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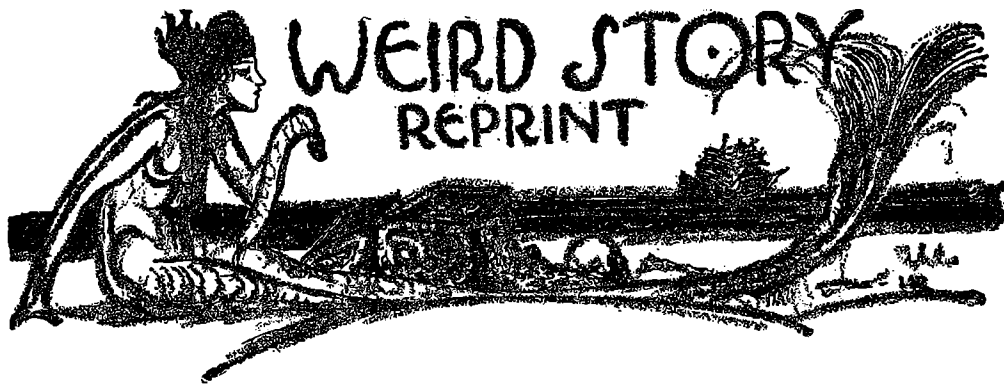
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



Leonora

By EVERIL WORRELL

I AM writing this because I shall not long be able to write it. Why does one long for the understanding and sympathy of his fellow beings—long to have that, even after the worst has befallen and he has gone from this life to that which awaits him? How many bottles laden with last messages float on lonely, unknown ocean surges, or sink to the bottom of the sea?

It will be so with this, my last message. That is, it will be uncredited, unbelievable, uncomprehended, although it will doubtless be read. But I have told my story many times, and heard them say that I am mad. I know they will say that, after I am gone—gone from behind these bars into the horrors of the fate that will overtake my spirit somewhere out in the open spaces and the blackness of night into which it will go. *He* will be there, one of the shadows that lurk in old cemeteries and sweep across lonely roads where the winds moan and wander homeless and hopeless across the waste spaces of the earth from dusk till dawn. Dawn!

But I will tell my story for the last time.

Even now, my years are those of a young girl. I am only seventeen, and they say I have been mad more than a year. When I was sixteen, my eyes were bright and my cheeks red with a color that did not come off when I washed my face. I lived in the country, and I was an old-fashioned girl in many ways. I roamed freely over the countryside, and my wanderings were shared by my only close friend, or else were lonely. The name of my friend was Margaret. Mine was Leonora.

The two of us lived only a quarter of a mile apart, and between us ran a lonely little road crossed by another like it. Our parents believed that it was safe for us, or for any child, to traverse this road between our houses alone at any hour. We had done it from our youngest days. It should have been safe, for we were far from cities, and malefactors of any sort were utterly unknown in our secluded part of the country. There were disadvantages attendant on living in such isolation, but there were advantages, too. Mar-

garet's family were simple farmer folk of sterling worth. My father was a student of some means, who could afford to let the world go by.

On dark or stormy nights, sundown generally found me safe indoors for the night, spending the evening by the open fire. Moonlight nights I loved, and on nights when the moon was bright I often stayed at Margaret's house, taking advantage of my freedom to wander home alone as late as midnight. Sometimes Margaret did this, too, staying late with me and going home without thought of fear; but I was the venturesome one, the one who loved to be abroad in the moonlight. . . .

Do horrors such as come to me march toward one from the hour of birth, so that every trait, every characteristic is inclined to meet them?

Up to my sixteenth birthday, my life had been like a placid stream. It had been without excitement, and almost without incident. Perhaps its very calm had made me ready for adventure.

ON MY sixteenth birthday, Margaret dined at my house and I supped with her. It was our idea of a celebration. It was October, and the night of the full moon. I did not start home until nearly midnight. I would not reach home until a little after that, but that would not matter, because my father would be asleep in bed, and, in any case, not worried about me or interested in the hour of my arrival. The bright colors of autumn leaves, strongly softened and dimmed in the moonlight, rose all around me. Single leaves drifted through the still air and fell at my feet. The moon had reached mid-heaven, and the sky was like purple velvet.

