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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Gray World

By PAUL ERNST

Gregor awoke to a terrifying gray dawn, in which there was no color, and life was terribly changed

GEORGE GREGOR blinked, and shook his head to clear his wits. He felt numb, dazed, as though his skull were filled with cotton wool that suffocated his thoughts and pressed against his eyeballs from behind.

Sight and wits began to clear now. His immediate surroundings began to swim into place around him. Consciousness took command again. One funny thing persisted, though. Sort of an optical illusion.

Everything around him, walls and familiar furnishings of his bedroom, light from the electric globes, his own hand when he held it out to look at it—all had a queer grayish tinge. In fact, he could see no real color anywhere. It was as if he were color-blind.

Well, perhaps he was! Perhaps that fall on the floor had done it. Clumsy, tripping over the rug that way. And banging his head against the corner of the table. Had the knock against his skull, slight as it seemed to be, done something to the optic nerve to make him color-blind? He blinked at grayish walls and furnishings and light, while the events of the evening came back to him.

They'd all been downstairs in the living-room — old Carfax, Gordon Fisher, Mark Seely, and himself. The talk had swung to science; and Carfax had taken the floor. Carfax was 'way up in chemistry, Gregor knew vaguely. Professor, author of several books on bio-chemistry, all that sort of thing.

Carfax had started with the old one about the emptiness of space.

"You see this chair, gentlemen? It seems to be quite solid, doesn't it? And yet, incredible as it sounds, it is actually about ninety-nine per cent empty space. The atoms composing this solid wood chair-arm and chair-back are so loosely woven that, could the whole structure be magnified a billion times, we could not see the solid matter for the holes between."

Gregor wasn't much interested. Besides, he dimly remembered hearing things like that back in his college days. However, he was host here; and one of the duties of a host is to feign interest whether or not he feels it.

"What keeps us from falling through a chair, if it's as tenuous as all that?" he asked.

"The fact that we, and the chair, and all the rest of our solid world, are all in the same dimension," said Carfax. "We are in tune, so to speak. Our atoms, and those of our surroundings, are of similar architecture; and when one body comes in contact with another, the opposing atoms clash instead of intermeshing and slipping through each other. If this were not so, we could walk through stone walls at will."

At this point Gordon Fisher, the young fool, had started to pull the professor's leg.

"Then if we could change into another

"The girl went unconcernedly on with her dressing."



dimension we could perform all sorts of weird miracles, eh?"

"Amazing miracles," replied Carfax.

"Well, that ought to be right up your alley, sir. You're an outstanding scientist. Couldn't you cook up some sort of chemical mess that would change a person from one dimension to another?"

CARFAX solemnly cleared his throat. "Such a thing is more possible than it may seem at first glance. Indeed, I

may as well admit that I am at present engaged in experiments that, if generally known of, would be described as revolutionary. I'm not actually *working* on them, you understand," he added hastily. "Just keeping such experimental labor as a hobby—merely playing about with the thought, as it were."

"And you've actually had success in your experiments?" inquired Gordon, so seriously that even Carfax should have caught on.

"That," said Carfax importantly, "I do not feel at liberty to answer."

"What would another dimension look like to me, supposing you could give me some sort of pill to send me there?"

"We can only imagine what it would look like. I should say it would be a world in monochrome. Gray, perhaps. Yes, pretty surely gray. Otherwise, everything would appear about the same as in this dimension."

"But there'd be no solid matter any more, eh? My atoms would intermesh with the atoms of this chair, for example, and I'd fall through it if I tried to sit on it?"

"Oh, probably you could sit on it, if you sat down very lightly. There'd be a little resistance left."

"Why, Professor!" exclaimed Gordon excitedly. "You have a fortune in view if you've got such a magic pill up your sleeve. Think of it! 'Take our dimensional pills. No more shins barked on chair-legs when you get up in the dark. No more black eyes from running into bathroom doors. Does the good wife object to your going out evenings to lodge meetings? Take a pill—and walk out through the side of the house!' It's a wow, sir. Let me have first crack at organizing a sales force, will you?"

Carfax, who tended to be a pompous old ass anyway, had glowered. "You may laugh. But let me tell you that the world may some day be astounded at the results of my work along such lines."

"Tell us more," Gordon had begged. Gregor could have kicked the outrageous young idiot. Instead, as host, he had changed the subject.

"I think I hear my wife laying the midnight festal board in the dining-room," he had said, getting up. "Shall we go and sample some Welsh rabbit and coffee?"

