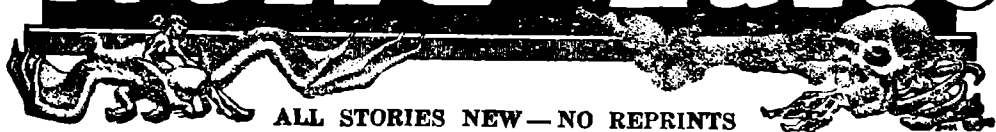


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

July, 1945

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

LONG NOVELETTE

- THE WATCHER FROM THE SKY** August Derleth 6
The laws of space and time may be thrust aside by ancient evil known only to a few men whose voices cry in the wilderness of disbelief

NOVELETTE

- DEVIL DOG** Manly Banister 46
The dogs, creeping through the jungle faster than a man could travel in the open, were a Godsend—most of them!

SHORT STORIES

- FOG COUNTRY** Allison V. Harding 29
People are born here, and live here . . . but only if they can't possibly move away!

- THE DAI SWORD** Manly Wade Wellman 37
A man with occult knowledge and interests ought to have first bid on the sword of the Dais

- ONE WAY TO MARS** Robert Bloch 58
The only catch about a journey to Mars is—nobody's yet figured out how to make the return trip

- THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD** Edmond Hamilton 64
The aged statesman complained that intolerance, old grudges and ambitious men plague this world eternally

- CARNABY'S FISH** Carl Jacobi 74
There was something strange about the lake . . . but what was in the lake was far stranger!

- QUAKING PROVIDENCE** Reeder Goald 81
Everybody has a theory about the war but somewhere there is a little, oldish man who knows!

- THE DEAD MAN** Ray Bradbury 84
It's not fair to play jokes on a dead man. Well, anyway, it's not healthy!

- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS** Irwin J. Weill 73

- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB** 93

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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Carnaby's Fish

By **CARL JACOBI**

MR. JASON CARNABY was a man of medium height, medium features, and medium habits. At forty-six he was one of those bachelors who, having passed from youth well into middle age, would have attracted no comment other than a casual query as to why he had never married. He operated a small real-estate business with rather shabby offices in the town of La Plante and, with the exception of

Heading by **BORIS DOLGOV**



At times the lake looked as though it had been superimposed upon the landscape like a double exposure photo

a stenographer who came in two days a week, he worked quite alone.

Inasmuch as La Plante was located near the Atlantic coast, much of his business had to do with shore property, summer homes and cottages. These holdings moved fairly fast, but occasionally he acquired a home which refused to attract a buyer.

Of all these, the Dumont place was undoubtedly the most difficult to move. While it was listed as "shore property", it was actually on Philip's Lake, a short distance inland. It was part of an estate which had passed through probate, old Captain Dumont having died more than five years ago. Since that time it had had but one occupant, a Dr. Septimus Levaseur, who had lived there almost a year and a half before his death, which had come about suddenly and somewhat obscurely.

The death of the doctor, who had been an amiable fellow, if somewhat distant and hazy at times, had given rise to some of the rumors which had become attached to the Dumont place and made it so difficult to sell or rent.

Dr. Levaseur had died of a heart attack, apparently brought on by over-exertion. He had been found on the East road the night of a big storm half-clad, a crucifix clutched in his hand. Mr. Carnaby, who was the soul of the conventional, had always regarded the doctor as somewhat queer, but, in final analysis, Mr. Carnaby's judgment was circumscribed by the question of rent, and Dr. Levaseur had always paid his rent promptly.

Nevertheless, his strange death had doubtless been the basis for the rumors that there was something odd about the house, that the whole property was damned, and that finally, Philip's Lake was "queer." Mr. Carnaby was admittedly at a loss as to how these stories had got started; the circumstance of Dr. Levaseur's having been found clasping a crucifix and but half-clad on the East road might have excited the superstitious, but Mr. Carnaby failed to discover how the lake came to be implicated. Since other property in Mr. Carnaby's hands adjoined the lake, he was irritated, lest some stigma similar to that attaching to the Dumont place should likewise become attached to other properties. He made some effort to

isolate rumors concerning Philip's Lake, and finally got down to two basic tales.

