

« « « Gripping Tales of the Uncanny » » »

Strange STORIES

VOL. I, NO. 1

CONTENTS

FEBRUARY, 1939

THE SINGING SHADOWS

Vincent Cornier

An Evil Wraith Dances and Supernal Voices Whisper Warnings as Averil Egerton Struggles in a Web Whose Warp and Woof Are Mystery and Death! [Complete Novel] 15

THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE

Robert Bloch

Twelve Generations of Evil Incarnate Rise to Avenge the Abode of Secrets Forbidden! 41

EYES OF THE SERPENT

August W. Derleth and Mark Schorer

A Voodoo Zombie Haunts a Modern City as Blood-drenched Victims Cry Out for Vengeance! [Complete Novelet] 52

THE INVADERS

Keith Hammond

Furies of Hell are Loosed Upon Earth by Michael Hayward 69

CHANGELING

Manly Wade Wellman

This Misbegotten Being Was the Progeny of the Unknowable 80

THE SORCERER'S JEWEL

Tarleton Fiske

Eyes Focused on Infinity, an Artist-Scientist Sees a Horrific World 87

MAJOR McCRARY'S VISION

Ralph Milne Farley

Time Stands Still to Answer an All-important Question 97

THE FROG

Henry Kuttner

A Betrachian Horror Howls in a Witch's Holocaust! 102

SERVANT OF SATAN

Otis Adelbert Kline

The Devil's Disciple Summons Elemental Slaves to Their Grim Tasks! 112

THE BLACK ARTS—(A Department)

Lucifer 6

STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Application for entry as second class matter pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1938, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$1.15; foreign and Canadian, postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If a name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

Read our companion magazines: Thrilling Detective, Thrilling Adventures, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, West, Thrilling Mystery, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Western, Thrilling Love, Sky Fighters, The Lone Eagle, Everyday Astrology, G-Men, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Detective, Popular Love, Popular Western, Masked Rider Western Magazine, Startling Stories, Texas Rangers, Range Riders, Detective Novels Magazine, and Black Book Detective Magazine.

CHANGELING



Where Sarah had stood now crouched a chubby, rosy little girl

*These Misbegotten Beings Are Usually the Creatures of
Elves and Fairies, But This One Was the Progeny
of the Unknowable Malignities!*

By **MANLY WADE WELLMAN**

Author of "Dream Dust from Mars," "Glimpse," etc.

THE series of deaths at Wauketa has never been completely explained. The townspeople were too exorcised at the time to talk sanely, then or thereafter. The newspapers were less understanding than usual. And today the only living actor in the inner drama does not remember clearly.

Not that he is senile; David Gaul was thirty-six last birthday. But he was only eight years old when his father, the professor, took him to call on Derwyd Evans. Naturally his recollections come in patches alternately vivid and vague, like a crazy quilt. It was only recently that he cared to discuss them at all.

His childish impressions of Wauketa might go for any midwestern hamlet that summer—dinginess, dryness, overalled farmers with battered wagons and sleepy horses, a hot sun overhead and not a breath of wind.

Professor Gaul's brass-bound automobile was a novelty sufficient to draw a group of loafers as soon as it came to a halt on the main street. The clustered faces seemed friendly enough until Professor Gaul asked the way to Derwyd Evans' home. Then every brow scowled.

DAVID remembers his sudden panic at the evident change of heart toward him and his father. The oldest of the group cleared his throat nastily before he spoke:

"Turn right, next corner. Drive to the end of that lane. You'll see his flower gardens." Again a clearing of the throat, a dextrous stream of amber tobacco juice from between bearded lips. "What you say you want to see him about?"

"Thanks," replied the professor. His blue eyes glinted and his mouth set itself under his trim moustache as he manipulated the car's ponderous starting system. Everybody moved back from the brass-bound monster as it awakened to growling life. Professor Gaul drove around the corner indicated.

David was nervous with the sense of hostile glares that followed them. The car rolled between pallid, paint-thirsty houses and wilted yards.

"There's a black ribbon on that door, Dad," said the boy. "And there's another farther down."

"People are dead in those houses," his father informed him.

David, to whom death was not a reality as yet, felt curious rather than disturbed. "Are lots of people dying?" he asked.

"Lots," replied his father. And David saw more knots of crepe on other houses as they passed.

"Why did they die?" was his next question.