And then had come that silly fall of his. His toe had caught in a loop of the rug. He had fallen forward, thrown out his arms to keep from hitting the library table in his path—and gone out like a light in the midst of a shower of stars.

* * * * *

HE GAZED around at the four walls of his bedroom. Evidently they'd taken him up here, ascertained he was all right save for the rap on his head, and gone downstairs again. But that was funny, too, hang it. You'd think some one—his wife or some one—would be in here with him. After all, he'd hit his head hard enough to knock him out, hadn't he?

And why was everything gray like this?

An insane thought came to him, only to be put out of mind at once as impossible. No, it was the fall. Something had gone temporarily wrong with the optic nerve.

He saw now that he was lying on the bed, fully dressed, just where they'd laid him when they carried him upstairs. He started to clamber over the side and get to his feet, cautiously, for with the first move everything started going round before his eyes.

Still cautiously, he clutched at the edge of the night-table beside the bed to assist himself.

"For God's sake!" mumbled Gregor.

His hand had gone through the solid wood almost as though there were nothing there! Only the faintest of pressures had informed him when his flesh passed through the inch and a half of close-grained walnut.

He scrambled out of bed quickly enough at that—only to receive a second shock.

The force of his rising sent him clear to the ceiling, where he hung for an in-

stant like a toy balloon before floating slowly down to the floor again. He had no more weight than a puff of eiderdown.

"For God's sake!"

Gregor took a deep breath. The grayness of everything! The way he could poke his hand through solid substance! His lack of weight! Carfax!

The pompous old madman had deliberately experimented on him—probably stung by Gordon's taunts—and had transposed him to another dimension! Gregor could only hope to heaven the lunatic could reverse his process.

He started toward the door, without a backward glance at the bed. He'd confront Carfax at once, and demand that he be restored to his normal dimension. Fancy living out one's life in a world where nothing had substance!

At the closed door he halted. Wait a minute, now. Maybe he'd been imagining things—still hazy from the blow on his head. He'd try again.

Slowly his hand went out toward the closed door. At the last moment he jerked it back again, panicky at the fear that he was after all in his right senses. He composed himself and extended his hand again.

The tips of his fingers touched the door. Then they went through, with his arm after it, till arm and hand were thrust out in the hall while his body remained in the room. He felt sweat pour out on his neck and forehead. He couldn't see through the door; at least it was that solid; but that very fact made the whole affair worse, somehow.

He stared incredulously at his shoulder, pressed against the solid-looking door—with his arm sticking out in the hall on the other side.

"My God! Where's Carfax?"

He leaned lightly against the door, and passed through. The slightest imagin-

able push had been enough to force his body through it.

In the hall, he forgot for an instant how his weight had been so inexplicably reduced to next to nothing. He started hastily for the stairs, to go down and find Carfax.

One step sent him soaring from the door of his bedroom to the head of the stairs thirty feet away. En route he would have raked his head along the ceiling—save that the ceiling offered no more solid resistance to his head and shoulders than the night-table had to his hand. For an instant he had been slicing through the ceiling, with the upper half of him in the attic and the lower half in the hall below. That was all.

He clutched the bannister at the top of the stairs when he came down, meaning to steady himself. His fingers met in the polished wood.

"Carfax!" he shouted. "Carfax! Damn you—where are you?"

HE STARTED down the stairs, carefully now, a step at a time. The very press of his toes, in their springy action, sent him up three feet into the air. But he could walk almost normally if he stepped flat-footedly.

Floating more than walking, he descended the stairs and went to the living-room. There was no one there. All the lights were on—those odd, gray lights that made him feel as if he were walking around in a gray and black and white photograph—but not a soul was in the room.

Carfax and Gordon and Seely had evidently all gone home. But they must have gone in a hurry. He couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few minutes.

He started impulsively to go back upstairs and seek out his wife. She must

be in her room, unless she was telephoning for a doctor, or rumaging the medicine chest for bandages and things.

He stopped as abruptly as he had started. No, he mustn't confront his wife in this state! God knew what he looked like to normal eyes. He might be a brilliant green, or a nauseous purple, or something.

He stepped to the large mirror hanging over the refectory table. What *did* he look like, anyhow?

"For God's sake," he moaned once more. He rubbed his eyes, looked again.

Nothing whatever showed in the mirror. No reflection of him was outlined in the clear glass. He could see the room behind him, detail by detail, as though no five feet ten inches of stocky body intervened.