Three cottage residents on the opposite shore from the Dumont place said that a small area of water far out toward the center of Philip's Lake was frequently rough and white-capped, when not a breath of wind was stirring. Mr. Carnaby's very reasonable suggestion that the lake might be connected to the ocean by underground channels opening off from the vicinity of the disturbed area was brushed aside. The cottagers countered with an additional tale to the effect of a pale light or a shimmering radiance which sometimes wafted over the lake like a will-o'-the-wisp. And finally, old John Bainley told of hearing on several occasions a melodious singing far out from shore, singing which was so wonderfully lovely he wanted to swim out to it, though he hadn't been in the water "for nigh unto sixty years." Whatever the source of these old wives' tales, they played their part in the failure of the Dumont house to attract a renter.

After repeated efforts to dispose of the property, all of which came to nothing, Mr. Carnaby decided one morning in July that something final should be done about the Dumont place. Accordingly, he gave the keys of his office to his stenographer, hitched his horse to the buckboard, and headed down the East road.

IN DUE time he reached Gail's Corners, where he rested the horse and refreshed himself with a soft drink at the settlement's only store, through the display windows of which he could see across the summer landscape to the circle of drab gray water which was Philip's Lake. He knew that this body of water was only by courtesy called a lake, for it was merely a small quay from which on occasion a neck of water afforded an outlet to the Atlantic.

As he stood there, gazing out at its surface, it occurred to him that he had never, after all, actually examined the lake; that is, he had not gone out on it, though he handled property touching upon it on all sides. There was something strangely melancholy and at the same time somberly attractive about Philip's Lake, and it might well be worth while to row out on to it, provided the flat-bottomed rowboat which had always

laid along the shore of the Dumont place was still there. At the same time, it might not be amiss to idle away a little time in fishing, a recreation for which Mr. Carnaby had found all too little time. Acting on this impulse, he bought a cane pole, a spool of line, and several varieties of artificial bait, and resumed his journey.

He reached the property at length: an old style Cape Cod house, rectangular in shape, with a narrow veranda and an acre of surrounding ground. It seemed, as he stood in the weed-grown yard, that the house had a detached look, as if in some way it did not belong there. Gazing at the lake again, he had the rather uncomfortable impression that it too had been superimposed upon the landscape like a double exposure photograph. He entered the house and went through the building room by room, making notes on the back of an old envelope as to repairs that should be made, their approximate cost and other items.

Finished, he locked the door and passed down the path toward the lake. A dozen yards from the house stood a stone well with a pagoda roof over it. At the shore he mused for some time over an old harpoon which Captain Dumont apparently had cast there in an idle moment. The weapon reminded him that Captain Dumont had served on a whaler in his younger days.

The flat-bottomed rowboat was still there. Mr. Carnaby bailed out the rain water with some effort, threw his new fishing tackle across the thwart and pushed out on to the lake. On the water the impression that the closely-wooded shores were somehow out of proportion came again, and he took off his spectacles and rubbed them with a polishing cloth. He began to feel that he had come here not of his own will but in response to an indefinable and growing attraction emanating from the depths of the green waves. What a queer creature man is, Mr. Carnaby thought, to create a fascination for the unpleasant. He thrust away a desire to leap overboard and, with an effort, began to arrange his tackle.

For an hour he fished. Having no leader, he fastened the plug directly to the line and proceeded to throw the bait as far out as he could with the aid of the pole, and then jerk it gently along through the water.

Tiring of his fruitless efforts at length, and wanting to rest his eyes from the glare of the sunlight on the water, Mr. Carnaby leaned back and lowered his lids. The day was drowsy, and so, too, was he. When he awoke, the sun had gone down and the gloom of late twilight was dropping upon the lake. In his boat, Mr. Carnaby was far out from shore, drifting aimlessly.

Indeed, he was approximately in the center of the lake, and a little wind was rippling the water there. Suddenly conscious of the time, Mr. Carnaby took up the oars and began to row hard. It did not occur to him that his fish-pole was propped under one thwart with the line trailing behind the boat in the water until in the half-darkness he saw the pole abruptly bend almost double. He barely had time to grab it and pull with all his strength.

THE fish came through the water slowly, heavily. As it drew closer, Carnaby could sense rather than see it weaving to and fro in the black water, not so much struggling to free itself as reluctant to come with the line, though his catch did not seem to come willingly. It was somewhat awkward to handle the cane-pole in his cramped quarters, but at last Carnaby got his catch alongside, and reached down to complete his capture.

His first impression was that he had caught a catfish. His second was of something so infinitely more horrible that an involuntary exclamation of horror escaped him.

But the twilight, surely, played his eyes tricks. He had now laid his pole down, and, still holding the line, though with uncertain eyes averted from his catch, he slipped a small flashlight from his pocket, switched it on, and turned the comparatively feeble ray on to his catch.

