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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Date in the City Room

By TALBOT JOHNS

Two old friends keep a weird rendezvous

HE STOOD on the door-sill of the old Globe city room and looked around. The place seemed about the same, though after a year's absence he seemed to see it differently—sort of all at once instead of item by item. There was a new and shiny teletype clicking monotonously in the corner, but the faded yellow bulbs with their green metal shades hanging from the ceiling still cut triangles through a perpetual haze of blue smoke. Cigarette-charred desks, crumpled wads of yellow copy-paper and the old crack in the ceiling that the owners had never fixed because the plaster had fallen on Bart Davis' head and he'd been killed the next day on a fire story—the old-looking boy in the doorway took them all in with a glance and turned to Clem, sitting at the night desk.

"Hello, Reggie," said Clem.

"It's been a long time," said Reggie.

"It has, at that," said Clem.

That was all, for a minute. It was enough, Reggie thought. Things would begin to iron themselves out in a while. No use trying to rush them.

The smoke from his cigarette curled under a lampshade and shot out in a little swirl as it hit the hot bulb. Red Mackenzie, of the twelve-to-eight shift, slouched into the city room, cursing softly because he was a couple of minutes late.

He almost collided with Reggie, but didn't give him a glance. I suppose that's what happens, thought Reggie,

when you've been away as long as I have. He didn't have to look right through me, though.

"It's just a year to the day, isn't it?" said Clem, drumming noiselessly on the night desk with his big knuckles.

"That's right," said Reggie, "just a year."

"I was wondering if you'd come," said Clem.

"You knew very well I would," said Reggie. "I told you, didn't I?"

Funny thing, but it was getting colder. Red was on the phone now, getting a stick from AP on some wedding in Baltimore, and had his coat off, despite the chill. Reggie wanted to speak to Red, but decided not to. Red was a good enough guy, but probably wouldn't understand. Clem—good old fat Clem, with his thinning gray hair and his forty-year jowls—was leaning back in his chair, staring at Bart Davis' hole in the ceiling, his thumbs linked in the arm-holes of his vest as Reggie had seen them for years when he worked on the night staff. "One of Clem's boys," they used to call Reggie in the old days. One of the boys who would go through a herd of wildcats and a hundred cops to get any story that Clem wanted—until a year ago.

"We were fools, Reggie," said Clem.

"I'll say," replied Reggie.

"We should never have let her jam our lives up that way," said Clem.

"Women are poison to good newspapermen," said Reggie.

Now it was coming out, and he was

glad of it. He'd worried about this for a year, and here it was, staring him right in the face. Three hundred and sixty-five nights of thinking about Clem, to whom he should have been loyal—of the girl, who knew no loyalty to anything, and of himself, too. All added up, they made this moment, right now, face to face with Clem and the whole thing ready to blow off.

All Clem said was, "We should have found some other way out of it."

"You know I felt that way, too, at the last minute," said Reggie, "when it was too late."

"Yes," said Clem, "I know."

Reggie had known that Clem would be like this, because Clem always understood. His heart warmed up in spite of his chill. He was glad he'd come—glad he'd kept this crazy date, made a year ago when neither of them thought it could be kept. No matter how hard it was, these things ought to be talked out, he thought. No matter what happened or what they'd done a year ago, he and Clem were still as close as any two men could be. Sometimes, during the past year, he'd wondered if they *would* be men when they met tonight. People can stand just so much and no more. Clem seemed the same, though. Probably he did, too.

TIME seemed to race through his brain as he stood there, six feet of curly-topped reporter, gray slouch hat on the back of his head. Time was a funny thing. For a year it had dragged until he almost went insane, waiting to come and see Clem as they'd planned it. Now, here he was and there was no time, really—just he and Clem, and Red on the phone, still getting the paragraph from Baltimore and paying no attention to either of them. No minutes or seconds in this moment—just

he, Reggie, waiting for Clem, his friend, to say something.

"It wasn't really your fault, Reggie," said Clem. "She was a wild one and I was sort of a fool. None like an old one, they tell me." He laughed, and startled Reggie, because it wasn't like one of Clem's old rollicking bellows that used to clear the wires as far as Chicago. It was just a little, thin, sardonic laugh, like the wind whispering in a tenement fire-escape.

"Don't blame her too much," said Reggie. "A couple of years before she met you she and I were pretty thick. Came a time when I couldn't forget it, and neither could she."

His words seemed to come to his ears from very far away, and sounded short and clipped. How else should they sound? he wondered. He was tired. The constant clacking of the teletype got on his nerves, and he seemed unable to hold his thoughts together as well as he used to. He wandered over to the teletype to see what all the racket was about, and pulled a yard of paper out of the basket. "Famous Movie Actress Gets Fourth Divorce; Senator Promises Lower Taxes If; Orange, N. J., Bride and Groom Killed in Triple Crash. . . ." A dream world, he thought—he and Clem had the only reality—he and Clem and their problem.

". . . And I was too old, anyway. Must have been crazy." Reggie realized that Clem was still talking. Funny—they must have gotten out of tune for a minute. "You two kids—I loved you both. Should have just backed out of the whole thing. But I had to go and marry her, and try to set up housekeeping. Me, Clem Roberts, whose home is right behind this desk and always has been! Thank the Lord there were no kids. What's she doing now, Reggie?"

"I don't know," said Reggie. What did he care what she was doing?

"Don't care, either, hey kid?" Clem was more like himself now, but a little pale still. "Neither do I. It's you and me from now on!"

There it was. That was what Reggie had been waiting for. Now that he had it, now that he knew that he and Clem were as they always had been, what of it? What was left for them now? He felt tired again. Let Clem figure it out.

"You figure it out, Clem," he said. "Where do we go from here?"

"Now you're talking sense, boy," said Clem. "I don't see any reason why we can't go on as usual, and pick up right where we left off. Things are going to be different—don't kid yourself on that—because we're different. We have to be, after"—he made a funny, quick motion with his hand—"all that. But we're still pals, we've got more sense than we used to have, and that's that."

They used to call him, the boys that didn't like him—and there were plenty who didn't, though they slaved for him—"That's That" Roberts.

Clem pulled his big antique watch out of his vest pocket, looked at it and started to pull on his coat. Then he reached for the phone.

"Shoot me up a morning final!" he barked in a voice that didn't sound like

his at all. Red Mackenzie, batting out the Baltimore story on his typewriter, looked around suddenly as if he'd heard Clem for the first time, and then turned back to his pecking with a puzzled look on his face.

A boy brought the paper in, tossed it on the desk, and ran out again without saying a word. Reggie leaned over with his fists on the desk top, and watched Clem turn to page three.

"You didn't make front page, Reggie," said Clem. "Bad luck to the end."

"O. K. with me," said Reggie. He leaned over further to see the half-column story, and his coat sleeve slipped up on his arm.

"Bad burn you have there," said Clem.

"Doesn't hurt now," said Reggie, and they read the story together.

PAYS WITH LIFE FOR CRIME ON MURDER ANNIVERSARY

Ossining, N. Y., July 26: At two minutes past midnight tonight Reginald J. Fallon, New York Globe reporter, went calmly to the electric chair for the murder by shooting a year ago today of his city editor, Clement J. Roberts of White Plains, N. Y. Witnesses marveled at the composure of the condemned man, who seemed to welcome . . .

"That's that," said Clem. "Let's go."

They walked out of the city room arm in arm, and the clock said quarter after twelve.

