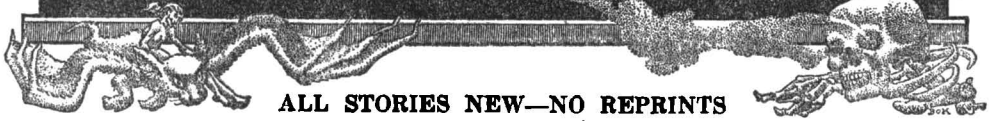


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JULY, 1941

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
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HENRY AVELINE PERKINS, Associate Editor.

First Night

By MINDRET LORD



"I gave myself the pleasure of tripping Miggle up!"

YOU knew I used to be a playwright? My taste and talent ran to farce, rather than to turgid drama, and when I invented characters or thought about a plot, somehow they always seemed more at home in a cosy parlor, bedroom and bath than in a gloomy mansion of high tragedy. I suppose it's undignified for one in my position to cling to such worldly interests, but I must confess that even now, when I chance upon a more than usually dramatic incident, I am unable to leave it alone. I'm like an old firehorse when the alarm sounds. Yesterday, for instance, I happened to observe an occurrence in life that might have been the first act of either a comedy or a tragedy—depending upon its outcome. My curiosity got the better of me, and before the play was over I had not only written

a large part of it, but had played a number of the roles.

One of my haunts is a small but rather charming old inn. Its reputation (to which I have contributed much) seems to recommend it to honeymooning couples. Its surroundings, deep in the woods and well-away from town or village — far from paved highways and ceaseless traffic—its remoteness, its quiet, and above all, its reputation for harboring a pleasantly humorous spirit, have made it quite famous as a setting for love scenes and sequences of the more romantic sort.

My duties at the Inn are not hard—an eerie laugh, an occasional light groan, a few hurried steps along the corridor, and whatever impish fancy happens to suit my mood. But no chain clanking—no screams. On the whole, the Inn is one of my least

arduous appointments. It suits me—and I suit it. I was resting in the deserted lobby when a car drove up to the door. While the handsome young couple climbed out, I had a hasty look at the papers in the boy's breast pocket and discovered them to be Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Elwood. According to the marriage license, her name had been Susan Vance; the document bore the current date.

Young Thomas was the soul of gallantry—yet he was making a strenuous effort to appear casual, blasé—as if this were an old business and that on the whole, it was a bore. I made some notes of their dialogue on the cuff of my shroud:

THOMAS

(Opening the trunk. Susan stands at his side, fidgeting)

Why don't you go inside and wait for me, dearest?

SUSAN

(Almost tearfully)

You mean you want me to leave you?

THOMAS

(Swinging out a heavy bag and setting it down on his toes)

Of course not, darling. But don't say things like that so loudly. Do you want everybody to know we've just been married?

SUSAN

But we have, haven't we?

THOMAS

(Jerking out the other bag and scraping his knuckles painfully)

Damn!

SUSAN

Oh! You're swearing at me—already!

THOMAS

I'm *not* swearing at you.
(He picks up the bags and starts toward the door. She remains beside the car. He stops and calls:)

Coming dear?

SUSAN

(In a low, but carrying voice)
"You don't love me!"

THOMAS

(Puts down the bags and returns to her, blushing)

I *do* love you, darling. I adore you. I worship—

SUSAN

You swore at me.

THOMAS

I didn't swear at *you*, darling. I swore at my fingers. Look! See where I scratched the skin off?

SUSAN

(With an agonized moan)

Oh! My poor darling sweetheart! Does it hurt simply terribly?

AH, ME! As the opening of a play I wondered how I could improve upon it. They were so young—so sweet—so typical. I knew the characters and the plot backwards and forwards; the dialogue was like the refrain of a familiar old song. I could write it in my sleep—yet the comedy is always fun to watch—especially for the rather sentimental old ghost of a playwright.

Young Thomas walked up to the desk like a man in a trance, and I actually had to steady his hand as he signed the register: Mr. and Mrs. Tom Elwood. We looked at it for a moment, decided it wasn't quite correct, scratched it out and wrote: Thomas Elwood and Wife. To this, we added a flourish.

