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CONTENTS FOR  
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Number  
1

- Cover Design . . . . . Virgil Finlay  
*Illustrating "Spotted Satan"*
- Spotted Satan . . . . . Otis A. Kline and E. Hoffmann Price 7  
*A stirring tale of Burma, and a leopard that was not a leopard*
- Mortmain . . . . . Seabury Quinn 32  
*A beautiful Russian vampire who could not rest quiet in her grave*
- A Million Years in the Future (Part I) . . . . . Thomas P. Kelly 50  
*The weirdest and most exciting interplanetary tale ever printed*
- Twister . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 85  
*A weird experience of two newly-weds in a ghostly village*
- Realization . . . . . Harry Warner, Jr. 93  
*Verse*
- Portrait of a Bride . . . . . Earl Peirce, Jr. 94  
*An intriguing psychological story of a man who fell in love with a shadow*
- Forbidden Cupboard . . . . . Frances Garfield 105  
*What shape of horror lifted its tenuous arms out of the dark cupboard?*
- The Unveiling . . . . . Alfred I. Tooke 112  
*An uncanny tale about a great artist who painted emotions*
- "Up from Earth's Center" . . . . . Virgil Finlay 115  
*Pictorial interpretation of a quatrain by Omar Khayyam*
- Lips of the Dead . . . . . W. J. Stamper 116  
*A favorite story from WEIRD TALES for June, 1925*
- "It Happened to Me" . . . . . 120  
*A new department of true weird experiences by readers of WEIRD TALES*
- The Eyrie . . . . . 121  
*Our readers exchange opinions*

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.



**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**



"She fell back, her face all gone frostily dry."

# Forbidden Cupboard

By FRANCES GARFIELD

*What was that shape of horror that lifted its tenuous arms  
out of the dark cupboard?*

WHEN I had panted up the two flights of stairs and set down my suitcase, I saw that Father O'Neil was standing at the open door of my new flat. He was the very picture of chubby, priestly embarrassment.

"The place isn't ready yet, Miss Colt," he protested. "We didn't expect you until tomorrow, you know."

"Yes, but I took an earlier train," I

replied, "and the expressman's bringing up my trunk."

The good father looked at me thoughtfully. With his round belly, his black garments and comfortable warmth of nature, he reminded me of an old-fashioned depot stove. Even though his face was solemn just now, its rosy cheer was like a glow of friendly flame.

"Well, come in," he said at last. "I

don't see how I can keep you on your own doorstep," and he managed a smile. "I promised to look after you, and I shall. I'm in charge here. Probably you think the arrangement odd."

"Oh, not at all," I made haste to say, though I burned with curiosity to know why a priest doubled as landlord. It was all because of Lola Knesbec, my old professor of boarding-school English, that I was taking the flat. She knew that I hoped to live and write in New York, and that I wanted the cheapest of comfortable lodgings.

Her old friend, Father O'Neil, was renting flats in an ancient house on the border of Greenwich Village. There was an exchange of letters, careful consideration of my financial and character references . . . and here I was, at once delighted and mystified by the situation.

I entered, and almost squealed in delight.

"You like it, Miss Hampton?" asked Father O'Neil.

"Tremendously!" I assured him, and I did. No tawdry stage-set this, simulating a crass dream of a Village studio with cushioned divans, batik hangings and conflicting colors; no, nor was it imitation Park Avenue, with mock-oriental rugs and plush over-stuffings. The huge living-room was papered in fawn brown up to the lofty ceiling, with heavy carved molding, and the open fireplace—a real one, not a portable sham—had a white marble slab for mantel. The furniture, of massy wood with leather cushioning, bespoke unmodish comfort. A full-length mirror hung opposite the front door. The windows, set high in the front wall, had varnished maple shutters inside. To such a room might Washington Irving once have come to tea, talking of headless horsemen to his crinolined hostess; while, outside the half-open shutters, might have paced and shivered a beautiful, wretched man in un-

seasonable nankeen, hungry for the lunch he could not buy—Edgar Allan Poe.