A woman's head drifted there, looking up at him—an exquisite feminine face with long blond hair trailing in the water, which, rippling over the countenance white in that darkness, revealed teeth bared in an expression of unutterable malignance. The barbs of one of the gang hooks had bitten deep into the red mouth, and from it flowed a thin stream of blood.

It was a live, a perfectly moulded human

head—but the body was that of a fish, with tail and fins!

For several seconds Mr. Barnaby sat frozen to immobility. Then the flashlight slipped from his hands; he dropped the line and began to row wildly for shore.

He beached the boat and staggered unsteadily up the path. When he reached the house he halted breathlessly, overcome by nervous reaction. The shadow of his patiently waiting horse and buckboard loomed beyond the gate, but in spite of this bewildering horror, he did not feel up to driving the lonely road back just yet. He climbed the stoop, inserted his key into the lock with trembling hands, and re-entered the house.

The stillness of the long-closed interior closed about him like a cloak, soothing his troubled nerves. He lit a lamp, carried it into the living room and placed it on the table. Then he got out his pipe and began to smoke slowly and deliberately.

Was he mad, he wondered, or was the thing he had seen only the after-effect of a latent dream? Had he witnessed some phantasmagoria, created by water and darkness which his numbed senses had reformed into a vagary of the subconscious? One thing was certain. Tell his experience to the townfolk of La Plante, and he might as well write a no-sale ticket for the property. Once such a story got around, no amount of advertising would be able to overcome the superstitious aura that had already begun to gather around the Dumont place.

It came to him that certain rumors concerning Dr. Levaseur and his strange death had been bruited about with raised eyebrows—vague, formless whisperings. Certainly the man had been odd, and the oddity of his character was brought home to Carnaby now as he looked upon the room in which he stood.

THE walls had been done over in a shade of bluish green that was dark and cheerless. The rug was a light brown, and the border design resembled thick layers of pebbles interlaced with sand. On one wall was an old print of Heinrich Heine; near it hung a faded etching of a sailing vessel in a storm; and in one corner stood a bookcase filled with large and obviously heavy volumes.

Still smoking and somewhat calmer

now, Mr. Carnaby crossed to the books. *Loreleysage in Dichtung und Musik. Mysteries of the Sea*, by Cornelius Van de Mar. *The History of Atlantis*, by Lewis Spence. As he stood looking at these titles, Carnaby became aware again, by a process of idea-association, of the nature of Dr. Levaseur's curious obsession. He was instantly apprehensive again, and curiously disturbed, for his memory brought back vividly that strange and horrible experience on the lake.

Dr. Levaseur had claimed to be an authority on loreleis, on marine lures of legend and mythology, and he had written several papers on these old beliefs. Surely these were somewhere available, thought Carnaby. Yet he was briefly reluctant to look for them, a little afraid of what he might find. However, after but a few moments of hesitation, he set about searching for Dr. Levaseur's papers among the publications in the bookcase, and in a short time found a thick sheaf of dusty foolscap, closely written in a fine, precise hand.

This he carried to a chair and read.

At first, in his nervous haste, he found it difficult to keep his attention to the pages, but gradually the brooding silence of the house drifted out of his consciousness. He read for an hour, and at the end of that time he sat back in silent amazement. Dr. Levaseur had apparently been not only an authority on lorelies and ancient allied folklore, but he had also been versed in a myriad of psychic phenomena which had any kind of marine background. And, incredible as it seemed, the doctor apparently had accepted many of these tales as factual accounts.

He had written at some length the account of the Tsiang Lora siren which hardened Dutch sailors had reported dwelt near an islet off the southeast coast of Java. Seen only at night, cloaked in bluish-white radiance, this siren, like her many mythological counterparts, took the form of a woman, lovely and ethereal, whose whispered plea for help drifted across the water with all the power of a lodestone. Dr. Levaseur had added to this narrative the factual results of several geodetic surveys made by the Netherlands East Indies Hydrographical Department, pointing out that the sea floor at this point of latitude and longitude sloped sharply upward and formed a shallow reef

or submerged tableland. In addition, the doctor recounted the foundering of a Dutch brigantine near this location in the early sixties. This ship had carried a passenger, a rich Malay woman, who was suspected of being a priestess of the *dularna* sect.

He had carefully chronicled the tale of Dabra Khan in the Arabian Gulf, a masculine lorelei who supposedly shouted false commands in the helmsman's ears during a storm; of McClannon's Folly, a needle spire of rock off the Cornish coast which changed to a voluptuous maiden clinging to a spar when viewed through a lane of fog, each case described with scholarly directness.