"Yes, sir," said Miggle, the Inn's general factotum. "You'll be wanting the bridal suite, I presume?" Miggle is an egregious ass and has no tact whatever.

"I guess so," said Tom, in faint, miserable tones.

Miggle picked up the bags and led the way, smirking in the security of the dark corridor. I gave myself the pleasure of

tripping him up, so that he landed rather heavily on his stomach, causing considerable damage to his sense of humor.

I needn't tell you that there are some things a respectable spectre will not do—and one is eavesdropping on such a charming young couple as the Elwoods. It's not cricket, and even if it were, it is doubtful if the most talented haunter in the field could create enough of a stir to make his efforts worthwhile. Like all actors, we have our pride, and it is a melancholy thing to play to an audience that sits on its hands.

As I left the bridal suite, not more than five seconds after Miggle's departure, Tom and his bride were in each other's arms—the living, breathing picture of true love. I was so touched that I groaned a few bars of a love song and floated down the stairs into the kitchen where I materialized a dozen American Beauty roses for Dinah, the cook. In the box was a card, saying, "Be mine tonight!"

A couple of hours later, when I was swooping around through the trees, outside the Inn, imagine my amazement to see Susan Elwood backing the car out of the garage—alone! Sitting beside her, I discovered that she was sobbing heart-brokenly and that her eyes were blinded by tears. Certainly, she was in no condition to drive the car herself, so I aided her, though without any knowledge of where we were going. I guessed that she had no particular destination in mind, and that she was merely trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and her husband.

What was it that had scuttled the matrimonial bark so early in its voyage? Something trivial, I felt sure—something that could be patched up, and *would* be, if I had anything to say about it. Seeking a clue to the cause of the trouble, I glanced through the contents of the suitcase on the floor. It was filled with male clothing—her husband's! Obviously, she had

snatched up the wrong bag in her nervous haste. "This," I said to myself, "begins to look more and more like a farce worth seeing." But how wrong I was!—or at least, how nearly wrong.

Though deeply rutted, the road ahead was straight for a mile or so, and I felt that it would be safe to leave Susan for a few moments while I transferred myself to the presence of her deserted husband. I found him in the sitting room, incompletely clad in a pair of striped shorts and a shirt. Into the telephone he was shouting:

"I *know* I sent my clothes out to be pressed—but now I don't want them pressed—I want them back immediately! At once! . . . What? *Why* must there be some delay? . . ."

While he listened to Miggle's stammered apologies, I glanced at the note that Tom clutched in his hand. It read:

"Since your silly old shower bath is more important than me—I'm going home to Mother. This is all a terrible mistake. It's lucky we found out before it was too late.

"Susan.

"P. S.—You'll find the car at Mother's."

Farce, again—pure, unadulterated slapstick! Now, I thought, is the moment for the curtain to fall on the first act. The husband is stranded in a most undignified condition, and the wife is on her way home to Mama. Only one thing was missing—some bit of melodramatic suspense—some menacing counter-plot involving stolen "papers," espionage, sabotage, or something of the sort.

But I had been gone too long from Susan. On my way back to her, I passed through the kitchen and discovered the reason for the "delay" in delivering Tom's trousers. Dinah had been so flustered by the roses that she had burnt a hole through

their most vital section. In passing, I counterfeited a ten dollar bill and left it in her apron pocket to recompense her for the fault that was really more mine than hers.

WHEN I rejoined Susan she was stopping the car in front of a dilapidated general store in the ugly little village of Blackwoods. We entered the place together. She went directly to the telephone booth, while I floated about under the low, dirty ceiling.

My first glimpse of the only other person in the store was a real thrill of pleasure—professional pleasure, that is. Never had I seen a character so perfectly fitted both in appearance and manner for the role of villain. He was a hulking, lantern-jawed brute, with piggish eyes, a cruel, lascivious mouth and a thatch of dank, straggling hair. His skin was pale—pasty pale—*prison* pale. His shoulders slumped forward, and his dangling arms hung in front of him like those of an ape. Here, I thought, is just what the play has been wanting: a good, strong menace. I should have been rather disappointed if the creature had failed to take advantage of the situation.

