

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 29

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. 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.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Glicking Red Heels

By PAUL ERNST

*Nobody knew that Gruin had killed his sweetheart, but her little red heels,
tapped a march of death wherever he went, driving
him to a desperate resolve*

THERE are two kinds of fear. There is fear of the known—terror of death or disease or accident, or of social consequences of wrong actions. This is bad enough, but it is a little thing compared to fear of the unknown. *That* is the horror that freezes your brain and stops your breath in your throat; *that* is the terror that wrings sweat in icy drops from your clammy skin. Somewhere near you a black force lurks, some shadow from a hell incomprehensible to mortal mind, some *thing* from another world which looms over you and threatens you with a menace all the more awful for being unguessable. It is then that you go mad and babble in your frightful torment of danger—and cannot even say what that danger is. . . .

Eldon Gruin was in the grip of the first fear. He was to know the second, too; but at the time he knew only the first, and thought that bad enough. His fear was of the consequences of a wrong act, and it was embodied in a girl.

The name of Gruin's fear was Maria José, whose father cut and stitched leather in the repair of shoes in a dingy basement shop on Eighth Avenue in New York. Her father was a gargoyle of a man, alone in the world save for his Maria. But Maria—ah, she was a throw-back to some Castilian ancestress who supplied inspiration for the fiery men who made Spain unconquerable.

Maria had great black eyes with ridiculously long lashes, and a perfect,

dainty oval of a face, and red, red lips, and a body that sculptors in old Greece would have loved, and tiny feet on which—as a sort of symbol of her mercurial temperament and gayety—were always red-heeled shoes. They danced, those red-heeled small shoes, in a sort of gay, mad rhythm of their own as Maria clicked down the street in them. They had danced into hearts and out again, with an unsatisfying trill of laughter before they carried their shapely, tempestuous young owner into Gruin's life.

It was all inconsequential, a thing no sane person should have built hopes on, Gruin often reflected irritably.

He was thirty-one, fairly wealthy, single, and out for fun. He had met her at a night club where—till the fat proprietor had tried to mix intimacy with managership—Maria had danced for a little while professionally, in twinkling white satin pumps with red heels.

Gruin had made her a few promises, perhaps. A man does when he is captivated. And Maria had begun to cling. At first it had been exhilarating. Men looked after her when she clicked up the sidewalk on those ridiculous, pathetic, appropriate little red heels to meet him. Gruin, who was not bad-looking, knew that he and Maria made a striking pair together.

Nice to have a girl like that live only for your whims. Intoxicating to have such beauty almost abjectly at your command. Exhilarating to the ego to know

that you can turn on such a love-stream. Natural to forget that it might be difficult to turn that love-stream off again.

It wasn't long before Gruin had found that he was driving a force that could not be controlled much longer. And then it was annoying. No, more than that—it was rather terrifying!

So he sat in the Lance Club lounge the afternoon of the evening which was to be the turning-point in his not very useful young life, and condemned Maria José.

Any girl with any sense would have

known that the affair must be transient. She was a garlic-eating cobbler's daughter. He was heir to a modest fortune and owned an old name. Had she seriously thought he meant to—marry her? She couldn't have! Yet she was certainly acting like it now.

Gruin shifted in the leather club chair and sipped some of his cocktail. And he felt faint perspiration steal out on the palms of his hands as he reviewed Maria's recent conduct.

When she clicked up on her red heels to meet him now, it was more often than



"His fingers hooked over the branch and his foot left the clutch."

not to burst into tears because she hadn't seen him last night or the night before—she demanded all of his time. When he talked of taking a trip, she stared deep into his eyes, tearful no longer, and advised him not to. There had been a newspaper rumor of his engagement to a debutante in New York, and——

GRUIN sipped his cocktail again. Rather, he gulped it for strength.

He had at first thought it cute and picturesque of Maria that she carried a little knife in her garter just above her beautiful right knee. He didn't think it was at all cute now. So Gruin sat in the lounge of the sleek, quiet club and knew what had to be done.

