

Weird Tales

July
1954

THE SURVIVOR . . .	H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth	2
<i>The very house itself did seem possessed.</i>		
MORE THAN SHADOW . . .	Dorothy Quick	22
<i>"... where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood —a land of Heart's Desire."</i>		
NEVER STOP TO PAT A KITTEN	Miriam Allen deFord	33
<i>Because—you never know what's going to have happened the day before yesterday.</i>		
WESTERN HIGHWAY (Verse)	Clarence Edward Flynn	39
THE SIN EATER . . .	G. G. Pendarves	40
<i>A powerful novelette of possession and dual personality.</i>		
BEWARE OF VAMPIRE WOMEN (Verse)	Patricia Burgess	77
THE GREEN HUNTSMAN . . .	Dorothea Gibbons	78
<i>Who knows what ghosts and legends haunt the woodland depths?</i>		
THE TREE OF LIFE . . .	Paul Ernst	86
<i>Was it legend that a green leaf could bring back a life that had gone?</i>		
GUARDIAN . . .	W. J. Suprenant	92
<i>... the police captain was trying to find any human connection with the abominable horror.</i>		
PASSING OF A GOD . . .	Henry S. Whitehead	101
<i>Would the story be too outrageous, too incredible, to appear in print?</i>		
OFF THE MAP . . .	Rex Dolphin	119
<i>Of course, 1665 is a long time ago; can aught but legend survive?</i>		
THE EYRIE . . .		127

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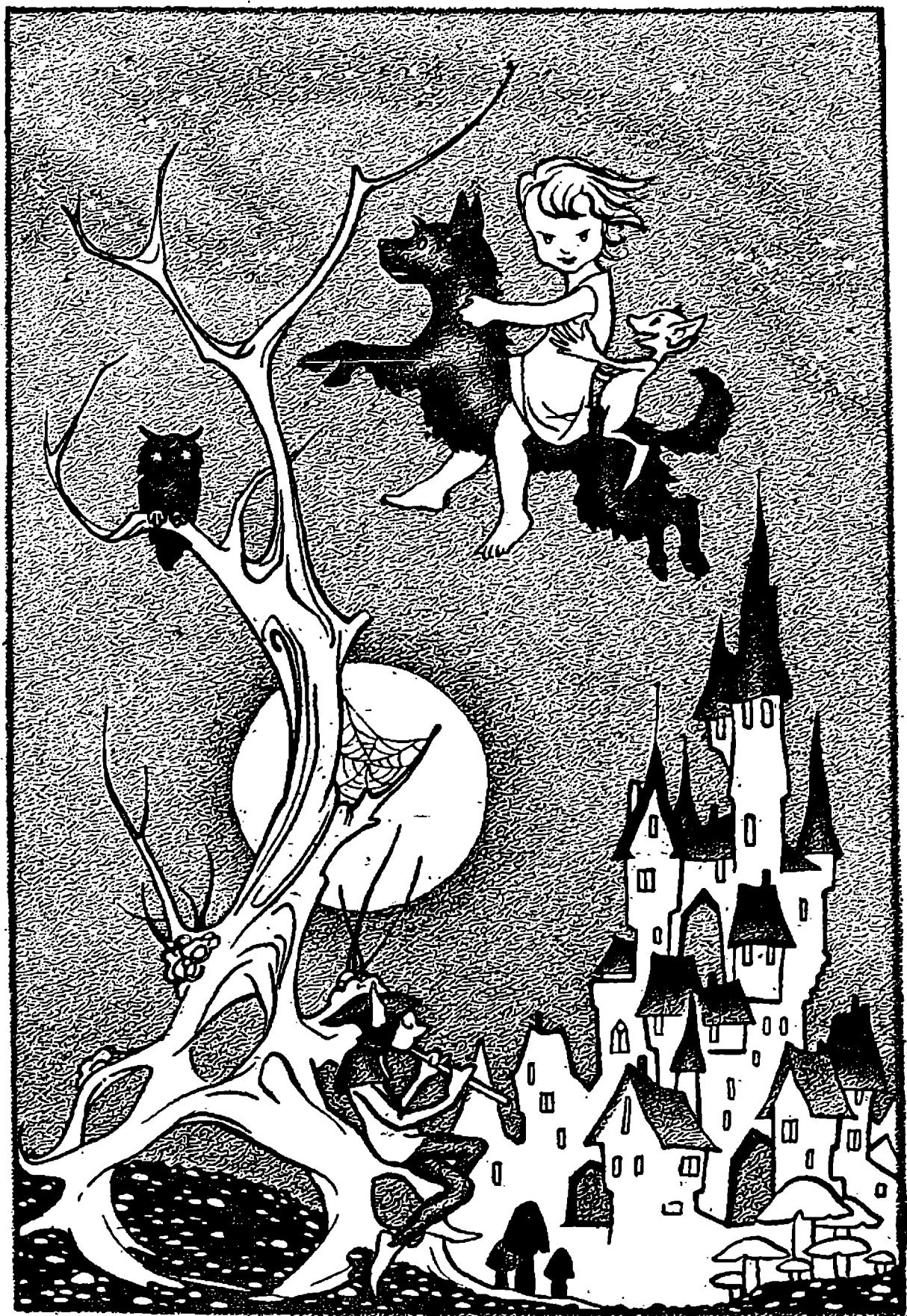
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173

