10 STORY FANTASY

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, *Editor* Vol. 1 No. 1, Spring 1951

THREE GREAT NOVELETTES

TEN FANTASTIC SHORT STORIES

10 STORY FANTASY, published quarterly by Avon Periodicals, Inc., at 119 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y. Single copies 25¢. PRINTED IN U. S. A.

CRY WITCH!

She was young and enchanting, and the heart of that village boy was lost to her—yet what was it about her that made the peasants shudder, the old women to cross themselves, and the villagers to bar their doors at night?

By FRITZ LEIBER

THE GIRL was very beautiful and she came into the cafe on the arm of a young writer whose fearless idealism has made him one of the most talked of figures of today. Still, it seemed odd to me that old Nemecek should ignore my question in order to eye her. Old Nemecek loves to argue better than to eat or drink, or, I had thought, to love, and in any case he is very old.

Indeed, old Nemecek is almost incredibly old. He came to New York when the homeland of the Czechs was still called Bohemia, and he was old then. Now his face is like a richly tooled brown leather mask and his hands are those of a dapperly gloved skeleton and his voice, though mellow, is whispery. His figure is crooked and small and limping, and I sometimes feel that he came from a land of ancient myth. Yet there are times when a certain fiery youthfulness flashes from his eyes.

The girl looked our way and her glance stopped at Nemecek. For a moment I thought they had recognized each other. A cryptic look passed between them, a guardedly smiling, coolly curious, rapid, reminiscent look, as if they had been lovers long ago, incredible as that might be. Then the girl and her escort went on to the bar and old Nemecek turned back to me.

"Idealism?" he queried, showing that at least he had not forgotten my question. "It is strange you should ask that now. Yes, I certainly am an idealist and have always been one, though I have been deserted and betrayed by my ideals often enough, and seen them exploited in the market place and turned to swords and instruments of torture in the hands of my enemies."

The tone of his voice, at once bitter and tender, was the same as a man might use in talking of a woman he had known and lost long ago and still loved deeply.

"Ideals," he said softly and fingered the glass of brandy before him and looked at me through the eyeholes of his Spanish leather mask. "I will tell you a story about them. It happened to a very close friend of mine in old Bohemia. It is a very old story, and like all the best old stories, a love story."

SHE WAS NOT like the other village girls, this girl my friend fell in love with (said Nemecek). With the other village girls he was awkward, shy, and too inclined to nurse impossible desires. He walked past their houses late at night, hoping they would be looking out of a darkened window, warm white ghosts in their cotton gowns. Or wandering along the forest path he imagined that they would be waiting alone for him just around the next turn, the sunlight dappling their gay skirts and their smiles. But they never were.

With her it worked out more happily. Sometimes it seemed that my friend had always known her, back even to that time when a jolly Old Man in Black had made noises at him in his crib and tickled his ribs; and always their meetings had the same magical conformity to his moods. He would be trudging up the lane, where the trees bend close and the ivy clings to the cool gray wall, thinking of nothing, when suddenly he would feel a hand at his elbow and turn and see her grave, mysterious, sweet face, a little ruffled from having run to overtake him.

When there was dancing in the square and the fiddles squealed and the boards thundered and the bonfires splashed ruddy gilt, she would slip out of the weaving crowd and they would whirl and stamp together. And at night he would hear her scratching softly at his bedroom window like a cat almost before he realized what it was he had been listening for.

My friend did not know her name or where she lived. He did not ask her. With regard to that he was conscious of an unspoken agreement between them. But she always turned up when he wanted her and she was very artful in her choice of the moment to slip away.

More and more he came to live for the hours they spent together. He became contemptuous of the village and its ways. He recognized, with the clarity of anger, the village's shams and meannesses and half-masked brutalities. His parents noticed this and upbraided him. He no longer went to church, they complained. He sneered at the schoolmaster. He was disrespectful to the mayor. He played outrageous tricks on the shopkeepers. He was not interested in work or in getting ahead. He had become a good-for-nothing.

When this happened he always expected them to accuse him of wasting his time on a strange girl, and to put

the blame on her. Their failure to do this puzzled him. His curiosity as to her identity was reawakened.