"But I *am* here," he whispered.

He patted his chest experimentally. Yes, that was solid enough. He gazed down at himself. He could see legs and waist, clad in solid-looking brown cloth. His feet looked solid, and the tan shoes on them. Nor could he see the floor through his feet.

He whirled to the mirror again, vaguely hoping to surprize it into giving back his image. It was as blank as before.

"I've got to find Carfax at once, that's what I've got to do," he said aloud. "At once! What does he think he's trying to do—giving me a drug while I'm unconscious, and then going away and leaving me in another dimension!"

He started determinedly for the street door. Then he hesitated again. What *did* he look like to normal eyes? The mirror had stubbornly refused to give any hint. Was he all gray, too, like the world that surrounded him? Or was he a monstrous-appearing thing, human in nothing but outline? Would he frighten the first

pedestrian he met into calling the police and having him locked up?

Gregor shrugged. That, at least, was no risk. They couldn't lock up a man who could walk through closed doors.

He leaned gently against the barred portal before him, and stepped through it to the street.

Gray and black, the night was. Overhead black as pitch save for dim gray points which were stars. Beneath, solid black where shadows of buildings fell athwart the street, and solid light gray where the rays of the street lights penetrated. The photograph he was living in now was a time exposure.

The street was deserted, of course. It must be one in the morning: it had been about eleven-thirty when his clumsy fall had broken up the party. Up ahead, however, he saw a taxi drawing to the curb to discharge a hilarious party of four. He hastened toward it, floating along at a prodigiously swift pace.

Now for the test, he thought. He'd see what effect he had on denizens of the dimension he had just left. Would they scream and run? Or would they see him as a normal man instead of a freak who moved in a world of mist?

There were two men and two girls in the party. One of the men paid the bill as Gregor drew near. The other three were already starting toward the house in front of which the cab had stopped.

Shrinkingly, Gregor approached. He was within ten feet of the bill-payer when that gentleman concluded the transaction—and turned his back to Gregor to catch up with the other three in his party.

Gregor didn't know whether to be glad or sorry he hadn't been seen. He was getting more and more anxious to find out what he looked like.

He stared at the back of the man, half

minded to call after him. Then he turned to the taxi.

The cab was already moving away from the curb—as unconcerned as though a possible fare hadn't been standing there at all.

"Hey!" shouted Gregor, as the cab rolled off. "Hey—come back here!"

The cab did not hesitate. The driver didn't look back.

"I suppose he thinks just because I'm bare-headed that I'm drunk or taking a night hike to cure insomnia or something," muttered Gregor.

HE FELT an increasing impulse to talk aloud, as one does when alone. Ah, that was it! When one is alone. That explained the dreadful sinking feeling that more and more was bearing him down. He was lonely. Lonely? He felt as though he were the last man left alive on earth!

Torn by his feeling of colossal loneliness, he stared first after the retreating cab, and then over his shoulder at the merry foursome just halting at the door of the house behind him. He took a few steps in their direction; but the door opened, and they stepped inside.

And then a new, chill doubt assailed him. Take a taxi? He couldn't do that. Feather-light as he was, and sinking through solid substance as easily as he did, the slightest jolt of the cab would send him through bottom, top or sides and into the street. He decided he'd better walk to Carfax's house.

The professor's home was about a mile west of there. Gregor started off, floating along like eiderdown borne on a zephyr. It would have been exhilarating, in a way, had he not been so oppressed by that vast loneliness, and so profoundly fearful that Carfax might not be able to bring him back from this bleak gray dimension.

And then he noticed consciously something that had been slowly happening for the last ten minutes.

The black shadows of his photographic world were gradually losing some of their solidity. From black to dark gray, and from dark to lighter gray, they were changing. Also the sky above was losing its inky darkness. It was lightening more and more—and the change was taking place at the east!

"Dawn," whispered Gregor, eyes wide and startled. "*Dawn!*"

But it couldn't be. Dawn came at about four-thirty at this time of year. And it had been not quite midnight when they had that talk in the living-room—that talk that was to lead Carfax to such experimental madness.

Nevertheless, it was dawn. He could see a tip of the sun coming up now—a blinding rim of pearl-gray light. Why, he had been unconscious for hours! Yet he had come to, back in his bedroom, to find himself alone. It was inconceivable that his wife had left him by himself while he was still unconscious. Or had he stirred to a few moments of rational-sounding delirium that had convinced every one he was all right, and settled back into a coma after they'd left him? But he couldn't have done that. He hadn't hurt himself as severely as that. Or had he?

