

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1949

Cover by Matt Fox

LONG NOVELETTE

- COME AND GO MAD** Fredric Brown 4
Who is to know with certainty the mad from the unmad in this turbulent world in which both play parts.

NOVELETTE

- THE MASHER** Ewen Whyte 32
A species of man usually thought to be annoying but harmless—usually that is!

SHORT STORIES

- FROM THE VASTY DEEP** H. Russell Wakefield 26
Beyond the furthest depth of the fathomless ocean comes an ageless horror to right men's wrongs.

- THE BLUE SPECTACLES** Stephen Grendon 44
Strange sights could be seen through these glasses; of this and that and things quite preposterous.

- HOW STRANGE MY LOVE** Russell Branch 50
If two people represent the opposite poles of emotional intensity what happens, pray tell, in the middle?.

- THE UBIQUITOUS PROFESSOR KARR** Stanton A. Coblenz 57
The suspect of the crime is often one least liable to suspicion.

- IN THE X-RAY** Fritz Leiber, Jr. 66
The X-ray reveals many matters beneath the surface—beneath the surface of the human being and the small confines of his world.

- THE PREVIOUS INCARNATION** Harold Lawlor 74
Certainly life heretofore is of as much concern as life hereafter.

- FLORAL TRIBUTE** Robert Bloch 81
You know those flowers they put in graveyards? They're there for a very special reason you might not guess!

- DARK O' THE MOON** Seabury Quinn 88
A strange doom stalked this man through the bayous; a doom far worse than revengeful bullets or a hangman's noose for those are simple ways of dying.

WEIRD TALES CLUB 3

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179

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How Strange My Love



By Russell Branch

OH, TEDDY why did you lie to me? Such a needless little lie, and it doesn't really matter. Except the not knowing and needing you so. I'm shivering, Teddy, and frightened. So terribly frightened. . . .

I'm here, you little fool. Out here in the garden—where your tulips will bloom this spring. Lying on the cold hard dirt, Sally,

And how strange the intensity of hate that knows no bounds but fate itself

with a bullet through my lung. *Your* bullet, my utterly stupid, my incredibly lucky little wife. The bullet you fired so wildly into the night, with your hand shaking and your eyes closed blindly. . .

Teddy, my love, I need you so. The police are coming but it's you I need. The shelter of your arms, the warmth of your chin against my head. Come home, Teddy, and hold me tight. Like you did that first, wonderful night on the Caribbee. . . .

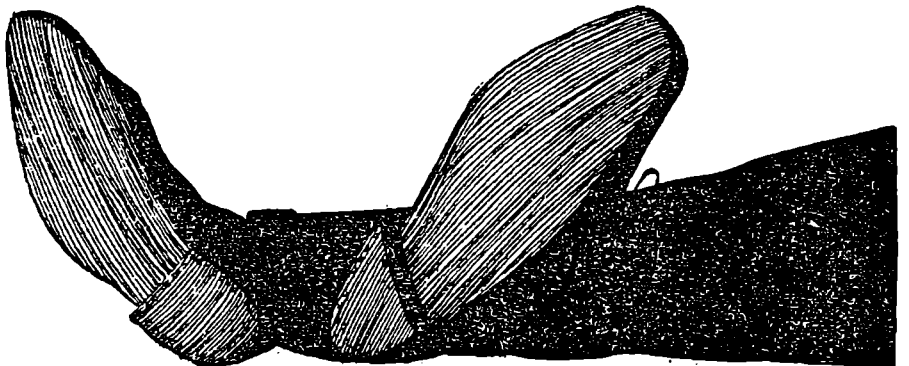
Out here, stupid! Out here watching and hating you, with the blood choking in my throat. I know you've called the police; I saw you go to the phone. Then you remembered the window shade . . . as if you could shut out your terror with that flimsy fabric! I can still see you, my ugly duckling. Your shadow. Pacing, turning, rubbing your wrist with that maddening, foolish gesture of yours.

I wish now I'd done it while I had the chance. . . . in fact, that very first night, aboard the Caribbee. I wish I'd put my hands around your throat, Sally, instead of around your waist.

