

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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*A "Haunted House" Story
with a Touch of Humor*

Golden Glow

By Harry Irving Shumway

WHEN you're rolling along through the country at forty miles an hour, and have been so doing for several hours, any excuse to stop and stretch is a welcome excuse. It gives you an opportunity to light a longed-for pipe and takes the kinks out of your back. I lighted mine.

My friend, Doctor Wilbur Hunneker, whom I have never called anything but Hunky, vaulted from the driver's seat without the formality of opening the door.

"Judas Iscariot!" he grunted, slapping the dust from his shoulders and digging at his eyes. "Some dust and some breeze!"

"What you stop here for?" I asked him, propping my feet up on the windshield. "Not that I don't welcome any hesitation in the fierce procedure which you call touring. But why here?"

He grinned and pointed toward a tumbled-down, decrepit-looking cottage, almost entirely covered with woodbine. In front of it grew the most magnificent clusters of Golden Glow I have ever seen. There were hundreds of these beautiful yellow heads swaying in the sunlight, and they were in strange contrast to the drab and weather-beaten background of the house.

"Going to pick you a nosegay," he said. "You haven't energy enough

to gather wild flowers for yourself, so I'll do it for you."

"Go to it," I said, relieved, and sank back on the deep cushions in a cloud of my own smoke. "But look out for the pooch. Also day-time ghosts. That old shack may have both."

"I'm not afraid of either," he replied, and moved through the high grass toward the house.

Lazily, I watched him selecting the choicest blooms. Then my gaze wandered over the old squatty-looking house.

It was indeed a derelict, a perfect example of the abandoned home. I couldn't imagine anyone having been near it or in it for a score of years. The small window-panes were covered with cobwebs and the marks of falling leaves and pelting rains of many years. The door in the center was innocent of paint, and great seams ran down and across its sections, witnesses of the battles it had put up against the roaring storms.

The stone slabs, slanted and sunken, which served as steps to the door were moss-covered and almost hidden from sight by the luxuriantly growing grass. Not a sound came from the place, or indeed from anywhere else.

Hunky returned to the car, grinning at me with a huge bunch of the golden flowers. He presented them

with a sweeping gesture. Not to be outdone in courtesy, I rose and made him a mocking bow.

"Accept these tokens of my esteem, I prithee."

"I do, Sir Knight, and go to hell," I replied. "If you're through with this horticultural business what d'you say we get to the fishing? That's what we started out for—trout, not yellow bellies."

He held up his hand in protest.

"There is no element of romance in your sordid make-up. You're as flat in the head as the fish you catch. Take a look at that old house. What stories it might tell! What ghosts may have prowled about in its sombre interior! I see a broken pane in the quaint side window of the door. Adventure calls. Watch me."

The nut! He noiselessly moved toward the door. Then he gingerly thrust his hand through the jagged opening in the side window and felt for the key. I saw by the smile on his face that he had found it. He removed his hand, turned the outside knob—and the door opened. He peered around, and then went inside.

It wasn't premonition or an unknown feeling of anything that prompted me to leap over the side of that car and beat it for the inside of that house. It was a glimpse of one corking fine mantle that I caught through the open door. Old mantles, newel-posts and corner china-closets exert an influence over my artistic soul that brooks no laziness. I'll walk ten miles through a bog any day to get a peep at something rare and fine in old woodwork. This one called to me, and I went.

I had on rubber-soled shoes, as did my companion, and hence made little noise. Hunky was nowhere in sight, but there was a side door beyond the fire-place and I knew he must be prowling about on the other side of it.

"Say, Hunky, did you see this old mantle?" I called, moving toward the door.

I went through it—and found myself looking at two most unexpected things—Hunky, with his hands raised above his head, and a nice, blue-black automatic held in the unwavering hand of an old woman who was sitting in a chair.

"YOU, too!" she snapped at me, "Up with 'em! Now what the hell are you two crooks breaking into an old woman's home for?"

"Good heavens, ma'am," stammered Hunky. "We—that is—I thought it was a deserted farm house. No intention of annoying anybody. We are simply touring—just a lark to break in here."

"'Lark', hey?" said the old woman, a most unpleasant glare in her eyes. "D'you call it a lark to bust into my home and maybe rob me? How do I know you mightn't have murdered me?"