He had started something with Maria that would never die while she lived. If he tried to slide out of her life, she would raise a scandal that would ruin him with his righteous grandfather, from whom all monetary blessings flowed. If he tried to leave town, she would follow. If he tried to get it over quickly and finally by marrying some girl of his own class——

The knife at her knee was small, but it was slim and sharp, and it had been flashed more than once before his white face.

Living, Maria, the cobbler's daughter, was a constant menace to Eldon Gruin. So Maria must die.

Gruin shivered a little in the big leather chair in the luxurious lounge. Murder is a large order, even when you're as sure you can get away with it as Gruin was. In addition, there was a dim realization in the back of his mind that the Josés, father and daughter, were not quite as other people were. There was something a little — well, mystic — in their vital black eyes.

The one time when Gruin had consented indifferently to meet Maria's

father they had come upon him in the back room of his solitary sweatshop, talking. Talking—with no one else in the room. Talking to her mother, his dead wife, Maria had explained seriously, afterward. And in the man's deep-set eyes had been a flame that killed laughter on Gruin's lips. Something in the spirit and soul of the Josés, father and daughter, that set them a little apart from others — something mystic and unknown. . . .

"Hell," said Gruin, finishing his cocktail and grimacing contemptuously at himself.

He was a fool. He was imagining things. Maria was just a girl—a woman whose ardent infatuation had grown to the point where it threatened a fortune he was to inherit, and his whole future life and good name. He could imagine his grandfather's disinheritance speech if he presented the mercurial cobbler's daughter in the gaudy red heels as his wife!

"It's my life or hers," Gruin told himself, to stifle the gray fear of murder—even so easy and fool-proof a murder as he had in mind.

And with the gray fear lulled by what he chose to call the inevitable, he had dinner at the club and then went to meet Maria. . . .

He met her at Eighth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street at a little after half-past eight. She clicked over the sidewalk in her red heels to the curb, glowing and beautiful in a squirrel coat which he had indiscreetly called an "engagement" present when he offered it—because otherwise she would not have accepted it.

"Eldon! My darling! You are late. I have waited and waited."

"I said, eight-thirty," Gruin mumbled.

"I did not want to wait that long. I could not. I have been here since before

eight. . . . Sweetheart, you haven't said you love me. . . ."

Gruin opened the door of his roadster and she got in.

"Eldon, this waiting and waiting—I cannot understand it. When are we going to—to stand before Father Mollé, so I will be with you always?"

"Very soon," Gruin said, sliding into gear. "You will not have to wait for me ever again."

Up Riverside Drive they went, across the Hudson and up the Palisades, to a place where they had parked often at night during the spring and summer and fall—a place that had given Gruin courage to do murder by simplifying it.

There was a spot where you drove off the crowded highway, down half a block of unfinished dirt road with a low wooden rail at the end. The rail barred the street-end from a hundred-foot drop down the cliffside to piles of crushed rock that were to be a new dock soon. And the rail was very flimsy and a little rotten. And there was a great tree that grew at the cliff's edge and flung one branch straight over the road so low that a car's top almost scraped it.

ANOTHER car was parked in the road-end when Gruin got there with Maria, in spite of the December cold. Gruin had to wait for this car to leave. He put his arm around Maria, meanwhile gazing upward to be sure that he had stopped the roadster directly under the low branch of the big tree.

"It is cold," said Maria, shivering in spite of her fur. "Would we not be warmer with the top up?"

"The air tastes good," said Gruin hastily. It would ruin his plan if the roadster's top were put up. He had to have a clear space above him.

The other car left. He and Maria

were alone in the open roadster under the December stars.

"Are you sick?" said Maria, gazing at him in the dashlight.

"No, no. Not at all," said Gruin, whose teeth showed a tendency to chatter.

Maria looked deep into his eyes. Something mystic and inexorable in her black ones. . . .

"Eldon, you are acting very strangely. It is not that you are thinking of breaking your promise?"

"Of course not," Gruin said hastily.

Maria's eyes still searched his, aflame with infatuation, and with tempestuous resolve. The light from the roadster's dash showed on little red heels, on a length of silk stocking that even now could make Gruin's pulses jerk a trifle, on soft white flesh with a twisted garter under it—on a slim little dagger! Then slowly her skirt went down again.

