

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XV

NUMBER 3

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2467 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, 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.

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# GERARD 7932

By SARAH NEWMAYER

**A**BOVE the battered table an anemic gas flame made dully visible the squalor of the dingy, narrow room. The bare floor had long since been scuffed paintless, and a gaunt cot sagged along one wall where age-browned paper peeled in jagged, leprous spots.

Close beneath the flickering light stood a woman, scanning the *London Times* with feverish intensity. The hands that gripped the newspaper were translucently thin, blue veins showing flat as though penciled on their surface. She was small, and slender to emaciation, so slender that the threadbare dress, drab as despair, seemed to hang on her very bones. Yet the fragile body suggested the exquisite proportions of a Tanagra statuette, and in the pallor of the still beautiful face smoke-blue eyes flamed dimly, like guttering candles.

Those eyes, the only living things in the waxy face, were fixed now on a "Personal" half-way down the agony column:

7932—May we meet in eternity, where the truth alone will be known and believed, and calumnies and false judgments cease.

It was mid-morning, but the heavy blanket of a London fog pressed darkly against the window-pane. For days the city had been shrouded in that yellow-gray pall. For years the woman's life had been wrapped in a chill fog of treachery and despair. Night itself would be better. That was what she had desperately decided, and the "Personal" was her last message.

He would see it and read it, she

knew. He took the agony column, with coffee and rolls, every morning for breakfast. A man may change his wives, easily, but his habits remain fixed. Still, to make certain he would recognize the "Personal" as directed to him, she had been tempted to key it with his complete telephone number—Gerard 7932—but that would have drawn the attention of others, and she could not leave a last good-bye that might humiliate him.

It was strange to think she would never see the sun again. Nor the warm brown earth, the friendly grass, and trees beckoning in the wind. Only the ugly little room with the evil fog crouching at the window. Soon she would leave her body there and set out alone. Was there another life beyond—or merciful annihilation? Today she would find out. Even now it was time to go. Where? Involuntarily she looked toward the window and, shivering, drew the torn shade close. The gas flame flickered more brightly. The shabby hole of a room seemed a bit less dismal.

What must one do to get ready for death? Was there nothing more than mere mechanical preparation? No good-bye?

In happier days, farewells and homecomings had never been complete without loving, foolish little presents. Now that she was going away for the last time, she longed to celebrate with a final gift. But there was not one friend to whom she could offer it. Poor, indeed! Only a wedding ring, too loose for the bony, small finger it encircled. She could not part with

her ring, though her husband had taken away everything it symbolized—love, protection, happiness, even his name.

He had been able to withdraw his gifts. But it was out of his power to make her take back what she had given him, the drudgery which had helped support him during those lean years of struggle to establish himself in his profession. She was no longer his wife—she did not even share his name—but her love would inevitably continue a fundamental part of his career. He could never wrench that much of her apart from his life.

What a wonderful thought to carry with her! It might keep her warm even in the grave. A fluttering radiance for an instant brightened her wan face—the afterglow, the fare-thee-well of love. She picked up the *Times*. Her message was too sad. It should have been a joyous good-bye—that gay word of parting in the old days: "Cheerio!"

Why not telephone him now? It would be so easy. Just a coin in the slot—"Gerard 7932"—then his voice. Quickly: "Cheerio, old dear!" Click the receiver back into place, and turn a smiling face to death.

But no, she was forgetting. His secretary would answer the telephone. Strange that she could forget! There had been another secretary. . . . Savagely she jerked up her thoughts. She wanted to carry beauty with her out of the world, not bitterness.

As she began methodically to tear the newspaper into strips, her glance was arrested by the "Personal" at the top of the agony column:

Would anyone possessing skeleton and having no use for same, kindly lend it to two medical students who are unable to buy.—Elfort, 142, Cambridge St., S. W. 1.

Here was her opportunity! Ironically enough, her body. The one gift men had persistently sought from her. Withheld from all but one; lavished on that one, who had turned it into

a weapon against herself. As the old, bitter panorama flashed through her memory, it seemed the crowning mockery. For the thousandth time she wondered dully what excuse her husband would have used to divorce her if the very work she had done to help him had not given him such a cruel lever.

They had married so young and so poor. A few months after the pinched gayety of their honeymoon, jokes about poverty had not seemed humorous—to Richard. He grew increasingly morose, spent less and less time at home, harried so by creditors. To bring in needed extra sovereigns she worked at whatever she could find to do. One day an artist asked her to pose for him. Work in the nude paid best, and she was desperate. She was afraid to tell Richard. But he never seemed to think it strange when the unpaid bills diminished. He was always ready to ignore unpleasant things.

He began to get on in his profession. Social engagements in which she was never included became an important part of his life. Too proud to question him, she pretended to accept his casual explanations that these engagements were only to further his career. Beating back doubt and dismay, she made every excuse for him in her own mind. But she began to sicken under the suspicion that he longed to be rid of her.

Late one afternoon, wearily returning home after hours of posing, she found a stranger waiting on her doorstep. He asked her name, handed her a folded document and was gone before she could question him.

In the nightmare weeks which followed, she managed to see her husband once. Bewildered by the legal technicalities of the divorce plea, with little money and no able friends to lend their support, she begged Richard to be kind to her, to accept the innocence of those "secret meetings with individuals hereinafter named,"

and withdraw his charges. At last, in a frenzy of despair, she implored him to be merciful because of the gratitude he owed her. That had turned him from stone to violent rage. He literally pushed her out of his office, ripping from his arm the terror-stricken clutch of her beseeching fingers. Hope gone, she had let the divorce proceed uncontested, unwilling to drag down in the wreck of her life the reputations of those artists her husband had named as correspondents. Their money, earned blamelessly by her beautiful body, had helped pay Richard's bills.

