

Weird Tales

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MAKE ME A CHILD AGAIN

by David Lewis Eynon

The case of the sentimental
scientist. . . .



"**B**ACKWARD, turn backward, oh time in thy flight," standing before the window he noticed that the hollyhocks around the well were doing better this year, "make me a child again—just for tonight."

"What were you saying, Charles?" She lowered her fashion magazine and shooed Siegfried so that she could drop her feet from the stool.

"Hmnm?" He stooped to rub the dog's back as it came waddling towards him. "Oh, just a poem." He glanced at the magazine in her hand and smiled, dropping his pipe into his pocket. "Only a poem."

"Oh, a poem." How paradoxical he really is, she thought. And then her mind slid ahead to London, only a week away now. London, and all the things it meant. Things as vital to her happiness

Heading by Joseph Eberle

as the chirp of crickets and solitary hours in the laboratory were to him.

"You haven't forgotten anything in your packing?" she asked suddenly. The fear that he might be delayed, somehow—that he might have to put off leaving because of some trifle—pricked at her more sharply as the days before his voyage ran out. Trifles were so important to Charles. He might easily balk over a misplaced book or a damaged instrument.

"I hardly think so," he smiled gently and gave Siegfried a final pat. The Dachshund continued to pester him as he started out of the room.

"Will it be late tonight, again?" she asked.

"Do you mind terribly?" He knew that the added "again" was justified, but he had worked into the night so often, of late. He felt it was more a habit than a vice.

"I'm afraid so, darling. I'd like to get one or two things finished, before I leave."

"All right, Charles." The mention of his departure brought back her anticipation of the freedom ahead, not only from him—one could so easily feel free of Charles—but freedom from the boredom of their bucolic neighbors. "I don't mean to scold. Only that it's our last week together—and then you'll be off

in that awful country, picking up your ridiculous seeds and things."

"Of course." He kissed her lightly and they separated, she going to the telephone to call the Pembertons about cards and he—carefully closing the door against the dog—threading his way back to the laboratory.

He found the light and switched it on against the twilight. For some minutes he stared around the room, absorbing the ordered plants and jars and bottles. In the jungles there would be none of this neatness, he realized sorrowfully. But once into the high plains, and then . . . well, he'd heard reports of growth that might be crossed and nursed and brought to even greater flower here, once he returned. He thought of a poem and then, realizing time was short, took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

FOR a second he studied the scrawlings on the wall, down low and childishly executed. Broken pots, neatly piled in the corner with the swept up earth, held his eye a bit longer. Then he turned to the bag from the store, which the boy had brought up from the village and left during dinner.

Quickly he emptied the paper sack, laying his purchases out along the bench. They were al'

there, he noted as he folded the bag and slid it into a drawer. The gumdrops, the jacks, crayons and paper—even the tinkertoy set Mr. Havens had offered to search his storeroom for.

"Some little chap having a birthday?" the shopkeeper had asked pleasantly, with the gently forceful concern Charles had always found so refreshing in his country neighbors. The botanist had diverted his attention with a show of interest in a mechanical bear, and then left with the assurance that the things would be sent up with the boy when school was out.

Charles spread the purchases around the room, making careful choices between each item. The gumdrops went on the floor, in the corner. The bench got the drawing paper, and the pencils, still in their paper band, stood up on the stool. The tinkertoy set was placed under the light, in the center of the laboratory bench and the jacks laid in an empty pot near the sink.

He took a last look around the room, made sure that everything valuable or fragile was out of reach. Satisfied, he opened the drawer in the metal cabinet and brought out the tablets.

There was time to replace the bottle and lock the cabinet before the tablet took effect. Time, also, to place the key above the door-

sill and bolt the laboratory entrance. Then Charles sat back in the armchair and started reciting softly to himself.

II

THE knocking gradually woke him. He stirred, blinked at the light and then rubbed his face.

"Charles," there was a note of anxiety in her call, that had almost given way to exasperation. "Charles. Come say good night to the Pembertons, won't you? We've finished our game," she added as she heard him moving across the floor.

"I'm rather a mess, darling," he pleaded. "Would they understand if . . ."

