.

"Yes," she barely made herself heard.

The fire, that had been just coals, found something to blaze up on. Smoke rose dark above the bright flames. The rain outside came barreling down, and there was a rising wind, too, with a whoop and shove to it that made the lock-joints of the cabin's logs creak.

"Sounds like old Forney Meechum's hard at work." I tried to make half a joke, but she didn't take it as such. Her dark-bright eyes lifted their lids to widen, and her hands, on the chair back again, took hold hard.

"Forney doesn't want me to do this," she told me, as if it was my ordinary business.

"He's dead," I reminded her, like to a child.

"No," she shook her copper head. "He's not dead, not all of him. And not all of me, either."

I wondered what she meant, and I stepped away from the fire that was burning bright and hot.

"Are you a Meechum or a Donovan?" I asked.

"A Meechum," she told me. "But my true love's a Donovan."

"Like Lute Meechum and Jeremiah Donovan?"

"You know about that." Her hands trembled a mite, for all they held so hard to the chair. "Who are you?"

"My name's John." I touched the strings to make them whisper again. "Yes, I know the tale about the feud. Old Forney Meechum, who could witch down the rain, said Lute Meechum mustn't have Jeremiah —"

"He's here!" she cried out, with all her loud voice at last.

The wind shook the cabin like a dice-box. The shakes on the roof must have ruffled worse than a hen's feathers. Up jumped the fire, and out winked the candle.

Jumpy myself, I was back against the logs of the wall, my free hand on a shelf-plank that was wedged there. The rain had wetted the clay chinking soft between the logs, and a muddy trickle fell on my fingers. I was watching the fire, and its dirty gray smoke stirred and swelled, and a fat-looking puff of it came crawling out like a live thing.

The smoke stayed in one bunch. It hung there, a sort of egg-shaped chunk of it, hanging above the stones of the hearth. I think the girl must have half fallen, then caught herself; for I heard the legs of the chair scrape on the puncheons. The smoke molded itself, in what light I could make out, and looked solid and shapy, as tall as me but thicker, and two streamy coils waving out in the air like arms.

"Don't!" the girl was begging something. "Don't let him —"

On that shelf at my hand stood a dish and an empty old bottle, the kind of bottle the old glassmakers blew a hundred years ago. I took up the dish in my right fist. I saw that smoke-shape drifting sort of slow and greedy, clear from the hearth, and between those two wavy streamy arm-coils rose up a lumpy thing like a head. There was enough firelight to see that this smoke was thicker than just smoke; it must have soot and ash-dust in it, solid enough to choke you. And in that lumpy head hung two dull sparks, for the eyes.

Gentlemen, more about it than that you'd not care to have me tell you.

I flung the dish, and it went singing through the room and it went straight for where I threw, but it didn't stop. It sailed right on past and into the fireplace, and I heard it smash to pieces on the stones. Where it had hit the

smoke-shape, there showed a notchy hole all the way through, where the cheek would be on a living creature. And whatever it was I'd thrown at, it never stopped its slow drift over toward the table, gray and thick and horrible. And in the chimney the wind stomped up and down, like a dasher in a churn.

"No," the girl wailed again, and moved back, dragging the chair along with her.

Then at once I saw what was in whatever that thing had for a mind, and I ran at the table too, passing so close to one of the smoke-streamers that the wind I made fluttered it like a rag. Just as it slid in toward the chair, bending to sit down, I slapped my guitar across the seat with the silver strings up.

I'd figured right. It couldn't touch the silver, being an evil haunt. It moved behind the table, and its sparks flickered at us both. I felt a creeping hot smelly sense, like dirty smoke. It made me feel sick and shake-legged, but I made my eyes look back at those two glaring sparks.

"Are you Forney Meechum?" I asked at it. "Want to sit down at this dumb supper? Think it was laid out for you?"

It swayed back and forth, like a tree-branch, and outside the rain fell in its bucketfuls.

I moved quick around the table, with the guitar held toward it. I'd thought it moved slow, but it was across the room to the other side the way a shadow flings itself when you move the lamp. I ran after it, quick, and got to the door first.

"Not out this way," I yelled at it, and jabbed a finger into wet clay chinking between logs. I quick marked a cross on the inside of the door planks. Then the Forney Meechum thing was sliding at the window.

"Not that way, either!" I shooed it back with the guitar, and sketched a cross on the glass pane. Then the waving arm-streaks and the lumpy cloud of head and body were sliding back toward the table.