"I assure you, madame," I interrupted, "my friend here had no intention of doing the slightest harm. It was, as he says, a lark—just to show off to me. I followed him because I was interested in the old woodwork—and not your modern hardware," I added.

She lowered the gun slowly.

"Hum. Well, you don't look like desperate characters now I take a good look at you. I was frightened, I guess."

"Sorry," said Hunky. "No intention of frightening anybody, and it was silly of me to break in. I apologize."

"Well, I guess that's all right. I'll let you go. But don't come around here scarin' me again," replied the evil-looking old woman. "Now you get!"

We got. Hunky stepped on the gas and we traveled. I hope I am not a saffron member of the coward league, but just the same I own there are many views I prefer infinitely more than the muzzle of a dog that both barks and bites. Hunky was not

much upset. He's familiar with guns. I prefer fishing rods.

"A quaint old party," he mused, as we got under way. "Old house, everything all dust-covered, old woman—and an up-to-date automatic in her fist. How many old farm ladies pack new guns?"

Now I was awake. "Yes, and how many old ladies up in this section of the hinterland speak with an unbu-colic accent. I know the local dialect, and she doesn't belong."

"We'll stop here for gas," said Hunky, guiding the car around another which was filling from a tank by a country store.

A thick-set young man was turning the gasoline pump-handle and another man, athletic in build and in his early thirties, was watching the flow into the tank of his car.

Nobody up in that section of the world ever hurries, and the conversation between the two was easy and unruffled.

"Sure you won't disappoint us?" asked the store-keeper.

"No fear," answered the other. "Cases all taken care of and I can get away with no trouble. Better give me two quarts of oil, Ed, medium."

The one called Ed went inside, and Hunky and I followed him in search of tobacco. He obliged me with a package and also some conversation which he seemed anxious to spill.

"That feller out there is our district attorney," he said. "Wouldn't think it, would you? Young and all that. Fact, he's the youngest district attorney in our state. He plays short field on our baseball team—The Hunterville Tigers."

"So he's district attorney?" inquired Hunky.

"Sure is, and smart as they make 'em."

Hunky wandered out to the cars in front I followed. He approached

the young official, who was putting up the hood of his car in readiness for the oil.

"Sir," said Hunky to him. "Are you District Attorney for this county?"

"Yes, sir," answered the man, straightening up and gazing back at Hunky with a pair of very frank and fearless gray eyes.

"In that case I want to tell you something," said Hunky. "I just broke into an old house about three miles down this road. It looked to be a deserted house, all covered with woodbine and a lot of golden glow in the front of it."

"That's the Old Collishaw House. It is deserted. No one has lived there for fifteen years."

"I thought so, too—consequently when I ventured through a door and looked smack into the barrel of an unprepossessing revolver you can realize I was surprised some."

The young District Attorney pushed his hat up from his forehead. There seemed nothing at all that could be hidden from his eyes, and now he bent their gaze on Hunky.

"Hum," he said finally. "If that had happened at night I'd say that you were seeing things."

Hunky laughed.

"My friend had the same pleasure and also assisted me in reaching for the sky. It was an old lady who was on the other end of that gun."

"Old lady?"

"Yea. She searched us mentally and told us to get out. We did. That wasn't more than fifteen minutes ago. Here's the strange thing about it to my mind. Old house, old lady, everything moss-covered and dusty—and a brand new up-to-date automatic in the old dame's hand."

The other man mused over this without comment. Finally he shot a question at us.

"Where are you two going?"

"Fishing in Cold Stream Pond. Come up here every year. My name

is Doctor Wilbur Hunneker and my friend's is Edward Triteham."

"You wait here for me," said the District Attorney, quickly making a decision. "I'm going to run down there. If some one is hanging around that house I want to know who it is and what they want. Will you wait here until I return?"

"Certainly," Hunky replied. "Or I'll go with you if you like."

"No," the other quickly answered, getting into his roadster. "I'll go it alone. See you later."

HE SHOT off down the road in a cloud of powdery dust.

Hunky and I went into the cool interior of the country store and regaled ourselves with root beer and the store-keeper's conversation, which for the moment was wholly of the young District Attorney. He was a most remarkable county official, we were told.

