

Strange STORIES

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DEATH IS FORBIDDEN	Don Alviso	
<i>Did this Man-Muddle, Created by the Scalpel of a Wizard Surgeon, Have a Soul? [An Eerie Complete Novelet]</i>		
		16
THE CULT OF THE DEAD	Gabriel Wilson	
<i>Dark and Terrible are the Mysteries of Black Haiti!</i>		
		33
KAAPI	Marian Stearns Curry	
<i>A Jungle Spell is Cast when a Dark-haired Maiden Dies</i>		
		41
LET ME OUT!	Maria Moravsky	
<i>An Imprisoned Mind Struggles Grimly for Release</i>		
		51
THE MASTER	Shelton Goodall	
<i>There is a Terrible, Uncanny Secret About Malvolio, the Animal Hypnotist, a Secret That Makes Men's Blood Go Cold! [A Complete Novelet]</i> . . .		
		54
HE WAITS BENEATH THE SEA	Tarleton Fiske	
<i>David Ames Fights a Menace that Would Rule the World</i>		
		65
A MESSAGE FOR HIS MAJESTY	August W. Derleth	
<i>A Mysterious Visitant Opens the Dread Door of the Unknown</i>		
		75
HALF BULL	Manly Wade Wellman	
<i>Still Today the Redman Flings a Stone Upon the Indian Cairn!</i>		
		79
THE GHOSTLY VENGEANCE	A. Hyatt Verrill	
<i>A Sea Wraith Seeks to Even Scores with Life!</i>		
		88
THE GEIST OF THE JUNGLE	R. R. Winterbotham	
<i>An Amateur Archeologist Makes a Startling Discovery in Yucatan</i> . . .		
		96
THE LIGHT MUST BURN	Capt. George J. Rawlins	
<i>Eerie Drama is Enacted within the Devil's Reef Lighthouse</i>		
		104
HOUSE OF THE GRIFFIN	Will Garth	
<i>Forces of Terror Strike from the Void</i>		
		109
SPAWN OF BLACKNESS	Carl Jacobi	
<i>An Evil God Shuns the Light and Seeks Victims in Darkness</i>		
		112
THE BLACK ARTS (A Department)	Lucifer	8

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LET ME OUT!

By MARIA MORAVSKY

*Author of "The Great Release,"
"The Castle of Tamara," etc.*

DO YOU believe in the supernatural, Doc? I didn't think you would. . . . Yet there are things. . . . Let me tell you what caused my nervous breakdown, and see what you think of it. Yes, I know you were told in a general way, but without the details. . . . It's those tangled details that got me, I think. Being unable to straighten things out. . . .

To be fresh from college, in these troubled years, is no joke. I had a hard time finding that job as a helper in the Peaceful Rest funeral home.

Well, right after the first pay day, they entrusted to me a well embalmed corpse, to be sent by express to Jacksonville, for cremation. A middle-aged man who had spent most of his life in a cashier's cage of the First National, and had hated it, hated every minute of it. They say that this hatred of being confined went with him to the grave. . . . Figuratively speaking, of course, since he was to be cremated.

Well, on that trip along the windy coast, I sat in the car adjoining the baggage car. Across from me, there sat a baldish, florid-faced fellow. An amiable stranger.

We started a conversation. He seemed to be dreadfully bored. They say this is the state of mind when we

*An Imprisoned Mind is
More Hopelessly Doomed
Than an Imprisoned Body!*



*An unearthly scream emanated from
the coffin*

are terribly receptive to other people's ideas, dead or alive, hovering about us. . . .

You don't believe in a living man being a subconscious mouthpiece for the recently dead? No, I didn't think you would. But I have my doubts. . . . You see, that one in the adjoining car bothered me a bit. Oh, sure, he must have been quite dead—embalmed.

"I have a charge in the baggage car, too," my companion said, with a somewhat impish grin. "A parrot. I'm in the show business, you know. My parrot and I are going to Jacksonville to perform in a vaudeville act. It's quite a special parrot. Like to see him?"

I had always been fond of animals. As a boy I dragged home all sorts of stray cats and dogs, much to my parent's annoyance.

"I haven't got a cracker," I said jokingly, "but I'll take a look at him."

"First have a drink with me," the amiable stranger offered.

IT WAS good cognac, old Hennessy. It warmed my heart. I felt quite cheerful when we walked into the baggage car, and my mind was far from morbid imaginings. But suddenly I was chilled with fear. I seemed to hear a sound of fists banging against wood, and a hoarse voice crying:

"Let me out! Let me out!"

