

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

July, 1944

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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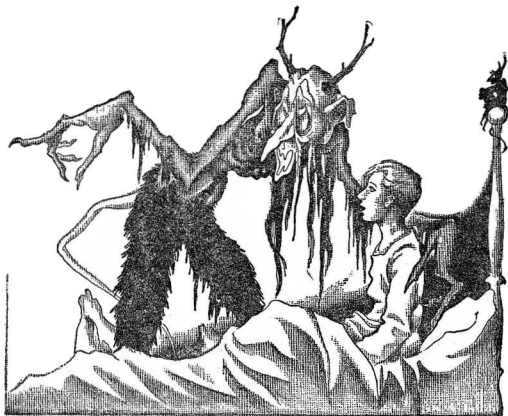


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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.



Guard in the Dark

By ALLISON V. HARDING

PROUDLY little Ronald Frost showed the new tutor his row on row of shiny lead soldiers . . . soldiers in the painted khaki of the army, in the navy dark blue, and in the blue with red trimming of the marines. Some were standing, some were marching, some lying on their stomachs, guns pointed forward.

"Look at my machine gunners," said the

twelve-year-old boy to Jeffrey Wilburts as he pointed to another part of the shelf whereon lay squad after squad of tiny toy figures, each with a machine gun—sub-machine guns and light and heavy ones.

Jeffrey nodded interestedly and took some of the pieces off the shelf to look at them more closely.

"Be very careful!" the little boy cautioned

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

*The tin soldiers were not just playthings—they were pawns
in a ruleless war of horror*

as Wilburts minutely examined a soldier holding the miniature replica of an automatic rifle.

"Sure I will. Tell me, Ronald, why do you have so many? You must have several hundred soldiers here."

"Need 'em," said the youngster, his mouth setting in a tight line.

"Do you like to recreate battles, I mean fight out some of the campaigns of the war?" It had occurred to Wilburts that perhaps his pupil's mania for toy soldiers had such a significance.

"Nope."

"Well, what then?"

"I have to have them." Ronald Frost turned away from his toy closet with a fist full of marines. Jeffrey watched him as he meticulously replaced the tin soldiers that had been clustered in groups on the tables and floor of his bedroom.

Jeffrey Wilburts smiled to himself. "Ah, changing the guard, eh?"

"Yes." No more than that. Not very communicative.

Wilburts noticed that Ronald placed the soldiers in a careful pattern. They formed a circle of toy-soldier protection around the center of the room. The center where Ronald Frost's bed was!

WHEN Jeffrey Wilburts, fresh from a teacher's college course, had interviewed Mr. and Mrs. Frost for the job, this had been the main thing they had told him that day in the Frost's pleasant suburban home.

"He's not at all a dull boy," said Mrs. Frost with a sort of a perplexed pride, "but he has this fixation about soldiers."

"I'd have to tell you what our bill is supplying the boy with these lead soldiers," snorted Mr. Frost. "And besides, I think Ronald is getting about old enough to give up playing with toy things like that."

The Frosts had liked young Wilburts and he them. He had taken up residence there as companion and tutor to Ronald. He soon realized that the young Frost lad was no ordinary twelve-year-old. The boy was bright when he wanted to be. He had imagination.

But with all of this Jeffrey detected a certain listlessness that was most unbecom-

ing a chap of Ronald's years. He shunned the company of other children of his age in the neighborhood, and although he did passably well in school—his teacher told Wilburts that he would be an honor-roll pupil if he would only try—his social adjustments were not at all normal.

He detested the games that went on in the school yard and was in the habit of sneaking off home after class was out instead of mixing with his peers in a raid on the local ice-cream parlor.

"We need somebody to bring him out," said Mrs. Frost to Wilburts. "Heaven knows Mr. Frost and I have tried to do all we can for him. . . ."

"You might be able to help my son, er, if I had one, but you can't help your own," quoted Wilburts brightly from something he remembered in a child psychology class.