"Miss Knesbec was sure you'd like it," smiled the priest. Standing close to a high-silled window, he was bathed from the knees up in gray light from the autumn sky. His shanks were darker and more indistinct, literally wading in floor shadows. He drew out a stubby briar pipe, already filled.

"May I smoke?" he asked.

"Please do."

And I remembered that I had something else to say, concerning a fascinating tale that Lola Knesbec had hinted.

"**I** UNDERSTAND that this house once belonged to Guilford Golt," I offered, and waited for a response. It came, and it was more intriguing than I had dared hope. Father O'Neil's face lost some of its pinkness, and the hand that held the pipe seemed to quiver.

"What do you know about Guilford Golt?" he demanded.

"Only that he was an eccentric scholar of the middle Nineteenth Century," I replied. "Miss Knesbec told our class that his character had been used by Fitz-James O'Brien in that story about the wizard who brought evil little toys to life, and by Nathaniel Hawthorne for the alchemical genius in *The Birthmark*—"

"Miss Knesbec was right," said Father O'Neil; "only those tales did not do Guilford Golt grim enough justice."

"And didn't this house once belong to him?" I pursued.

"It did," the priest nodded. "Golt conducted many experiments in it—experiments that escaped legal notice because legal men scorn to believe such things. But he and his works were baleful. A group of citizens visited him one night in a very vengeful mood—he had made himself too dreadful a figure, even for the strange and tolerant community that was New York

nearly a century ago. And in the morning he had vanished.

"I doubt if he was to be frightened," continued Father O'Neil gravely. "He was the sort who had gone beyond fear. But—yes, he was driven away. And he had no heirs. And this house remained closed until recently, when we of the church, as trustees, were asked to put it to some profitable use. And so we are renting flats in it—having taken certain precautions."

As he spoke this last word, his eyes wandered, as if in spite of themselves, to a gray-painted door in the rear of the room. Then he spoke more brightly:

"I've laid a fire ready. Shall I light it?"

"Please," I said, slipping off my coat. The gray door to which his involuntary glance had directed me must be a clothes-closet. I moved toward it and drew down the latch, but it would not open. A great chest of dark wood, that at first had seemed a bar of the low-fallen shadows, had been shoved against the bottom of the door.

"Wait, don't open that door, my child," called Father O'Neil suddenly. He had crouched down to light the fire, but now, moving quickly for so plump a little man, he was at my side. His pleasant face was anxious.

"Not if you say so," I said, rather startled.

He smiled once more, in an obvious effort to reassure me. "The closet must never be opened. In fact it is to be plastered up—then it will be cut off permanently and can be forgotten."

"I doubt if I could pull that chest away, in any case," I smiled back.

"Don't even try."

I moved across the room, to the bedroom, and laid my coat upon a stout old walnut bed.

"Now to get at my work," I said, coming back into the parlor. "I'm a long jump behind, as usual."

"Then I'll go. I, too, have work." Father O'Neil put his pipe into his mouth and took up his broad, black hat. "I'll be back later, if you don't mind. I'm expecting some workmen. I hope they won't bother you—interrupt your writing."

"It's quite all right," I assured him. "Don't give it a thought. Won't you have tea with me, around four o'clock?" I asked him on impulse. "I feel that we're destined to be friends."

"Thank you, I'll be delighted." And he smiled himself out.

Almost immediately came the expressman with my trunk and suitcase. I began at once to arrange my few possessions and as soon as possible got to work.

It was no inspiring job—merely a panegyric of a business man, even titled by my employer, the doting widow—*Truman Murdock, A Man's Man*. But I set out to do the best I could in a compromise between the canonizing taste of the man's heirs and my own idea of what a biography should be.