And now that same body, lovely no longer, was still in demand. There was grim humor in the thought. She smiled in bitter self-derision. Even in the flesh she was a first-class skeleton—and that was what was wanted! "Two medical students . . . unable to buy . . ." Macabre though it was, she felt grateful that she was not quite a pauper. She had something left to give. Now she could close her eyes on the travesty of life with a twisted smile. There was a sardonic sense of fitness in offering her last gift to medical students. Poor, eager, funny lads, with their audacious "Personal." How well she understood their hopes and hardships, their soul-shriveling disappointments and their incredulous joy when the tide of success finally turned in their direction. Here was a chance to speed them on their way, to give them a mute "Cheerio!"

Her note was brief:

Call at 1525 Cardle Road any time after nine a. m. Thursday and ask to be shown to Muriel Barr's room. You may have the skeleton for taking it away.

When she came back from the pillar box at the corner she was shuddering. Gasping for breath, she slammed the door. Safe! The world shut out. Shut in with death. Out there in the fog were vague shapes drifting and dissolving—ghosts! Cold, clammy,

like dead hands slipping over you. Quick! Quick now, she must close it all out—fog, life, love, everything she knew of reality, the dear familiar things of earth and sky, the close feel of humankind. With no compass but her lonely soul, she must venture out into the dark. Perhaps, though, there might be friendly lights and even, at the end of night, sunshine and a new day.

With weakly trembling fingers she stuffed the strips of paper into the cracks around the door, plugged the keyhole, then slid limply to the floor. She was tired, so very tired. But in that moment, drained to the dregs of life, repose came, strength for her purpose. Struggling to her feet, she looked keenly about the room. She had sealed it well.

It was time to do the last thing.

She stretched out her hand toward the flickering gas jet. No, she would blow out the flame. It sputtered, dancing frantically an inch above the gas tip as her breath cut between. Such a feeble flame, a mere wisp of light, to cling so tenaciously to existence. One more puff—closer—stronger . . .

The room became a black horror closing in on her. Her clawing fingers rasped the wall, then gratefully clutched the cold rigid pipe and raced along it to turn off that hissing poison.

But with her fingers at the stopcock, her momentary wild panic subsided. Like an automaton she turned and groped her way to the bed. Stiffly she laid herself down on it. Arms tense at her sides, she waited—waited . . .

And then she felt fear leave her, lifting like a fog from the city. Anguish slipped away. Turning on her side, she tucked one hand under her cheek. A lethal drowsiness relaxed her whole body. Her mind seemed to float above it, drifting higher and higher, another self. Any moment the invisible thread that held it might gently snap and she would rush up-

ward, buoyant and free, leaving below an inert, dead weight.

Old scenes began to take form and grow vivid. She could think of the past without sorrow. When she and Richard were young and together. Too long had she closed her mind to those bright yesterdays. Now she could give memory one last holiday—let it gather a garland of the sweetest flowers of the past.

A garland . . . a funeral wreath . . .

**T**HERE was something sinister about the closed door. The two young men looked with growing suspicion at the mask-like face of the lodging-house keeper. But her narrow, pale eyes showed only a subterranean curiosity. She stooped to the keyhole. Quickly straightening up, she ordered the callers to break open the door.

A rush of gas met them. One dashed to the window and jerked it open, tearing down the tattered curtain. The other turned off the gas, then bent over the huddled figure on the bed. He touched it furtively—stiff and cold.

"I'll go for the coroner," he murmured thickly as he stumbled toward the door.

"No, you don't!" The landlady pushed him down on the step beside his companion. "You'll both wait here till the copper comes. He'll find out what you two know about this!" She marched heavily past them down the stairs, opened the front door, and blew a police whistle.

When the officer arrived a faint odor of gas still lingered in the narrow room. A brilliant shaft of sunlight lay across the bed, turning to gold the long bronze hair that half covered the small person lying there so still, so unconcerned.

With the arrival of the coroner, the brief examination of room and body

was completed. The medical students showed him their note.

"Pretty good joke—on herself!" he commented. "I suppose the body's yours, as long as she gave it to you, but it'll have to lie in the morgue the usual time. Where're you going to keep it—in your bathtub?"

**A**S THE students hurried out from the gray misery of the damp lodging-house, the sunshine of early spring seemed the unreal radiance of another world. In silence they walked block after block down the mean street. Suddenly the younger blurted out:

"God! If I had the money I'd give that little creature a decent burial!"

"You blooming idiot! She was damn near dead with consumption and starvation anyway, but if she hadn't seen our 'Personal' in yesterday's *Times* we'd have lost our chance."

"D'you mean you're going to—Christ! We advertised, but not for a skeleton with the flesh still warm on it!"

In his own way, though, the other was for carrying out the last wish of the dead.

"Now, look here, old chap!" he argued. "The science of medicine has got to advance, suicide or no suicide. That body back there is no more and no less than the body of a dead dog in a gutter. Pure luck. I call it! Not only gives us a skeleton, but Dr. Evans wants a tubercular body for dissection at the clinic. I'll just stop in here and telephone him. What's his number, d'you remember? Trafalgar—Trafalgar—no, it's Gerard—something. . . . Wake up, wake up, man! What's Evans' number?"

"What? Dr. Evans? Oh—Gerard 7932."