But toward the end of the manuscript there was an underlined paragraph that Mr. Carnaby read several times.

It is now four months since I have come here. Yesterday I went out upon Philip's Lake for the first time, and I know now that I was not wrong in my judgment. It is there, it called out to me, and for a moment I thought I saw it in all its malevolent beauty.

I cannot wait until I have seen it again. Tomorrow, taking full precautions, and using all the powers at my disposal, I shall strive to entice it from its lair. The desire is almost overwhelming.

Mr. Carnaby sat looking off into space for a long time. At length he put his pipe into his pocket and returned the manuscript to the bookcase. He blew out the lamp and made his way out of the house to the buckboard. He was in deep, perturbed thought as he drove slowly home.

THEREAFTER, Mr. Carnaby made no further attempt to find a renter for the Dumont place. He filed the deed and abstract away in an old shoe-box, marked: *Miscellaneous N.G.*, and he went about his business, saying nothing to anyone about his experience on the lake.

In this manner fall passed into winter, and the town of La Plante went about its routine in its usual fashion. It was the following spring, a balmy day in early May, that Mr. Carnaby chanced to meet his old friend, Lawyer Herrick, as the latter was emerging from the courthouse.

"Well, how's business?" Herrick inquired politely, accepting Mr. Carnaby's cigar.

"Should be a run on shore property this summer, what with that new pike cut through from Kenleyville."

"Yes, there should," Mr. Carnaby agreed.

"I see you've got the Dumont place rented again," Herrick continued. "I thought you would in time. It's a nice place."

Mr. Carnaby looked at the lawyer sharply. "Why no, it's not rented. What ever made you think it was?"

Herrick flicked his cigar ash into the wind and frowned slightly. "I drove by there yesterday, and I thought I saw a woman sitting on the shore, sunning herself. A woman with blond hair."

"Is that so?" said the real estate man. "That's odd."

It was so odd that he decided to visit the property the next day. He could, he told himself, kill two birds with one stone. A tenant farther down the East road had complained of a bad roof, and Mr. Carnaby had put off for some time the task of inspecting it.

When he turned into the lane leading to the Dumont house, Mr. Carnaby cast a quick glance at the shore. The westerling sun was in his eyes, and the fire-like reflection from one of the windows blinded him, but for a moment he fancied he saw a woman sitting on the shore. But at second glance, somewhat out of range of the sun's reflection, he saw nothing; the place bore the unmistakable appearance of desertion—not alone the house, in its aloof desolation, but all the land belonging to it.

Mr. Carnaby opened the house and went into the living room. With all his experience in entering long-closed houses, he could never repress the initial spell of depression which swept over him as his nostrils caught the smell of dust and stale air. Nothing was changed from his visit of six months before. Yet he had, however, curiously, expected change; the casual suggestion inherent in Herrick's brief conversation had affected him most disagreeably; it had caused him to think again of that horrible experience on the lake, of Dr. Leveseur's pursuits and death, of the tales concerned the Dumont place.

He lit the lamp, for daylight was fading outside, and already the room was hazed with early twilight. He lit his pipe, too, and,

as usual, the tobacco smoke soothed him somewhat. Now that he was here, his thoughts returned again to Dr. Levaseur's manuscript; he took it from the bookcase where he had left it, and sat down to glance through it again. This time, however, he could find no attraction in the written words—the paragraphs seemed stilted, disconnected, even absurd. Nevertheless, cold as he remained to Dr. Levaseur's thesis of the reality of loreleis and similar creatures, he was most unpleasantly impressed by the scholarly, almost dryly erudite weight of evidence which the doctor had adduced to sustain certain half-hinted beliefs. And there was that curious reference to "something" in Philip's Lake.

SOMETHING like an hour passed before he heard the singing. Even then he was hardly aware of it, so soft was the voice and so far off. But presently he looked up from the manuscript and listened. Almost at the limit of his hearing range it sounded, the overtones blending into the sighing of the wind.

Definitely it was a woman's voice, singing a strange lilting melody. It grew louder, and, despite an apprehensive hesitation, Carnaby strode to the window and opened it. It was a song such as he had never heard before, sung in a contralto, wandering up and down the octaves in an aimless yet appealing way. Through the window he could see no living person, only the shadowy Lombardies that marched down the slope to the shore of the lake.

The singing grew louder until it seemed to resound from the walls of the room. And now as he listened, Mr. Carnaby experienced a strange sensation. It was as if every nerve and fiber of his body responded to that voice and urged him to go to its source. It was a lure, and with his bucolic matter-of-factness the real estate man unconsciously fought it with all his will.