She was not a village girl, she was not a gypsy, and she certainly was not the daughter of the nobleman whose castle stood at the head of the valley. She seemed to exist for him alone. Yet, if experience had taught him anything, it had taught him that nothing existed for him alone. Everything in the village had its use, even the beggar who was pitied and the dog who was kicked. He racked his brains as to what hers might be. He tried to get her to tell him without asking a direct question, but she refused to be drawn. Several times he planned to follow her home. When that happened she merely stayed with him until he had forgotten his plan, and by the time he remembered it she was gone.

But he was growing more and more dissatisfied with the conditions of their relationship. No matter how delightful, this meet-at-the-corner, kiss-in-the-dark business could not go on forever. They really ought to get married.

My friend began to wonder if she could be concealing something shameful about her background. Now when he walked arm-in-arm around the square with her, he fancied that people were smirking at him and whispering behind his back. And when he happened on a group of the other young men of the village, the talk would break off suddenly and there would be knowing winks. He decided that, whatever the cost, he must know.

IT WAS near May Eve. They had met in the orchard opposite the old stone wall, and she was leaning against a bough crusted with white blossoms. Now that the moment had come, he was trembling. He knew that she would tell the truth and it frightened him.

She smiled a little ruefully, but answered without hesitation.

"What do I do in the village? Why, I sleep with all of them—the farmers, the preacher, the schoolmaster, the mayor. . . ."

There was a stinging pain in the palm of his hand. He had slapped her face and turned his back on her, and he was striding up the lane, toward the hills. And beside him was striding an Old Man in Black, not nearly so jolly as he had remembered him, cadaverous in fact and with high forehead deeply furrowed and eyes frosty as the stars.

For a long way they went in silence, as old comrades might. Over the stone bridge, where once he and she had dropped a silver coin into the stream, past the roadside shrine with its withered flowers and faded saint, through the thin forest, where a lock of his hair and hers were clipped together in a split tree, and across the upland pasture. Finally he found words for his anger.

"If only she hadn't said it with that hangdog air, and yet as if expecting to be praised! And if it had happened only with some of the young fellows! But those old hypocrites!"

He paused, but the Old Man in Black said nothing, only a certain cold merriment was apparent in his eyes.

"How can she do it and still stay so lovely?" my friend continued. "And how can they know her and not be changed by it? I tell you I gave up a great deal for her! But they can enjoy her and still stick like leeches to the same old lies. It's unfair. If they don't believe in her, why do they want her?"

The Old Man laughed shortly and spoke, and the laugh and the words were like a wind high above the earth.

"She is a harlot, yet whosoever possesses her becomes highly respectable thereby. That is a riddle."

"*I* have not become respectable."

The Old Man showed his teeth in a wintry smile. "You really love her. Like old King David, *they* desire only to be warm."

"And she really sleeps with them all? Just as she said?"

The Old Man shook his head. "Not all. There are a few who turn her away. The philosopher who stays in the little cottage down the road and scowls at the religious processions and tells the children there is no god. The nobleman whose castle stands at the head of the valley. The bandit who lives in the cave on the hill. But even they cannot always endure life without her, and then they get up in the chilly night and go to the window and open it, and the bandit goes to the frost-rimmed mouth of his cave, and they call brokenly in the moonlight, hating themselves for it, and she comes, or her ghost."

The Old Man turned his head and his sunken eyes were very bright.

"They are weak," he said, "but you may be stronger. It's a gay life in the crags."

"Old Man," my friend answered, "you've shown me two paths and I'll take neither. I won't leave her and freeze to death in the crags, no matter how gaily. And I won't share her with those fat hypocrites. I have a plan."

And he turned and went whistling down the hill, his hands in his pockets.

WHEN HE had almost come to the village, he saw a tall hay-wagon coming up the lane. There were two rich farmers on the seat, with stiff collars and thick vests and fat gold watchchains, and she was sitting between them and their arms were around her shoulders. The schoolmaster had begged a ride and was lying on the hay behind the seat, and he had slyly managed to slide his arm around her waist.

Watching them from the middle of the road as the wagon slowly creaked nearer, my friend chuckled and shook his head, wondering how he could ever have been so blind as not to realize that she was the town harlot. Why, he had seen her a hundred times, drunken, clinging to some man's arm, hitching at her skirt, singing some maudlin song. Once she had beckoned to him. And it had never occurred to him that they were the same woman.

