

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 32

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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, 1924, 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, \$5.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 66 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

Dust in the House

By DAVID H. KELLER

A weird mystery story about an old house that had been closed for a century, and the two skeletons that sat across the table from each other in that house

"IT IS a good thing for you that you happened to see our advertisement," commented the lawyer. "It means that the Hubler estate, worth at least several million, will go to you instead of being distributed among various charitable institutions of the city of New York."

The man seated on the other side of the table smiled. "It was rather singular that I just happened to see your advertisement in a Paris paper. I do not know how I happened to read it in a part of the paper I seldom look at. Of course I knew I belonged to the family, but I never bothered to look them up. Are you sure there are no other heirs?"

"None that we can be sure of. Of course the usual number of claimants; that was bound to occur, but all of them are fraudulent. There was one other genuine heir, the daughter of a great-uncle of yours. We know she was born; we do not know that she died; we simply cannot find her. We have satisfied all legal requirements in our search for her. If she does not appear in a week, the fortune is yours. Of course there are conditions but that only makes it more interesting. The whole affair is interesting. Think of it! A valuable estate tied up for one hundred years, meantime increasing in value simply because of the real estate connected with it. Our legal firm has cared for it all these hundred years, as a trust. And meantime the house has been unoccupied, unopened and unentered for all

those years. It has often been painted on the outside and the roof repaired as needed, but no one has been inside since the windows were boarded shut and the front door locked by your great-grandfather.

"It seems that he locked the door and stayed near the house till the windows were boarded shut. Then he came to our law office, had this most peculiar will made, and then killed himself. His heirs were to enter the house at the end of the hundred years, spend one night in the dining-room and then divide the estate among them. Then the house was to be torn down, all the furniture burned, and the land sold."

The man smiled rather sourly. "One night alone in the house?" he asked.

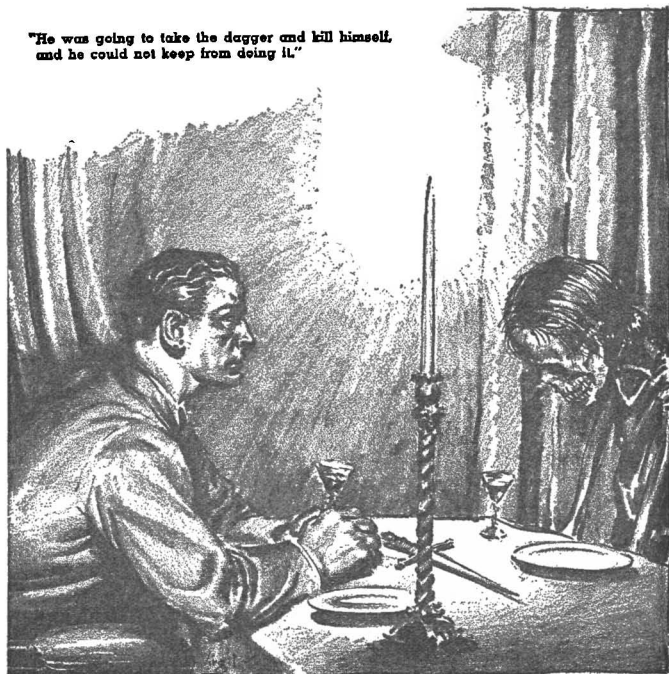
"Yes," replied the lawyer. "A representative of our firm is to go there with you, and see that you are escorted to the room. The next morning that man will call for you. Then legal application will be made for the dissolving of the trust and the closing of the estate."

"And I am the only heir?"

"Yes, except for this lost woman. As I told you, we know she was born. Her mother died and her father disappeared, taking the baby with him. And we have proof that he died, but where his daughter is we do not know. We have tried to find her, but failed."

"How old would she be if she were living?"

"He was going to take the dagger and kill himself, and he could not keep from doing it."



"About thirty years, if the birth certificate is correct."