I was happy. It was too beautiful

a night to go home. It was a night to enjoy to the fullest—to wander through, going over strange roads, going farther than I had ever gone. I threw out my arms in the moonlight, posing like a picture of a dancing girl which my father had—I had never seen a dancer!—and flitted down the road. As I reached the cross-road, the sound of our clock chiming midnight drifted to my ears, and I stopped.

A beautiful high-powered car stood just at the entrance to our road, its headlights off, its parking lights hardly noticeable in the brilliant moonlight.

I knew it was a fine car, because my father had one, and on rare occasions the fit took him to drive it. When he drove it I went with him, and I noticed cars, for I loved them. I loved their strength and speed, and their fine lines. I loved to rush through the air in my father's car, and was never happier than when I could coax him to drive the twenty miles to the state road, and go fast on the perfect paving. But aside from my father's car, I had never seen a good one on these little back country roads.

I stopped, although I knew I ought to go on. And as I stopped just short of the cross-road, the big car glided softly forward a few feet until it stopped, blocking the road to my father's house. My father's motor was a silent one; but this car actually moved without the slightest sound.

Until now I had not seen the driver. Now I looked at him.

His face was shadowy in the moonlight. Perhaps it did not catch the direct light. There was a suggestion of strong, very sharply cut features, of a smile and a deep-set gaze. . . .

My pen shakes until I can hardly write the words. But I heard the doctor say today that I had nearly reached

the end of my strength, and any night with its horrors may be the end. I must control myself and think of the things I am writing down as they seemed to me at the time.

I was just turned sixteen, and this was romance. And so I stopped and talked to him, although we exchanged few words. That night he did not ask me to ride with him, and so I was less afraid. For with the romance was fear—but I answered his questions.

"What is your name?" he asked; and I answered, "Leonora."

"It is music in my ears," he said softly; and again, I felt that this was romance. I felt it again, when he added: "I have been looking for you for a long time."

Of course, I did not dream—I did not think that he meant that. I had read novels, and love stories. I knew how to take a compliment.

"Do you often pass this way as late as this?"

Something made me hesitate. But something about him, something about our meeting alone in the moonlight, fascinated me. If I said "no," perhaps I would never see him again.

"Very often, when the moon is full," I said, and moved to go around the car. In a moment the gloved hand that rested on the wheel had touched the broad brim of his hat; another movement, and the car shot silently ahead and was gone.

I RAN home with a beating heart. My last words had almost made a rendezvous of the night of the next full moon. If I desired, there might be another encounter.

Yet it was two months later when we met again. The very next full moon had been clear, cloudless, frostily cold—and a lovely November night. But

that night I was so afraid that I even avoided the full light of the moon when I crossed our yard in the early evening to bring in a book I had left lying outside. At the thought of traversing the road that led to Margaret's house, every instinct within me rebelled. At midnight, I was lying in my bed, with the covers drawn close around me, and my wide-open eyes turned resolutely away from the patch of moonlight that lay, deathly white, beneath my open window. I was like a person in a nervous fit—I, who had never known the meaning of nerves.

But the second month, it was different.

After all, it was a fine thing to have mystery and romance, for the taking, mine. Or were they mine for the taking? Perhaps the man in the long, low car had never come again, would never come again. But his voice had promised something different. Would he be there tonight? Had he been there a month ago? Curiosity began to drive me before it. After all, he had made no move to harm me. And there had been something about him, something that drew and drew me. Surely my childish fears were the height of folly—the product of my loneliness.

I went to Margaret's, and stayed late—almost, as on that other night, until the clock struck 12. At last, with a self-consciousness that was noticeable only to me, I wrapped my heavy coat around me and went out into the night.

The night had changed. It was bitterly cold, and there was a heavy, freezing mist in the air which lay thickly in the hollows. The shadows of the bare trees struck through the dismal vapors like dangling limbs of skeletons. . . .

What am I writing, thinking of? The scream that pierced the night, I

could not suppress. I must control myself, or they will come and silence me. And I must finish this tonight. I must finish it before the hour of dawn. That is the hour I fear, worse than the hour of midnight.