It seemed but a moment when the subject of the talk was back in another swirl of dust. He jumped out of his car. We went out to meet him.

"Gone," he said laconically to our inquiring look. "But somebody was there all right. What the devil they wanted is more than I can fathom. Nothing disturbed—isn't much to disturb. But it bothers me. You're sure about that gun?" His eyes bored us.

Hunky faced him.

"Quite," he said quietly. "I know guns. Also, I know the look in eyes behind them. I'm a physician and I have to know people. This old woman had some good reason for wanting to scare us away."

"I know that," replied the young man, with his mouth set in a line. "Guns and deserted houses don't make a very reassuring picture."

"Did you look all around the house?" inquired my friend.

"Sure. Probably those old eyes were on me while I was doing it. She couldn't have gone far; possibly she

was in the woods nearby. I made only a cursory examination so as not to excite suspicion if she or anybody else had been watching. Now let's see, what's back of that house. The old wood lot—a pasture——"

"That's all," spoke up the store-keeper. "Then the railroad cuts through beyond that."

"Railroad!" said the District Attorney sharply. "Why, that's about the point where that wreck was yesterday afternoon."

"Yes," replied the store-keeper. "The pasture lot runs right down to the bend, and it was on that bend that the cars left the track."

"By George! you're right," exclaimed the District Attorney.

He seemed to ponder the situation for a few moments. Then he made a movement as if to be off.

"I won't detain you gentlemen," he said quickly. "If you want to fish you'd better be on your way. Just about time to make it before sundown."

Hunky smiled.

"I'm not so keen on fishing as my friend Triteham here," he said quietly. "I'd much rather go along with you to see that wreck."

The District Attorney eyed him carefully. Then:

"All right. I'd be glad of your company if you feel that way about it."

"Something tells me I had better leave the fish to their watery beds today," said I.

"All right," answered our new acquaintance.

And the three of us started on a brisk walk in what seemed a circuitous direction. The District Attorney knew the lay of the land, and after about twenty minutes we came upon the railroad tracks. Here we turned back in the direction of the deserted house.

In about three-quarters of an hour we came upon a distant view of the wreck around a bend. A railroad gang

was at work, straightening the tangled mess caused by three freight cars which had left the rails.

The District Attorney approached the foreman of the gang and made himself known.

"Anybody hurt?" he asked.

"Nope. Not going very fast. We hope to get the tracks cleared by tomorrow."

"Do you mind if I look around—over the cars?" asked the District Attorney.

"Go ahead," replied the foreman.

The three of us began inspecting the whole train from engine to caboose. The District Attorney scrutinized everything.

After the examination, which seemed to offer up nothing of special interest, our new friend suggested we retrace our steps. We straggled along the ties, each to himself, nobody having much to say.

"Something tells me," finally spoke the District Attorney. "that your old woman with the gun and this wreck are connected in some way. Certainly there is nothing either mysterious or valuable about that old house. Why should someone become suddenly interested in it enough to go around armed and to warn away intruders. The only thing significant is that wreck. If it is that—then developments will take place quickly and in darkness."

"It is getting dark now," I suggested.

"Yes. I'm going to stick around here and see what I shall see. You boys can find your way back to the store. Just follow the tracks and turn into the path at the bridge."

Hunky smiled. "If it's all the same to you, we'd like to stick."

The District Attorney hesitated a moment, then said: "All right. It will be a lonely vigil, and maybe you can help if anything does happen."

We stopped about half a mile from the wreck, and sat down to wait for darkness. In the woods twilight is

short, and we hadn't long to wait. Back we turned and worked cautiously toward the wreck.

The gang was still at work, and in the distance we could see their grotesque shapes by the light of their lanterns. The operations were up ahead and we kept just in the rear and about a hundred feet to one side of the caboose. This vantage point enabled us to command a view of the wreck and the approach to it from the pasture and woods. Our own position was well concealed.

Four hours went by, slowly because of the damp and cold of the night. The illuminated hands of my wrist watch told me it was between eleven and midnight. Banks of fleecy fog clung here and there to the low trees and the ground. The night sounds of the woods mingled eerily with the sharp noises made by the wrecking crew. It was cold and damp.