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Heading by Boris Dolgov

"Deep in the dewy shadows of a wood or where
stars walk upon a mountaintop."

More Than Shadow

BY DOROTHY QUICK

THE third time it happened she was aware of its strangeness.

Up till then it hadn't mattered or seemed important, but the third time made her realize that something unusual was taking place and that there was cause for alarm.

She had just finished lunch and thought the philodendrons on either side of the mantelpiece needed watering. So, because she had gotten into the habit of saving water during the shortage, she took her glass, which was as full as when the maid had filled it, and started towards the fireplace. Half-way there the glass, for no reason which she could account, slipped from her hand.

The water spilled on the delft blue rug and rapidly began to coagulate into a shape as the glass rolled off towards the fireplace.

She watched the wet shape on the rug. "It is a little dog," she half whispered.

Almost as though an artist had

painted it, there on the rug was the outline of a dog, a tiny dog with puffy, curly hair and, due to the way the water had absorbed and the wet and dry patches, it had a most beguiling expression. It was so real that she had to restrain herself from bending over to pick it up.

It looked exactly like a little dog waiting to be lifted into its mistress's arms. It had dimension and a definite personality. It seemed more than a shadow or a wet spot.

Just then Mona remembered that this had happened before—twice.

The first time had been at the table—here in the dining room. Her youngest daughter, aged three, had upset her glass of milk, purposely Mona suspected, knowing her offspring didn't like the bounty of the cow. She was just about to utter a reprimand when the child, Carol, had cried out, "Look, Mummy, it's a little dog."

The milk had run across the table as fluids do and settled in front of Mona's place. The shape of the damp place on the linen tablecloth was definitely that of a little dog.

The same little dog at which she was looking now, Mona thought and shuddered.

That day at the table she had laughed. It had seemed funny. Because the spilled milk had settled in the form of a little dog Carol had escaped the scolding and Mona had mopped up the milk reluctantly because the little dog shape was so cunning.

But she forgot about it almost immediately.

THREE days later, a rainy Sunday afternoon it was, she was sitting in the living room with her husband, Hal; the three children, Carol, Meg and Harry, Jr. were playing nearby. Ellen, the maid, brought the tea. Mona gave the two older children a very weak version and Carol had milk in her cup. Then she handed Hal his stronger share. He started with it towards his favorite chair. The cup, which had seemed firm on its saucer, could not have been, for it bounced off, spilling the tea on the beige carpet.

For an instant there was silence. Then Carol came running over from the other side of the room. "Little dog, little dog," she

exclaimed, pointing to the wet spot.

Mona stared. It was true. There was the outline of a little dog, curly haired, with an uplifted paw.

Her husband laughed, "You're right, Carol. It is a little dog, and it's cute too. I'd like a little dog like that around the house."