My companion looked at me with suppressed excitement. I wondered if he heard the same thing. . . .

With shaking finger, I pointed to the coffin.

"He wants to get out," the showman said with a queer smile.

Well, God in heaven, so did I, and I would have run blindly out of the car if my new-found companion, wearing that impish grin of his again, had not pointed to the cage that had hitherto escaped my notice and said: "Don't be silly. It's Oscar, my parrot."

I was suddenly angry, with that characteristic anger that succeeds a fright caused by a hoax.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me that!" I demanded.

"Anything for a joke," he said placatingly. "I was bored—"

"Fine way to amuse yourself—frightening people?"

"Forgive me," he implored again. "I'm addicted to practical jokes, but I mean no harm. Let's have another drink."

I was so disgusted, I wouldn't even look at his bird which had scared me so. Out we went, to commune again with the good old Hennessy. It was so mellow, I almost forgave the man his practical joke.

"This trip drives me crazy. I hate trains. Nothing bores me more," my companion complained again. "Let's take Oscar out of his cage and bring him here. He needs to stretch his wings after being cooped up here for so long."

Oscar was a handsome bird, an Amazonian parrot with blue forehead and emerald wings tipped with scarlet on the shoulders. It could talk a blue streak. After amusing ourselves with it for a while I suddenly remembered that I had left my pipe in the baggage car.

"I think I'll go with you. You look somewhat unstrung," my companion said sympathetically.

I was really grateful to him. I was somewhat scared of stiffs, even after a week of their company. Nervously I started to look for my pipe in the dimly lit car and found it lying on the edge of the coffin. Just as I was stretching my hand toward it, I heard the hoarse voice again:

"Let me out! Let me out!"

I knocked the pipe off the coffin. My companion looked at me with lips tightly compressed.

"Your damned bird!" I started to flare—

"Oscar is in the next car," he said. "You couldn't hear him from here!" He looked at me, his eyes gleaming impishly. And again, muffled by the wood, there came the cry from the coffin:

"Let me out!"

Beads of perspiration stood on my forehead. I could feel them. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face.

"Do you—do you hear it, too?"

HIS face worked strangely. I thought that he was about to cry.

"I knew it from the first," he said solemnly, controlling his emotions at last. "I said it was the parrot, because I didn't want you to lose your nerve. You're young, and it's your first job, and I sympathize with you. Let's get out of here and have another drink."

I walked out, shaking all over. I was grateful to the stranger for his consideration. The bottle of good old cognac was almost empty when he suddenly slapped his thigh, burst into laughter and handed me his card.

He was a ventriloquist.

I wanted to sock him in the jaw, but restrained myself. After all, I had played the fool. I had had no business to get frightened—me six feet tall, weighing two hundred pounds, a college graduate, an amateur wrestling champion. It was ridiculous to carry on like a superstitious old maid.

We finished the bottle amiably enough. I was rather light-headed when the time came to take my charge to the crematory. My companion felt somewhat better, his feet were more steady.

"You know, I do feel guilty. . . . We'll check the parrot with the station master, and I'll drive with you to the incinerator where they burn the stiffs," he offered.

"Fine!" Unsteadily, I wrung his hand.

I dimly remember driving to the huge, ornate building with the queer electric furnace. My head must have been pretty clouded. I don't recall any

conversation between myself and the crematorium attendants—my companion must have taken care of all the details. I just remember a great burst of blue flame, and the goose pimples rising on my flesh when I heard once more:

"Let me out! Let me out!"

I looked at the ventriloquist. Here he was again, with his sacrilegous, impudent jokes! I lifted my hand to strike him. But it stopped in mid-air. I saw his face, florid before, now deathly pale. He was as shaky as I.

"I swear I didn't do it this time," he whispered. And I knew he was telling the truth. My heart nearly choked me.

The crematorium attendant, his face a whitish blur, seemed suddenly bereft of all flesh, and stood exposed to the bones, a grinning skeleton, as if seen by some second sight, more powerful than any X-ray.

Molten metal seemed to flow through my veins. I was being drawn irresistibly to the furnace from which there issued for the last time the dreadful cry of the dead cashier. How often in life his spirit must have voiced that same cry— And now—

"Let me out!"

Now, Doc, you've treated me awfully well here. I'd like to be discharged now. But I'd be much obliged if you would tell me before I go what caused my nervous breakdown. Was I drunk then, at the crematorium, or was it another of my pal's ghoulish jokes? What, you're not going to discharge me! Do I have to stay here? Let me out, let me out. . . .