He laughed again, out loud this time, and stepped forward boldly and stopped the horses.

The farmer who was driving got up unsteadily, jerking at the reins, and roared in a thick, tavern voice, "Loafer! Good-for-nothing! Get out of our way!" And the whip came whistling down.

But my friend ducked and the lead horse reared. Then he grabbed the whip and pulled himself up onto the wagon with it, and the tipsy farmer down. The other farmer had found the bottle from which they had been swigging and was fetching it up for a blow, when he snatched it away from him and broke it over his head, so that the brandy drenched his pomaded hair and ran into his eyes. Then he tumbled him off into the road and laid the whip onto the horses until they broke into an awkward gallop which made up in jouncing what it otherwise lacked in speed.

When the fight started, the schoolmaster had tried to slip off the back of the wagon. Now he tried to hang on. But hay is not easy stuff to cling to. First his books went, then his tall hat, then he. There was a great brown splash. The last they saw of him, he was sitting in the puddle, his long legs spread.

By the time they reached the bridge, the horses were winded. My friend jumped nimbly out and swung her down. She seemed to be amused and perhaps even delighted at what

was happening. Without any explanation, he took her firmly by the wrist and headed for the hills.

Every now and then he stole a glance at her. He began to marvel that he had ever thought her perfect. The dearest thing in the world, of course, but perfect?—why, she was much too cream-and-sugary, too sit-by-the-fire, too cozy and stodgy-respectable, almost plump. Well, he'd see to that, all right.

And he did. All through the long summer and into the tingling fall their life went like what he had always imagined must come after the happy endings of the fairy tales his grandmother had told him. He repaired the little old cabin in the hills beyond the upland pasture, and stuffed the old mattress with fresh green grass, and carved wooden dishes and goblets and spoons, and made her a pail out of bark to fetch water. Sometimes he managed to filch from the outlying farms a loaf of new-made bread, sometimes some flour, sometimes only the grain, which she ground between stones and baked unleavened on another stone over the fire. He hunted rabbits and squirrels with his revolver, but occasionally he stole chickens and once he killed a sheep.

She went with him on his hunting expeditions, and once or twice they climbed into the crags, which seemed not at all cold and forbidding, as on that afternoon when he had walked with the Old Man. He made slim flutes out of willow wands, and they piped together in the evenings or out in the sunny forest. Sometimes, as a solemn jest, they wove twigs and flowers into wreaths as an offering to fancied forest gods. They played games with each other and with their pets—a squirrel who had escaped the pot and a brave young cat who had come adventuring from the village.

True to my friend's expectations, his beloved grew brown, lithe, and quick. She went barefoot and tucked up her skirt. All signs of the village faded from her, and her grave, mysterious, sweet expression grew sparklingly alive, so that he sometimes shivered with pride when he looked at her. All day long she was with him, and he went to sleep holding her hand and in the morning it was always there.

HE HAD only one worry, a trifling and indeed unreasonable one, since it was concerned with the absence rather than the presence of ill fortune, yet there it was. He could not understand why the farmers did not try to track him down for his thefts, and why the village folk had not done anything to him for taking their harlot.

He knew the people of the valley. He was not so credulous as to believe he had fooled them by hiding in the hills. Any poacher or thief who tried that had the dogs baying at his heels before morning. They were tight-fisted, those valley people. They never let anything out of their hands unless they made a profit. But what the profit could be in this case, he could not for the life of him determine.

In a small way it bothered him, and one night just before Hallowmas he woke with a start, all full of fear. Moonlight was streaming through the doorway. He felt her hand in his and for a moment that reassured him. But the hand felt cold and dry and when he tugged at it to waken her, it seemed weightless. He sprang out of bed and to the doorway and the hand came with him. In the moonlight he saw that it was a dead hand, severed at the wrist, well preserved, smelling faintly of spices.

He kicked the fire aflame and lit a candle from it. The cat was pacing uneasily. Every now and then it would look toward the doorway and

its fur would rise. The squirrel was huddled in a corner of its cage, trembling. My friend called his beloved's name, very softly at first, then more loudly. Then he shouted it with all the power of his lungs and plunged outside.