Carol clapped her hands, "Daddy, get one for Carol."

"Maybe." Hal nodded, "if we could find an attractive one like that."

The other two children were there by then, exclaiming, saying they'd like a dog too.

Hal got another cup of tea and reached his favorite chair with it safely, before he delivered the pronouncement, "You can't all have dogs. If you'll just settle for a community animal—"

By the time the argument was over the carpet had dried and Mona forgot the whole business as quickly as the children did. But now here was the dog again, and more real than ever.

Tiny, curly-haired, with a front paw elevated appealingly, a sharp, pointed nose, utterly beguiling. "It must be a poodle," Mona thought, "a very small poodle. But why does it keep happening? Is it an omen, does it mean we ought to have a dog?"

It was probably a trick of wind ruffling the rug, but it seemed as though the paw was further out-

thrust and the outline of the little creature quivered with eagerness.

Ellen came into the dining room. Mona called her, pointed to the spot. "What does that look like?" she asked.

The girl giggled, "Why, for all the world like a little dog, the kind the leprechauns keep. 'Tis said in Ireland the little people ride them on moonlight nights."

"Where do they go?" Mona was surprised at herself for putting the question.

"Now that we do not be asking." Ellen lapsed into the brogue she'd brought with her two years ago when she came over to visit her Aunt Mary who cooked for Mr. and Mrs. Hal Devitt. "But," she dropped her voice as though afraid of being overheard, "some say the little dogs take them over the mountain to the land of youth."

A quotation from Yeats leaped into Mona's mind.

*Where nobody gets old and godly and grave
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue
And she is still there, busied with a dance,
Deep in the dewy shadow of a wood
Or where stars walk upon the mountainside.*

The words had always appealed to Mona, ever since she had played the girl in the play the graduating class had done at school, "The Land of Heart's Desire." The lines had stuck in her mind, and now they were echoing over and over, "Deep in the dewy shadows of a wood, or where stars walk upon a mountaintop."

And the little dog could take you there—over the mountaintop to the land of heart's desire where—what was it the child in the play had said? "Could make you ride upon the winds, run on the top of the dishevelled tide, and dance upon the mountains like a flame." Her mind went back to the play. There had been more. She remembered the child's speech:

*You shall go with me, newly married bride
And gaze upon a merrier multitude.*

Then there had been Irish names, Nuala, Ardoe the wise, Feacra and Finvarra,

*And their land of Heart's Desire
Where beauty has no ebb, decay
no flood,
But joy is wisdom. Time an endless-song.*

The little dog could take you to that!

MONA caught herself up sharply. The coincidence of the dog's outline happening there, times and Ellen's old-world leprechauns with their dogs to ride had woven a spell over her—that and Yeats' magic poetry. But she mustn't be a dreamer as she had been in the part of Maire which she had acted in the play—and never forgotten. She could remember now how when she had sunk to the floor, playing dead, the child having stolen her soul away. She had felt that it would have been worth it to find that land where people were forever young, never to grow old, "to dance upon the mountains like a flame." It would have been worth losing your soul, she had thought.

Then the curtain had fallen and the child was her schoolmate, Meg, again, and she was Mona, alive and hoping Hal had liked her performance.

He had; that very night he had proposed. "I shouldn't yet. I've got three more years of college, but after seeing you so ethereal, so beautiful, and so far away, I had to be sure of you. Will you marry me, Mona, when I can support you?"

She would, and they had been married before he had taken his place in his father's law office. They had been very happy. Their life had been full. They loved each other, had three wonderful

children, she had wanted nothing. Yet why did the outline, something more than a shadow, of a dog, make her remember and long for the Land of Heart's Desire? This was nonsense. She mustn't even think of it any more. She turned to Ellen. "Get a cloth," she commanded and was ashamed at the edgy tone in her voice, "and mop it up."

"Yes ma'm," said Ellen, and then in a sharp tone of surprise, "But it's all dry—the little dog has gone."

A WEEK after that the dog came. It was a poodle and Carol found it down by the garden gate. She and Meg came running to Mona, the little bunch of black fluff clasped tightly in Meg's arms.