"It seems you're right," sighed Mrs. Frost. "We can't help him, apparently. I still think a lot of this has to do with those stupid soldiers he's so preoccupied with!"

"High time the boy got over these ideas," said Mr. Frost with an angry rustle of the paper. "But don't try to just take the soldiers away from him. It's an impossible task." Mr. Frost elaborately rolled his eyes ceilingward. "I tried it once and he got so excited . . . well, we had to call Dr. Brown."

Properly warned and initiated on the way things stood Wilburts started to apply his great knowledge of child psychology, learned from dusty library tomes and aged professors who were much nearer their second childhood than their first.

Jeffrey quietly decided that he would closely observe the boy. It was preposterous to try and bully the lad. You never got anywhere that way. And it was most old-fashioned.

In the corner of the room, almost behind a screen that hid a wash basin, was an easy chair. Jeffrey made it his in the evenings, ostensibly to chat with Ronald, but really to watch the ritual that went on, commencing when the light sneaked slowly from the room across the sky into the west.

Out of his play closet Ronald would bring scores more soldiers to supplement the ones that, all day, had been grouped in small clusters around the room. Jeffrey watched this

procedure for several nights before he felt that it was time to pop a few questions.

THIS evening Wilburts watched as the twelve-year-old arranged his miniature troops. The tutor was once more taken with the precise and scientific way the lad covered the room with his knots of soldiers.

"Ronald."

"Um?"

"Why do you do this every night?"

"Cause I need to, that's why."

"You like to have them around you, eh?"

The little boy's face was tight-lipped and grim for one so young. He said nothing for a moment.

"I have to have them around me."

He placed six blue-clad soldiers on the edge of the washstand beside Jeffrey. Wilburts found himself staring at the soldiers fascinatedly. Their uniforms were such exact replicas of the real thing, their equipment so cleverly copied, their little figures stalwart in rigid posture—only their little gray-white lead faces completely unlife-like, expressionless like putty-wax dolls. Wilburts looked from one to the other of the six little figurines. All their faces wore a blank, mysterious, nothingness expression, an ageless passiveness that could only be achieved in lead.

Jeffrey Wilburts counted forty-five soldiers around the room. Some were on the bed table, others, numbering among them several machine gunners, were on the floor at the four corners of the bed.

Wilburts shook his head and after good nights were said went off to his room down the hall. The situation was an intriguing one. Here was a lad who was logical on all subjects as far as he, Jeffrey Wilburts, could make out—and he could make out very well—and yet he had an obsession on soldiers. Wilburts comforted himself to sleep with the thought that the Frost's could not have gotten in a better man for the job of handling the boy.

In the morning, violating his usual custom of dressing and going right down to breakfast, Wilburts went in Ronald's room still in slippers and bathrobe. The boy was bending over something on the floor and didn't hear Jeffrey.

"Morning," said Wilburts lustily.

Young Frost turned quickly, putting his hand behind his back. He glowered at the tutor.

Wilburts started forward slowly. Ah ha, here was something interesting. He was determined to see what Ronald was hiding. The boy backed away from him as he came on.

"Ronald, what is it you have there?"

The boy said nothing but merely stepped backward until he came against the closet door. He was fumbling for the knob, his eyes hatefully on Jeffrey when the companion stepped forward quickly and pinned Ronald's arms to his sides.

"Now, let me see," gritted Wilburts, surprised at the strength in the youngster's body. The two swayed together for a minute, Ronald's face white with strain and then the man's strength forced the boy's hands outward and forward and then finally the small, tight fingers opened and objects dropped to the floor. Wilburts stepped back, one hand still holding the boy's wrist and bent over.

With his other hand he explored downward. The objects were toy soldiers, or at least, parts of them. Heads and torsos, legs and arms, little guns broken loose from the solder that held them to tiny lead bodies—like real soldiers who have been in battle . . . a score of soldiers, broken and bent—dead soldiers!

Ronald stood back now, breathing rapidly. He looked at the floor and then at Wilburts. Jeffrey hardly knew what to do. His first impulse was to grin the whole matter off.