"We're going to find out," said the professor.

He braked the car to a halt at the end of the lane. There, in sharp and

disturbing contrast to the sere and withered lawns they had seen, was a stretch of bright green grass and gay flower-beds. Professor Gaul gazed piercingly at the pleasant, almost lush growth, and his blue eyes turned frosty as they lifted to the brick house in the midst of the grass and flowers. He dropped a lean, brown hand upon his son's shoulder.

"David," he said gently, "I brought you along because I need your help."

The boy thrilled to the suggestion at once. "Yes, Dad?"

"It isn't that I like to carry you into what might be danger; but good men have to face these things to help the world. Don't they?"

"Yes, Dad," said David.

"All right, pay attention." The gentle voice grew earnest. "In this house live a man and a woman and a little girl. You'll probably be invited to play with the girl."

"Aw, gee!" protested David, who was at the threshold of the age when playing with girls is regarded as sissyish.

"Do it to help me," urged the professor. "You see, I suspect something—I got the clue to what I suspect out of an old book—but I'm not sure. Be civil, son, and try not to quarrel with her. On the other hand, be careful. Don't take anything she offers without looking closely at it first. Above all, eat nothing she gives you. And if something happens to frighten you, set up a yell for me."

"Who's scared of girls?" demanded David stoutly.

His father laughed and cuffed him affectionately on the nape of the neck. The two got out and walked side by side up a stone-flagged path between the flower-beds, then mounted the porch. Professor Gaul knocked at the door of the house.

The man who opened to them was plump-bodied and not as tall as the spare professor. David noticed with surprised distaste that he wore high heels on his stout tan shoes, as if to increase his inadequate stature. Green eyes bulged from his pink moon of a face and he flaunted a bristly, tawny-red mustache.

"Yus, sir," he greeted them cordially, with a clipped accent strange to David. "You must be Perfussor Gaul. I got your letter, sir. Honored." He pronounced the H. "Won't you step into the 'ouse, you and the young gent?"

"Thanks," said David's father. He urged David along with a touch on the arm, and they entered the house together.

The front room was of a cool, green dimness, by reason of drawn blinds. David's quick eye caught first a flimsy table piled with ornate books, a shelf with more volumes across the room, then a mantel of imitation marble on which stood a glass dome with a brilliant stuffed bird inside. He yearned to examine that treasure, but he had been taught early not to request such privileges in strange houses.

AS HE stared about, a woman came in by a rear door and stood by the plump man. She was a gaunt, sharp-faced creature in a high-necked dress of brown stuff, the kind of garment once called "sensible." Only one ornament relieved it, an ivory buckle or clip on the voluminous skirt—but stay . . . it was not an ornament, it was a tiny pale hand clutched there—a hand that seemed free from any arm or body, yet was manifestly alive!

David's heart gave a skipping throb, and voluntarily he shrank close to his father. Then he knew sudden relief as the owner of the hand stole into view from behind the woman.

It was a girl of David's own age or a little more, a spidery little thing with dead black hair and eyes. Her mouth was like a painted red lozenge in the midst of her pallid, young-old face. She still clung to the woman's skirt with one hand and picked at the edge of her dotted pinafore with the other, a childish gesture that seemed somehow deliberate, like a grown actress playing a little girl. Her first gaze was for the professor. She gave David her second glance, then her eyes went back to his father, with some-

thing in them like shrewd apprehension.

The plump man who, David realized, must be Mr. Derwyd Evans, was making a ceremony of introductions. "The moddom, Perfussor," he announced with a flourish. "My dear, this is Perfussor Gaul, who wants to interview me about the trial, you know. And this," with a lardy smile at David, "is young Master Gaul." He paused, and let his proud green eyes caress the girl. "Our dotter, Perfussor," he continued. "Make a courtesy, Sarah." He pronounced it Sayrah.

The child bobbed up and down with the suddenness of a weaving boxer. She still gazed at Professor Gaul, who gave her his best twinkle. Her answering smile was of the thinnest.

Derwyd Evans continued: "Sayrah was quite a figger in the trial. My star witness, and all that." He patted the child's dead-looking hair.

"How so?" inquired Professor Gaul.

"Why, she was in it from the first," volunteered Mrs. Evans. "Everybody who died—every soul—had been given flowers by Sarah. It was claimed that they died at night, with the flowers in vases by their beds."