Out of the chorus of exclamations and requests of "Can we keep him?" Mona gathered that the dog had been sitting by the gate, that it had greeted the children like a long-lost friend, that they already adored it. There was no sign of a collar or license tag. It hadn't been clipped, and it was adorable. The minute they put it down it capered up to Mona, turned several circles in front of her and then put up one paw, "Like the dog on the rug". Mona thought. She felt strange about the dog; but she had to admit it was captivating. When it jumped up in her arms and cud-

dled its head against her neck she was completely won over.

"Yes. You can keep it if no one claims it," she said, absurdly conscious of the appeal of the little creature. She was as desirous as the children to have the little dog, but common sense warned her not to let them count too much on having it. "But I'm sure that it has an owner. It's such a beautiful dog." She caressed the little head "that it must belong to someone. It's probably lost—run away maybe. They might advertise for it in the paper—"

"We don't have to read the papers," Meg suggested with practicality.

"That wouldn't be honest," Mona told them. "We will watch out. In the meantime you can play with him. Suppose you get him some milk, Harry."

Harry obliged. Mona reluctantly put the little dog down. It drank a little, then cavorted about, jumping up on the children, licking their hands. When it came to Carol it leaped into her lap and, putting its paws on her shoulders, seemed to be whispering into her ear.

"Did you ever see anything so cute?" Meg asked.

MONA was conscious of a twinge of jealousy. She had loved the feeling of the tiny head nestling close to her face. She shoved her feeling into the back

of her consciousness and agreed that the little dog was cute.

So did Hal and Ellen. They all hoped that no one would claim the tiny poodle. It was so gay, such good company. It seemed to know just what their mood was and fit into it.

"I've always heard poodles were smart," Hal said after it had been with them two days; "but I swear this one is almost human."

With that the little dog climbed up his leg and licked the man's big hand as though it were saying 'thank you.' "See what I mean?" boomed Hal, patting the small head. "I certainly hope no one comes for it."

No one did.

After a week they felt safe; and as though "Jet," so called for his beady, black eyes and "because he was jettisoned" Hal added, and then had to explain to the children what the word meant.

They all, except Ellen, adored the poodle. Ellen kept insisting there was something strange about him. The poodle seemed to like them all equally well. To Mona there was something specially appealing about the little dog. She actually reached the point where she tried to get him off to herself, carrying him into her room to be with her while she napped—but, whether by design or not, he always barked

or made some noise that brought the children running.

Baby Carol would put up her three-year-old hands to the bed. "Yet" she would call, "Yet," her tongue not able to master the intricacies of the letter J.

Then Mona would have to lift the little thing down, and off he would go with the children scampering with all the abandon of youth—so oddly at variance with the wise look in his shoe-button eyes.

"It's that that makes me love him so," Mona thought, "that queer mixture of youth and wisdom. It's amazing what a difference a dog makes in a house."

And it really was. The children never needed to be amused now. They had Jet. If they got restless he brought his ball, dropped it in Meg or Harry's lap for them to throw. He retrieved without being taught. Even Hal was forced into the game and Mona—no matter how busy the children were there was always some time during the day when the dog cuddled up into her neck as he had done the first day he came.

Mona found herself looking forward to it almost as a ritual. "It's ridiculous" she scolded herself, "but when he's there I seem to have visions of a never-never land, Yeats' Land of Heart's Desire. I suppose because I thought of the play with all that non-

sense of Ellen's when he first came and its association of ideas. But it's uncanny, really."

Finally she told Hal about it. "I think I'm going mad. I keep wishing he'd grow life-size and I could ride away on his back. I see visions in which I—sober, sedate Mona—dance upon the mountains like a flame. Do you think I'm crazy?"

HAL looked at his pretty wife. "You're anything but sedate, Mona. You know you're lovely and you're not nuts either. There's something about that animal—you know, when he licks my hand it feels like water touching my skin. I think of the rushing waters of a bright brook with motes dancing in the sunlight, and I feel like chucking business and going fishing. Pretty silly the end of April."

"Well, you could go to Florida," Mona said seriously.

