

Weird Tales

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Contents for June, 1925

- Cover Design Andrew Brosnatch
- Monsters of the Pit Paul S. Powers 341
A Thrilling Tale of Gigantic Spiders
- The Devil-God Frank Belknap Long, Jr. 349
The King Read Poetry, so the State Took Measures to Protect Itself
- Black Hill Frank Owen 357
The Golden Buddha Brought Misery and Terror to Cass Ledyard
- The Third Thumb-print Mortimer Levitan 369
A Scientist Makes a Horrifying Discovery About Himself
- Marble Laurence D'Orsay 375
Evil Was the Brilliant and Inventive Mind of This Physician

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The Clock** ----- **Arthur Styron 382**
A Five-Minute Story of a Terrible Obsession
- The Soul That Waited** ----- **Louis B. Capron 385**
A Passion for a Mummy—a Love That Bridged the Centuries
- An Arc of Direction** ----- **Junius B. Smith 393**
His Horoscope Said He Would Be Hanged on a Certain Day
- Hurled Into the Infinite (First Part)** ----- **J. Schlossel 397**
Two-Part Astronomical Story
- The Witch of Kravetz** ----- **Michael V. Simko 415**
A Barbarous Russian Custom—and a Famous Beauty
- Lips of the Dead** ----- **W. J. Stamper 422**
A Gruesome Tale From the History of Haiti
- The House, the Light, and the Man** .. **Gordon Philip England 427**
A Specter Rose From the Coffin—and the Man's Mind Gave Way
- Invaders From the Dark (Conclusion)** ----- **Greya La Spina 431**
Serial Novel of Werewolves and Occult Powers of Evil
- Loo Tun Sin** ----- **Everett Boston 450**
The Dawn Clouded the Moon With Trouble, so Loo Marred the Dawn
- Strange Tales From Santo Domingo** ----- **Arthur J. Burks 453**
No. 5. The Phantom Chibo.
The Bandit José Espinosa Lures His Victims to a Quagmire
- Dead Hands** ----- **Walter G. Detrick 458**
They Stretched From the Grave, These Hands of His Grandmother
- Servants of Satan** ----- **Seabury Quinn 463**
No. 4. George Burroughs, Martyr.
True Tale of New England Witchcraft
- The Hanging of Aspara** ----- **Leavenworth Macnab 468**
Sensational Newspaper Hoaxes Give Tang to an Execution
- The Eyrie** ----- **472**
A Chat With the Readers

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WEIRD TALES

317 Baldwin Building

Indianapolis, Ind.

*Two Women, One Living and One Dead,
Fought for the Life of John Paul*

DEAD HANDS

By WALTER G. DETRICK

Author of "Through the Horn Gate"

JOHAN PAUL was mad—mad with a delicious, soul-thrilling madness. The hour was late and his path led over a steep hill, but he heeded these things not at all. Eunice's kisses were still warm upon his neck and lips, and the memory of that last embrace still filled his veins with ecstatic tinglings.

The whole experience was delightfully strange and new, for that sort of madness comes but once; yet about it all there was a strange elusive tinge of familiarity which made it the more entrancing. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the rough path under them; his face was turned upward to the star-lit sky. Adam, the first, may thus have walked after the primal tryst with Eve.

Although he was quite alone, it was not in the nature of things that he could be silent at such a time as this, so he sang. There were many songs that he could sing, albeit somewhat badly; but now, with that haunting sense of joy oft repeated running through his brain, he began to hum an impromptu verse:

I heard you sing in Paradise,
A thousand years ago;
I called you from the happy skies
Down to this world of woe.

It was a strange song; and strange it was for this precise, well-ordered young man to be singing and cavorting under the stars like a barbarian, but he was a little mad.

Past the whitewashed wall he walked, up the hill and down the other side, through the pine-bordered lane and on to the sturdy old farmhouse where he lived; and all the time his eyes saw not and his ears heard not. In the same exalted mood he sought his bed and lay for an hour or more tossing about in a frenzy of happiness.

