

Weird Tales

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 408 Holliday 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. English office: G. M. Jeffries Agency, Hopefield House, Hanwell, London, W. 7. 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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Contents for November, 1925

- Cover Design ----- Andrew Brosnatch
- The Stolen Body ----- H. G. Wells 581
Evil Entity Seizes a Man's Body and Tries to Destroy It
- The Return of the Undead ----- Arthur Leeds 589
A Hospital Vampire—Morphine—and a Ward Full of Children
- Lukundoo ----- Edward Lucas White 599
Every Tale of African Pigmies That Whistled and Jabbered
- Vale of the Corbies ----- Arthur J. Burks 607
The Beating of Unseen Wings Filled the Valley of Ravens
- Midnight Realism ----- William Sanford 612
At Midnight the Phantom Stepped Down and Stabbed Itself

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The Acid in the Laboratory**-----**Gordon Philip England** 615
Heartless and Cruel Was the Physician, but He Knew How to Suffer
- Candle-Light** -----**Louise Garwood** 621
She Returned From the Grave, but He Would Not Receive Her
- The Man-Trap** -----**Hamilton Craigie** 625
A Monstrous Plant Makes Its Kill
- The Seventh Devil** -----**F. Douglas McHenry** 630
Scientist Puts Human Brains Into the Skull of a Gorilla
- The Ghostly Lovers** -----**William James Price** 636
Verse
- Under the Hau Tree**-----**Katherine Yates** 637
Death Could Not Keep Them From Their Honeymoon
- The Headless Spokesman**-----**Irvin Mattick** 643
Short and Terrible Tale of Murder
- The Waning of a World (Part One)**-----**W. Elwyn Backus** 647
Four-part Serial of a Voyage to Mars
- The Gargoyle (Conclusion)**-----**Greya La Spina** 677
Serial Novel of Devil Worship
- Weird Story Reprint**
No. 5. The Young King -----**Oscar Wilde** 690
Three Marvelous Dreams Did the Boy King Dream
- The Fiend of the Seine**-----**Dick Heine** 697
Horror-tale of Paris
- Whispers of Heavenly Death**-----**Walt Whitman** 699
Verse Reprint
- The Eyrie** ----- 700
A Chat With the Readers
- The Conqueror Worm**-----**Edgar Allan Poe** 704
Verse Reprint

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*From the Land of Spirits She Came
to Him—and He Was Afraid*

CANDLE-LIGHT

By LOUISE GARWOOD

Author of "Fayrian"

DAVID closed the great oak door behind his departing guests, happy at last to hear their laughter and their footsteps mingle with the patter of the rain outside. How long they had stayed and tried him by their good-natured talk—and they could never have understood why he wanted to be alone! Now his silent house was left all to him and he might abandon his mind to the memories which seemed to creep like specters from the dusty corners and faded curtains; to the strange dream that he had borne in his heart so long.

He walked across the thick carpet to the fireplace where the embers were smoldering and casting a glow on the hearth. From overhead, on the mantel, the light of the candelabra flickered and danced down about his graying hair. He heard the drip-drip of the rain on the casement sills; then a gust of wind crowded the drops into a flurry. "Hush! Hush!" it seemed to say. Was it wind, or a sigh? He started. There was the odor of violets again! He walked to the window and opened it so that the damp air blew upon him; and his face twisted in his effort to speak aloud, but he could only whisper, "Eleanore!"

"Drip-drip, patter-patter," answered the rain.

He closed the window, and, sighing, went back to stare once more at the embers and press his temples with

cold fingers. Yes, she would come! She would come back to the old house which had grown musty and dismal for want of her—to him, David, whose heart had grown musty and dismal for want of her. She had promised to come back again sometime in early spring; and he had waited through the years—so long that his hair had grown touched with gray and his face had become lined. But now it would be different. He knew that she was near. Else why that sound of muffled footsteps he had heard of late, sometimes following, sometimes going before him over the velvet carpet through the lonely halls? The swish of curtains that moved as if from a person passing by? The odor of violets here and there—her violets? And strangest of all, the little yellowed handkerchief he had found in the carved chair? The handkerchief belonged in the chest where he kept the trifles she had once used; around it, too, clung the breath of violets, together with the same odor that was given forth by the sunless rooms downstairs. The chest was always locked—yet he had found the kerchief.