"Now don't you go encouraging me. I don't have a vacation till August! I just wanted to explain the dog's effect on me." He patted Mona's shoulder. "You see, dear, it's because the little dog is so young, so blithe and gay he releases our inhibitions. It's good for us."

Mona wasn't convinced. "The children are young, blithe and gay. They don't make me want to dance on the mountain like a flame."

Hal threw back his head and laughed. "That would be pretty difficult to do. Have you ever seen a flame dance on a mountain? These poetic imageries are all right until you break them down. Then what have you—nothing, nothing at all."

He was right of course. A flame could dance in a fireplace but on a mountain it would be, as Hal said, nothing, or a forest fire. She joined in her husband's laughter and forgot the whole business when he suggested they might go out dancing.

They hadn't done that for a long time. It would be fun indeed. "I'll go nap," she told him, "so I'll look my best."

"You always do." He kissed her as he had when they were engaged. Mona forgot everything but the moment.

The poodle was on her bed waiting for her—wagging its pom-pom tail in an utter abandon of ecstasy, cavorting up and down regardless of her blue satin bedspread. Mona wondered idly how he'd gotten up on the high bed. He was such a little thing. "Jet," she said in the manner proverbial to all dog lovers, "Good Jet" and patted the tiny head.

As she took off her dress the poodle watched her gravely. He was like a little old woman sitting on the end of the bed—or a gnome. She slipped into a

wrapper, a filmy thing of lace and nylon and curled up on the bed. In two seconds flat he was beside her, nestled into the curve of her shoulder, his head close to her cheek.

For once the children didn't come and she lay there strangely content, her fingers caressing the soft wool of Jet's pompadour.

PRESENTLY she began to hear a weird music, soft and slow, unlike any she had ever heard before; a line from a song came to her—"Strange Music of the Spheres." Someone must be playing a radio, she thought, and yet no radio had ever produced music like this, yet in some odd way it seemed mixed up with the poodle's rhythmic breathing and the Yeats' play came back into her mind. *The Land of Heart's Desire, where nobody gets old.*

Then she must have fallen asleep for the poodle began to talk. "I can take you there—where everything is wondrous strange and beautiful, where running water makes music all day long, where there is no age, no pain, nothing but happiness. Will you come with me? Ride upon my back to eternal joy?"

And then incredibly the poodle was beside the bed, the size of a pony, small but big enough to carry her.

Mona knew instinctively that

if she got on his back she would achieve the Land of Heart's Desire. Out of the large body the same poodle eyes looked into hers. In them was eternal youth and an age-old wisdom. But there was something else—something that filled her with horror—a cold, calculating look that was evil. She shivered and pulled her robe close.

In her ears the music swelled and the poodle's voice mingled with it. "Come, come with me to eternal joy. Just get on my back."

The music was louder. Suddenly she forgot the evil, forgot everything but the promise of eternal joy. She swung around on the bed, her legs dangling over the side. Then she was on her feet and the poodle threw back its coal black head and made a sound that was half human, half animal, but wholly triumphant, and it was the same evil she saw in the shining eyes. For the first time she was aware of the dog's sharply pointed white teeth. She had noticed the incisors when the poodle had been small, thought they were over-large. Now they looked exactly like the fangs they were. She visioned them dripping with blood—her blood—and she stopped advancing, standing stock still. Her eyes met those of the dog's, those jet-like button eyes that had given him his name.

"No," she whispered, "no, I cannot come."

"Only one step." The voice came from the poodle's throat, mingling with the music. "Only one step and it is yours—eternal youth—with me." The poodle's eyes were veiled. It lifted one foot enticingly. "Come," it insisted, and moved nearer to her.

Again she began to move towards the dog who now seemed larger than ever. "You won't get out of the door with me on your back," she said.

"There will be no doors for us now, or ever again," the dog replied. It looked at her again.

THIS time she saw the evil in its eyes but she didn't care. The music had her in its spell. The poodle had charmed her, too. She no longer thought it evil or that it was strange it had enlarged itself. She knew that it would bear her through the door or the wall, if necessary, to another world—to eternal joy or eternal damnation. She didn't care which as long as the music lasted.