You remember, Teddy? You held me close and you whispered in my ear, "Let me call you my darling. . . ."

Moonlight and music . . . some corny popular song that drifted up from the deck

Heading by
Vincent Napoli



below. We'd given up dancing—you never could dance, my clumsy dumpling—and you giggled like a schoolgirl when I led you up the companionway to the hurricane deck. You kissed like a schoolgirl, too . . . awkward, timid, inept. I should have known then it wouldn't be worth it.

You'll never know what you gave me, Teddy. The strength—the courage and ecstasy and self-forgetting that comes to a girl when she knows she's wanted, and makes her a woman. The first time for me, darling, and even though I knew it wasn't for you it didn't matter. That was part of it, my dear: the knowing that you, a man of the world, had chosen me.

I know how I must have seemed to you, Teddy; a mere girl. But I was a woman when we finally went below, a woman with moonglow in her face and stardust in her eyes. I could feel them there, Teddy, and I remember how sharply Daddy looked at me when we came into the bright lights of the card saloon. . . .

YOU were always such a fool, Sally, such a stupid little dope. That very first night you almost gave the whole show away, like a child with a secret. After all, it had only been a kiss or two, but you looked as if. . . Well, your father saw that look, and I knew I had to work fast.

But Daddy didn't understand, no more than he could ever understand. "It's your bedtime, young lady," he told me, just as if I were still a child. But it didn't matter, because you smiled understandingly at me; Teddy; smiled and bowed and kissed my hand, right there in front of all those people, and I went below to my stateroom with a whole new set of dreams.

Your old man wasn't dumb, my obvious one. He packed you off to bed, and he invited me to have a nightcap with him in

the bar, and I knew what was on his mind. . . .

"Your business, Mr. LeClair? . . . You say your family home's in Florida?"

But he didn't ask those questions, my sweet; I hit him first:

"Mr. Gresham, I think I've fallen in love with your daughter."

That took the wind out of his pompous belly, I tell you, and it was really funny. Bernard L. Gresham—Mr. BLG, Incorporated, in person—looking, like he'd gotten hold of a very hot potato and didn't know quite how to put it down.

But what the hell, that'd been the main idea of the cruise to begin with, hadn't it? A husband for the poor little rich girl, a suitable mate for the ugly duckling?

Always such a bear, Daddy was—a nice but clumsy bear. "We'll take a cruise to Havana, Sally. A vacation for me and a nice change for you. It'll put roses in your cheeks, and who knows? Maybe some nice young man."

Sure, I knew what your father thought of me. Not quite what he had in mind. Not the nice dull Harvard boy, the Long Island banker's son, he'd hoped for. A bit too old, Mr. LeClair, a bit too smooth, for my little innocent. . . . A bit too smooth for himself, as a matter of fact.

He let me pay for the drinks; I think he hoped to embarrass me. If he'd only known about that bill I handed the bar steward . . . the last of a beautiful friendship with a not-so-beautiful widow who had also come to Havana seeking romance, and the reason I'd had to leave so suddenly. . . .

You were so charming, Teddy. So sophisticated and so different from the boys I'd known before. I knew Daddy didn't like you; he was afraid of that sophistication, afraid I'd get hurt.

But how could I have been hurt—even



if it had ended with those two glorious days and nights? I was like a person who had lived her whole life in a dark cave, and now had seen the sun for the very first time.

Yes, your old man was really funny, Sally. Afraid of me—and at the same time afraid that it was just a passing flirtation with me. Afraid that it'd be a quick goodbye and a broken heart when we reached New York; afraid it wouldn't be. But I knew a good thing when I saw it, Sally, so it wasn't goodbye when we landed. And that's when he really began to worry, that wealthy, fat-headed parent of yours.

I admit I had a black moment, darling, when I had to say goodbye at the pier. Because this was no longer sun and moonshine and a little intoxicated world of its own; this was New York with a cold wind and dirt and traffic and a lonely apartment waiting on Central Park West.

But you put the sun back in the sky, Teddy. You said, "Not goodbye, but au revoir, darling," and you kissed me quickly, while poor Daddy stood by and growled helplessly in his throat, looking embarrassed.