It is the hour when Those outside must seek their dreadful homes, the hour when striking fleshless fingers against my window-pane is not enough, but They would take me with Them where They go—where I, but not another living soul, have been before! And whence I never shall escape again.

I walked down, slowly, toward the cross-road. I would not have lingered. I would have been glad to find the cross-road empty. It was not.

There stood the car, black—I had not noticed its color before—low-hung, spectral fingers of white light from its cowl lights piercing the mist. The cross-road was in the hollow, and the mist lay very heavily there—so heavily that I could hardly breathe.

He was there in the car, his face more indistinct in the shadow of his broad-brimmed hat than it had been before, I thought, his gloved hand resting as before upon the wheel. And again, with a thrill of fear, there went a thrill of fascination through me. He was different!—different from every one else, I felt. Strangeness, romance—and his manner was that of a lover. In my inexperience, I knew it.

“Will you ride tonight, Leonora?”

It had come—the next advance—the invitation!

But I was not going with him. I had got the thrill I had come for. He had asked me, and that was enough. It was enough, now, if I never saw him again. This was a better stopping-point. (Remember that I was only sixteen.)

A stranger had come out of the night, had been mysteriously attracted

to me, and I to him. He had asked me to ride with him.

I do not know what I said. Somehow, I must have communicated to him what I felt—my pleasure in being asked, my refusal.

His gloved hand touched his hat in the farewell gesture I remembered.

“Another night, Leonora. Leonora!”

The car glided forward and was gone. But the echo of his voice was in my ears. His voice—deep, strange, *different*—but the voice of a lover. My inexperience was sure. And already I doubted if, after all, this would be enough for me if I never saw him again. Another time, he would be as punctilious, as little urgent. But he might say—what would he say?

THE January moon we hardly saw, so bitter were the storms of that winter, so unbreaking the heavy clouds that shut us from the sky.

The February full moon was crystal-clear in a sky of icy light. The snow-covered ground sparkled, and the branches of the trees were ice-coated, and burned with white fire. But I clung to the fireside, and again crept early within my blankets, drawing them over my head. I was in the grip of the fear that had visited me before. I was like a person in the grip of a phobia, such as they say that I have now, shunning the moonlight and the open air.

It was March.

Next month would bring the spring, and then would follow summer. The world would be a soft and gentle world again, in which fear would have no place. Yet I began to long for a repetition of the meetings at the cross-road, a repetition that should have the same setting—the rigors of winter, rather than the entirely different surroundings of the season of new buds

and new life. My last attack of unreasoning terror had passed away again, and again it seemed as though it left behind it a reaction that urged me more strongly than ever toward adventure.

Had *he* been at the cross-road in the bitter storms of January, and on the sparkling white night which I spent close indoors? Would he be there on the night of the next full moon, the March moon?

There was still no breath of spring in the air on that night. The winter's snow lay in the hollows, no longer whitely sparkling, but spoiled by the cold rains that had come since it had fallen.

The night sky was wild with wind-torn clouds, and the moonlight was now clear and brilliant, now weirdly dim, and again swept away by great, black, sweeping shadows. The air was full of the smell of damp earth and rotted leaves.

I did not go to Margaret's. I sat by the fire, dreaming strange dreams, while the clock ticked the hours slowly by, and the fire sank low. At 11, my father yawned and went up to his room. At a quarter before 12, I took my heavy cloak, and wrapped it around me. A little later, I went out.

I knew that I would find him waiting. There was no doubt of that tonight. It was not curiosity that drove me, but some deeper urge, some urge I know no name for. I was like a swimmer in a dangerous current, caught at last by the undertow.

The car stood in the cross-road, low and dark. Although it was a finely made machine, I was sure, it seemed to me for the first time to be in some way *very* peculiar. But at that moment a cloud swept across the face of the moon, and I lost interest in the matter,

with a last vague thought that it must be of foreign make.

Then, suddenly, I was aware that for the first time the stranger had opened the door of the car before me. Indeed, this was the first time I had approached on the side of the vacant seat beside the driver.