She took another step. The poodle cavorted like a prancing horse as it had done when it was a tiny dog showing off. "Hurry," its words rang in her ears. "Hurry, get on my back so we can ride."

She put her hand on its shin-

ing topknot, the black hair that was soft as cashmere.

The music enveloped her like a mantle of lovely vibrating sound.

She put her other hand on the poodle's back that was clean-shaven, smooth as broadtail and as high as her shoulder.

Just as she was about to swing herself into place the door opened and the children tumbled in, Baby Carol, Meg and Harry Junior.

"Mother," Meg said reproachfully, "you've got Jet in here."

She was back on her bed, the poodle lying curled against her neck, tiny as always, but looking at her with deep unfathomable eyes.

Even as she looked at it she saw and felt the deep sigh that wracked its fragile little body.

In her ears was a whisper, "Too late." The music was gone.

"Yet, Yet," Baby Carol was pushing herself against the bed.

"I was asleep, Mona told herself, "and I dreamed, but what a dream!"

Almost in a daze she reached up for the poodle, cradled the tiny body in her two hands. "Run along, little Jet," she said.

The poodle leaned towards her and licked her cheek.

For an instant she thought she heard the music again. But it was only wishful thinking. Except

for the children the room was quiet.

"Yet, Yet," Baby Carol was calling.

Mona gave the poodle to Harry Junior.

"Run along, children," she admonished, "Mother has to dress."

THEY left her and she got off the bed. She felt enervated. "What a dream!" she said, half aloud. "I'm actually exhausted—over a dream—no, I guess it was more than a dream. It was in the nightmare class."

She shook the memory of it off, bathing her face with cold water to get rid of it. She dressed quickly. When she reached the living room and Hal she wore her new Dior taffeta suit with the bell-like flaring skirt and the jeweled cap that perched jauntily on her golden curls.

"Mona," her husband exclaimed, "you're ravishing." He kissed her.

"What a fool I was," she thought, "to want to leave him for eternal joy—even in a dream! Why, I've got eternal joy with him! And the children. It took a nightmare to make me realize it, though."

She sighed as the poodle had sighed:

"Come along," Hal said.

"Shouldn't we tell the children good-bye?" she asked.

"I sent them off to the garden to play—and I've told Ellen we're going out. Come on dear, tonight is entirely our own."

"I must tell you about the silliest dream I had," she began as they hailed a taxi.

"Later," he said. "Right now I want to talk about you and how lovely you are."

She never did tell him about the dream.

IT WAS late when they reached home. "It's been a perfect evening," Mona said as Hal put his key in the front door lock.

The door swung open before he turned the key. A white-faced Ellen stood inside, peering out at them anxiously.

"Is anything wrong?" Mona asked, alarmed by the look on her maid's face.

Ellen kept staring. "Did you take the baby with you?" she asked. Her voice was unsteady.

"No," Hal replied tersely. "Why?"

Ellen's lips quivered. "I so hoped you'd taken her, even though I was sure you hadn't. She's gone. She wasn't there when I called the children for supper—neither she nor the little dog. I asked Meg and Harry where she was and they said the last time they'd seen her she was

playing with Jet in the far corner of the garden."

"But surely—" Mona began over Hal's, "We'd better phone the police."

"Oh, no sir." Ellen wailed, "It's no use. It's May eve; the time when the "little people" have power. They've spirited her away. The little dog was their emissary. He came ahead to get someone from this house. I never liked the little dog. I think I knew from the first—"

"Nonsense," Hal broke in, "there was nothing wrong with the dog. There are no little people. I'll phone the police and ask the neighbors—"

"I did that," Ellen cut in. "Two of them saw Carol. They said she was laughing happily, riding on the back of a poodle dog as large as a pony."

Mona remembered what she had thought was a dream—a nightmare. When the poodle had grown big—big enough to take her to the Land of Heart's Desire. She remembered the cold, calculating look—the evil.

It had been actuality, not a dream. In one sickening moment she glimpsed another world, another dimension and knew it was more than shadow and that she would never see her child again.