Worn out by the violence of his emotions he at length slept; and in dreams he seemed to touch the edge of another world. Strange to relate, it was not a celestial world where starry-eyed maidens sang, but a hobgoblin realm full of terrible things. A quaint little old woman slowly ascended the steep path that led to the farmhouse, assisting her uncertain feet with a long staff. Her shoulders were stooped and bowed by the burden of ninety years. Her steps were slow and faltering, each laboring breath bespoke a run-down machine, but the invincible old eyes shone with purpose and determination.

From afar Paul saw her coming and ran swiftly to meet her. Though great tears were running down his cheeks, he was very glad. When he was but a helpless, puling infant, death at one pounce had robbed him of both father and mother, and these old arms were the ones that had taken him up and cared for him. Paul was a good man, and he had been a fairly dutiful grandson, but of late certain memories had been pricking his heart

like a thorn. How often had some act of his caused those fine old eyes to fill with tears! How often, figuratively speaking, had he set his foot on that stout heart!

Feeling very humble and unworthy, he fell on his knees before her and covered her wrinkled hands with tears and kisses, too powerfully moved to utter a word.

The gray figure did not respond to this unwonted display of affection. Astounded, Paul looked up at her face and saw that instead of the accustomed look of dotting affection she was regarding him with an expression which was unmistakably hostile. Puzzled and aghast, he drew back a little, still keeping on his knees. Memories which had been submerged in the first rush of emotion began to rise. He remembered the strange and terrible thing now.

"Why, grandmother," he gasped, "you are dead!"

"Yes, my grandson," she replied, and her tone was full of menace. "Yes, I am dead, and you—". She did not finish the sentence, but faded back into the strange and incorporeal limbo out of which she had for a brief moment emerged; and Paul found himself lying on his bed, weak and trembling, and sweating from every pore.

A YOUNG man of the Twentieth Century who has just been graduated from a very modern college does not believe in dreams. Paul was such a man, but in spite of his sophistication he was profoundly disturbed.

It was just a year since he had watched them heap the earth over this grandmother who was the only kin he had ever known. At the thought of her his heart throbbed with pure affection. What a woman she had been! Could father and mother, even if aided by a score of other kindred, have done more for him?

Life had dealt very graciously with this young man, and he was well aware of the fact. Like a very humble Pharisee he began to give thanks for the ways in which he was not as other men are.

First there was his superb body. He had made the football team at college. He knew how much the old woman's patient care had to do with the development of those strong thighs and sinews, and in a great measure they were part of the heritage she had bequeathed him. When his first remembrance began she had passed life's allotted three-score and ten, but even so it had not been hard for him to form a mental picture of the wonderful figure she had been in her youth.

His reverie changing, he thought of the three hundred fertile acres which were now his. It was a splendid domain, splendidly equipped. No litter of neglect marred the farmstead. Fences, houses and barns were all as they should be. Here and there over the fields were producing oil wells; the black tunnel of a coal mine pierced a hilly corner. All these things, and more, were now his own; but he did not allow himself to forget that it was the gray woman of his dream who had helped to wrest all this from the wilderness, or that it was she alone who had held the possessions intact until he could care for them.

Intruding on these pleasurable musings came conscience with her thorn. The gray woman had been old before he saw the light of day, and frosty age and fiery youth cannot dwell together without conflict. In spite of her affection for him there were times when she could display Spartan sternness. His rebellions were many, but it was her will that prevailed in the end, down to that last morning when, sitting in her chair, tired and full of years, she had fallen asleep for the last time.

His love affair did not begin until after her passing, and he was glad of this, for she was spared the sight of another usurping the place that she had held for so long.

"Are you sure of that?" queried his conscience. He remembered his dream and shivered.

Normal, healthy youth, however, does not long remain cast down. Soon his thoughts turned from the dead to the living, and when at last he fell asleep no gray shadow of the past disturbed his rest.