I had planned a good first chapter, at least—a widely imaginary pedigree. His patronymic suggested the dashing follower of Roderick Dhu, and I might even quote a few lines of Walter Scott. His mother's name had been Blake—perhaps this made him a connection of William Blake, perhaps even of that Sir Percy Blake who is supposed to have sat for Frans Hals as the *Laughing Cavalier*. All this could be whipped into good copy to get the book off to a readable start. Down I sat to the typewriter, drumming at it page after ambling page. "Each of us," I paraphrased something I had seen in *The Reader's Digest*, "is a great vehicle in which ride all the ghosts of his forefathers. . . ."

What was it that stirred behind me?

I SWUNG quickly around. No living thing was there; I saw only the room, the furniture, the fireplace in which the

blaze had died to a ruddy scattering of coals, the gray closet door spanned by the dark chest. There was the noise again—or was it?

I rose, crossed the floor, and stopped just beside the forbidden closet, listening with both my ears.

Silence now. I might have been mistaken, nervous in a new house, excited by Father O'Neil's air of mystery. Who, and in what stodgy book, has said that an imaginative mind is bad for the nerves? Standing beside the closet, I wished that Father O'Neil had not been at once insistent and mysterious about my leaving it shut. My impulse to pry was natural and extreme, as with all women in such a situation, clear back to the wife of Bluebeard.

I examined the chest that did duty as obstacle. Heavy, dark, roughly carved, it looked at first like something out of the hold of a pirate ship; but undoubtedly it was only a modern imitation. The lock, for instance, was a new automatic one, and fast. I could not lift the lid. The closet door, by contrast, was not locked at all. Indeed, it had not even a keyhole—only a heavy iron latch, painted dull gray like the rest of the panel, and once before I had lifted it.

Looking closely now, I saw that there was a mark in the paint above that latch, a line undoubtedly scraped when the paint had been fresh. A cross; no, it was more than a cross. At the upper end of the vertical bar was attached a sickle-like curve. I had seen such a device before, in my childhood, and had heard an old Irish cook call it the "God-have-mercy sign." What was such a sign doing here?

My mind turned again to Guilford Golt. The legend, so skimmed over by Lola Knesbec and now by Father O'Neil, had credited him with belief, if not power, in black magic. Did this closet have something to do with the tale? If so, why did

not the priest bring such a knowledge into the light instead of plastering the door shut? The amateur-detective impulse, which surely makes up part of every human soul, became strong and insistent.

I bent, seized the handle at the side of the chest, and tried to drag it away. Who could have refrained from such an effort? But the weight momentarily baffled me. In the midst of my tugging, I let go and straightened up guiltily. A sharp ringing sound filled the room.

The telephone—I hadn't even noticed that there was one. It rang again, and yet again, while I walked toward it. The raucous summons angered me for a moment, and I snatched up the instrument with a needlessly sharp "Hello!"

"Hello," said a high, drawling voice, hard to classify as male or female, young or old. "I want to order a ton of coal."

"You have the wrong number," I replied.

"But I bought coal there last year," protested the drawl. "Isn't this Chelsea 3-0036?"

It was, as a glance at the instrument's foot showed me; but I could only repeat that I had no coal for sale.

"You used to sell coal," insisted the voice reproachfully.

"There's some mistake," I said, and somehow felt as if I were shirking my duty. "This is a private home." And I hung up.

Just like a telephone, I thought savagely; interrupting my work—but I hadn't been working. I had been about to investigate that closet.

I walked back to the chest. The problem, I felt, must be faced; Father O'Neil had not wanted me to open the door, but I must prove to myself that I did not fear that little scratching noise, if indeed there had been a noise. And I needed storage space.

Again I bent, seized the chest, and

this time succeeded in dragging it slantingly back from its position.

Again sound—shrill now, and tuneful. It flowed in and filled the room, but from outside.

Mystified and intrigued, I hurried to the window. It was open a crack, and I lifted it all the way and leaned out.

THE musical shrilling came from a penny whistle, and the ragged old man who played it was getting real melody out of his tawdry instrument. He was playing *Annie Laurie*, from which, as I peered out at him, he shifted to *Bonnie Doon*. Then he saw me, and ceased to play at all. Taking the whistle from his mouth, he gazed up at my window.