"And her baptismal name?"

"Lilith Lamereaux."

The man drew himself forward in the chair as he said slowly, "Lilith Lamereaux! I knew a woman by that name; in fact, I knew her rather well. She tried to kill me several times."

"What happened to her?" asked the lawyer, rather sharply.

"I do not know. Perhaps I do not care. She passed out of my life. I would like to know what actually did happen to her. Of course she did not kill me,

only tried to. The fact that I am here today talking to you is confirmation of the fact that she did not kill me. But I will give her credit for trying. Her attempts were intelligent and genuine. I am alive today because I outguessed her. Evidently she was one woman who became discouraged by repeated failures. At least she stopped trying and disappeared."

"A singular coincidence," mused the lawyer. "Of course there may have been two women by the same name; but the name is an odd one. We have been unable to find anyone of that name in America, and our advertisements in Eng-

land and the Continent have been unanswered. Of course we have no description of her; so it would be useless to have you tell us what your Lilit had looked like."

"She was very beautiful," sighed the man.

"And evidently very dangerous," commented the lawyer. "But fortunately our firm has never interested itself in the criminal side of the law, and I can simply say that I have a human but not a professional interest in your story of triple escape from a potential murderess. Will you meet me at the front door of the house at five-thirty tonight? Better bring an overcoat, rubbers and something to eat and drink during the night."

"Rubbers?" asked the man. "I thought you said the roof had been kept in repair."

"It has. But the dust, man! Can you imagine a house unopened for a hundred years? Unopened, unaired, unentered, uncleaned? We cannot tell what state it is in."

"That is true. I will wear them, and bring along something to eat and a bottle of wine, and perhaps some candles. Of course there is neither gas nor electricity in the house."

"Of course not. The house has not been opened for a hundred years, and gas and electricity were unknown when it was occupied. I have often wondered just why it was to be occupied for one night and then torn down. Evidently some peculiar fancy on the part of your ancestor. And here is something interesting. He had two sons. One simply disappeared and the other lived on to keep the family alive. There is something that has always interested me. One son disappears, the father shuts the house, makes his will and kills himself. And now one hundred years later the only one of the family alive enters the house with a

lawyer, and whatever mystery there is will be solved."

"And I suppose you will represent your firm tonight?"

"Absolutely. I grew up with this mystery as one of the most precious parts of our legal firm. In fact I think I would have died years ago. But I was determined to be there when the house was opened, and that kept me alive. I simply had to stay there in the office, as the oldest member of the firm, year by year waiting till I could enter the house. So I will be seeing you at five-thirty, and don't forget the rubbers."

"I will be there," answered the man. "And the more I think of it, the more determined I am to bring whisky instead of wine. I may need something like whisky before the night is over—to wash the dust down my throat."

PROMPTLY the two men met at the front door of the old house. The old lawyer, who evidently thought of everything, pulled a large key out of one pocket of his overcoat and a can of oil out of the other pocket.

"The lock may be rusty," he explained as he oiled the key and squirted some oil gravely into the keyhole. "A lock unused for a hundred years may be very rusty, but it was a good lock and a stout key, and with a little oil and patience we can open the door. Ah! I can feel it turn. Now you will excuse me if I pause and take a tablet of nitroglycerin. An anginal attack at this time would certainly spoil my pleasure."

He waited and then swung the front door open.

"We will wait a little while and then we will go in. I have two electric search-lights. You take one. Turn it on. Just as I expected! This front room is the parlor, with elegant draperies, furnishings and carpet. Look at the dust! Several inches

thick! Over everything! Look at the little waves in the dust where the winter winds blew through the cracks. Like the sand waves of the Sahara. I spent some weeks there as a young man. This parlor is a little Sahara. Suppose we go upstairs first and save the dining-room till the last. It should be back of the parlor. Excuse me, but I am going to tie a handkerchief over my nose. I would advise you to do the same. No telling what germs are in that dust. Of course it may be almost sterile, as most of the family you represent has been. Walk carefully up these steps. No matter how hard we try the dust will rise."