"I think we'd better leave," Gruin said, a trifle thickly. God! this was the kind of thing you read about in the funny papers. You didn't dream, at first, that it would force you to murder. . . .

"We'll go," he said hoarsely.

He started the car, and shifted to first gear with the clutch pressed down. He raced the motor, pulling out the hand throttle on the dash so that the engine speed would maintain itself.

"Why are you making the engine go so fast?" said Maria.

"The motor's cold—have to warm it up. . . ."

With the words, Gruin stood up suddenly, as nearly erect as the wheel would let him. His fingers hooked over the overhanging tree branch—and his foot left the clutch.

The scream of tires spinning from sudden power of a roaring, full-throttled motor mingled with Maria José's shriek. The roadster leaped toward the wooden

rail at the edge of the cliff, with Gruin hanging over the road behind.

Maria's fingers tore at his legs as she sought to clutch him, and his left heel ground into her face, forcing her back in the seat. The roadster smashed through the wooden rail, teetered for just an instant on the edge of the cliff, then plunged forward.

The noise of nearly two tons of metal smashing on rock a hundred feet below, shocked the night. And Gruin dropped into the road and ran to the edge. He looked down.

Flame was rising from the wreck far below. He saw a black cascade in the path of the flame. Maria's hair. He was whimpering a little as he moved, without being conscious of it. There was a ledge ten feet down, with a thick bush growing from it. He lowered himself to that, clung to it, and began shouting for help. . . .

IT ALL went as he had thought it would. The papers got just the right angle.

A Gruin, scion of one of the city's best-known, if not richest, families, had been out with some girl named Maria José. He had parked at the edge of the Palisades. Probably there'd been a little drinking. When leaving, he had carelessly shifted the gear lever forward into second instead of forward into reverse. The car had plunged over the cliff carrying both of them, but he had been thrown out and had caught a bush which saved his life. The girl had gone on down—to death.

There was unfavorable publicity; there were infuriated lectures from his grandfather; there was talk of prosecution for criminal carelessness.

And that was all. With one clever stroke Gruin had gotten rid of a danger that had grown to intolerable proportions in his life. Decorously he went to the

funeral in which a girl's shattered body was lowered into the ground. And afterward, Maria's father came up to him.

Gruin looked hastily around. There was no one near, and he was a little afraid of the somber fire in the man's deep-set black eyes. He had aged twenty years. He looked like a gargoyle with an iron-gray beard and white hair.

"You killed Maria," he said, with the words coming slowly and painfully.

"I know." Gruin's face took on a contrite and sympathetic expression. "A terrible accident——"

"That is not what I mean," said Maria's father. "It was not accident. I know. You killed my girl on purpose. You murdered her!"

"No, no! I swear——"

Gruin stopped at the look in his eyes. And José went on, slowly, painfully, with every word ringing in Gruin's brain.

"I bring her curse on your head. You killed her to be free from her. But you shall not be free. She will be with you always, beside you, walking when you walk, stopping when you stop. Always, always beside you. . . ."

Gruin got away from there, and also, he was sure, away from all that had threatened him.

There were, when all the smoke had cleared away, no consequences at all. The charges of criminal carelessness never materialized. His grandfather, unconcerned with death, finally forgave him for wasting a few evenings with a cheap unknown named Maria. The world didn't dream that the tragedy at the cliff was not an accident. He had murdered successfully. . . .

And then he strolled from his grandfather's house one evening, bent for an engagement with a girl almost as beautiful as Maria had been and much more sensible, and a queer thing happened.

As he walked across the curb from

door to car—a big new coupé to take the place of the roadster—he heard someone walking beside him. At least he thought for a moment that he had heard steps matching his own. But he saw an instant later that he had been wrong, because when he turned around, there was no one on the sidewalk. No one within half a block of him.

HE GOT into the coupé and drove to the apartment of the girl he had the engagement with. Again, as he walked from curb to building door, he heard steps sound out beside him—possibly a little behind him, that matched his steps. But he scarcely thought twice about it, because there were half a dozen people around him here, and any one of them could have made the sound.