"Say, you've busted up a lot of those soldiers, Ronald."

To cover his own lack of assurance he put a note of reprimand in his voice as he talked.

THE boy said nothing. He simply knelt down and began to gather up the pieces of the broken soldiers. He turned and walked slowly into the closet and Jeffrey heard the noise as they were dropped into a receptacle there. Not knowing what else to do Wilburts walked back to his own room and after dressing quickly, went downstairs.

Before Ronald arrived he had poured out his story to Mr. and Mrs. Frost. If his soul

needed absolution, he got it from the two.

"That's just it," said Mr. Frost. "He demands these soldiers for birthday and Christmas and God knows any other time that I can be wheedled out of a dollar or so, but the boy is so destructive with them it's endless. We can't keep up with him.

"Don't worry about it, Mr. Wilburts." Mrs. Frost also put in her oar. "I just wish you could get him away from those soldiers permanently. I sometimes think they mean more to him than his father and I do."

Thus, his conscience surfeited, Wilburts attacked his wheat cakes with vigor and did not even look up when Ronald stole in a few minutes later with a small good morning to his parents.

Despite his smugness and the disadvantage of theoretical training, Jeffrey Wilburts was not entirely lacking in sense. He realized that Ronald, who before had merely tolerated him without question or enthusiasm, now attempted to avoid him as much as possible. This would never do. The first goal for the companion or tutor is to win and hold the youngster's confidence and friendship. Both from the standpoint of his future as a teacher and tutor and for the sake of his immediate pocketbook it would never do to alienate Ronald to the degree where the Frosts, despite their obvious liking for him, would have to look for somebody else.

Obviously, his campaign to win back Ronald's tolerance would have to be centered around the soldiers. On his day off in town Wilburts paid a visit to the toy department of a large department store where, after not a little thought, he discovered a set of khaki-clad troops, each with a sub-machine gun, and led by a nattily dressed officer with holstered revolver. Three dollars.

On his way out to the suburbs, Wilburts took the set from its wrappings and eyed the soldiers with satisfaction. Three dollars meant a good deal to Jeffrey Wilburts, but after all, he philosophized, you have to spend money in this world if you're going to get ahead. He looked closely at the soldiers and marveled casually at the care with which they were made, the uniforms and guns so precisely duplicating the real thing. The same deadpan faces, though. A faint

spot of color on the cheeks and then a lifeless putty white-lead face. Jeffrey picked up the officer and scrutinized him closely. He grinned at the expressionless tiny face and then suddenly realized that the passenger sitting opposite was eyeing him amusedly.

He put his package away carefully and settled back in the day coach with a copy of "Approach to Education."

Jeffrey Wilburts' scheme worked.

"For me?" said Ronald with brightening interest as Jeffrey took the cover off the box revealing the contents.

"Golly," and the youngsters made a grab at the precious package.

The lad took the soldiers out one by one, examining them closely. His face was bright and the look he turned on Wilburts was worth three dollars and more.

"Oh, thank you, thank you so much, Mr. Wilburts. I need them so," and Ronald ran off toward his room. It seemed that Jeffrey had scored with his ward . . . but not with the Frosts.

"Now what the dickens did you go and do that for?" said Mr. Frost in an annoyed voice.

Wilburts realized that some explaining was in order. It wouldn't do to win back the boy at the cost of the parents' regard.

"I'm trying to work this problem out, Mr. Frost. This is my line of work and you've got to let me handle it in my own way. I don't want the boy to think I'm against him."

Mr. Frost took Jeffrey's side. "I think he's right, dear. If Mr. Wilburts can get Ronald's confidence he'll be able to do more with him."

Mr. Frost harrumphed. "I think the best thing to do would be to take all those damn soldiers and chuck 'em out." He went back to his paper with an angry rustle.

"You know what Dr. Brown said, dear," Mrs. Frost reminded. "The child is emotional."