All night he searched and shouted in vain through the forest, striking at the inky branches as if they were in league with her captors. But when he returned at dawn, scratched and bruised, his clothes all smeared and torn, she was busy cooking breakfast. Her face, as she raised it to greet him, was tranquil and guiltless, and he found that he could not bring himself to question her or to refer in any way to the night's happenings. She bathed his cuts and dried his sweat and made him rest a little before eating, but only as if he had gone out for an early ramble and had had the misfortune to fall and hurt himself.

The cat was contentedly gnawing a bit of bacon rind and the squirrel was briskly chattering as it nibbled a large crumb. My friend searched surreptitiously for the dead hand where he had dropped it but it was gone.

All that day the sky was cloudless, but there was a blackness in the sunlight, as if he were dizzy and about to faint. He could not tire himself of looking at her. In the afternoon they made an expedition to the hilltop, but as he clasped her in his arms he saw, over her shoulder and framed by rich autumnal leaves, tinied by the distance, the figure of a man in a long black cloak and a broad-brimmed hat, standing high in the crags and seeming to observe them. And he wondered why the Old Man had stayed away from them so long.

That night she was very tender, as if she too knew that this night was the last, and it was hard for my friend to keep from speaking out. He lay with his eyes open the barest slit, feigning sleep. For a long time there was no movement in the cabin, only the comfortable sounds of night and her breathing. Then, very slowly, she sat up, and keeping hold of his hand, drew from under the bed a box. From this she took a small flute, which seemed, by the moon and flickering firelight, to be made not of willow but of a human bone. On this, stopping it only with three fingers, still keeping hold of his hand, she played a doleful and drowsy melody.

He felt a weight of sleep descend on him, but he had chewed a bitter leaf which induces wakefulness. After the tune was done, she held the flute over his heart and gently shook it. He knew that a little graveyard dust must have fallen from the stops, for he felt a second compelling urge of sleepiness.

Then she took from the box the severed hand and warmed it in her bosom. All this while he had the feeling that she suspected, was perhaps certain, that he was not asleep, but still carried out faithfully her ritual of precaution. After a long time, she gently eased her hand from his and placed the dead hand there and slipped out of bed and silently crossed to the doorway and went out.

HE FOLLOWED HER. The whiteness of her smock in the moonlight made it easy. She went down the hill and across the upland pasture. It became apparent to him that she was heading for the village. She never once looked back. On the edge of the village she turned into a dark and narrow lane. He followed closer, stooping to avoid the shrubs that sometimes overhung the walls.

After circling halfway round the village, she opened a wicket and went through. Watching from the wicket, he could see that she was standing before a dark window in a low-roofed house. Faintly there came the sound of rapping. After a long time the

window was opened. As she climbed over the sill she turned so that in the clear moonlight he caught a glimpse of her face. It was not the frozen and unearthly expression of a sleep-walker or one enchanted, not even the too gentle, too submissive expression of old days, but the new, sparklingly alive look that had only come with their summer together.

He recognized the house. It was the schoolmaster's.

Next morning the church bells were ringing as he strode back to the village, his revolver in his pocket. His steps were too long, and he held himself stiffly, like a drunkard. He did not turn into the circling lane, but went straight across the square. As he passed the open doors of the church, the bells had stopped and he could hear the voice of the preacher. Something about the tone of the voice made him climb the steps and peer in.

There was the smell of old woodwork and musty hangings, week-long imprisoned air. After the glaring sunlight, the piously inclined heads of the congregation seemed blurred and indistinct, sunk in stuffy gloom. But a shaft of rich amber fell full upon the pulpit and on her.

She was squeezed between the preacher and the carved front of the pulpit—rather tightly, for he could see how the wood, somewhat worn and whitened at that point by the repeated impress of fervent hands, indented her thigh under the skirt. The preacher's thin, long-chinned face, convulsed with oratory, was thrust over her shoulder, his blown spittle making a little cloud. With one hand the preacher pointed toward heaven, and with the other he was fondling her.

And on her face was that same shining, clear-eyed expression that he had seen there last night and that had seemed in the green forest caverns like the glance of some nymph new-released from evil enchantment, and that he knew his love alone had brought. With the amber light gilding her, he thought of how Aaron had made a Golden Calf for the Israelites to worship.