"Please, kind lady!" he bawled winningly.

My purse lay on that very sill, and I quickly opened it and fumbled out six copper pennies. These I flung down to him. They fell in a little rain about my serenader who, stooping quickly, retrieved the coins with eagerly darting clutches. In thanks he doffed the filthiest tweed cap I ever saw, played me a little chirpy flourish on his whistle, and tramped away.

A more pleasant dissuasion, that, from my attempt on the closet's secret. . . . I frowned. Was Providence marshaling these telephones and whistles against me, to hold me back from flouting Father O'Neil's wish? I toyed with the fancy for only a moment, then told myself that it sprang from a falsely guilty conscience. I went straight and purposefully to the chest, once more clutched its handle, and drew it away with a mighty heave. Straightening up, I pressed down the latch and opened the closet door.

I looked into absolute blackness, a formless and spacious cave of it; it was as though there were no sides or back to the little nook, as though it were, instead, a vast and lightless valley. But close to me,

so close that it must have dangled against the door when shut, hung something.

An old garment, was my first thought. I was about to step in and examine it, when my eyes were drawn to the inner side of the open door. It was covered with writing, crude, heavy writing as if it were done with a coarse instrument—even a human finger. I wondered what kind of ink could have turned such a rusty brown, and began to read:

They are shutting me up in here to die. They think they are rid of me—but I'll live. Life, in some sort, will be mine forever. The rotting of my flesh and my bones will only make my spirit free.

I write this in my own blood. They left me nothing else. I'm not done with this world. Whenever this prison is opened . . .

I was intrigued, and amused. Was this the bizarre legend that Father O'Neil had known of the place, and had hesitated telling me because it was so dreadful? The very fact of its being written in human blood was enough to discredit it with me. Melodramatic stuff from the paper-backed thrillers. I must chide him for judging me a simple, credulous child. I moved back, smiling, and saw a fluttery movement in the fabric-like hanging in the dark closet.

I turned to look again. There was a filmy openwork about it, like lace or net. Not a garment, after all; more probably a grubby gray curtain, stowed away here and forgotten. . . .

But does a curtain hold itself erect, to the width and height of a human figure, without hook or rod to support it at the top? Does a curtain turn toward you an unshapen upper roundness like an ill-modeled head, that shows two black caverns like a mockery of eyes, and does a curtain lift slowly a pair of ragged trails so that they seem to gesture and grope like skinny arms?

Does a curtain drift slowly from its place, and come toward you, as if it wanted to catch and grapple you?

I FELL back and away, my face gone all frostily dry and my legs suddenly bereft of stiffening bone, drained of living blood. The thing left its shadowed hiding, pausing for only an instant on the threshold. I had a good view of it. No, no curtain—no honest fabric at all. The cloudy mass of it, like a concentration of lint and dust and smoke, stirred in all its particles, yet clung to a filmy shape-travesty of a human being. The dull black eye-blotches narrowed themselves, as if the gray light were too strong. And then it drifted into the open, around the chest, and at me.

Its arms raised themselves to a level with the face. I saw, with an increase of disgusted horror, that its hands had no fingers—they flapped like dusty mittens, opening and extending, to take hold of me. My own hands drew up to fight back. My heart had become a giant fist, trying to batter free from my ribs. For by some fantastic telepathy, I knew what the creature wanted.

He intended to don me, as a human being puts on a garment, clothe himself in my flesh for his devil's doings. This was the thing that had been shut away from the world for so long—was now visiting its wrath and will upon me—once Guilford Golt, the sorcerer, now a fiend made stronger and ghastlier by death's change.