He might as well have been fastened to a steel cable. Step by step he found himself drawn across the room to the door and out on to the veranda. There he halted again, all but overcome by that voice.

On feet that were dead things Mr. Carnaby strode down the steps and down the path. He passed the well and continued to

the shore of the lake. Black water rippled at his feet.

And then he saw her. She was twenty yards from shore, waist deep in the water, moving slowly toward him. In the moonlight he could see her carmine lips as she sang her golden song. He could see her dripping tresses coiling about her nude shoulders. On she came, and still he stood there transfixed, held by some alien power.

Suddenly the singing ceased. Mr. Carnaby felt something snap in his consciousness like a clipped wire. The woman was directly before him now, and as she advanced, the lower portion of her body came clear of the water. A greenish scaled body edged with white. The body of a fish! The head and breasts were those of a woman, but even as he watched, he saw that head bloat and swell, lose its features, change to a horrible reptilian mass that gazed upon him with diabolic fury!

He turned, the spell broken, and the thing lunged toward him, seeming to move through the air. Down the beach Mr. Carnaby ran, a mighty horror assailing him, but his steps were turned to lead. Then, even as he faltered, he caught the glint of moonlight on a shaft in the sand. Old Captain Dumont's harpoon.

Driven by the wild impulse to save himself, he bent down, seized it and turned to face the monster. His heart stood still. There it was directly before him, an horrendous, loathsome beast with slavering lips and blazing, hyalescent eyes. It closed in, and as it did, Mr. Carnaby drove the harpoon before him with every ounce of strength he possessed. He felt the stinging recoil, but whether it was merely his arm reaching the limit of its range he did not know. Things became vague and indistinct for Mr. Carnaby then. A piercing scream seared into his ears. The monster wavered and sank backward. Then, uttering low, mueling cries, it turned and scrambled down the beach. Simultaneously the surface of the black lake seemed to rear upward and boil in a great cauldron of lashing waves and foam.

The thing reeled into the water. Twenty yards from shore it fell forward like a spent juggernaut. For a moment it lay there, body awash, heaving up and down. Then slowly it sank from sight.

MR. CARNABY spent eleven days in the La Plante hospital under close surveillance of his physician. Upon his release, he forced himself, however reluctantly, to return to the Dumont place and make a thorough investigation. He found the harpoon on the beach, where he had left it; he found also the indentations of his footprints. He found nothing more. Moreover, the house seemed exceedingly pleasant, even inviting. He could discover but one somewhat odd fact, and this mattered hardly at all—the report of the governmental meteorological station at the county seat nine miles east stated that, from May seventh to May sixteenth inclusive, wind velocities in the La Plante district were at the lowest point they had been for the entire year. Yet, during that time Philip's Lake remained in a turbulent state, white-capped and sullen with angry waves.

The effect of all this was to inspire Mr. Carnaby with the conviction that, in time, the Dumont place might after all be made to pay. He paid it another visit and found nothing altered; he took time to make a few repairs and had the house cleaned up a little. In a fortnight he managed to find a young couple who wanted the house, and rented it forthwith.

He waited uneasily for several weeks for any word of trouble, but nothing came from the Dumont place but the rent, with pleasant regularity, and presently Mr. Carnaby began

to look back upon his experience as a kind of neurotic condition which had given him unhealthy hallucinations.

It was ten months before he visited Gail's Corners again. On that occasion he had to pay a visit to the village doctor concerning a property he was handling for him. He found the doctor just back from the country, offered him a cigar, and lit one for himself.

"It's a coincidence seeing you, Carnaby," said Dr. Holmes. "I've just come from one of your tenants—and I need a drink, bad. Just get that bottle and the glasses from that cupboard, will you?"

Carnaby did so, his eyebrows raised. "Which tenants?"

"The Plaisiers. They're on the Dumont place."

A ball of alarm exploded inside Carnaby; he sat down, feeling his mouth going dry. "Nothing wrong, is there?"

"Wrong? God knows what you'd call it, Carnaby." He shook his head and poured himself a drink. "I delivered her baby all right—usually have trouble with the first, you know—but I didn't have any trouble with the delivery. But the baby! My God, Carnaby!—I never saw a baby that looked so much like a fish in all my life!"

He poured a drink for Carnaby and looked up to hand it to him. He was not across the desk from him where but a moment before he had been. Quietly, without a sound, Mr. Carnaby had fainted.