And then you sent flowers, Teddy, just two beautiful long-stemmed roses . . . so simple, so understanding. And the next afternoon . . . I was hoping you'd come, Teddy, hoping against all hope. . . .

Oh, I played it smart. I had to play it smart; my money was running out.

We had such fun, darling, such wonderful crazy fun. You were so romantic.

God, how I loathed it.

A gardenia for the girl-friend? Remember?

The quaint little restaurant, lousy with atmosphere and lousy with the food.

The walks in the Park.

"Darling, I have tickets for the theatre tonight . . . but why should I share you with others?" What a line!

But we told Daddy that we were going. . . .

"Tonight is ours, Sally. There'll never be another night just like this one."

You'd come in a car; a funny old car you'd borrowed from some friend, and you were so mysterious. . . .

I had to work fast, my chick, and I did.

I was down to my last twenty when I rented that car.

And you wouldn't tell me where we were going, but we drove and drove, far out of the city.

. . . To get us to that place in Maryland, that little town where you can get married without a wait, without questions.

I was frightened then, Teddy. I thought of poor Father and then I stopped thinking, because you were kissing me again. And we had our first little spat that night, our first married quarrel, because I kept worrying about Daddy. But I couldn't help it, Teddy. I couldn't forget how he sounded—angry and disappointed and sort of defeated—when I phoned him right after the justice of peace.

YOU wanted to go right home the next morning, baby, and it was all right with me. I had to get that rented car back, and I had to face the music sometime, so I figured it might as well be while the old boy was still groggy from the shock. . . .

That was the only flaw in my perfect happiness—seeing how upset Daddy was. He looked so old and so tired when he told me: "Sally, all I care about is your happiness. You know that, and I only hope you realize what you've done."

I don't know what Pop told you that morning, Sally, but he sure dished it out to me when he got me alone in his library. He wasn't exactly dumb, you know; most guys who make a fortune aren't. But he did underestimate me, my love; I think he had some idea he could pay me off in peanuts, after all my planning. I told him.

"Mr. Gresham, you're quite right. I haven't got a sou. But it seems to me that you—a man who started with nothing himself—should be the last to condemn me for that. All I ask is a chance, any chance."

Later, I remembered again what Daddy told me that day. That I had married you without really knowing a thing about you or your background—a stranger.

But I wonder if marriage isn't always a marriage of strangers? I don't mean the little things you have to find out, like personal habits and moods and how you like your breakfast egg. But the big thing: the person behind the shell you can never know,

the person who grew up and lived a stranger's life until you met. How well I remember that ghastly feeling when you told me about your brother for the first time. . . .

And you were impatient, Teddy—almost cruel at times, although you didn't realize it. But I loved you, darling, and I made allowances. I knew you were working hard to prove yourself to Dad, and how hard it was, in a job so far beneath your ability and interests. . .

Yes, Poppa came through, that generous father of yours. He gave me a job—as a salesman in the field where being the boss's son-in-law would not be a "handicap," as he put it. He even let you keep your charge accounts—for clothes—and he paid a cleaning woman to come in so that you wouldn't have to work so hard.

Generous? Yeah, just as generous as the 6 per cent mortgage he floated so we could buy this little dump. But he didn't scare me out, Sally. I gritted my teeth and kept on ringing doorbells and putting up with your incredible cooking efforts. . .

I tried so hard, Teddy—if you only knew. All I wanted was your love, darling, and for that I worked as I never had worked before. I could take your criticism, your sarcasm, your temper, Teddy. . . I could take everything but that feeling of strangeness, that feeling of knowing only a small part of you, with the rest all hidden behind some dark shadow. And I was so glad when you finally told me about your brother, because then I felt I was beginning to understand at last.

I HAD intended to wait longer, Sally, before I gave you that business about my brother. But you gave me the perfect opening, and it was too good to pass up. I mean when you brought up the subject of having children, raising a family. Made to order: the perfect opening for the perfect answer.

So I told you then, just three months after we were married. I told you all about poor Hugo, my pitiful, demented twin brother.