"We ride tonight, Leonora. Why not? And what else did you come out for?"

That was true. For the first time I now met him, not on my way home, not on my way anywhere. I had met him, only to meet him. And he expected me to ride. He had never forced, or tried to urge me, but tonight he expected me to ride. Wouldn't it seem silly to have come out only to exchange two or three words and go back, and wouldn't it be better to go with him? A less inexperienced girl might take the trouble to leave her house on a stormy March night for the sake of a real adventure—only a very green country girl would have come out at all for less. I would go.

I had entered the car. I sat beside him, and when the moon shone out brightly I tried to study his face as he started the car down the narrow road. I met with no success. I had become conscious of a burning anxiety to see more clearly what was the manner of this man who had been the subject of so much speculation, the reason of so many dreams. But here beside him I could see no more clearly than I had seen him from the road. The side of his face which was turned toward me, and which was partly exposed between the deep-brimmed hat and the turned-up collar of his cloak, was still deeply shaded by the car itself; so that I had the same elusive impression as before, of strong, sharp features, a deep-set gaze, a smiling expression. . . .

WE DROVE fast, over strange roads, So closely was my attention centered upon my companion, that I did not concern myself with the way we went. Later, I was to become uneasy over the distance we had traversed; but when I did, he reassured me, and I believed that we were then on our way home, and nearly there. I thought he meant by home, my father's house; and had I not thought that, my wildest nightmare could not have whispered to me what it was that *he* called "home"!

He was very silent. I spoke little, and he seldom answered me. That did not alarm me as it might have done, because of my ever-present conviction of my childishness, my crudeness. I blamed myself because my remarks were so stupid that they were not worth a reply, and the taciturnity that so embarrassed me yet added to the fascination that made me sit motionless hour after hour, longing more than anything else in the world to get a good look at the face beside me, to arouse more interest in my companion.

Once only, he spoke of his own accord. He asked me why I was called Leonora.

I asked him if he did not think it was a pretty name, remembering how he had said at our first meeting that it was "music in his ears." But I was disappointed, for he did not compliment my name again.

"Some would say it was an ill-starred name. But, luckily, people are not superstitious as they used to be."

"If that is lucky, you can not call it ill-starred."

I wanted to provoke him into talking more to me. I wanted his attention. But he did not answer me.

I can not go on. I can not finish my story as I intended to do, telling things as they happened, in their right order.

There are things I must explain, things that people have said about me that I must deny. And the night is growing late, and the rapping I hear all night long upon my window-pane, between the bars that shut me in but that will soon protect me no longer, is growing louder—as the dawn approaches. The pain in my heart, of which the doctor has said I would die soon, is growing unendurable. And when I come to the end of my story—to the end, *which I will set down*—I do not know what will happen then. But that which I am to write of is so dreadful that I have never dared to think of it. Not of that itself, but of the horrible ending to the story I am telling.

I must finish before the dawn, for it is at the dawn that They must go, and it is then that They would take me—where *he* waits for me, always at dawn.

But to explain first—people say I am mad. You who will read this will doubtless believe them. But tell me this:

Where was I from the time I disappeared from my father's house until I was found, "mad," as they say, and clutching in my frenzied grasp—the finger of a skeleton? In what dread struggle did I tear that finger loose, and from what dreadful hand? And although I, a living woman, could not remain in the abode of death, if I have not been touched by the very finger of death, then tell me this:

Why is my flesh like the flesh of the dead, so that the doctors say it is like leprous flesh, although it is not leprous? Would God it were!

Now, let me go on.

OUR SILENT DRIVE continued through the flying hours. Flying hours, for I was unconscious of the lapse of time, excepting for the once when I vaguely

became uneasy at our long journey, and was reassured. Had he who sat behind the wheel refused to answer my questioning then, perhaps I would then have become frantic with terror. But his deep, soothing voice worked a spell on me once more; and in his reply I thought I could detect a real solicitude which comforted me. I was assured that we would shortly reach my father's house; I would slip in before my father could possibly have waked, and avoid questioning.