"Light that candle!" I hollered to the girl. "Light it!"

She heard, and she grabbed the candle up from the table. She ran across the floor, the cloud hovering after her, and then she was down on one knee, shoving the candle into the fireplace, and that quick it lighted up.

And there wasn't any smoke-shape anywhere in the room we now saw plain.

"Where did he go?" she asked me.

I looked around to see. He hadn't left by the door or the window, for I'd made my crosses there.

"He ran," I said. "Ran before us like a scared-out coward."

"But he was strong —" she started to say.

"He was bad," I put in, not very mannerly. "Badness thinks it's strong, but it's scared — of lights and crosses, and silver."

Taking my guitar, I picked at the silver strings, and in the music I made I walked around the room, and around again, looking. For what was left of Forney Meechum must be somewhere, hiding. And we'd better find out where he hid, or he might be out at us again when we weren't ready.

I glanced in the corners, up in the rafters. Then at the shelf. Then I glanced at the shelf twice.

The old bottle that stood there, it was dark-looking, like muddy water. Or like muddy water, and in the muddy water maybe a hiding thing, like what can hide in such a place; a snake or a worse thing than a snake, waiting its time.

I didn't want her to see then, so I made up something quick.

"Look over in the corner yonder," I said to her. "Take the candle."

She moved to look, and I moved to follow her. Close against a wall, I scooped a lump of clay from the chinking, a wet gob as big as my thumb. I was within a long reach of the shelf.

"The corner," I said, pointing.

And, quick as I could make it, I jammed that clay down on top of the open bottle neck and shoved it in like a cork.

"What —" she began to say.

I picked up the bottle. It felt warm and tingly. In the candlelight we could see the thick dark boiling cloud inside, stirring and spinning and fighting every whichaway, with no way out. I took the candle and dripped wax on the clay, and in the wax I marked a cross with my thumb nail.

"Remember the Arabian Nights book?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No. It's foreign, isn't it?"

"Has a thousand and one stories," I said, "and one of them tells how a haunt was tricked in a bottle like this and sealed away forever. Forney Meechum's safe in there."

She moved with the candle and put it on the table. She pushed the chair back into place and stood behind it in her green dress, straight and tall and proud, the way I'd first seen her.

"Now he can come," she said to me, very sure. "Jeremiah."

"Jeremiah Donovan?" I bubbled out.

"Who else?" she asked. "He's coming back to me, after all these years. I felt him coming."

"Then —" I said, but I didn't have to say it. I knew who she was by now.

"I told you I wasn't all dead," reminded Lute Meechum. "Forney shot me in the heart and flung me in a grave, but I couldn't all die. I just lay there till I knew Jeremiah was heading back here for me."

I got my coat from beside the fireplace. It felt funny to be in that cabin, with one haunt inside the bottle and one standing behind the chair.

"Thank you for everything, John," she said, old-folksy mannerly. "Thank you kindly. You can go now, it's all right."

The door squeaked open.

In out of the night came one of the wettest people you ever could call for. His shoulders and pant legs were soaked, water dripped from his white hair and his old man's chin.

"Mr. Jay," I greeted him.

"Jeremiah," Lute Meechum greeted him.

He walked across, paying me no mind. "I had to come," he said to her, and the candle went out again.

But I could see him sink down in the chair, and the light from the fireplace made his face look all of a sudden not old any more.

He put up his face, and she put hers down. He went all slack and limp. Restful.

I was outside, with the bottle and guitar. There was nary cloud in the sky, and the moon shone down like a ball of white fire.

The cabin was dark inside now, and I could see by the moon that it was a ruined wreck. The roof fallen in, the window broken, the logs rotten — you'd swear nobody had set foot there for fifty years back. But inside, Jeremiah Donovan and Lute Meechum were together at last, and peaceful. So peaceful most folks would think they were dead and gone.

On along the trail that was now so clear, I found a tree that looked hollow. Down in its dark inside I put the bottle, and left it there.

It seemed to me I ought to be shaky and scared, but I wasn't. I felt right good. That dumb supper, now — the way I'd heard it said, sometimes a dumb supper calls up things that oughtn't be there; but now I'd seen a dead haunt, setting a dumb supper to tole a living man to her. And it wasn't bad. It wasn't wrong. They were happy about it, I knew that.

Walking in the bright moonlight, I began to strum my guitar, and, gentlemen, the song I sang is really an old song:

*Beauty, strength, youth, are flowers and fading seen —
Duty, faith, love, are roots and ever green. . . .*