He had one vague and irrelevant memory as he opened the vestibule door. It was a memory of Maria and him walking down the street. Striving to match his moods, Maria also, laughingly, strove to match his strides. She tried to keep her small red heels clicking on the walk in time with his steps. He had often teased her about it, taking longer and slower strides that taxed her smallness more and more till finally she simply could not keep step with him and would break rhythm with a gay laugh.

Maria and he, walking down the street, with her absurd red heels clicking in time with his step. . . .

He thrust the picture aside and went up deep-carpeted halls and stairways to the apartment of the blond with the slightly hard blue eyes with whom he had a date. And they went to a Broadway club and danced.

During the evening, Gruin cursed his memory for bringing back the picture of himself and Maria walking, with her red heels tapping the time of his steps. Because, after that recollection, his imagina-

tion really began to play tricks on him.

He began to hear heels clicking with each of his steps as he moved. Not just now and then, but all the time.

When he stood up from the table as the orchestra started, and walked around to help the blond with her chair, he heard a precise little heel-click with each stride he took. The click sounded, scarcely audible, right beside him as he escorted her to the dance floor.

In spite of himself, Gruin thought of those words of Maria's father: "You killed her to be free from her. But you shall not be free. She will be with you always. . . ."

The blond smiled up at him.

"Do you want to stand at the edge of the floor all evening? Or do you want to dance with me?"

He smiled back and they danced. He heard the click only once in a while over the orchestra's rhythm. And he paid no attention to it. There were many high heels here, and all high heels make that clicking sound. He lost himself in the promises in the slightly hard blue eyes just below the level of his own eyes. And he stopped his ears to the queer clicking, which sounded as he moved, for the rest of the evening.

But after he had left the blond and returned home, when he was walking from the garage to his grandfather's house, he couldn't stop his ears any more. The clicking was too infernally loud in the stillness that clutches city streets at three in the morning. And there wasn't a person within blocks that he could blame the noise on.

Click, click, click came the sound, as he walked along through the night. Exactly as though a woman's high heels clicked beside him. High, *red* heels. . . .

He stopped to light a cigarette which he thrust between disdainful, half-sneering lips. And the clicking stopped. He

went on toward his grandfather's house—and the light, precise tapping continued, a click for every step he took, like a ghost-thing marching in step beside him. An unseen ghost-thing. . . .

"Hell take it!" he said angrily aloud in the night. "I suppose this is a sample of what they call remorse. Well I'll be damned if I——"

THE light was on in the house. That was strange, at this hour of the night. Gruin hurried to the door—with the neat, small clicking increasing as his steps quickened. His grandfather opened the door before he could insert his key—and the old man was icily angry.

"Eldon," he said, "I want to speak to you, in the library."

Gruin followed him to the room in which he had received most of the old boy's rebukes. It was a psychological wood-shed where a verbal strap was applied to him. But this time the strap was unjustified to the point of being bizarre.

"You have tried my patience to its extreme limit," the old man said, ice-blue eyes smoldering. "You have achieved your final indiscretion. How dare you bring a girl to this house and sneak her in when my back is turned? And above all, a girl named Maria—after what happened a few weeks ago? To this house!"

Gruin's bewilderment was complete.

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"You deny you brought some girl to this house, to your room, secretly?"

"I certainly do. I've never——"

"Come upstairs, Eldon," the old man interrupted grimly.

Gruin followed him from the library up to the second floor of the big house. And as he moved, some unseen thing seemed to move beside him. Very softly, almost furtively, the clicking tapped in rhythm with his step. They got to Gruin's

suite, a big bedroom and bath and a small den, on the second floor. And there the old man pointed. He pointed toward a great leather chair by a flat-topped desk. There was nothing in the chair.

Gruin turned with a puzzled frown to his grandfather. And then, without going to the chair, he caught the odor that emanated from it—a faint perfume that filled the den—an odor of hyacinth.

Maria José had always used that scent. Hyacinth.

"Some woman has been in this room," the old man accused sternly. "The scent proves it. And her name was Maria. *That*, scribbled no doubt idly while she sat with you here, proves it!"