She lifted her sharp shoulders, in a shrug or a shudder. David could not tell which.

"And so the law made its expected mistake," added her husband. "They would 'ave it—the state's attorney and all—that there was poison in the flowers, and that I'd sent it by my little girl. But Sarah testified. She'd picked the posies herself, like the sweet, thoughtful child she is, and took them around with no word from me."

"Naturally, she was believed," Gaul summed up for them. "A child's evidence, given simply and straightforwardly, is almost always believed. Rightly so." He smiled at Sarah. "I've noticed the flowers. The only fresh ones in town, I dare say."

"Keerect," nodded Evans, cuddling Sarah's bony face between his fist

and flank. "It's been cruel hot and dry. But Sayrah here tends the beds morning and night—plants, waters, weeds, like the patron saint of gardeners."

Young David could have sworn the girl flinched at the simile.

"You'd think she magicked 'em, they do so well. Anyway, the case was declared no trial. And they're trying to solve things with doctors, not police."

"I noticed people are still dying," observed Gaul.

"Right you are." Mr. Evans seemed almost pleased at the thought. "I can't rightly offer sympathies, either. Free or no free, the people suspect and hate me. And nobody will take flowers from Sayrah."

He gazed fondly down into the child's face. "Go and play with young Master David, there's a good girl."

"I want to stay," she demurred. Her voice had a buzz in it—a bee in a fairy tale might talk like that. Her eyes had never left Professor Gaul.

"But I want to talk to the gentleman alone," Mr. Evans coaxed. "He's going to write an article about us—for the records at the state university, and all that."

SARAH was not as impressed as her father, nor as cordial. David, catching the professor's eye, sensed what was wanted of him.

"Come on, Sarah," he said at once, and took her by the hand. Her thin, dry fingers were like a bundle of sun-bleached twigs. She said nothing, but let him lead her out of doors and down upon the lawn. There he released his hold upon her hand and they faced each other.

"You want to play," she said. "Do you know my sort of games?"

"What are your games?" he asked. "Do you play house?" He hated the thought of any such effeminate pastime, but he was helping his father.

"House?" she echoed. "Yes, I have a little house of my own."

She was speaking with the kind of superior gravity that he had encountered in adults who did not like

him. Dashed, but determined to remain on good terms, he smiled his best.

"Come," she said, and again put her dry hand in his. She led him around the corner of the brick dwelling. David paused, wide-eyed, to look at one of the beds of flowers. They were strange to him, and somehow fleshy, like pictures he had seen of blooms in tropic jungles. The brilliant colors—blood-red, indigo-blue, canary-yellow—held his eye and at the same time hurt it. The perfume that stole up was really a combination of several, musky-sweet and heady.

"What are these flowers?" he asked Sarah. She shook her head.

"I do not know their names."

"Then I'll ask your father," he offered, and turned toward the front of the yard. But she clung to his hand.

"He does not know their names, either. Come."

She drew him after her, to the back yard.

It, too, was richly spread with grass, flowers and shrubs.

But today he remembers with clarity only the little hut or bower, covered like a trellis with vines. The vine-leaves were of a green so vivid as to seem dyed, and set among them were numerous tight, pallid buds.

"Those bloom at night," Sarah informed him. She drew aside some of the vines and revealed a small door, no larger than a burrow. "Come inside," she invited, with her first evidence of cordiality.

"That's too little a door for your father and mother," said David. He was thinking of his own back yard and his play quarters in the stable. The professor frequently visited him there, and only last week had helped him blow birds' eggs.

"I know it," returned the girl succinctly, and flung herself down on her stomach to enter. She slid through the opening as easily and swiftly as a lizard, but David, who had thought himself smaller than she, had quite a wriggle of it.

The gloomy interior was intriguing but not exactly cozy. For one thing,

the floor was covered with turf—cool and yet hard to appreciate with the absence of sunlight. The planking of the walls seemed spread with a smooth, pinkish substance. Touching it, David found it as soft as velvet, and it gave him the same unpleasant prickly shiver that he got from the sudden contact of peach down. It might have been a woven fabric, or a growth as of lichens. He does not pretend today to know which.

Sarah squatted on her haunches, child-fashion. Her bare, bony knees thrust up on either side of her like the rear elbows of a cricket.

"How would you like something to eat?" she asked.