"All right, dear." He heard her turn and start back down the passage. Making excuses for him had been necessary for so long.

He looked at his blackened palms and then forgot the neighbors and the formalities they forced on him. He felt queasy—too much sugar always did that to him—and the taste of gumdrops and the stickiness around his mouth urged him to the sink.

The water sloshed into the beaker. He rinsed it once, filled it again and drank deeply. Over the rim of the vessel he glanced around the room, thoughts tumbling one over the other as he saw the condition of the objects.

His watch showed nine. Two hours, then. Well, he'd been busy, at any rate, if the colored drawings were any indication. He picked up the nearest paper from the floor and carried it over to the light.

Crude. Little dancing stick figures. Some sort of game perhaps. Or a dance, even. The heads were round and flat, and the eyes—carefully executed—were large and empty.

The angular images were scattered over the paper on prancing limbs and somewhere in his mind a tune fled recognition as he snatched at it. Something rhythmic and monotonous that one might chant.

He shivered suddenly, and remembered his clothes in a rush. They lay about the chair. Pants and shirt—with underwear still protruding from them—were draped across the cushions. The shoes sat, side by side, on the floor. His socks had crawled across the room and collapsed near the bench.

AS HE dressed he moved quickly around the laboratory, picking up the jacks that had rolled into the shadows. The tinkertoy set sat unused upon the table. Two hours wasn't time enough, perhaps. Or had he been unable to reach the gaily colored box? He had managed the paper and pencils on the bench. Surely

the box wasn't out of reach, then?

But this was enough for tonight, at least. And the risk of discovery. Something must be done about clothes, he thought. Perhaps the Pemberton's youngster wouldn't miss a frock. He vaguely remembered some talk about old clothes for institutions—and a bundle stored momentarily in the laundry.

"Charles, you do look a fright!" She had a fire going, and his tea was waiting by the chair. Siegfried waddled up again and sniffed happily at his cuffs. "Sometimes I think you lock yourself in that wretched room and positively romp around the floors."

He glanced quickly in the mirror above the mantel and realized he'd forgotten to wash. It was better, perhaps, if he didn't make excuses. She'd seen him dirty before. A botanist works in the soil—even she knew that.

"How did the cards go?" he added cream and sugar to his cup and settled back in the chair. "Did you lose the homestead to the Pembertons?"

She chuckled and turned her smile from the fire to his chair. "Would you miss it if I did?" He tried so hard to be amusing—and only amused when he was being serious, she thought.

"I'll miss it in any case—when I'm gone." He stared into

the fire and thought of the months ahead. Months alone—busy months, but still alone with the jungle and the blacks and the disordered growth.

"Darling, while you're gone . . ." She had chosen the moment carefully. They were both alone, relaxed.

"Oh yes, I've seen Lindsey at the bank," he interrupted, knowing what must come, but nonetheless hoping to somehow avoid it. "You'll have the usual as long as I'm away. And Trevor-Benson has all the papers in case—" he searched for a casual phrase, "in case things shouldn't go just right."

"But of course they will, Charles. That's nonsense. It's only that . . . well, that if when you come back, I shouldn't be able to pick up again," she shot a glance over her cup and found him stroking the dog, "where we're leaving off now."

FOR some seconds he didn't answer. It was by no means a surprise—to either of them. And yet he had hoped it could somehow drift on, at least until he came back. But of course, it couldn't, and he admired her forthrightness in dealing with him so frankly.

Other women, he suspected, might have just gone on with their desires behind his back. But *she* wouldn't have him laughed

at, not even if it cost her months of the precious little time she had remaining before middle age set in and destroyed the chances she had put off so long.

He felt no bitterness, for in his work he had learned to respect the powerful forces of nature that must impel her. And he knew, as well, how much she was prepared to give up. The comfort she would lose, in leaving him.

What a rotten shame, he thought, that women could so easily trade youth and beauty for such fairy gold as position and affluence. If only they could somehow try them first, and finding the hollowness therein, answer the surge of their physical needs. Instead of staking everything for a few filthy coppers, and regretting the bargain too late.

But then, how many of them did regret? How many, instead, got both satisfaction and security—and very few the wiser? He owed her much, he knew, and pitied her even more.