DAYS passed and with the gift Ronald and Jeffrey Wilburts came somewhat closer. Whatever his peculiarities, little Frost was a clever lad and Wilburts began to see visions of himself receiving accolades as his young pupil went on to take high honors in school.

Ronald seemed to resent less Jeffrey's more frequent visits to his room, and the longer time spent there. It was interesting to Wilburts that the new soldiers that he had brought to the boy weren't immediately used. Ronald put them away in the closet.

"Aren't they all right?" the tutor queried anxiously.

"Oh, sure, but they aren't quite ready yet."

"Ready for what, Ronald? I don't understand."

The young boy got an impatient tilt to his head. "You don't put troops into real battle without training, do you?" And he leveled a most scathing look at Wilburts that seemed to say "any fool should know that."

"Oh, of course," said the companion hastily.

It was a week afterward that Mr. Frost met Wilburts outside and called him over to the side of the house where the waste receptacle stood.

"Look," Frost said pointing.

WILBURTS followed the direction of the pointing, and there, in among the throwouts was a pile of broken tin soldiers—easily a half a hundred of them.

"It's a disgraceful waste. I will not allow my son to grow up with such a streak of wanton destruction in him," stormed Frost.

Wilburts tactfully agreed with him and said he would speak to Ronald that evening.

It was dark outside when the two, tutor and young boy, retired to the latter's room. Automatically, the lad went about his job of placing out the soldier patrols. Jeffrey noticed idly that by now Ronald was using the machine gunners he had given him.

Wilburts broke the silence. "I saw a whole lot of your broken soldiers outside in the waste receptacle."

The boy showed little interest.

Wilburts went on. "That's pretty costly, you breaking them that way, Ronald. I hope you're not going to do that to the ones I gave you."

"I don't break them," Ronald turned to the tutor. "I don't break them."

"It's an expensive thing to do," went on Wilburts, ignoring the boy's denial. "Why not conserve the ones you have. Just between us, young feller, I don't think your father

liked my giving you those soldiers the other day."

Ronald paled and came over toward Wilburts. "I've got to have soldiers, Mr. Wilburts. I've just got to. I need more now. Every night some get killed."

"You mean you break them," corrected Jeffrey with a smile.

"I don't break them," Ronald cried. told Mummy and Dad that, too."

"Well, every morning there are a few more all broken . . . how come?"

"They're dead."

"Ronald!"

"I don't break them."

"You're talking foolishness, young feller. If you don't break them, who does? And it happens at night when you're in here alone. Surely you don't think I or your parents come in here and break your soldiers, do you?"

"No."

"Well, what then?"

Ronald hung silent, then said finally, "I don't exactly know."

Jeffrey Wilburts persisted. "Now you're adding one bad habit to another. You're telling an untruth. We're not thinking of punishing you because you break your soldiers. They're yours, but we're trying to make you see that it is a dreadful waste. It makes your father very angry. You want more and more soldiers—why mother says she bought twenty-five dollars' worth of lead soldiers for your last birthday. That's a lot . . . and then you go and break them."

Ronald was nearly on the point of tears. "But I don't break them, I tell you."

"Oh Ronald," Wilburts turned away with a feigned attitude of disgust.

"They protect me!"

"The soldiers?"

"Yes, and they get killed protecting me."

"Oh," so the lad wanted to carry this fantasy further, eh. "And just what is it that kills them, Germans and Japs, I suppose! Right here!"

"No," cried Ronald. "I tell you I don't know exactly. It's something I can feel at night. It comes in here. Into this room."

"And you need the soldiers to protect you, like a bodyguard?"

"Yes," the youngster turned beseeching eyes toward the older man. "I have to have

more soldiers. Please help me get them. I don't know what will happen if I can't."

THAT night after Ronald had gone to bed Wilburts had a long talk with the Frosts.

"It's my opinion," said Wilburts pompously, "that you ought to have your doctor look over this chap."

"Oh dear, you don't think he's coming down with anything, do you? There's been a lot of scarlet . . ."