Gruin walked to his writing-desk. He wasn't quite aware of how he got there. He knew only that in a minute he stood by the desk looking down at it—at a torn scrap of paper on the blotter—at one word, faintly scrawled on the paper.

"Maria."

And it was Maria José's handwriting.

At the pallor on his grandson's face, the old man promptly forgot all charges of ribaldry. He caught Eldon Gruin and helped him to another chair, and then called the butler and a doctor. . . .

Gruin was a strong-minded person. You have to be to plan and execute deliberate, cold-blooded murder. It wasn't long before a logical explanation occurred to him, and he drove to the shop of Maria's father.

"You broke into our house," he accused. "You set a stage in my room—dropped perfume of the kind your daughter used on my chair, and wrote her name on a scrap of paper, imitating her handwriting, on my desk."

He had come there confident in his conviction. But that conviction slowly faded as he looked into José's eyes. Dark

eyes, smoldering, mystic, so like Maria's eyes.

"You know it was not I who was there," José said in his pedantic, accented English.

Just that. Nothing more. Gruin turned and almost ran from the basement shop. And as he hurried, beside him hurried unseen little heels that clicked and clicked with each swift step he took. They followed him out the door, a little behind him as he rushed, and to his car. And there they stopped.

But he thought he saw the seat cushion beside him give a little with an unseen weight as he drove away. . . .

A STRONG-MINDED person in good health—that was Eldon Gruin. There was no insanity in the Gruin family. Yet in the days that followed he began more and more to fear, with a mighty fear, that he was going mad. For always he heard the little heel taps beside him as he walked, stopping when he stopped, beginning again when he went on. And always in his brain was José's curse, "*She will be with you always, beside you, walking when you walk, stopping when you stop. Always, always beside you. . . .*"

So Gruin came to know the worst fear the known holds for us: fear of madness. But that fear did not last long. It very speedily deepened into that last ultimate horror—of the *unknown*—which can prey on a man's mind.

Mad because he seemed to hear the weird clicking of heels beside him? *Seemed* to hear?

He went into the library one night when his grandfather sat at his desk, reading. It was late, and the house was very still. The old man's senses were excellent. He didn't become aware of Gruin's entrance for a moment, but then he glanced up quickly, with a slightly surprised expression.

"Oh," he said, carelessly. "You're alone."

"Of course. Why?"

"It sounded for a moment as though there were two of you," the old man said. "A sort of clicking. It must have been your hard heels against the floor."

Gruin managed to get out of there without letting his grandfather see the chaos in his brain. But he staggered like a drunken man after leaving the library.

"Sounded as though there were two of you . . . must have been your hard heels against the floor." God! Gruin didn't wear hard leather heels. Every shoe he owned had rubber on it.

"A sort of clicking. . . ."

The clicking of Maria José's small red heels as they twinkled unseen beside him! Maria José, who had died in flame and ruin at the bottom of the cliff!

He was *not* mad, then. The sound he had thought to hear in madness, actually was there to be heard. And then Gruin knew that ultimate horror which comes with the unknown. For if the sound really was there, perceptible enough for others to hear it, the cause of the sound must be there too!

A dead girl walking beside him! A thing from some unknown sphere! "*Walking when you walk, stopping when you stop—*"

"I walk with death!" Gruin told himself, shuddering, with the icy sweat of horror on his forehead.

Red heels clicking beside him, as small, unseen feet kept time with his. As Maria had kept time when they walked down the street together. With one difference. Maria, alive, had been unable to match his strides when he increased them to their full masculine length. Maria, dead, could do that. He caught himself crazily shortening and lengthening his step as he walked down the street—with people turning to look curiously after him. But

no matter how he walked, the unseen little heels beside him clicked in even pace.

Walking with death. Escorting a dead girl wherever he went. Sometimes Gruin talked with her, damning her, whispering curses, telling her to get back to the grave from which she had come. And more people began to turn to look after him as he walked the streets.

His grandfather and his friends began asking him what was wrong, and he couldn't tell them. His grandfather sent him to a great psychiatrist, and Gruin couldn't tell him what was wrong, either. Confession as to what was wrong with him lay too dangerously close to a murder confession.