Oh, you poor, poor darling—with that behind you. Of course I understood how you felt; and that was all that really mattered, although naturally I was disappointed too. I felt at last I knew what had been

eating your soul; I could see that it would be like living with some terrible shadow. And worse still, a shadow in your own image. . . .

I guess I must have made it good, really good. You almost had me weeping myself, Sally. . . .

I'll never forget the look in your eyes when you told me, never. A haunted look, as if you could never hope to escape it but were relieved anyway to have it out. You told me how he had escaped, how he hated you with all the consuming hatred of insanity, about that threat he had screamed at you in court when you had him committed. . . .

I made it good, Sally. Plenty good. Scared the daylight out of you. You thought you knew now why I jumped at sudden noises, the reason for the quick glances toward the window in the evenings.

I wasn't frightened at first, not physically. Just relieved that you finally told me about poor Hugo, and glad that I could share your trouble with you. But I gradually came to share your nervousness, too, and the fear that you tried to hide from me. And that afternoon when the first telephone call came. . . .

I let that go on for two weeks, sweet—until you were jumpy as a cat. The telephone was pure inspiration—and pure accident. You were outside, that Sunday afternoon, fooling around in this same garden bed, and I was dozing over the Sunday paper when the phone rang.

I answered it, and it was the wrong number, but I saw you hurrying toward the back door as if you hoped to get it before it rang again and woke me up. So I just kept on talking, Sally—talking with my finger holding the hook down. I knew you had stopped in the kitchen; I knew you were listening.

And when I hung up, and you came in with your eyes wide and fearful, I told you it had only been a wrong number. But you didn't believe me, Sally. You saw what you were afraid to see in my face. You were sure it had been Hugo—and the more I denied it, the more you believed it. . .

You tried so hard to shield me, Teddy, when you found that Hugo had traced you down. You tried to reassure me; you told me that Hugo could never locate you here,

that the police would catch him first. Yes, you were a darling, Teddy . . . but I knew it wasn't fear of burglars that led you to have double locks installed on the doors . . . and apply to the police for a pistol permit.

The gun was another inspiration, my love. The police. . . I wonder if it'll be that same pompous lieutenant we told our story to that afternoon when we got the permit? The one who came out the night your old man cashed in his chips for good?

You never knew it, darling—but I did my share of the shielding too. I got a phone call myself, a call that came just before you arrived home one evening. You were a little late, as a matter of fact . . . and I talked to your brother that time. It was horrible. He . . . well, he sounded like you in a way, and I could almost picture his face, so much like yours I knew. Except for that note in his voice—that brutal, threatening incoherence.

That was why my face was so white, Teddy; that was why I was relieved to the point of tears when I finally heard your key in the lock that evening. I couldn't talk to him, couldn't reason with him, but I could feel it. He hated you, Teddy; you and everything that was yours.

Face, damn you, back and forth, wringing your foolish hands. I can't see your face, but it must look now like it did that night I phoned you on my way home from work. You were one mighty sick-looking rabbit that night, Sally, and you had me worried for a moment, too, when you refused to talk about it. But then I got it. You were just being noble, keeping your worry to yourself, the stiff upper lip. It stuck out all over you.

I had to talk to someone, darling. I was so glad when I finally got up the courage to tell Daddy about it, even though I knew you didn't want me to. And Daddy was so understanding and sympathetic, Teddy; really he was. He had begun to change his mind about you—even though you never gave him much leeway. He told me that you'd done a good job at selling, even though you obviously disliked it, and he'd already decided to bring you into the home office at the first vacancy.

He did that the very next day, Teddy, the day after I told him about Hugo—because

it meant you wouldn't have to be away from home so much. . . .

YOUR old man began to come around about that time, Sally. He transferred me into the office, gave me a wage boost, even pulled the man-to-man stuff in an effort to find out more about my poor crazy brother. I knew then that you'd gone to him, pet—but I didn't yield an inch. Told him there was nothing he could do about my own family troubles, and thanks for the promotion.