A frightful fear shot through him. Maybe he'd fractured his skull. Maybe he wasn't here in the street at all, but was back in bed, raving and being held by doctors and nurses. Or maybe—he was mad.

However, this fear had short duration. As it had done several times before, his hand strayed to his temple, which had been the part of his head to strike the table. No, there wasn't even a bump there. He had not hurt himself badly—

and he wasn't mad. Mad people do not question their own sanity.

The only possible answer was Carfax. Carfax and his damned drug. He could picture the whole thing: himself lying on the bed, his wife bent anxiously over him, Carfax pompously clearing his throat.

"Here, let me give him this drug. It's a heart stimulant. It may help."

Gregor swore savagely, and started at a swifter pace toward Carfax's home. He'd make Carfax undo what he'd done, by heaven—or he'd kill him!

A lone, hatless figure in the gray dawn, he wafted over a sidewalk into which his feet tended to sink like soft mud; in the world but not of it; an exile in the misty, dreadfully unfamiliar plane to which Carfax's infernal drug was the doorway.

Now, with the beginning of day, a stirring of life was evident.

A newsboy, hauling a little wagon on which were piled his papers, appeared around the corner ahead of Gregor and started toward him, halting before every house to roll a newspaper and throw it at the door.

The sight was good. Gregor's fear, his abysmal loneliness, accentuated by the natural desertion of the streets at daylight, made him hungry to see any sort of human life.

But the boy seemed too busy with his affairs to pay any attention to a bare-headed straggler in the gray dawn hours. On he came, stopping, throwing, hauling his little wagon toward the next door. He was within twenty yards of Gregor now; yet not once had his eyes fallen squarely on Gregor's face.

Then one of his expert casts misfired. The paper he threw unrolled and fell into a flower bed beside the door he had aimed at. The boy dropped his wagon handle,

and went to retrieve the paper and put it back where it belonged.

Gregor sighed deeply. At that moment he felt as if he would have given half his fortune to have had the lad smile and nod a good morning to him. But, there! His footfalls were soundless. The youngster was no doubt half asleep. It was natural that he hadn't noticed him. And in a way it was reassuring. It indicated that Gregor was not the monstrosity he'd feared he might be: if that were true, no matter how sleepy and unobservant the boy was he would have seen him right enough!

MORE people began to emerge from the doors of houses and apartment buildings. A thin trickle of humanity, that was presently to become a swollen stream bound for the day's work. But not one soul stared at Gregor. Not one curious glance was turned his way.

He was very close to Carfax's place now. Less than three blocks intervened. Two of those three blocks lay along a street-car avenue; and here the trickles of early workers were converging into quite a rivulet. Now, at last, some one would have to pay him a little heed.

Almost eagerly, Gregor turned into the avenue, and headed for a group of at least thirty people waiting for a car.

Straight toward them he went. No eye was turned in his direction. It was uncanny. It was ghastly.

Gregor waved his arms. He *must* attract some attention. He felt as if it had grown into a life or death issue now. But still no one looked at him.

He strode to within five feet of the crowd. "Hey!" he shouted, with all his lung-power.

No one looked up from his paper.

A slow chill crept up Gregor's back. Eyes starting from his head, he glared at the incredibly incurious group of people.

Was he mad—or were they all stone-deaf?

"Hey!" he cried again. "Look at me, some one—for the love of God!"

It was more of a scream than a shout. A frightened, almost hysterical shriek. Still no one stared at him.

Staggering a little, Gregor went closer. He'd grab some one by the shoulder—that big man with the cigar in his mouth, for example—and *make* him look up.

He stepped up to the fellow, and clapped his hand down on his shoulder. He was not at all gentle about it. Big as the man was, he should have been fairly thrown off balance by it.

However, he wasn't. For once more Gregor's hand encountered no solidity where his eyes told him solidity was to be expected. Instead, his hand went down through shoulder and torso with almost no resistance.

The man took the cigar out of his mouth, expectorated, and put it back between his lips. He turned another page of his newspaper; went on reading.

"Carfax," whimpered Gregor. "Carfax. . . ."

Alone in a gray world; his body invisible to those whom he could still see as well as ever; his shouts unheard.

"Carfax, you've got to know how to get me out of this. You've got to!"

Straight into the group of people he walked—into it, and through it.