Wilburts interrupted. "No, no, I don't mean anything like that. I mean, I think this soldier complex has gone a bit too far. . . . I think we ought to have a doctor . . ." and Jeffrey tapped his head.

"Oh," said Mrs. Frost.

"We'll get Dr. Brown," boomed Mr. Frost. "I'll call him before I leave for town tomorrow and we'll have him stop by. I think it's a good idea, Wilburts."

On his way to his room Jeffrey silently opened the door of Ronald's room and peered inside. The room was dark and from the bed came the sound of the boy's breathing, deep and regular. Certainly nothing going on now. At least sleep kept him from playing his games. As he turned softly to go his foot almost struck a lone soldier on the floor near the door. He stooped and saw it was one of the machine gunners he had given Ronald, gun at the ready in a lifelike pose. Wilburts smiled and tiptoed into the hall.

Dr. Brown, prototype of the solid, jolly, optimistic country doctor, was in the next day in the late afternoon. He examined Ronald thoroughly and came downstairs with the opinion that "the young chap was high strung with a nervous constitution but physically he's sound . . . nothing to worry about."

After Brown had huffed and grunted his way into his great coat and departed, Wilburts thought seriously about telling Mrs. Frost that the country practitioner wasn't exactly the kind of doctor he had had in mind when he'd suggested that somebody look at Ronald, but Mrs. Frost seemed so carefree since the physician's visit and verdict that he decided to put it off for a while.

And when Mr. Frost came in at night and received the news he snorted and said,

"Just what I thought, there's nothing the matter with the young scalawag; he just needs to be taught some good common sense," and looked meaningfully at Jeffrey Wilburts, who thereupon decided to put off delivering his opinion of Brown for good.

Time passed and Ronald's pleadings for new soldiers became incessant and frenzied.

"But it's not nearly Christmas yet, Ronald. We can't be buying you things every time you have the wish," Mrs. Frost reasoned.

"And for Christmas it's time you wanted something like boxing gloves or a fishing rod," roared Mr. Frost to his son. "No more of these soldiers, my boy. That's for children. You don't want to be like a child now you're twelve."

It was increasingly evident that night by night Ronald's troops were being thinned out, by some contrary or destructive process, reasoned Wilburts.

Late one fall evening Ronald did something unprecedented. He crept into Jeffrey Wilburts' room. The tutor was moved by this visit from the boy and adopted his most friendly attitude.

"Well, hello there. Are you still walking around at this hour?"

"Mr. Wilburts, I want to talk to you, please." His eyes were downcast.

"Sure, Ronald. Go ahead," and Wilburts dropped the book he was reading and smiled in friendly fashion at the youngster.

The boy stood for a moment unsurely in the center of the floor and then looked up from his slipper toes and at Jeffrey.

"It's about the soldiers," he breathed out.

Wilburts didn't say anything.

"You see how my Mummy and Dad are about it. But I thought, I thought maybe you could—would get me some more. I need them, Mr. Wilburts."

WILBURTS frowned and shook his head. "You know what your family thinks about this, Ronald. You wouldn't want me to do anything behind their backs, would you?"

"It's that I don't have much more," pleaded Ronald. "After a few more nights I don't know what'll happen."

"Nonsense," expostulated Wilburts, not understanding what the boy could be going

on about so. "Just stop breaking them and you'll have enough."

"I don't break them," Ronald stamped obstinately.

"All right, then, whoever does, see they don't. No, I can't get you any more, Ronald. Most likely you'll be breaking mine soon," this last petulantly with thought of his own cash outlay. "Now you'd better makes tracks back off to bed."

Without another word the little boy turned and went off to bed.

The next day with Ronald off at school Jeffrey took the opportunity to investigate the closet where the boy kept his precious soldiers. He noted that stock of lead soldiers was truly low. And in a metal basket at the corner of the room were the broken parts of several dozen soldiers. It was wrong the way the boy kept breaking them. Why couldn't they be fixed up?