EXISTENCE is a series of storms separated by intervals of calm. In a few short hours Paul had drunk deep of both the bitter and sweet of life, but for a time thereafter nothing disturbed the even tenor of his way. Days, weeks and months crept by. The grain which had been sprouting when he first trudged along the two-mile path singing to the stars was now yellow and ripened. He had taken the same walk many times afterward, always returning in an exalted mood; and since the first eventful evening not even a disquieting dream had come to mar his happiness.

Now he was taking what he fancied would be the last of these rambles. Tomorrow Eunice would be his wife.

From his home, the two-mile path first ran down a long lane, bordered by great pines; then came the big hill. Climbing up one steep side of this and down the other, it then followed a more gentle rise along the whitewashed stone wall to the house on the hill, where Eunice lived.

It was at the foot of the big hill, near the beginning of the whitewashed wall, that the power line crossed. It looked very harmless. Anchored securely to strong steel towers, the vibrating living wires hung thirty feet above the path.

Perhaps Paul's mood still made blind his eyes, perhaps it was not

meant that he should see. At any rate, he did not notice a fine wire hanging from the deadly high-tension line above his head. It did not touch the ground, but dangled at just the right height to brush a tall man's neck. To its nether end was attached a short length of cotton string. It had rained slightly a few minutes before, and the fibers of the wet cord bristled warningly.

How this thing came to thrust itself across Paul's path will never be known. It may have been part of the string of a runaway kite, but if so, the kite was never found.

Unseeing and unknowing, Paul passed it by and continued his walk along the whitewashed wall until he came to the house where Eunice lived.

AS USUAL she was waiting for him on the vine-covered porch. With a subdued whoop he bounded lightly up the five stone steps, but at the top he paused momentarily, for she had not risen to greet him. Although he stood directly in front of her she gave no heed to his presence, but continued to gaze expectantly down the two-mile path.

"Eunice, Eunice, where are your thoughts?" he called gayly, but Eunice did not move. She sat still and continued to watch the path by which he had so lately arrived.

Dumfounded, but thinking himself the victim of a prank, he stretched out his muscular arms, intending to lift her bodily from the chair; and then came the great surprise. His groping hands encountered no resistance, but stumbling oddly, he found himself standing at her back; and still Eunice perceived him not. Now desperate, he shouted her name, stamped upon the floor and at last even struck at her, but without avail.

Paul struggled helplessly in the strange net in which he was enmeshed. This was the first time in his experience that he had encountered a com-

pletely baffling situation, and he was filled with impotent rage. Owing to his strange inability to establish contact with material objects, his efforts were confined to stamping upon the floor and shouting. His most earnest attempts, however, did not suffice to cause Eunice to turn her head, and no other person came running in response to his frantic clamor. He was like a goldfish beating its head against the side of a glass prison, or like a child trying to pluck objects from a mirror.

Patient and composed, as was her wont, Eunice waited until twilight had faded into dusk. Then, tossing a light scarf over her shoulders, she rose and started to walk down the path.

Because he was chagrined and frightened by the strange things that were happening to him, Paul followed a little distance behind her. Near their course a huge tawny dog of a fearless breed dozed contentedly. He greeted his mistress with a drowsy opening of one eye and a wag of his stub of a tail, then adjusted himself for another nap. At Paul's nearer approach, however, he leapt to his feet, with a snarl that was half howl, and flung himself in the path between Paul and Eunice. With bristling ruff and gleaming fangs he stood there, valiant, but plainly frightened.

Though young, Paul would usually have served as a model for those who would acquire the virtues of moderation and self-restraint, but now he was in something like a berserk rage. Here at last was something which knew and recognized him, and he felt that it had no right to be hostile. Straight at the threatening jaws he launched the same kick that had brought him renown in many a hotly contested game, but the results were not what he anticipated. His flying foot encountered nothing but empty air; and thrust forward by the im-

petus of his kick he found himself on the other side of the brute.

The inexplicable hemmed Paul around like a wall, and he could not escape therefrom, but it was otherwise with the dog. For the first and only time his stanch courage forsook him, and he fled snarling and whining.