David shook his head. "My father says not to eat before tea," he apologized, wondering at the same time where she kept any eatables. There was nothing in the way of container or other furniture inside the playhouse. Floor and walls were quite smooth, so far as he could see.

Just then something sighed or moaned in an opposite corner.

The boy started violently and almost made a dash for the door. But then he saw that Sarah betrayed no fear or surprise. She turned on her hunkers and crossed the floor without rising. From behind, it looked as though she made two crouching hops, like a toad. In the corner she paped with her hands, pressing the grass-tufts back from a small, dark hole.

"All's well," she mumbled down into it.

David thought that this reassurance was for him. Standing up—the ceiling was high enough for that—he took a step toward Sarah. But she motioned for him to stand back, and crouched lower over the orifice. Again the moan stole out of it. Then a gusty voice:

"We are famished," it breathed.

A pause, and David smiled. The girl was entertaining him by some trick of ventriloquism. He had seen such things in vaudeville theaters. But just as he started to say so, she frowned up at him for silence. Again the voice from the shadowy hole:

"We prosper only when men die." It was querulous, insistent. "You know that."

"But I'm suspected," Sarah began argumentatively. "Nobody will take—"

"What about the child with you?" broke in the unseen speaker. "Make haste. We sent you among men for the sake of—"

"Hush!" interrupted Sarah in turn. "I've already planned it."

She pushed the grass back across the opening and rose to confront David.

HE DID not like her set expression, nor the way she held one hand behind her back. "Who was that talking?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "Nothing you'd understand about," she put him off. "Here, do you want a flower?"

Abruptly her hand came into sight. It held a golden blossom. Not yellow or orange or any other living color—it was golden, like his mother's brooch, or the five-dollar piece the president of the university had given him last Christmas, or the tassels on rich velvet curtains he had seen somewhere.

The petals were well open, and in the center of them was the flower's heart, dark and lustrous and mystic, like the eye of a small night creature. Taken off guard, David almost reached for it. Then he remembered his father's caution and drew back his hand, bending instead for a closer look. He spluttered with sudden revulsion and drew back.

"It smells like sweat," he complained. "Did you get it out of that hole—where that talking came out?"

"I want you to have it," urged Sarah, and tried to thrust it into the front of his jacket. He took another backward step, and she advanced at the same moment. Panic, mysterious but overwhelming, entered him.

"I don't want it," he protested hoarsely, and then threw himself toward the entrance. A struggling scramble and he was through with dirt smeared on his clothes and a

button gone from his blouse. As he straightened up, thankful for the warmth and glow of the sun, Sarah was standing beside him again. It was as though she had stepped through the wall of the playhouse.

"All right," she conceded loftily, as though she understood and scorned his fear of the golden flower. "I'll pick you some from the beds out here. Surely," and a fiercer sneer colored her tone, "you won't be afraid of them."

She strolled to the side of the house, and her hands busied themselves among the radiant plants. David, every nerve still tingling with the fear that had saddled him in the playhouse, walked quickly past her. He would have gone to the front door, sought out his father and pressed him to take him away. But voices poured from an open window near the porch, and he slackened his pace to be comforted by them.

Professor Gaul was speaking politely: "So you're originally from Devonshire, Mr. Evans?"

"Brought up there—yus, sir," floated forth the affable reply. "Mrs. E., of course, is native Hamerican. It was 'er that got me to come to the States."

"And your daughter was born in England?" pursued Gaul.

"Oh, yus. Proper subject of the king." Mr. Evans was proud. "She's been 'ere, though, ever since she was a year old."

"Devonshire," harked back the professor. "You have interesting legends there—of imps and monsters and bewitchments."

David went on past the window. He was almost to the porch when Sarah spoke at his elbow.

"If you don't like that flower," she said, "here are some pretty ones. Look!"

Her description hardly did justice to the bouquet. David had never seen its equal. Two or three specimens, he thinks today, must have been rather splendid and valuable orchids, such as grow only in select hothouses. He cannot explain their presence in the open yard of a mid-western cottage.

There were others, long and white, like lilies, that he finds himself totally unable to identify. And a single thick green stalk held three small but turgid-looking buds, each of a different color—violet, red and yellow.

All these things he noted well without taking the gift, for he was decidedly afraid of Sarah. His eyes probed deep into the heart of the nosegay. All at once he was aware of something half-concealed among the leaves—something gleaming golden.

