

# MARVEL TALES

## Science and Fantasy

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Published by **FANTASY PUBLICATIONS, EVERETT, PENNA.**

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# LILIES

by Robert Bloch

*Presented in lieu of Mr. Bloch's scheduled yarn—"The Madness of Lucian Gray"—as a result of a mix-up in manuscripts, this short weird tale is well-worth a second reading.*

The Colorado Apartments is a substantial building, its red-brick walls rising to a four-story eminence that sets it definitely apart from the squalid sordidness of the surrounding neighborhood. Its tenants are likewise removed from the general wretched run of tenement scum that dwells in the ramshackle pest-holes adjoining the dignified brick edifice.

Most of these tenants have been in the building since its construction twenty three years ago; they are solid, middle-aged and infinitely respectable—the men white collar clerks or accounts, the women plump, comfortable and childless, filling lonely hours with parental ministrations to pet canaries. There are widowers, too—grey old men, and widows—grey old women; a very solid, conservative group of tenants indeed. They are a clannish group, the women exchanging gossip and recipes across the back porch of a morning; the men greeting each other from behind their evening papers on the front porch. They would visit one another perhaps, were it not for the unseen barrier of an apartment, the alien sense of espionage that is implied in the phrase, "across the hall". Apartment dwellers love privacy. Still, they do exchange foods—a cut of pie or pudding or perhaps a cool drink in the spring or summer.

There was, for example, Mrs. Hahn and her flowers.

Mrs Hahn was an elderly widow who dwelt directly below our 3rd floor apartment in number 13. She was German, a motherly soul much given to puttering around in her kitchen. She never left her house save on a Saturday afternoon when her married son called for her in his car and they spent the rest of the afternoon in the country. Invariably on Saturday evening she would laboriously mount the stairs to our apartment and present my mother with an armful of wild flowers gathered in the country by "me and my son Willie".

Her pathetic pleasure in this humble task and her reward in our thanks she enjoyed with wistful pride. She was grateful for this, her one weekly rite, the one chance she still had to be giving and doing in a world that had passed her by.

This weekly incident was repeated regularly for nearly a year. Every Saturday the old woman and her flowers came in the midnight dust—the floral tributes varying with the season; violets, sweet peas, marigolds, gladiolas, nasturtiums, poppies, roses.

Finally there came a Saturday late in October when the expected visitor did not materialize. Night deepened, and still no familiar ring upon our doorbell. We had not seen the old woman all week, and my mother was greatly relieved when at eight o'clock the bell finally rang and she opened the door to find the bent, familiar figure of the old woman standing outside in the darkness of the shadowed hall.

"Good evening." The usual greeting, cheerful yet hesitant.

"Why, good evening, Mrs. Hahn. Been out in the country again this week?"

"Well, no, not exactly. Anyway, my son Willie come and bring me these flowers—what a thoughtful boy he is, my son! and I thought if you might like a few——"

She proffered the bouquet. My mother thanked her; she turned and slowly descended the stairs once more. We heard the door of her apartment close softly, and closed our own

My Mother snapped on the light. Then she gasped—for the flowers in her arms were white calla lilies. She held them, staring oddly at the waxen blooms; was still holding them, in fact, when she looked through the window. A big car pulled up—black it was and shiny, with a closed back, and very long—and two men stepped out. One of them was Willie Hahn, and he was crying. Mother stepped over to the window. Hahn and the stranger were coming up the steps. They were outside our door now, on the way upstairs, and I heard a flash of their conversation.

“Yes, I brought some flowers—lilies, of course. Left them here about an hour ago on the——”

Mother looked out of the window at the funeral car. Then she glanced down at the flowers again, and for the first time noticed the tag around the stems.

“In memory of my dear mother, Mrs. Ludwig Hahn.”

Upstairs they were moving the coffin, and nobody noticed that the flowers on her breast were gone.

THE END