Eunice turned to look at the antics of the dog with wonder and amaze, but she saw or heard naught of the man who now stood by her side. Presently she gave a little cry of alarm and started to run swiftly down the path. Paul tried mightily to follow, but he could not. Night was coming—thicker, blacker night than he had ever known—and although his feet were like leaden weights he could not keep them on the ground. He heard Eunice's piercing shriek when she came to the wires at the foot of the big hill; and then the fearsome rushing night engulfed him absolutely.

The dark curtain closed not only over his sight, but over all his other senses as well. Hearing, touch, taste, smell—all were gone; yet as these faded it was as if a light were turned on in his mind, thereby adding many cubits to his mental stature. The mystery which had baffled him was now revealed. He now knew that his body lay stark and still under the deadly wire, and that Eunice was bending over it, screaming frantically for aid. He, himself, was no longer in the world or of it, but on some plane very far removed from earthly things.

His terror and panic were gone, but there were many things which he could not fathom even with his greatly increased thinking power. Myriads before him had passed through this same gate of darkness; every moment thousands more must be taking the same journey, yet he remained a lonely intelligence, lost in the depths of the black infinite. It was all unthinkably horrible. Where, oh, where, were those others?

MORTAL limitations prevent the telling of much that he experienced in this strange world. Knowledge did not filter to him through narrow sense-channels. Instead, his soul, freed of fleshy restrictions, now perceived clearly what before had been seen as through a glass darkly.

It was in this way that he eventually became aware of another presence. From out the fog and murk of mystery the gray woman of his dreams was coming to him. He felt, as of old, the dominant force of her. Here she was no longer aged and feeble, but a strong being as was her right. She was neither friendly nor hostile; her attitude was one of triumph.

"I could not go to you, but you have come to me," was the message she sent him.

Whether she had spoken or whether it was a thought passing from mind to mind, he could not tell. Fervently he wished that there had been something of warmth or affection in her greeting; but, nevertheless, her coming had made his situation much more bearable. His eager, searching mind seemed about to solve the great secret of existence when there came another sudden and dramatic change.

In a twinkling the gray woman became inconceivably remote, and he was once more a speck in the black depths of infinity. He felt himself tossed hither and thither—a helpless pawn in the struggle of two great contending forces.

After this came a period of dull blankness, broken at intervals by flashes of real earthly pain. Racked by the most intense bodily pangs, he seemed to have endured an age of torture before he at last opened his eyes on the kindly earth.

He was lying in bed in an unfamiliar room. Dr. Sayres, his old family physician, and a younger medico whom he knew but slightly,

were in attendance on him. Eunice and a white-gowned nurse were aiding them.

As Paul struggled for full consciousness he made an effort to speak, but the young medico motioned him to silence. Both doctors listened gravely to his heart beats, then they gave him a few drops of a powerful stimulant.

He lay very still, and moment by moment strength flowed back into his body. Presently nurse and doctors withdrew, leaving him alone with Eunice.

"Paul—Paul!" she sobbed; "by heaven's mercy you have come back to me. I walked down the path a little way to welcome you, and found you lying under the power line. You have been unconscious for hours, and part of the time they said that you were really dead. In spite of their greater knowledge I could not give up hope. I kept the doctors to the task of restoring you, and now you are here—the battle is won."

Paul spoke weakly, but from a full heart: "Oh, Eunice, my dearest, you have won a greater battle than you can imagine. I have a strange story which I will tell you sometime, but not now."

The converse of two people who have just passed such a great crisis needs but few words. Eunice pressed her face to one of Paul's hands and they sat in silent thankfulness.

UNWILLINGLY Paul had glimpsed great mysteries, and he had a fervent desire to forget it all. After a little while he began to pray. None of the formal prayers which he knew seemed meet for the occasion, so he couched his petition in the words of a familiar hymn:

A veil 'twixt me and Thee, dear Lord,
A veil 'twixt Thee and me;
Lest we should hear too clear, dear Lord,
And unto madness see.