But my fears were groundless. While Susan vainly attempted to reach her mother on the telephone, my Menace tiptoed to the back of the booth and placed his ear against the paper-thin partition. Presently, Susan's number answered in the condescending voice of a butler.

"Jeffries? This is Miss Vance—Mrs. Ellwood, I mean. Will you tell my Mother I want to speak to her? . . . She's not there? But where is she? She *must* be there—I need her! . . . Very well—when she comes in, tell her I'm on my way home. . . ."

Susan hung up, and Menace stepped away from the booth to stand, innocently picking his decayed teeth as she passed him on the way to the car. At the door,

she paused and turned back to ask, "Can you tell me how to get on to the highway?"

Menace made a gesture with a broken-nailed thumb, and lied, "Turn to the right at the graveyard and just keep going." I remembered that road—it wandered aimlessly through desolate swamp land and ended nowhere.

With an evil smile on his repulsive face, the villain stared after the girl until the car drew away; then, moving with suspicious speed, he went to the telephone and called a local number.

"Jakely?" he said. "Get this—I just started a dame down your road who's got a rock on her finger that must be worth five grand. You know what to do, don't you? . . . Well, step on it!—she'll be there in about twenty minutes. Just take her up to your joint and wait for me."

"The plot thickens!" said I to myself as I streaked back to Susan. The road was terrible beyond belief, and by now the night was dark as pitch. At my side, the girl shivered and moaned, "Oh why did I ever leave him? Why?"

"Why, indeed?" I almost asked. But at that moment we came to a detour sign in the middle of the road. The arrow pointed to a narrow, muddy path that twisted into the black heart of a forest of gnarled, misshapen oaks.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" said Susan. "I'm lost—I know I am. I'd go back if there were room to turn around."

There was no room, however. She had no choice but to go on. But as for me, I could choose a pleasanter means of locomotion than that lurching car. I got out and hovered comfortably in the air. Here I waited for a moment, more than half expecting what presently occurred.

When the ruby tail light vanished through the trees, a dark figure appeared from behind a clump of bushes, picked up the detour sign and set it down at the

entrance to the path Susan had taken. What a simple device it was! This would cut the poor child off from the rest of the world as effectually as if she were chained in a cellar.

Now, the second conspirator started after the car on foot and I floated along at his side. Jakely was a worthy companion to Menace (who was probably already on his way to the criminal rendezvous). He was a squat, greasy, powerful man, with a week's growth of black beard on his oily cheeks. There was something predatory in his way of walking—as if he were stalking an unsuspecting prey. In short, the casting of the part was most satisfactory.

When we had gone about a quarter of a mile, we came upon Susan's car, stranded helplessly in a carefully prepared trap of deep mud. The scene that followed was in the best Broadway tradition—the weeping, frightened heroine entrusting herself with touching gratitude to the villain's vile treachery. Jakely played his role to perfection. Carrying her through the mud and setting her on her feet, he assured her that she had nothing to worry about.

"Just come up and wait at the house," he said, "while I harness up the team and drag that bus of yours out of the mud—"

"I could wait here—"

"No, it wouldn't be safe for a young lady like you. Better come along and stay where there's no danger. It won't take long—and you'll be on your way again in no time. Come along, Miss."

He took her by the arm and she allowed herself to be led. I uttered a deep, shuddering sigh for innocence so betrayed.

"What's that!" Susan cried.

"Nothing to be afraid of." Jakely laughed coarsely. "Just an owl."

"An owl, my Jakely?" said I soundlessly. "Nay! No owl was that, but Nemesis! Nemesis, Jakely!"

I rather liked that line, and the mood was upon me to extemporize an even

longer speech, but I feared the play would suffer. In fact, I was afraid that it was beginning to suffer, already—not for lack of action and suspense, but for lack of a hero. If this was a melodrama, as it seemed to have become, the hero's triumphant arrival just before the final curtain was essential to its success.