"Sort of chilly this morning, isn't it?" a thin little man remarked to a fat fellow in a derby standing next to him. "Goes right to your bones, somehow."

Tottering, eyes glazed, Gregor went on toward Carfax's house.

If Carfax couldn't see him or hear him, how could he be made to understand that Gregor was there begging that he be transported back to his rightful plane?

But he'd get Carfax's attention somehow! He had to!

The professor's old-fashioned house showed before him down a tree-lined street half a block from the car-line. Gregor turned toward it as a pilgrim in quest of eternal salvation turns toward Mecca.

A man and a woman, quarreling together about some detail or other, stepped out of the nearest gate and came toward him. Instinctively Gregor started to step aside, then threw up his arm to ward them off. Through arm and body they walked, still grumbling at each other, on toward the car-line.

Gregor began to run, finishing the last few yards to Carfax's door at a frantic pace.

He pushed directly through the front door and into the lower hall. There he paused a moment in indecision. He had only visited here twice before; he was uncertain where Carfax's bedroom was. He assumed the professor was sleeping, callous as that seemed. Any man who could experiment on an unconscious and helpless human being with no more compunction than if he had been a guinea-pig, would be conscienceless enough to be able to sleep afterward.

Uncertainly, he went up the staircase in front of him, and walked through the wall into the first room on his right.

"I—I beg your pardon," he mumbled, forgetting he could neither be seen nor heard. "I thought this was the professor's room. . . ."

The girl, whom he recognized as Carfax's daughter, went unconcernedly on with her dressing. She yawned, and gazed through him at a clock on the bureau behind him. Gregor backed blindly out through the wall.

Now he heard a mumble of voices two doors down the hall. And one of the voices belonged to Carfax! Gregor covered the distance in a bound; but outside the door he stopped, trembling in every limb.

He felt as though he could not go into that room and face Carfax if his very life depended on it. Suppose he found no way of communicating with him across the gulf separating the two dimensions? Suppose he found, now that he was at last in the presence of the scientist, that all his wild hopes were groundless? No, not for his life could he compel his shaking legs to carry him forward.

Ah, but *more* than life depended on his confronting Carfax and somehow making him recognize the fact that he was there! With an enormous effort of will, he composed himself.

The voices sounded more loudly through the door. Carfax and—yes, Mark Seely, were in that room. And of the two Carfax sounded the most excited.

He *should* be the most excited, damn him! The thing he had done was worse than murder. But the excitement was bad. Very bad! It sounded as though he had got beyond his depth in that experiment, and was now fearfully trying to justify himself to Mark Seely. As if justification were possible!

Gregor's breath whistled between his teeth. Well, there was one way to find out what the professor's powers were.

He walked through the door.

In the professor's room everything was upset as if a feverish hand had rumbled it. Cigarette stubs littered the smoking-stand. The bed was awry, as though sleep had been wooed but not won. The carpet was a little crumpled under pacing feet.

On the bed sat the professor, eyes bloodshot, holding a glass in one shaking hand. Facing him, in an easy-chair, was

Mark Seely, a little less unstrung, but far from being in his normal state.

Reeling a little, Gregor stood near the door, gazing at Professor Carfax. And if ever blasting condemnation and accusation were in a man's eyes, they were in Gregor's. The professor, indeed, seemed to feel that murderous stare, for he shivered a little and gulped some of the contents of the glass.

"I think I'd better go home," Seely said wearily. "It's full morning——"

"No, no!" Carfax begged. "Not just yet. Stay with me just a little longer, will you?"

Seely settled back in his chair.

"God, a thing like that sort of—gets you, doesn't it?" Carfax muttered, his voice so low Gregor could barely hear it. "It shows how human and fallible we are."

Seely nodded, his lips twitching.

"One minute he was perfectly all right, talking to us, talking just as we are now, and then——"

"Try not to think about it," Seely cut in. "Try to forget it."

"If I only could! If only I could forget the sight of him tripping and falling—such a little fall—shouldn't have hurt a child——"

The bare-headed man in the doorway staggered back a pace as though he'd been stabbed. His teeth clenched. He squeezed his fists to his ears to shut out the words. But like the knell of doom they tolled against his quivering brain.

"One minute alive and well——" Carfax said.

Gregor bounded toward him; clutched at his shoulder. "No, no!" he shrieked. "Carfax, stop—for God's sake!"

"——and the next minute——"

"No—no—NO!"

"——dead," concluded Carfax. "Did you say something, Seely?"