The two men wandered through the second floor of the old house, through long-deserted bedrooms, once gayly decorated.

"Life and love have gone away, leaving doors and windows wide; careless tenants they," quoted the old man. "How appropriate! I never married, but I have always been a sentimentalist. What tales of love this house could tell, these furnishings relate, could they but talk!"

"I wish," said the young man sharply, "that I could ask you to stop quoting poetical nonsense. To me this is simply an old dirty house."

"But to me it is mystery, romance," countered the old man. "Well, at least there is nothing on the second floor, and above is the attic, which I can leave unexamined. And now for the dining-room."

"Yes. And twelve hours without your rambling poetry. Sorry," apologized the heir, "but I am really nervous, jittery, and all that sort of thing. Are you sure you cannot spend the night with me?"

"I could and I would like to, but if I did, the will would be broken and you would not receive a cent."

"But who would know?"

"We would, and honor to our law

firm is the most priceless of our possessions."

THEY went down the broad stairway and through the parlor. There was only one door at the back of the room and that was closed. The lawyer opened the door and announced,

"This must be the dining-room."

They turned their flashlights on the open doorway. And then the young man almost gasped,

"No dust!"

"Correct!" agreed the lawyer. "No dust. Spotlessly clean. I would suggest that we take off our rubbers. It would be a shame to spoil the spotless waxed floor. And now the mystery hangs over us as the dust hangs over the rest of the house. Do you see what I see? A mahogany table in the center of the room. Two empty candlesticks on the table. Two plates and two glasses. And three chairs. In one chair there is something that may have once been a woman. At least the remnants of a woman's clothes cover the dried skin and bones of one long dead. She must have been tied to the chair before — or after — she died. Don't move. Let us think about this first. Across the table are two chairs. One is empty. The other chair holds something long dead, and from the general appearance that was once a man. There is a cane on the floor, a gold-headed cane. See how the gold shines? As though it had been recently polished. Look at the oil paintings on the wall, and the sideboard with its shining glass. The candlesticks are of silver and they glisten as I throw my light on them. Excuse me. This calls for another tablet of nitroglycerin. I would not have missed this for anything. I am glad I lived to see it. And now suppose we walk through the room and open the door on the other side. — The mystery deepens. There is

the kitchen, and it is as dusty as the rest of the house. Well, whatever the explanation is, you will have to tell me in the morning. The will states that the heirs must spend the night here; twelve hours from six to six. Of course the old man probably thought there would be more than one heir."

The heir took a package of sandwiches out of his pocket, wrapped them and placed them slowly on one of the plates. On one side of the table he placed his quart of whisky. Then he placed two candles in the candlesticks and carefully sat down in the empty chair, and turned to the old lawyer.

"You said the house had been unopened for a hundred years."

"That is what I said."

"You said no one had been here."

"I was sure of it."

"Yet you see this room?"

"I do. I have seen everything in it. This dead man and this dead woman seem to have sat here for a hundred years. Since I opened the door I have asked myself a hundred questions and none of them has an answer. Now I will ask one more. See that dead man? Over his long-dried and dusty heart there is still the handle of a dagger. He was killed with the dagger and it was never withdrawn. Now I will take that dagger and withdraw it. The blade should be almost gone. But look at it! Long, the steel polished, the point like a needle. Answer that. Did this piece of steel kill this man? Or has the steel been replaced by a new blade? Or was this dagger the one that killed? I will place it on the table. The ivory handle is yellow with age, but it is clean. You see it is a very unusual handle; an artistically carved body of a nude woman. Well, if I keep on thinking about this I shall have to take another tablet of nitroglycerin. I will leave you with the two candles burn-

ing, and at six in the morning I will unlock the front door and bid you good-morning. And now good-night. I cannot say 'pleasant dreams,' for I think that you will not sleep."