"Eleanore! Where are you?" His own voice startled him.

He suddenly saw that the ashes in the grate were no longer smoldering rosily. They were getting gray. It must be time for him to go to bed. So after he had put the screen around the fireplace he began to extinguish

the lights on the mantel, taking one from its socket to guide him up the stairway. The last one of all, he left burning. "For her," he thought, and gave a whimsical smile. Then he turned and left the room to its fantastic shadows, to the whisper of the wind, to that soft laughter which was really the patter of raindrops against the sills. Above, on the high ceiling, danced the flickering light of the candle, while before him, gaunt and tall, moved his own shadow, and it fluttered ahead as he hastened up the steps. At the landing where the stairway divided into two smaller flights, he turned, and after ascending the one that led to the right wing of the house, crossed the narrow hall into his room.

Here with fresh tapers lighted, and his favorite armchair and books, it did not seem so lonely. Yet he did not wish to read—he wanted to open the small chest and look at its array of relics one by one. When he unlocked it a musty sweetness stole out. Sitting there he fingered the yellowed handkerchief, the silk fan with flowers painted on it, the gloves—yellow also now. The human hands that had worn them could never touch his again. Tears and prayers might bring her spirit back but they could never restore those warm hands to his clasp! Then he unfolded a scarf. How sheer and delicate it was—like her! How it breathed of her! He buried his face in it.

"Oh, my dear, you promised! I have waited so long—aren't you coming back? It has been lonely, Eleanore!"

The scarf fell from his hands. What was that noise? He rose, straining to hear, peering out into the darkness of the stair landing, then sank back again. Of course! The casement in the library; it had not been repaired, and the March wind was making it rattle. But he had best not worry to go down and fasten

it. There were the other things to look at, as if he had not gone over them a thousand times before—the pretty brooch, the comb, the letters written in faded ink.

HE WAS reading one of these letters when, as the wind died down, he heard through the steady pour of the rain a sound that was *not* the rattling of the casement. It was distinct and clear—"Click, clack." David wanted to go to the door, but he could not move except to rise and stand motionless in front of his chair as the kerchief, brooch and letters fell and scattered on the floor. His heart beat hard and sent a wave of red into his face. "Click, clack"—a footstep on the uncarpeted stair—the light touch of a woman's slipper! "Click." The rain came steadily down. He waited; the visitor seemed to have paused.

In a moment the steps began again and came up slowly—one, two, three, four, five—there were thirteen before the landing could be reached. "Click, clack, click." Eight, nine, ten. "Clack." At last he saw something. It was an aureole of light which, as the steps came nearer, grew into a semicircle: candle-light—but no shadow fell before it. Advancing within the light was the outline of a head of dark hair, then a white neck and shoulders, until finally upon the landing stood a slim figure clad in a pale robe. A hand rose to shade the candle, and slowly the figure turned and looked up toward him with large eyes. A thick braid fell over each shoulder.

David tried to hold out his arms. They were leaden. "Eleanore!" he tried to call. Only a gasp came from between his parted lips. And she stayed there a minute, smiling, then came toward him up the smaller steps—"Click, clack, click"—very slowly, and after crossing the hall she stood in the doorway of his room. There she paused again. And those tender

words of welcome which he had yearned to say through all the years would not come. A strange timidity held him back from her. He wanted to fall upon his knees and cry. At last he uttered halting words.

"You—you have come!"

"Yes, David; I have come!" Her voice was calm and sweet. She advanced. Her dainty slippers touched the carpet noiselessly and her long garment dragged behind with a sighing sound. When she had reached the table where the lights were, she put her candle in an empty bracket, then sat down upon a low stool facing David. It did not seem that she thought of coming nearer. How different this was from the meeting he had dreamed of! His own voice was calm as she said:

"Why did you not come before? I have waited so long, darling." He stepped toward her, but leaned back against the table as he saw that she shrank away. Her eyes grew wide.