That night when Ronald was setting up his soldiers—all that were left unbroken—Wilburts brightly said, "The thing to do is to solder the broken parts together. Don't just chuck them out that way. How about it, Ronald?"

The boy turned toward him, "Don't you see, that doesn't do any good. When a soldier is dead, he's dead. You can't stick him together and make him a soldier again. He's just a statue."

I give up, thought Wilburts.

The next morning Jeffrey found the boy picking up the usual broken and twisted soldiers. More than ever the lad's bedroom looked like the scene of a horrendous battle. The thought appealed to Wilburts. World campaigns fought on a small scale with toy soldiers! It was intriguing.

All through the day the boy moped, showing little interest in anything. Dark circles under his eyes testified to the fact that he had not slept too well. He answered solicitous queries from his mother asking how he felt with short replies.

As night approached he excused himself and went upstairs early. Mr. Frost harried the whole business off. Mrs. Frost thought maybe he was coming down with something. Jeffrey Wilburts, after saying good night himself, decided to go upstairs and see what was going on.

With greater care than ever before

Ronald was arranging his blank-faced little soldiers—at his bed table and on the floor around his bed. Jeffrey sat in the chair by the washstand and watched, ignored by young Frost.

"You haven't very many left," accused Wilburts.

"Not enough tonight, not nearly enough," replied the boy half to himself.

The preparations went on for some time and then Ronald undressed himself and got into bed. "Good night, Mr. Wilburts."

Somewhat taken aback at the lad's perfunctory attitude the tutor mumbled good night and left the room. Several hours later, in his own chamber, it sleepily occurred to the half-awake Wilburts that it might be a good idea to watch the youngster for a while. And when he got up in the night to step on his soldiers in some perversion of fantasy, why Jeffrey would catch him red-handed. Grabbing a large loose-leaf notebook in which to jot down anything of worth and sticking a pencil in his pocket he stole down the corridor, opened Ronald's door ever so softly and crept into the darkened room.

Ah, the chair by the washstand. That would be a fine vantage spot. The man seated himself and settled into the most comfortable position. As his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, the room began to assume shape. The bedtable and the bed loomed up slowly out of the blackness. The softly breathing bundle on the bed was Ronald. His pupils enlarging to compensate for the gloom, Jeffrey began to make out the little knots of soldiers, some of them his gift to Ronald, around the room. He smiled to himself. Now just wait for that little imp to get up and start to break his soldiers just as an excuse to get some new ones!

TIME at night and in the dark barely exists. It is the hand of a watch slowly creeping around a luminous dial, the slow breathing of a human, the strange night sound of soundlessness. How long Jeffrey sat there before he began to nod he did not guess or try to guess.

He drifted out of nothingness to awareness for no immediately appreciable reason. The room took a vague, unreal form before him. The window was a quartered

square of faint lightness to his left. The curtains moved sluggishly in the night air—but there was something else! There was some other movement in the room. Jeffrey's hands felt numb in his lap. The white there was his open notebook. Was Ronald astir? No, he could see—yes, that must be Ronald's head there on the pillow. Suddenly Wilburts felt his eyes drawn inexorably to something moving on the floor near him.

He looked—he could move his eyes but the rest of him was seemingly paralyzed. That movement was—a soldier, soldiers! The toy soldiers were moving! All the while Wilburts clearly registered these thoughts, his mind was anesthetized with a numbness of shock or sleep—or death. It was quite impossible. All around in the dark corners small things were deploying—small lead figures, running and crouching, holding their tiny guns in readiness!

But the mind-shocking fantasy was not over—this hallucination, for that it must be, reasoned one small hindmost part of Jeffrey Wilburts' brain, was not passing.

What had awakened him, he realized now, was the Breathing. Not from the bed, not from little Ronald, but from somewhere—someone else. A breathing that was like the exhalations from the lungs of a dozen dying men, like the mournful wash of sea on an open coast, like a thousand things, all unpleasant—all inhuman or soon to be!