The young man opened the bottle of whisky, and took four fingers full.

"You will find me here, you Ancient Mariner, and inside me you will find the quart of whisky. I should have had two quarts. If there was much less than a million at stake I would go with you and let the sick and the motherless of the city have the old man's money and be damned to him. But a man will do a lot for money. Good-bye. I will answer some of your questions in the morning."

The old lawyer left and shut the door. Then the front door creaked shut on its rusty hinges. The heir took another drink and wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand.

"I will drink some," he whispered to himself, "and then I will try to solve this mystery. Of course someone has been here. These dead bags of skin and bones did not wax the floor and dust the table and polish these candlesticks. And that dagger. It seems to me that I have seen that somewhere before. Perhaps another drink will clear my brain."

MINUTES passed, and hours. At eleven he looked at his watch and started to eat the sandwiches. Meantime the bottle was rapidly being emptied. And then came midnight.

He started to laugh. "If anything was going to happen it would have happened by now," he whispered to himself. "So, as nothing has happened, nothing will happen. I will empty the bottle in one last, long drink and go to sleep for the rest of the night. I thought for a while—but that was simply silly—to think of that. I never saw that dagger before. I know that I never have seen it before. I

simply saw something that looked like it; but this one, no! I am going to keep on telling myself that I never saw it before and at last I will believe it."

He emptied the bottle. And then he must have slept.

Waking with a start, he looked at his watch. He held it to his ear, and cried,

"It stopped! I must have forgotten to wind it. It stopped at midnight and I never knew it. And now I do not know what time it is. I may have to wait only a few minutes or hours or an eternity till the lawyer comes for me. If only I knew what time it was I would be happier. How long was I asleep? How long must I stay awake?"

And then he heard a tap, tap, tap, tap, little heels walking on a wooden floor, drawing nearer, more distinct; little heels tapping in mincing steps on a clean wooden floor. They sank noiseless in the thick dust of the house, and all the house was covered with thick carpeting of century-old dust except this room. His head whirled; he shut his eyes and shook his head to clear it. And then he opened his eyelids and there was a woman walking toward the table. She was dressed in flounces and furbelows, hair-ribbons, pantofles and jewelry of the past century. In one hand she carried a candlestick with lighted taper, in the other hand a bottle of wine. She placed them both on the table.

And then she took a handkerchief and started to dust the table and the pictures and the glasses. She went around the room like a little wren, making the place spotless, and all was quiet save for the tap-tap-tap of her little heels on the waxed and spotless wooden floor. Finally she replaced the half-burned candles with new ones. She poured two glasses of wine and silently placed one in front of the man.

"Well," she said finally, "how very,

very odd to find *you* here! Who would have thought that you would be here? And why did you come? For the two million, I suppose. I might have known it. You were always so anxious to do anything for money. And now that you are here, and I am here, shall we drink to each other as we did in the past? You will recall the wine and the vintage. Or have you had too much whisky to recall anything? That was the trouble with you. You would have been a fine man and a faithful lover, only you had to drink too much at the wrong time. Drain the glass. You need it. But I will not drink mine, for you may need all in the bottle to keep your brain going till morning."

He picked the glass up and slowly drained it, and then started to laugh.

"Think of you being here!" he sneered. "I might have known it. Whenever there was any deviltry you were somehow at the bottom of it. But I am going to be rich now, and I will give you half of it if you go away and leave me here till the morning. You give me your name and address and I promise you that I will give you half of it. Come on, be a good girl and get out."

She simply laughed at him. "You have not changed at all," she said, "and you still think that all a woman thinks of is money. Drink another glass of the wine. It is perfect. Do you remember when we drank this same wine in the little patio in northern Italy?"

"I remember very well. That was the third time."

"And I told you there would be one more time and then I left you, and now you meet me here. How appropriate! I sent you the newspaper with the advertisement in it; I knew that would bring you back to America. And of course I knew about the will. I could have had half the estate had I been willing to disclose my identity. I did not care for the

money. It was something more than wealth I wanted. Drink the wine, past lover of mine, drink the wine."