Something was blocking my retreat. I tried to scream at the touch of it, but achieved only a sigh. The wall, beside my writing-table, was at my shoulder-blades. Within reach of my hand lay my dictionary, bought last week for a dollar in a second-hand bookstore. I clutched it, hurled it with all my force. It struck, square upon the cheek, or where the cheek should be. The book did not make a noise,

did not stop its flight. It flew through and past—into the inky blackness of the closet.

Where it had struck was a ragged notch. I could see the wall through it. The shape did not pause or falter. It drifted closer, I felt, like a crushing weight, its purposeful menace.

Its arms spread now, horizontally, to pin me against the wall. I thought to dodge away. Too late! I was caught in the angle of the wall and the table. The torn, musty head seemed to crinkle up its surface below the eyes, as though it were smiling for all its lack of mouth.

The window—could I reach it, lift it, scream for help? Jump out? Too late for that, too. The dirt-fluff mittens were soaring up before my face, fumbling to touch my neck. An aura of dust thickened in my nose and throat. A wave of cold passed over me like a shaking buffet, dimness weighted my eyelids, my head lolled upon my shoulders as if it were imperfectly fastened there. The round head, the dull eye-patches, were within inches of my face. I could not cry out.

But suddenly the creature shrank back, as shaken as I had been. Something had started, dismayed it. There! A noise, coming again to my rescue.

A knock, loud and free, at the door. After a moment, a voice:

"Miss Hampton?"

Father O'Neil was outside. And the thing knew him. I had no doubt the thing had been outfaced by Father O'Neil, and feared him; so might a more forbidding creature fear what a priest could and would do. . . . It retreated more swiftly, falling, almost, back on its trail through the room.

All at once I could breathe again, could hold myself erect without the help of the wall.

"Miss Hampton, may I come in?" asked Father O'Neil again.

The filmy grayness had gained the open door of the closet, drooping abjectly in its hurry to seek shelter there. It drew itself inside, making itself small and dark, to match the shadows. I managed to hurry after, to throw myself across the dragged-away chest, to fall against the panel, swinging it shut with my weight.

My fingers groped to the latch, lifted it, and let it fall into place.

"F—Father O'Neil!" I found my voice at last. "Yes. Come in."

And my front door opened. Still sagging against the closet door, I turned to face that blessedly welcome visitor, all hearty girth and churchly blackness and rosy, beaming face.

"I'm afraid that I'm just a few minutes early for tea," he began, and then broke off, staring at me. "Why, Miss Hampton. What are you doing at that door?"

Quickly he hurried across to me.

**I** DREW away, came around the chest once more and faced him.

"You weren't really going to open the closet?" he chided me earnestly.

I shook my head mutely and with absolute honesty. Not all the publisher's gold, the critics' acclaim, the reading public's patronage, would ever tempt me to put my hand on that latch again.

Father O'Neil bent. With a quick, solid shove, he moved the chest back into its sentinel place against the bottom of the door.

"Once more, I urge you never to look into that closet, Miss Hampton," he ad-

dressed me solemnly as he drew himself erect once more. "The plasterers will be here within an hour. Meanwhile I am forced to ask you for your promise."

"I promise," I assured him with husky eagerness.

The priest smiled approval, and helped me to set out the tea-things. My hands, deadened as though by injection of some drug, could not help but shake. And Father O'Neil noticed.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you, my child," he apologized gently. "Yet it is important—extremely important—that the closet door remain shut forever." He looked at me calculatingly. "I was tempted for a moment to tell you everything; but I doubt if you'd believe the story."

I nodded. I had learned too much already, ever to have complete peace of mind again. I had known the breath and face of a danger more dire than anything that threatens only the flesh. That danger had been averted. Father O'Neil had saved me without himself knowing how close a call it had been.

I made a sudden decision. Just now I held the priest's respect and friendship. He thought that he was protecting me by remaining silent. Why trouble him, worry him, by saying I knew the story of a horror that was now closed up again? Why shake his sturdy courage and mastery of the awful situation? And already the memory was becoming blessedly unreal, dream-like. . . .

"No," I agreed, as brightly as I could manage. "I might not believe it."