I whisked back to the Inn and found Tom Elwood pacing the floor, his abbreviated costume unchanged. Coming to a quick decision, I rang the telephone bell, and when he put the receiver to his ear I spoke in a muffled voice:

"Darling, this is Susan. Oh, it's terrible—I've been kidnapped. No—don't ask questions. There's no time—they may find me any moment. Just let me tell you where I am. . . ." Having described the road to Jakely's place, I added, "Darling, I'm so sorry I left you, I love you so! Come to me, darling—save me!"

I think I ought to mention, right here, that in this case I made my voice so low and so hurried that young Tom was not sure of the exact words. But that he was sure enough of their import to play his role with vigorous realism I had no doubt. Really, I felt that he would solve the problem, unaided, of rescuing his hapless wife, but to prevent any unnecessary delay, I abstracted Miggle's trousers (he was asleep in bed), and dropped them in the hall for Tom to stumble over. In a pocket were the keys to Miggle's car.

As you probably realize, *timing* is of great importance in the production of any play, and especially in the case of a fast-moving melodrama is it so. If the action slows—if either hope or despair too greatly out-balances the other in the delicate scales of suspense—the audience is apt to yawn and reach for its hat. As a craftsman I saw that it was my duty to keep the play going at a furious pace.

Returning to Jakely's I discovered that Menace had arrived during my absence.

The two men were standing outside the cabin, conferring in whispers:

"Look," Jakely was saying, "why not run this thing into something big?"

"A snatch?" Menace guessed.

"Why not? Nobody knows she came this way. We'll put the car where it'll never be found. All we need is a few letters in her own handwriting."

"How we going to get 'em?"

"You kidding?"

Menace grunted. "And then?"

"We won't need her any more."

"Okay. Let's get started. I'll work her over while you figure out what we want her to write."

Obviously, the time had come for me to take a more active part in the play. As Menace and Jakely turned back to the cabin, I materialized myself as Susan's double, and stepped over the threshold.

"Hey!" Jakely yelled. "Where you going?"

"I've decided to walk to the highway," I said. "I'll send for the car in the morning."

"I wouldn't do that," said Menace, moving forward stealthily. "You better stay right here." Jakely was circling around to my other side.

"No—thank you for your kindness, but I'll just be going—"

Together, the two men snarled, "Oh, no, you don't!" and lunged at me. They met in mid-air, their heads colliding with a loud crack. From a distance of ten feet I watched them untangle.

"I had her," Menace said. "What happened?"

"I had her—but you got in the way. Anyway, there she is!"

Cursing, they sprang at me again. Always just beyond their grasp, I led them through tearing brambles and ripping thorns, over sharp rocks, through swamps and pools of sucking mud.

The path taken by the mad pursuit

made a wide swing through the forest, returning, at last, to Jakely's cabin. (I had looked in at intervals, always to find Susan patiently reading an old magazine.) Now, as I floated toward the place, the two villains staggering after me, bruised, bleeding and completely exhausted—I heard the throbbing of a motor, not far off. Jakely and Menace were panting so loudly that the sound could not reach their ears.

Entering the cabin I de-materialized myself and vanished. Within a few seconds, Jakely and Menace (with young Thomas closing in behind them) tumbled over the door step and lurched into the room where Susan waited. She dropped her magazine and started to her feet in sudden fright.

"*Got you!*" Their hands reached out for her like bloody claws.

"No!" she screamed, backing away to the wall. "Don't touch me! Help! Help! Help!"

It was Tom's cue, and he spoke his line from the open door: "Touch one hair of her head—and you die!"

The villains swung round and the hero waded in. I don't know whether it occurred to Tom as somewhat strange that he was able to subdue two such gory giants with such ease and despatch. Each took one blow on the chin and fell fainting to the floor.

So the play ended as all good melodramas end—with the beautiful girl in the brave hero's arms. Susan delivered the curtain speech:

"Darling, never let me leave you again! Never!"

As he bent to kiss her I noiselessly applauded, and neither walking nor running chose the nearest exit.

Purely as dramaturgy I was rather pleased with my creation; the performance had been better than adequate—the production excellent.

In short, it was quite an auspicious First Night.