HE DID as she ordered. It seemed that he had lost all power of self-control. He had to do as she told him. There were anger and hatred in his eyes, but there was also terror. He tried to rise from the chair. He wanted to scream for help. He thought of falling to his knees and crying for mercy. Instead he simply sat still and looked at Lilith Lamereaux.

She picked up the thing on the chair near him and walked away. She was in back of him and she simply vanished, tap-tap-tapping on the waxed, polished, dustless floor. He wanted to turn around and see where she had gone, but instead he simply kept looking at the burning candles. Then he heard the tap-tap-tapping of her little heels and there she was back again, arranging the plates on the table, one in front of him and one in front of the dead woman on the other side of the table. She arranged the glasses and the bottles and wiped a speck of crumb and a drop of the wine off the polished table.

"I always like to have things neat," she commented, with her little bird-like laugh. "You know I always was neat. My soul was so clean till I met you some years ago. And now I am going to take this dagger and carefully wipe all the finger prints off the handle and put it cautiously on the table in front of you. I will not try to use it on you again. I tried three times and failed, so why should I try again? But—take another glass of the wine—empty the bottle—that is good; it is like old times to see you drinking. You always thought such curious thoughts when you were drunk — and you are drunk now. In fact you are very drunk. And you are wondering if this is not a hundred years ago. Can you do that?"

There are two of you at the table drinking. And in desperation the little lady kills you, and then perhaps she poisons herself.

"The father comes in and finds you both dead. Perhaps he blames himself. At least he leaves you there and locks the house. Now the poor little lady is dead; so she cannot kill you again, but you could kill yourself. How easy it would be for you to kill yourself! And if they examined the dagger for finger prints they would find there your finger prints. It would be suicide; they certainly could not blame this poor dried-up lady tied so carefully to the chair and seated across the table from you.

"And you have wanted to kill yourself so often. Keep that thought—you wanted to kill yourself so often. And now with the whisky and the wine and the perfect stage-setting and your memories of how you treated me, it should be so easy for you to do so. All you have to do is to take the dagger and plunge it into your heart. I will tie you to the chair so you will not drop over—after you are dead. And all the money will go to poor people who need it; to little children who have no parents. It will be the only act of kindness you ever thought of doing in your life; it will even atone for the way you treated me. Go ahead and do it; in fact, after I leave you, you cannot help yourself."

She walked in back of him and he could hear the tap-tap-tapping of her little heels on the waxed and polished and dustless floor. He looked at the candles burning with steady flame in the silent room. It was too silent. He thought he could hear his heart beating, or was it the tap-tap-tap of her little heels pounding his life away? No! It was her heels. She was in back of him. She was passing a sheet around his body, tying him in the chair so that he would not fall to the

floor when he died. She stroked his hair, and she dropped a kiss on his hair and she whispered that she was sorry that he was going to do what he was going to do because they might have been happy if things had been different, and now he should listen to her little heels tap-tap-tapping out of the room and out of his life because he was going to take the dagger and kill himself and he could not keep from doing it if he kept looking at the candles and thinking of Lilith Lame-reaux and the past years when he might have been happy if he had been different.

And then tap-tap-tap and she was gone. And he was alone.

Across the table the woman dead a hundred years looked at him, and it seemed that she smiled and urged him to be a man at last and not be afraid, because it was not such a hard thing to be dead, if there was love, even a dead love in your life. And the more he looked at her and at the two candles the more he knew that he had to kill himself, and the more sure he was that he would kill himself. The woman across the table seemed to change to Lilith, and there was the tappity-tap-tappity-tap of his heart and the tap-tap-tap of her heels on the floor—or was she tapping on the table with her polished finger nails? He could hear the blood pounding in his ears and everything was beating rhythmically to the tune of the tap-tap-tap, and words came and kept time with the music in his ears, and he heard her say again and again, "You have to kill yourself—you have to kill yourself—tap-tap-tappity-tap-tap—you have to kill yourself." Little white drops of sweat came out on his face, and slowly, very slowly, he reached for the dagger and with clenched hand did the thing he had to do.

