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Cover Design . . . . .	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Albino Deaths"</i>		
The Albino Deaths . . . . .	Ronal Kayser	258
<i>A grim weird story of torture on the Wheel of Death in a fantastic dungeon</i>		
The Crystal Curse . . . . .	Eando Binder	272
<i>A veritable rhapsody in blues—a curious tale of other dimensions</i>		
Beyond Death's Gateway . . . . .	Paul Ernst	290
<i>Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal, seeks out a temporary death</i>		
Haunted . . . . .	Alfred I. Tooke	307
<i>Verse</i>		
The Black Abbot of Puthuum . . . . .	Clark Ashton Smith	308
<i>A tale of gruesome horror in an uncanny monastery of the desert</i>		
The Devil's Swamp . . . . .	Robert Avrett	322
<i>Verse</i>		
The Hour of the Dragon (part 4) . . . . .	Robert E. Howard	323
<i>A vivid goose-flesh novel of a thousand eery thrills—a tale of Conan the barbarian</i>		
The Creaking House . . . . .	Clarence Edwin Flynn	344
<i>Verse</i>		
In the World's Dusk . . . . .	Edmond Hamilton	345
<i>A gripping tale of the last survivor of the human race and his attempts to repopulate the world</i>		
The Ship that Committed Suicide . . . . .	A. J. Mordtmann	354
<i>A tender and pathetic story about a weird experience in the Antarctic</i>		
The Graveyard Rats . . . . .	Henry Kuttner	359
<i>A ghastly fate befell the caretaker of the cemetery in the horrible burrows beneath the graves</i>		
Homecoming Day . . . . .	Jay Wilmer Benjamin	364
<i>The old colonel and his chum of former days were united at last</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
A Masterpiece of Crime . . . . .	Jean Richepin	367
<i>An eery yarn by a famous French author—translated by H. Twitshell</i>		
The Eyrie . . . . .		376
<i>A forum wherein the readers of this magazine express their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Homecoming Day

By JAY WILMER BENJAMIN

*The old colonel and his chum of former days were united  
at last—a brief weird story*

**H**OMECOMING DAY was over. The team had won, Dress Parade had clicked smoothly, and the old grads, who had been well fed and cheered to the echo at evening mess, were now in the big gymnasium across the parade ground, where a colorful military ball was writing *finis* to the celebration. And Colonel Roger Samson, Thornleigh's president, was very tired.

Somehow, Homecoming Day always made him feel old. It took him back to the time when he was a young cadet at Thornleigh, strutting and proud in his gray uniform with the shiny shoulder pips and the new boots and Sam Black as he commanded the crack company of the battalion. So he sat in his study, a worn briar in his hands, and smiled a little wearily and a little sadly.

It was intermission. Outside his window, the boys were passing to and fro. Snatches of conversation came to him, talk of dates, and the hot music at the gym, and the chances of riding Reveillé and skipping the penalty sheet. Their cheerful chatter blended into Roger Samson's day dream. They were no longer 1935 cadets. They were "War" Richards, really named Walter Arthur, and "Brad" Sanders from Kentucky, who received his nickname the first evening at mess when he drawled, "Please pass the brad." They were "Red" Nuckols and Bill Hancock, the inseparable corporals of his own Company B, and that fresh rat, Billy Ludlow. . . .

The colonel reflected, somewhat bit-

terly, that none of his own class had returned for this Homecoming Day. It had been a good class. They had sworn eternal fealty to Thornleigh. And they had come back, too—something about the school, with its ivy-covered towers and the campus statue of old Marcus Thornleigh, commander in the army of Washington, made for a tradition deeper than mere spouting of flowery phrases at Finals. They had come back in a body to do him honor at the first Homecoming Day, just after he had been made president of the old academy. The old crowd, his crowd, had kept on. And then, year by year, they had fallen out. "Absent from formation here, gone to answer a Golden Reveillé," as one *In Memoriam* page in the academy annual had expressed it.

So Roger Samson dreamed and smiled, until the cadets and their girls went back to the gym and the music of the orchestra once more stole softly across the parade ground to his open window.

From closer by, for those not at the hop, the sweet notes of Taps, sounded by the band's best bugler, floated into his study. Officially, the corps was being put to bed. The colonel snapped off the light and went to the window. Brad Sanders had been a bugler too. An unconscious sigh escaped him. Brad Sanders, and Red Nuckols, and that grand crowd of boys. Adventurous "Little Billy" Ludlow, his room-mate, six feet one in his stocking feet. What ever had happened to the fellow? Dropped out of sight in one of his

interminable jungles in India or some place. The colonel reflected that he hadn't heard of Ludlow in a half-dozen years, but he never failed to think of him on Homecoming Day.

He watched as the yellow triangles marking commissioned officers' quarters, where lights were allowed after C. Q., dissolved into surrounding blackness. The suddenly mournful notes of the bugle were long drawn out. It was almost as if the world were ending, he reflected. Everything was dark now. Nothing was left but youth—happy, unthinking, unknowing youth, dancing madly to the rhythm of the throbbing drums. Suddenly Colonel Roger Samson felt very much alone. He sank slowly into his desk chair. He was tired and sleepy. The bugle call came loud and clear:

Day is done;  
Gone the sun  
From the lake,  
From the hill,  
From the sky . . .