As the night grew older, it became more dismal. The moon which had swung high overhead sent long shadows scurrying from every tree and shrub, every hill and hummock, as we dashed by. The wind had fallen, but yet blew hard enough to make a moaning, wailing sound which seemed to follow us through the night. The clouds that had swept in great masses across the sky had changed their shapes, and trailed in long, somber, broken streamers like torn black banners. The smell of dank, soggy earth and rotting leaves, of mold and decay, was heavier since the wind had sunk a little. Suddenly, I had a great need for reassurance and comfort. My heart seemed breaking with loneliness, and with a strange, unreasoning despair.

I turned to the silent figure at my side. And it seemed that *he* smelled of the stagnant odor of decay that filled the night—that the smell, and the oppression, were heavier because I had leaned nearer to him!

I looked—with a more intense gaze than I had yet turned on him—not at the face that bent above me now, the face that still eluded and baffled me—but down at the arm next me, at the sleeve of his cloak of heavy, black cloth. For something had caught my eye—something moved—oh, what was

this horror, and why was it so horrible?—a slowly moving *worm* upon his sleeve?

I shuddered so that I clashed my teeth together. I must control myself.

AND then, as though my deep alarm were the cue for the hidden event to advance from the future upon me, the car was gliding to a stop. I tore my horrified gaze from the black-clad arm, and looked out of the car. We were gliding *into a cemetery!*

"Not here! Oh, don't stop here!"

I gasped the words, as one gasps in a nightmare.

"Yes. Here."

The deep voice was deeper. It was deep and hollow. There was no comfort in it.

The mask was off my fear, at least. I was face to face with that, though I had not yet seen that other face.

I leaped from the car, and fell fainting beside it. Black, low-hung, and long, and narrow—I had been to but one funeral in my life, but I knew it now. It was the shape of a coffin!

After that, I had no hope. I was with a madman, or—

He dragged me—in gloved hands through which the hard, long fingers bruised my flesh—past graves, past tombstones and marble statues, and I was numb. I saw among the graves, or seemed to see—oh, let me say I saw strange things, for I have seen them since; and I was numb.

He dragged me toward an old, old, sunken grave headed by a time-stained stone that settled to one side, so long it had marked that spot. And suddenly the nightmare dreaminess that had dulled my senses gave way to some keener realization of the truth. I struggled, I fought back with all my little strength, till I tore the glove from his

right hand, and the finger of his right hand snapped in my grasp—snapped, and—gave way!

I struggled in the first faint rays of dawn, struggled as I felt the old, old, sunken earth give way beneath my feet. And the sun rose over the edge of the earth, and flamed red into my desperate eyes. I turned for a last time to the inscrutable face, and in those blood-red rays of the dawn I saw at last revealed—the grinning, fleshless jaws, the empty eye-sockets of—

Statement by the Superintendent of St. Margaret's Insane Asylum

THIS DOCUMENT was found in the room of Leonora —, who was pronounced dead of heart-failure by the resident physician. Attendants who rushed to the room on hearing wild cries, and who found her dead, believe the fatal attack to have been caused by the excitement of writing down her extraordinary narration.

The doctor who had attended her considered her the victim of a strange form of auto-hypnosis. She undoubtedly disappeared from her home on the night of the eighteenth of March, and was found two days later in an old cemetery, three hundred miles away. When found, she was incoherent and

hysterical, and *was holding in her hand the finger of a skeleton*. How and where she might have come by this, it was and is impossible to surmise.

It seems, however, that she must have been lured from her home by some stranger, and have escaped or been abandoned near the cemetery; that she must have read of the legend of Leonora, and that it must have made a morbid impression on her mind which later, following the shock which caused her to lose her reason, dictated the form her insanity was to take.

It is true that her skin, from the time of her discovery in the graveyard, had a peculiar appearance suggestive of the skin of a leprous person, or even more of that of a corpse; and (which she does not mention) it also exuded a peculiar odor.

These peculiar phenomena were among those attributed by the doctor to the effects of auto-hypnosis; his theory being that, just as a hypnotized person may be made to develop a burn on the arm by the mere suggestion without the application of heat, Leonora had suggested to herself that she had been contaminated by the touch of death, and that her physical nature had been affected by the strength of the suggestion.