Two weeks later the old lawyer sat alone in his office. Now and then he reached in his pocket, took out his little bottle and placed a tablet of nitroglycerin carefully under his tongue. He was trying to think, and his thoughts did not make any sense. His stenographer brought in a card. He glanced at it, took another tablet and simply said,

"Have her come in."

In came a little lady, beautifully dressed in black. Her little heels tap-tapped on the bare floor.

"Please do not say a word till I am through," urged the lawyer. "Where have you been, and why did you fail to answer our advertisements? Don't you know it cost you nearly two million? If you know me now, you knew me then and knew about the will. And where were you that night? Let me tell you something. I took your cousin to that house and left him there. There were two bodies there, tied to chairs around the center table, and I left him there in the third chair. The room was spotless; there was no dust. I was afraid; so the next morning I brought a witness with me, the very best detective I could find, and when we entered that dining-room there was only one dried body there, that of the woman. The other body was gone. And your cousin was dead. He had been killed with the dagger that I found in the room, and the detective took finger prints of the dead man and the dagger and he says that the man killed himself. And it does not make sense; and where is the other body, and where were you that night? I will tell you in confidence that the dead man was afraid of you. He said that you had tried three times to kill him, and now everything points to the fact that he got drunk and killed himself. But why was the room so clean?

"Of course there is nothing I can do

now, and perhaps it is just as well that he died when he did, because he was not worth much anyway, but how about me? Here I have waited all these years to find out about the house and its mystery, and instead of finding out anything there is simply more mystery. Won't you please tell me what happened? Or don't you know? And did you really try to kill him three times and did he really kill himself?"

"You poor dear man," cooed the little lady. "You know I heard that you were worrying yourself sick; so I just simply had to see you before I left for Europe. Now I tell you what to do. You are to have the house torn down. When they tear down the dining-room you be there, sort of puttering around aimlessly, and you will see them tear into the wall by the fireplace and there you will find a passageway to the house next door. And in that passageway you will find the man who was dead for a hundred years, or what is left of him and his clothes.

"Then you will find that the house next door is empty but it was rented by a lady named Susan Smith, but she has moved because she is going to Europe tomorrow. And of course I read the will and I knew that the dining-room was going to be used, and I simply detest dust and dirt; so of course the room had to be cleaned, but I had lots of time, and it was a beautiful room when everything was dustless and polished. I even patched up the clothing of those two poor dear dead things, and when you and the man walked in I was really proud of how nice everything looked,

"I did not want the money and I am not sure that I wanted my cousin to die. I am sure that I did not want to kill him. In fact, I tried to forget; but I guess I went too far and suggested something to him, and so that is the way it goes in life when men are not kind to women who love them. And he must have killed himself. I was not at all sure he would, but when I read about it in the papers, I knew he had.

"And now I have one question to ask you. I am going to hold your hand when you answer it, because I want you to be very careful to give me the right answer. Perhaps you had better take one of those silly little pills first. Your stenographer said to me, 'Good God! Are you Lilith Lamereaux? The old Boss will sure have to take a pill when he hears you are here!' So take your silly little pill and hold my hand and look me in the eye and tell me. Do I look like a woman who would murder a man? Or do I look like a little wren who just loves to tap-tap-pity-tap through life with her high heels lightly pounding beautiful waxed dustless floors?"

The old lawyer took a deep breath.

"I don't know, Lilith. I really don't know. But I do know that if I were thirty years younger I would go to Europe with you tomorrow even though I was sure that on the third day out you would toss my dead body to the fishes."

"You are a dear," she laughed, and gayly tapped her way out of the office and out of his life.