And that promotion! I wanted to toss it in his fat face, and walk out on both of you. But I didn't. I'd stood it this far and I wasn't going to spoil everything I'd so carefully built up. One more little piece of business, and then. . . .

Oh, Teddy, I lived in fear those days. Those horrible long days that went on and on like nightmares while you were away. Alone in this house, nerves jumping every time the phone rang, forcing myself to go outside long enough to hang up the wash, trembling when the postman or the laundry man came to the door.

I wanted to move back into the city then so desperately, dear;—back to an apartment where there would always be people around. But you said no, that we couldn't live our whole lives trying to hide, and I knew you were right.

Until that horrible day when I went out to take some old newspapers to the garage.

Really a nice piece of acting, that garage business was, my dear. Not to mention perfect psychology.

I saw him then! A shadow in the corner of the garage. He looked so much like you, Teddy; in fact my first reaction. . . .

You thought at first it was I, honey child. You started to say, "Teddy! What on earth—" Then you put your fist to your mouth. I could see the wheels going around: Teddy isn't home. Teddy's at the office. This isn't Teddy, this. . . .

When he turned, I knew. He turned slowly, clumsily, not with that quick grace of yours. And his face—as if it had come from the same mold, but had warped horribly. His blank eyes . . . he just stared, Teddy, stared at me like a trapped wild ani-

mal, with his face full of blind hatred. He took one step. . . . I don't remember. I think I must have screamed. I couldn't move, I may have fainted for a second. . . .

You screamed, baby—and closed your eyes, like you always do when you're frightened. I could have finished you then. . . . God knows, I wanted to. I wanted to choke that hysterical screaming off, force your eyes open so that you could look into mine at the last moment and know. But I didn't, Sally. Not then, not yet. . .

When I came to he was gone; Teddy. I got myself into the house, somehow; I locked the doors, and found the pistol in your dresser. I remember I was shaking so I couldn't even dial, had to ask the operator to get your number. And when the girl at the office told me you'd already gone, that she thought you were on your way home. . . .

Perfect psychology, my dear. Out of those old clothes I'd appropriated from someone's rubbish barrel; back into my own, down in that old hobo camp under the culvert. Then around the block, up to my front door. Mr. LeClair, home a little early from work. The thoughtful husband, the intuitive husband—home early because of a hunch that something was wrong. Yes, home to his hysterical, stupid little wife. . . .

Darling, darling, you'll never know! When you came in, gathered up the pieces in your strong arms even before you knew what had happened. Because somehow you did know . . . and there you were, my strength and my courage and my protector!

Like pulling strings on a puppet; that simple. I went through all the motions; took the gun out of your limp hand and went out back and searched all around. Listened to your incoherent tale, called the police with a few embellishments of my own. . .

Then the police came, even as they will come now. But it's you I'm waiting for, Teddy. I won't feel really safe again until you hold me close once more, tell me it's all right. . . .

I got a big laugh out of that, too. That detective—Conneley? No, Conóver. Lieutenant Conover, that's it. Fixed me with his wise eyes and said, "Mr. LeClair, we'll need an exact description of your brother."

And I grinned and said, "Lieutenant, you're looking at one right now. We're

identical twins, and even—our own mother. . . ."

That was when you raised the roof, my darling—with your indignant protest that we were really nothing alike, not at all. Because you had seen Hugo. . . .

I had the strangest sensation that day, Teddy—of course it was nothing but sheer nerves, reaction. I was lying there on the couch, and you were talking to the police officer, and it suddenly seemed to me that I was looking at two people in one: the wonderful man I had married—and another one who called himself Hugo. And when you grinned that self-mocking, that cynical, grin and told the lieutenant that your brother looked exactly like you . . . well, it was almost as if you had read my thoughts.

SURE, the cops poked around and found nothing and promised that they'd send out a general alarm. I knew then that the time would never be any riper, so I called your father, right after they left.

I knew why Daddy came over that evening, Teddy dear; I knew it was because you had called him. You were just trying to spare me, darling, and don't think—never think—that I blame you for what happened. I know that you've always blamed yourself, but don't, dearest. After all, I kept him here; I argued and protested and refused to go home with him unless you'd come too. . . .