"You're trying to give me that sweaty thing!" he accused.

Her face darkened. "Take it, you fool," she commanded in a terrible voice, and clutched his shoulder with her free hand.

DAVID wailed with fear—he remembered it ashamedly—and tore himself free. He turned and ran. The porch was high, but he sprang upon it without using the steps, clutched the knob of the door and wrenched it open.

Professor Gaul and the Evanses, seated around the table, glanced up with good-natured smiles.

"Hullo, Master David," the plump head of the house greeted him. "In time for tea, eh? It's almost ready."

"Yes," nodded Mrs. Evans. "I'll fetch it now."

She rose and glided into the rear of the house with a heavy swish of her long brown skirts.

David came into the room, looking mutely to his father for help. He did not want to glance back, for he knew that Sarah had entered behind him. He felt her eyes, scorching into his back like the points of two hot poker.

"How do you do, Professor Gaul?" she said over David's shoulder. The bee-buzz was in her voice again, soft but menacing.

Gaul rose and smiled down at her. At the same time he held out a hand and David came gladly to seize it. His father's steady touch gave him strength and courage. He dared turn and look at Sarah.

Tense, determined lines creased

her thin face around the mouth and at the corners of the eyes. In her hand was the bouquet, held out as if she would press it upon Gaul.

"David was afraid to touch these," she informed the professor. "If they don't hurt me, why should they hurt him?"

Her own father's green eyes popped jovially. "Why, indeed?" he chuckled.

"Take them," said Sarah, planting herself before Professor Gaul.

David's father continued to smile. "I will, in a minute," he temporized. "We're just going to have tea. Are you hungry?"

Mrs. Evans had come in, carefully balancing a big brass tray. It was burdened with a teapot, a steaming kettle, and a plate of frosted cookies.

Sarah frowned. "I don't think you like my flowers, Professor Gaul," she said, in a queer, taunting tone. She sounded at least sixty years old, and wise and wicked to match.

Gaul laughed cheerily, as though she had made the most delightful joke. "And you," he bantered in turn, "don't like tea, do you?"

WITHOUT letting go of David, he shot out his free hand like the paw of a cat. From Mrs. Evans' tray he snatched the kettle of hot water. With the same movement, in the same instant of time he dashed it full into the tense face of Sarah.

She squeaked, like a bat knocked down in mid-flight. The air was suddenly full of steam—or smoke. David smelled something pungent and rotten. Then the vapor was gone, as abruptly as it had risen.

Mrs. Evans stood with feet planted, her mouth open in uncomprehending surprise, the tray shaking in her hands. Beside her, risen from his chair and standing with bent knees as if ready for a spring, her husband sputtered and goggled. The professor and David remained hand in hand. But Sarah was gone.

Where she had stood to offer the flowers now crouched a chubby, rosy little girl, naked as a new-born babe. She rose slowly to her feet. She was

of David's age, approximately, but not so tall as he by several inches. Her face was as healthy and blank as Derwyd Evans' own. Her hair was tawny and red, like his mustache. And, like his, her eyes were large and round and green.

The first to speak was Derwyd Evans. "Wh-what's come over Sarah?" he bleated.

Gaul muttered, more in soliloquy than reply:

"Those old books were right. Such things can't stand up under boiling water." He faced Mrs. Evans, who was setting a tray upon the table with the slow care of the stunned. "This proves that you two aren't guilty in the least. Only blind to what you were nourishing."

"But our Sarah—" began the woman.

"She wasn't your Sarah," Gaul corrected her. "This is your child. Look at her, and be convinced. The other creature was substituted for her at birth, by what evil power we know not." He drew a deep breath, as if the explanation tired him. "She was a changeling."

"Changeling," repeated Evans, as if in a dream. "Changeling."

Professor Gaul nodded across the room.

"Isn't that a dictionary on your shelf yonder? Look the word up. I think that you find it says a changeling is a child secretly substituted for another in infancy by fairies or elves—only in this case, the substitution must perforce have been made by creatures incredibly malign."

Evans faced slowly around and stared at the dictionary as though it were the greatest wonder he had seen that afternoon. But his wife was holding out a trembling hand to the little naked girl, who smiled up at her.

"Come on, David." The professor led his son to the door, and out into the open.

All around the house the flowers and grass had withered, strangely and completely. The yard looked like any of the others along the street.