But had Aaron really made the Golden Calf, or had he stolen it? For the old words that the preacher mouthed had a new and thrilling ring to them, which could only come from her.

My friend groped sideways blindly, touched the back of a pew, steadied himself and screamed her name.

The floor of the church seemed to tilt and rock, and a great shadow swooped down, almost blotting out the frightened, backward turning faces of the congregation. She had slipped from the pulpit and was coming down the center aisle toward him. He was holding out his hand to fend her off and dragging at his pocket for the revolver. The preacher had ducked out of sight.

She was very close to him now and her hands were lovingly outstretched and her expression was unchanged. He brought up the revolver, stumbling back, frantically motioning her to keep away. But she kept on coming and he fired all six charges into her body.

As the smarting gray smoke cleared, he saw her standing there unharmed. Someone was screaming "Witch! Witch!" and he realized it was himself and that he was running across the square and out of the village.

NOT UNTIL he ran himself out and the shock of terror passed, did the Old Man in Black fall into step with him. My friend was glad of the Old Man's presence, but he did not look too closely, for sidewise glances warned him that the cadaverousness had become extreme indeed,

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and that the cheeks were white as bone, and that for good reason there were no longer any wrinkles in the domelike forehead.

The Old Man did not speak, which was a kindness, and showed no signs of elation at his victory. Together they paced towards the distant crags. Down the road they passed the little cottage in which the philosopher lived, and the philosopher came out and stood watching them go by. He looked very shriveled and dry and his hair was dusty, his clothes were old-fashioned and very tight. When they were almost past he raised his hand in a jerky salute and went inside and shut the door.

After a while they left the road and cut across the hills past the castle that stands at the head of the valley. On the battlements was a tiny man who waved at them once with his cloak, very solemnly it seemed. At the foot of the crags they passed the cave where the bandit lived, and the bandit stood in the stony mouth and raised his gaudy cap to them in a grave, ironic greeting.

They were all day climbing the crags. By the time they reached the top, night had come. While his companion waited for him, my friend walked back to the crag's edge for a last look at the valley.

It was very dark. The moon had not yet risen. Beyond the village there was a great circle of tiny fires. He puzzled dully as to what caused them.

He felt thin hard fingers touch his shoulder and he heard the Old Man say, "She isn't in the village any more, if that's what you're wondering. An army passed through the valley today. Those are the campfires you see in the distance. She's left the preacher, and the schoolmaster, as much as she ever leaves anyone. She's gone off with the soldiers."

Then the Old Man sighed faintly and my friend felt a sudden chill, as if he had strayed to the margin of oblivion, and it seemed to him that a coldness had gone out from the Old Man and flowed across the whole valley and lapped up into the sky and made the very stars glittering points of ice.

He knew that there was only one creature in the whole world immune to that coldness.

So he lifted his hand to his shoulder and laid it on the smooth finger-bones there and said, "I'm going back to her, Old Man. I know she'll never be true to me, and that she'll always yield herself eagerly to any mind with wit enough to imagine or learn a lie, and that whatever I give her she'll hurry to give to them, as a street woman to her bully. And I'm not doing this because I think she's carrying my child, for I believe she's sterile. And I know that while I grow old, she'll always stay young, and so I'm sure to lose her in the end. But that's just it, Old Man—you can't touch her. And besides, I've given myself to her, and she's beautiful, and however false, she's all there is in the world to be faithful to."

And he started down the crags.

OLD NEMECEK leaned back and fingered his brandy glass, which he had not yet raised to his lips, and looked at me smilingly. I blinked at him dully. Then, as if finishing the story had been a signal, the beautiful girl came out of the bar, still on the arm of the young writer. She hesitated by our table and it seemed to me that the same cryptic look passed between her and old Nemecek as when she had come in. And because

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she was very beautiful and very young, and because the young writer was famous for his idealism, I found myself shivering uncontrollably as I watched her walk toward the door.

"Here, drink your brandy," said Nemecek, eying me solicitously.

"The girl," I managed to say, "the girl in the story—did she come to the New World?" I was still under the spell of the fairy tale to which I had been listening.

"Drink your brandy," said Nemecek.

"And her lover," I went on. She was gone now. "That very close friend of yours. Was he really—?"

"The closest," said Nemecek.