So dear poppa comes rushing over in his limousine to rescue poor little frightened daughter, and there we all were, sitting around and arguing about it. . . .

You were so troubled, darling; so upset and stubborn and self-recriminating for having gotten me involved—and so very decided about handling your own "problem" as you called it. Daddy wanted to call in a private detective agency, but you just shook your head savagely and took out that pistol and showed it to him grimly.

"He's my own brother, Mr. Gresham. And if he's a dangerous maniac—then I'm the one to deal with him, one way or another."

You had just said that, Teddy—when I saw a look come into your face that frightened me even more than your grimness. You

suddenly leaned forward,—staring past us, looking at the window beyond the couch. And then, before we could even turn, you were on your feet, running toward the front door with the pistol in your hand. . .

That was when I made my last big play . . . right then, when we were talking about it. They watched me go, my startled wife and old Money Bags, and they did just what I expected. . .

Yeah, I'll have to give the old boy credit. He wasn't a coward. He rushed right after me, just as I figured and hoped he would, and I let him have it just as he stepped out the door. He never knew what hit him; he was still blinking into the darkness when the shots blasted into him. Three, I think—just as fast as I could work that old revolver I'd bought at a pawnshop. . .

I died a thousand deaths that night, dearest one, while the guns roared outside. I don't know how I finally made it, how I ever got my feet to move me to the door. I saw the crumpled heap on the steps; my mind screamed that it was you even as I knew it wasn't. Because you were running back from the darkness then, running up the front walk to take me into your arms. . .

So I came back, from chasing my own shadow down the street, my sweet, and you were already at the front door. Standing there looking down at your father's body, and sobbing my name. I'd done a good job, I saw as I bent over him. He was gone already; gone beyond all help and all speech.

I felt so guilty about it afterwards, Teddy. . . I didn't realize then that my own father had been killed, I just felt a stunned relief that it wasn't you lying there. You were alive, Teddy, alive but wounded. . .

That was all there was to it, my love. Just you and me. Me, your dutiful, brave husband, with a bullet nick in his shoulder. . .

I didn't realize about Daddy until later—not until the police came, and the ambulance, and they started taking pictures and measuring things.

THAT shoulder of mine hurt like hell, but it was worth it. With that, and all the rest of the buildup, how could they suspect anything? You had actually seen Hugo—and then there was that helpful

neighbor down the street who was sure he had seen someone running away right after the shooting.

They found the other gun, of course: the old revolver I had tossed into the bushes while I was so bravely chasing the insane brother who had missed me and had killed my father-in-law.

They arrested the pawnbroker and he admitted he had sold the gun . . . but to a shabby tramp, not a gentleman like that Mr. LeClair. And they took paraffine tests of my hand, sure . . . but all that proved was what my own emptied pistol already showed, that I had tried my best even if it had been my own blood brother.

They found out more about Hugo, of course. That a man named Hugo LeClair had once been committed, but had escaped three years ago, from a private sanitarium near New Orleans; that his papers had been signed by a brother named Theodore who subsequently had disappeared to escape local gossip and the tragic past. . . .

In short, my dear, they found everything—and nothing.

Or, I thought it was all over then, Teddy; I thought our troubles were over and I tried to believe you. You explained to me how people who were legally insane could still be surprisingly rational and clever; that Hugo would never dare show up again, even if the police didn't locate him. I thought I hoped . . . until tonight. . . .

So there it was, my love. Nothing left but you and a half-million dollars—after taxes. I knew it would take a year to get the will settled but I also knew what was in your will, my angel, and I could wait. . . .

Until tonight, at the window again. . . .

I thought I could wait; I was willing to wait. Theodore could have waited, damn him! But Theodore was dead; Hugo had killed him long before he found you. And Hugo had to come back once more, and spoil everything . . . because Hugo couldn't . . . wait. . . .

Darling, darling Teddy! Where . . . where are you?

Come out . . . Sally. Out in the garden, Sally . . . come out . . . see Hugo. Poor, crazy Hugo . . . with . . . the hole . . . in . . . his chest.