"I expect you'll have to do as you feel best," he smiled softly and looked at her with tenderness. "But let it wait, at least, until you're sure," he added, meaning that she should enjoy the advantages she had bought as long as she liked. And after all, he felt, it might be that he wouldn't come back—and then

he chided himself for being melodramatic.

"Thank you, Charles, thank you very much." She would have made it up, then and there, in the wave of affection she suddenly felt, if she hadn't spent so many desperate hours deciding that this was the only way.

"Then it's settled," he rose from the chair and started for the doorway. "I'll be up rather early tomorrow, and busy all day, I'm afraid. Didn't I hear something about a bundle of clothes for relief? They're in the laundry, aren't they?"

III

SHE breakfasted late and over her coffee stared out into the garden. How the hollyhocks had sprung up! Charles must have been busy, or he'd have gotten at them by now. She closed the *Times* and gathered the plates—hers and Charles'—from the table.

Perhaps the shears were in the kitchen. Minerva was hurrying through the baking to be finished in time for her half-day. Yes, Mr. Charles had left them by the sink, last week, and she had put them on the shelf in the shed. The maid took the dishes and started the hot water running.

Such huge shears—she'd need gloves, she remembered, and carried them across the living

room to the closet. Charles would be pleased—even now—at her show of interest in the garden. She could easily have the plants around the well trimmed in time for lunch.

As she rummaged through the closet shelf she heard the Pemberton's child squalling. A lost toy, most likely. Unless he'd been pulling Siegfried's tail again, and the dog had nipped him in self defense. What a bother children could be—how fortunate she and Charles. . . .

But the cries were coming from the house, she thought. Turning, she stuck her head into the hall and listened. Soft sobs from the laboratory. They stopped as she took the few steps down the hall, then started again as she pressed her head to the door.

Around at the open window she could make out a tiny foot, shoeless, sticking out from beneath the bench. Charles was nowhere about, and she wondered how the Pemberton's boy had managed to get in.

"All right," she called, "I'll be right there. Don't touch anything," she added quickly as she ran around to the back, where the loose doorway would let her pry the bolt with the shears.

As the door flew open the child squalled louder, having an audience, and screwed its grimy fists into its eyes. A shattered

pot on the floor, an evicted plant sprawled in the crumbled earth told the story. She stared at the boy, and realized that the Pemberton's child was blond.

For a second she smoothed its hair, thick, dark, tousled. The child's sobs gave way to gasps as it felt her hand across its forehead. In the corner Charles' empty clothes held her attention.

"Here now, you're all right." She drew the little fists down and wiped the tears away with her handkerchief. The eyes—young as they were—could not be mistaken. Even the nose, still largely unformed, had the beginnings of that beakishness which made Charles look like a kindly hawk.

The enormity of the thing held her in indecision for a moment, but it was too phenomenal to argue with. It must be either accepted or rejected, it could hardly be questioned. When she finally grasped the circumstances she took the child's hand and led it out into the garden, as if the morning sunlight might somehow bring things clear.

Siegfried came lolling up to them and nuzzled the child familiarly. Gaily, tears forgotten, the boy pulled at the dog's ears and winced as the wet nose found his face. She watched, still stunned, as they gambled across the

grass towards the hollyhocks.

The maid! Quickly she stepped to the kitchen window. No, her coat and hat no longer hung by the door. On the table a tray of tarts stood cooling. Through the hedge she heard the Pemberton's auto grind down the drive. Then silence, except for the dog's playful growls.

She fetched a tart from the table and returned to find them playing on the flagstones. The boy waited dutifully as she broke the pastry in half, then held out his hand. Siegfried pushed in to get at the jam dripping from the open end and jostled the child back among the flowers.

A thrill of fear went through her as the boy came up against the low stone enclosure of the well. The tart found his mouth and he turned to peer into the cool darkness of the well, chewing slowly as he listened to a frog splash into the water. Her decision was swift, so swift that she seemed to act without thought.

* * *

The phone in the constable's house was answered by his wife. "George," she called her husband from his bicycle repairs, "come you quickly! It's Sir Charles' wife—she says a strange child has fallen down their well!"