Red heels clicking always with him as he walked, stopping when he stopped, beginning again when he moved . . . the red heels of Maria who had been sent by him to death over the edge of a cliff. . . .

HE DROVE in his coupé to the street-end where the roadster had crashed over the wooden barrier and plummeted to piles of rock below, while he hung from the branch over the road.

There was no wooden barrier there now. There was a concrete wall, hastily erected after the "accident." It was a thick wall. It would stand any shock. Or—would it?

Gruin got out of the coupé and went to the wall. As he strode, beside him sounded the quick, half-dancing, half-marching accompaniment.

Gruin shuddered, as much with cold as with ever-present horror. He weighed only a hundred and twenty pounds, as against his former hundred and eighty, and the winter wind seemed to go through his coat and to his bones.

The wall was pretty solid. He walked along it. And, click, click, click, click, walked the unseen Thing beside him.

"Solid," he said aloud, chuckling a little and then jerking his head around to see if anyone had heard him. "Not so easy to send anybody over the edge here, now."

He stood on top of the wall and stared down. The piles of crushed stone were still there; it had been too cold for work on the dock.

"That's where you went, damn you," he mumbled to the Thing in the phantom red heels that clicked beside him. Beside him—even as he walked down the wall with nothing but thin air on either side.

He began to chuckle again, aloud, craftily.

"Nobody's ever suspected, except your father. And he can't hurt me any. Nobody knows I killed you."

He stepped down from the wall. And beside him a click sounded, a little louder than usual, the click of a red heel coming down from the two-foot step from the top of the wall.

"Damn you!" Gruin shouted. And then he pressed his hand to his lips. On the highway, several blocks away, a hitchhiker stared curiously at him, then went on his way, signaling for rides.

"Shouldn't be out here," Gruin muttered laboriously.

He started for the coupé, parked a dozen yards from the new concrete wall. Dully he strode toward it. And as he walked, with each step came the accompanying small tap of little red heels, almost coinciding with his step on the ice of the road.

"Better not come out here again," he mumbled. "I'm safe now. But somebody might see me here and think it was funny—might start investigating the accident again."

He got into the coupé, settling laboriously behind the wheel. And then, as his eyes strayed sideways, his teeth met through his upper lip.

Always when he got into his car—which was often, as he drove a great deal to save walking and hearing the tapping heels beside him—he strove to keep his eyes from going sideways, to the cushion beside him. And always he was unsuccessful.

And always he saw the same thing—saw the seat cushion give a little as though someone had sat down there, next to him.

He saw it now.

"Damn you—damn you——" he cried brokenly.

The motor of the coupé was thrumming, responding to the mechanical touch of his foot to the starter. The depression in the seat beside him shifted a little.

"You'll go back to hell where you came from!"

Like another person, Gruin heard those words keen from his lips. Like another person he heard the motor roar into full-throated power as his foot jammed down on the accelerator.

"No," he breathed, as his hand slid the gear-shift lever into first. Like another person, pleading, remonstrating—and being unheeded. "No!"

The motor bellowed, the coupé's tires screamed as they felt full and sudden power applied. The car leaped forward.

"Oh, my God, no——"

The car, nearly two tons of steel, hit the concrete wall with all the power of the great motor, in first gear, behind it—hit the wall, crumpled, then crunched on through. The thunder of the coupé's crash on the rock far below shocked the late February afternoon. . . .

REMORSE, they called it. Eldon Gruin was so weighed down by the carelessness that had taken a life that he had gone to the scene of the accident and committed suicide by driving his car over the same cliff.

That was what was in the papers. What was not in them was something else; something that puzzled detectives for a while, till they gave it up as irrelevant, since they had no knowledge of the little red heels of Maria that had clicked beside Gruin from the time of her death.

That was, the curious thing found in each heel of each shoe that Eldon Gruin owned—a little sliding weight that had been inserted and re-covered by some deft cobbler. They didn't move when the shoes were handled, unless they were shifted briskly up and down as a person walking would move them. Then they made small clicking noises in unison with the movements. . . .