**“W**AKE up, Samson—wake up!” The colonel opened his eyes. The light was on. But he was dreaming. He was quite certain of it. For there in his study stood Billy Ludlow! Little Billy Ludlow, hands holding an imaginary bugle, lustily singing the words they used to chant to Reveillé:

The *cap-tain's* worse than the *ser-geant*,  
And the *col-onel's* the *worst* of all!

“Billy!” The colonel knew definitely, now, that he was asleep. He had that feeling of knowing it was all a dream, but not wanting to wake up, and he determined in a flash to go on with it. “Little Billy Ludlow!”

“Nobody else!” said Billy Ludlow, advancing with outstretched hand. “How'ya, old lady?”

“Man alive! Man alive!”

“I'm glad you're here,” said Billy Ludlow heartily. “It's been a long time since we talked with each other here at Thornleigh.”

“Too long a time, Billy. Why didn't you come back before?”

“You did very well without my help,” said Ludlow, and smiled. “I couldn't come before. But I'm here now, old boy. Let's go.”

“All right, let's go,” echoed Roger Samson, and the years seemed to drop from his shoulders as he talked. “Let's look over the academy. Want to?”

“I'd love it,” said Billy Ludlow simply.

“The boys are asleep—in bed, anyway.” Samson chuckled. “They play the radio after Taps now, Billy. What they call the 'red-hot' bands come on late at night. Twenty demerits if they get stuck by the O. C. Say, remember the time we had the big feed in the corner suite?”

“You bet. Red Nuckols drank a pint of hard cider and insisted on going out to climb up on old Thornleigh's stone horse.”

“Not so loud, Billy! And you walked off six hours of penalty tours on the beat when they caught you in Red's room after Taps? Well, let's look at the new Science Building.”

Arm in arm, they set out across the parade ground. Samson laughed happily.

“It's certainly great, your coming back, Billy. Why, I thought maybe you were dead. I'll have to show you the lab—maybe work you for a contribution. The old desk in McIlrairie Hall, with the initials—and the tree where we used to shinny out of bounds, and all that. Remember?”

“Yes, we shinned out of bounds. We wouldn't stay here when we could, and then later——”

They walked slowly across the moon-lit yard.

"Samson—do you really love the old academy?"

The colonel stopped. "Of course I do," he declared earnestly. "The boys and their problems, the instructors and their families—it's my whole life, Billy. Why, I always did want to run the academy, even when I was a rat here. Why?"

"And you wouldn't like to leave it for anything?"

"Not for anything. Not until I——"

"Well, you *what*?"

"Let's not mention that. It makes me sort of afraid, Billy. I don't want to die."

Billy Ludlow's voice was soft and friendly. "But we all have to some day, Samson."

"Yes—some day. But not——" The colonel stopped talking. Then his words fell over themselves. "Billy! Where have you been? You—you——"

Billy Ludlow put a steadying hand on his arm. "Yes—I went on six years ago. In China. It isn't bad. Steady does it, old boy!"

Colonel Roger Samson tried desperately to wake up. The music from the gymnasium sounded clearly in his ears, but the tune was an old waltz, and it came from a band. He found himself listening eagerly, even as he struggled to shake off the dream of Billy Ludlow's hand on his arm. Might as well dream a little longer. It was pleasant.

"Hear that?" he demanded, managing a grin. "Remember the excitement *that* tune made, over fifty years ago?"

"Yes, old boy—I remember."

Roger Samson listened, and the music soothed his jumping nerves. And then

over and above the other instruments sounded a cornet.

"It sounds like Brad Sanders!" said Colonel Roger Samson.

"It *is* Brad Sanders," answered Billy Ludlow.

Roger Samson struggled in earnest then—struggled as a sleeper fights to awaken when an alien noise disturbs his dream—fought desperately at first, then feebly as the parade ground grew brighter with an unearthly light.

"But I'm only in my late sixties!" argued Roger Samson, as if to convince himself that this thing was not possible.

"We have waited a long time," answered Billy Ludlow gently. "Don't you understand? Come with me."

From far, far away, as if from another world, Roger Samson's ear caught the faint sweet call of a bugle sounding the final notes of Taps:

All is well,  
Safely rest;  
God is nigh . . .

He stood quietly, listening, as the golden thread of music thinned and broke.

"Come," said Billy Ludlow. "They are waiting."

Brad Sanders' cornet swung into the lilting bars of the Reveillé March. Colonel Roger Samson grinned in relief. Billy Ludlow flung an arm across his shoulder. He heard them calling—"Samson the Mighty!" That would be Red Nuckols. Why, he hadn't been called that for years! The past was receding, and somehow the old colonel did not mind. He did not mind at all. For before him a fresh scene was opening clearly—a scene of undreamed-of, indescribable splendor. It was Homecoming Day! Arm in arm with Billy Ludlow, he went forward. . . .