"It has not been long. It has only been a little while." The wind whined through the gables outside. David watched her draw the white robe close around her while a new loneliness arose in his heart.

"Has it seemed short to you, then? Oh, the long, long years, Eleanore! They have made me old—and you say 'a little while!'"

Why were they so strangely calm? Why were they not in each other's arms with that sweet, warm embrace of old? The smile was gone from her lips now. She said mournfully:

"I have tried to come to you so many, many times—and I could not. Sometimes I was at your window whispering to you; then I would laugh and tap on the panes—but you never heard."

"How could I know?" He shook his head. She sighed and it seemed that there were violets in the room.

"I am glad to be here. I am glad to be near you, David, because" (she

drew the robe close about her again) "it was lonely and cold."

David shuddered. "Where—where was it lonely and cold?"

She made a vague gesture that caused the open sleeve to fall back from her arm.

"Out there."

After a few minutes she looked down at the things which lay on the floor at their feet, and the open chest.

"What are these?"

Once more that queer loneliness!

"Don't you know, Eleanore? Surely you remember—"

"No."

"Why, they are your own! Your letter, dear, the comb you wore in your hair—"

How small and like a child she looked as she slipped down from the stool and knelt among the relics! She held up the yellowed handkerchief and looked at him with a question in her eyes.

"This, David," she said, "I think I—remember—"

He shuddered again. After that she looked no more at the things but straight up into his eyes.

"I like to be here," she said simply. "It is warm and sweet where you are, David." His heart beat faster as he looked down and saw something of the old light burning in those strange eyes.

"And I am old, Eleanore—I grew old when you left me—everything grew old and musty and dismal when you went away." He motioned to the ceiling with bits of cobwebs in its corners—to the faded carpet. "But you are young and beautiful—"

She gave a laugh that sounded like the patter of rain against the casement.

"No, no! It is *you* who are young: I am not young!" The eery laugh pattered again. "David, I—". She seemed to be groping for words she

could scarcely remember. "I—love—you!"

She rose; she stretched out her white arms; she was coming toward him. He shivered and grew cold as she came nearer. Her arms touched him. He shrank away. They encircled him. He tried to pull back but he was held by terror. Her icy lips were seeking his: the fragrance of violets was heavy in his nostrils, and deathly and heavier still, the damp, moist odor of the mold around their roots!

"Don't—don't!" he cried. "You are—oh, God!—go away!"

The white arms fell from around him and she cringed. He looked into eyes of unutterable sadness. Then she covered her face with her slender hands and rocked her body to and fro, moaning:

"Oh, oh, oh! I tried and tried to come—and I came to you at last and you were afraid. You are afraid of me!"

He could not speak: he clung to the table, weeping. The mournful voice went on:

"I must go away; and it will be lonely and cold and I can never come back any more."

Slowly she went over to where the candles burned and lifted one from the bracket, shading it with her hand. She turned her piteous face toward him again, crooning the words over and over to herself as if they were a weird song:

"You were afraid."

And now she was walking through the doorway, the long garment trail-

ing behind her, the dark braids swinging loosely. David could not follow.

"Come back—come back!" he tried to call but the words were only a whisper. "Click, clack, click, clack." Then "Click, clack," again, farther and farther away. He listened and watched until the halo of light grew smaller and smaller and the footsteps died off in the silence; while the wind and rain outside sounded as if they took up the burden of her moaning:

"Oh—oh—oh! I came to you and you were afraid."

A SHARP pain—David jerked his head up: it had struck the wooden chest that lay on his knees. How strange! He could not remember having sat down again—or having gathered the things from the floor; stranger still, the candles which had been only half-burned when she was there, flickered fitfully in their sockets, ready to expire. One at a time the flames fluttered and went out.

The next morning was bright and sunshiny, the sky all blue, and the trees and flowers were fresher from last night's rain. As David looked out the window the air was sweet and he saw that the gardener had been putting out new violet plants. From all around the garden their blooms looked up at him with bright faces where drops of moisture lingered, shining like tears. Later, as he walked down the staircase, he found spots of candle-drip all the way—and the last socket of the brass candelabrum on the mantel was empty.