Suddenly the sharp eyes and ears of the District Attorney must have told him something, for his hand went out in warning. Whatever the warning was, it proved correct because we became aware, almost at once, of five dark figures stealing up the slight incline toward that part of the train which remained on the rails. Then we noticed two more figures edging their way toward the front end of the wreck where the operations were being conducted.

"LET 'em start whatever they intend doing," whispered the District Attorney. "We are outnumbered, two to one, unless the crew backs us up. You're both set?"

"We're both armed and we're both good shots," answered Hunky.

The five figures showed no hesitation in their movements, but made for the fourth car from the caboose. We could see two of them hold a third man upon their shoulders while he worked at the door.

Beyond, the other two had sur-
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prised the work gang and we could see their hands go up in the flickering light.

"Let's get nearer," whispered the District Attorney.

Slowly, we began to move forward. We were about one hundred and fifty feet from the larger group when an unexpected shot rang out. The men working on the door became alert in a second.

We could see the five men dragging boxes from the car, the door of which they had slid back. They weren't any too quiet about it, so our footsteps were not heard.

The District Attorney ran quickly forward in a crouching position. We followed and spread out so as not to be in his line. When he was within twenty feet one of the robbers turned—and he never turned again in this world. The District Attorney dropped him with one shot.

Both our guns barked at the same time. So sudden and unexpected had been our onslaught that we had a bully jump on them. The resistance, while spirited and desperate for a few seconds, was quickly overcome. Three of them were laid out, either wounded badly or dead. One tried to get into the car, and Hunky dropped him right in the doorway. He came down with a thud on the ground. The one remaining man surrendered, and we disarmed him.

Shots were coming from the head of the train, and, leaving the scene of our first encounter, we rushed down there. The two on guard had turned for a minute, and the boss of the wrecking crew had drawn his gun and opened up on them. They were caught between two fires and couldn't get away.

In a matter of minutes we had them all trussed up. The others we carried into the caboose for the time being.

The District Attorney wasted little time on them. He turned his attention to the car which had been opened

by the robbers. When Hunky and I came up he was a puzzled man.

"Turnips!" he exploded. "A whole carload of 'em! Must be something else in here."

The three of us tugged and hauled for a quarter of an hour, while a brakeman held a lantern for us to see by. Our efforts were finally rewarded by something which we were not surprised to find by that time.

Yes, indeed. Case after case of whisky! That was the cargo those birds were after.

IT WAS plain enough now. The gang was part of an organized whisky-ring engaged in smuggling whisky from Canada into the United States. They had, through the connivance of confederates, secreted the liquor at the point of embarkation beneath a larger load of turnips. The car would have reached its destination and been secretly unloaded by members of the gang waiting for it, possibly in the big train yards at night.

Then had come the wreck. Perhaps someone in the employ of the road had wired the gang. Anyway, they had learned of it and hustled to the scene desperate on getting the liquor.

The connection must have been between the old deserted house, which we had stumbled on by mistake, and the wreck. Evidently they had planned to carry the stuff in cases to the deserted house and thence over

the road by automobiles. Undoubtedly, we would find several big high-powered cars when we got to the house.

The District Attorney, Hunky and I went into the caboose after checking up the loot which proved to be over one hundred cases. Some of the crooks were stretched out and some sitting up. Two of them would never do any more robbing in this sprightly existence.

One was sitting hunched upon a stool and a mighty evil-looking bird he was. His black eyes scowled all kinds of malevolence at us. He looked vaguely familiar and when I caught his eye I recognized him.

"Hum. Changed your sex, I see," I snapped at him.

He didn't favor me with a reply—just glared at me.

"Recognize our old pal, Hunky?" I said to my friend. "This is the old lady who gave us the scare in the farm house."

"By George, you're right," said Hunky. "What was the idea of the masquerade?"

But the fellow wouldn't tell. And he never did say, as far as we ever could learn, why he had chosen to play the part of an old woman. Perhaps he had figured that in that role he would be better able to avert suspicion if he had been seen around the deserted farm house. Perhaps it would have worked, too, had he not made the mistake of holding us up with that suspiciously new and modern gun.