Then the breathing was a shadow. A shadow that was dark and made the rest of the room seem light in comparison. A blotch of preposterously shaped blackness that had no reason and no reality, except that it *was*. Slowly it was coming. From the window and the door and the ceiling and the walls . . . all at once!

Wilburts could barely move. His fingers twitched in his lap, on the sides of the notebook that lay in his lap. For the paralysis of his body, his eyes tried to make up. For they were darting everywhere. Jeffrey looked at the bed and there was Ronald sitting up, his eyes white discs of blank, stark fear.

Great activity was taking place on the floor around the bed. Suddenly a tiny flash, followed by others in rapid succession from different sections of the room, attracted the tutor's eye. The soldiers were fighting back!

BUT whatever it was they were fighting was still coming. A breathing, panting noise of a thing. Nameless, descriptionless except for the grotesque shadow it threw. The soldiers were scattering as the shadow darkened and grew in intensity around the bed. Jeffrey saw that one after another the toy guards were going down. The flashes of firing were growing less frequent. Still the noises in the room were the distant, indistinct but recognizable noises of battle heard from afar—and all the time the heavy, slobbery breathing grew in volume until its wheezing inhalations were like a giant bellows half-full of unhealthy water.

But the crowning blow of terror came to Jeffrey Wilburts when he felt a tug and pulling on his trousers and suddenly, as he looked down, a tiny figure pulled itself desperately into his lap. That part of Wilburts' mind still functioning in a semi-rational manner dimly recognized the tin soldier as the officer of the ones he had given to Ronald.

But now the officer, standing on Wilburts' open notebook, had his revolver out of his holster and was shooting toward the center of the room—shooting upward, upward where something black was hovering over the bed upon which a little boy sat and stared with the gaze of one who cannot see beyond the inside of his eyes.

The breathing sound was deafening and suffocating. The air was filled with a dampness, a vibration that was maddening, the armed resistance from the floor and bed-table had ceased. The monster—whatever it was—had won. Jeffrey wished himself awake and with a terrific effort of will forced his hands upward. He pushed his notebook shut and drove himself up and toward the door. He had no memory of opening it and stepping out into the hall, or of getting into his own bed, throwing the notebook into his bag and falling on his bed.

The next morning Ronald didn't come down to breakfast. Wilburts, although he had a memory of a very bad dream, attached no significance to this—that was until Mrs. Frost went upstairs and let out a scream for the others. Jeffrey and Mr. Frost ran up the stairs. Ronald was sitting up in bed grinning at them strangely. Briefly, Wilburts' attention went to the floor. Everywhere

were the soldiers—every one broken. Another pitiful cry came from Mrs. Frost as the two men rushed closer. It was frightfully obvious. The boy was utterly mad; he had turned into a complete, raving idiot in the night!

As he rode toward the city Jeffrey Wilburts thought unpleasantly of that last day at the Frosts. He remembered the strange cawing noises the boy had made, the drooling from the mouth, Dr. Brown's visit and the call for specialists. He shuddered. It was most unpleasant. And most of all the remembrance of his own terrifying dream. But he did remember planning to go down to Ronald's room and sit there for a while to see what would go on. Yes, of course, he'd even taken a notebook to report anything of significance.

On inspiration Jeffrey reached into his bag and brought forth the large loose-leaf book.

As he pulled it onto his lap he noticed the bulge. He flipped open the pages and caught the object as it fell out.

It was the toy soldier-officer! Wilburts wet his lips and his head pounded.

The one that had come with the soldiers he had given Ronald not so many weeks ago. The one that had crawled upon his lap and onto the notebook in his dreadful dream last night!

Wilburts' mind worked slowly over the details, chewing each fact slowly while his face tingled and dampened.

He brought the soldier closer, much closer to his face. Wilburts' fingers trembled. It was all quite impossible!

The tiny lead face should be a blob of expressionless putty and paint. But it wasn't.

Instead the toy soldier's countenance was frozen in a grimace of unspeakable horror—rivaled only by the face of the man so near its own!