

fantastic

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Mr. Dittman's

Monsters

BY WILLIAM P. MCGIVERN

Did you ever wonder where pink elephants come from? Out of a scotch bottle? Not necessarily, as Arthur Dittman discovered when an uninvited guest showed up. But Arthur wasn't a very enthusiastic host because he already had a monster of his own.

MRS. DITTMAN glared across the table, and voiced the age-old plaint of neglected wives. "I'd think you could give me a little attention once in a while. Always with your nose in that silly *Chemist's Monthly!*"

Mr. Dittman looked up also. In fact, both of him raised a single head, because there were really two Arthur Dittman's. The reasoning man, and the patient little sufferer. The reasoning Dittman was surprised. He could not imagine how anyone so gross, homely, and plain stinkerish as Mrs. Dittman could expect attention from anyone.

Aside from a certain fascination Mr. Dittman had experienced from watching the movement of Mrs. Dittman's mustache, he had never had any great interest in the woman.

Why he had married Martha,

Arthur could never really say. The proposal was made in a dark room — a setting arranged beforehand by Martha's frantic parents — and Arthur always suspected that the perfume was drugged.

But he took his defeat like a true sportsman. A bookkeeper by profession, his great love was chemistry. So, what with his patient nature and his basement laboratory, he survived.

"Arthur, answer me!" Martha Dittman barked, whereupon the patient Mr. Dittman took over. He said, "Sorry, my dear. There are some new formulæ here that are very interesting. Coupled with the material I found in that old parchment volume —"

"You mean that witch's book? I told you to burn it!"

"But my dear. It contains information of great value!"

"Well, I'll burn it. Someday

I'll go into that abominable laboratory of yours and —"

"My dear — I'm sure you wouldn't do a thing like that. You know what pleasure I derive from —"

"I know it's making a widow out of me!"

It's probably keeping you out of the divorce court, Madam, the reasoning Mr. Dittman said, but silently of course. Extreme ugliness is grounds for escaping military duty. Why not grounds for divorce? If I told them how unpleasant it is to lie in bed beside —

"I suppose you're going to spend the whole evening there, as usual?"

"Well — I have plans for a couple of new mixtures."

Mrs. Dittman glowered, and her husband thought, *if only her personality did not match her general unsightliness so perfectly. Why must her disposition wear a mustache also?*

Mr. Dittman got up from the table and smiled at his wife — this in itself being no small feat — and said, "I won't be long, my dear. Just a couple of mixtures."

"I'll keep reminding you," Martha said, darkly. And he knew she would. By knocking on the door every ten minutes in order to break his solitary pleasure into small chunks rather than allow it to flourish uninterrupted for a whole evening.

Safe at last behind the door of

his beloved laboratory, a change came over Arthur Dittman; a change for the better. He smiled a smile of contentment that seemed to smooth the wrinkles away from his eyes — wrinkles acquired through the years from squinting against the expected shock of Martha's image against his unprotected optic nerves. Even the sagging flesh of his jowls seemed to tighten; flesh made heavy by the weight of his eternal patience. There was new spring in footsteps understandably reduced to a shuffle by the mere contemplation of the years ahead with Martha.

Arthur went happily to work, his love of it made audible by snatches of conversation he tossed from one side of his mouth to the other. "I could never understand why they left the catalytic element out of that formula. Perhaps they didn't have a name for it in 1281. That was a long time ago. Hmmmmm. Let's see now — ground bat's ears. This synthetic should certainly do just as well. And why shouldn't a compound of digitalis and riboflavin activate the formula if anything will. I wonder —"

Arthur chatted happily with himself and went about mixing concoctions that might have been termed devilish by those wishing to put a melodramatic connotation upon plain, unromantic chemicals.

Finally, Arthur was ready to

complete his experiment. He put on his rubber gloves, turned his face away, and added the last ingredient.

Thirty silent seconds passed, while the retort seemed to be tasting the stuff suspiciously. Then it belched and spewed forth like someone who had just discovered a raw oyster in a slice of angel food cake.

The room filled, instantly, with a cloud of smoke — white, slightly odorous — exactly as prescribed for such occasions by specialists in such matters and by all the old books.

Arthur Dittman cowered in a corner, and rubbed his smarting eyes. This didn't help much because there was some sort of caustic substance on the rubber gloves which left his optics positively streaming.

Then a soft, wistful voice said, "Hello."

Arthur finally got his eyes open and found the room to be clearing fast but he still couldn't see anything. He said, "Hello," also, but mainly from reflex action.

"You're sad," the wistful voice said. "You've been crying."

"I assure you, it's entirely chemical — not emotional."

"Emotion — chemistry — biology," the sad voice pursued, "they're all hopelessly intermingled."

"I — I suppose you're right, but —" Arthur's eyes were begin-

ning to function again and he could vaguely define a large, wavering blob of matter near the Bunsen burner. He said, "I — ah, didn't hear you enter."

"I'm sorry — I thought you knew. You were kind enough to bring me here."

At that moment there was a sharp knock on the door, followed by Martha's strident voice. "Arthur! You're smelling up the house again. Whatever you're doing — stop it!"

"I'm sorry, my dear. The experiment is over now."

"And a very successful one," the wistful voice stated.

"What did you say?" Martha wanted to know.

"I said the experiment is over."

"Well, I don't care whether it was a success or not. Stop it!"

"Martha — I wish you'd come in and see —"

"Come in? You couldn't drag me into that filthy place!"

"Well, I certainly wouldn't try anything so drastic, but —"

"Just get rid of that awful smell and come to bed."

"Who's that?" the nice voice asked, as Martha strode off upstairs.

"My wife. She isn't in sympathy with my hobby."

"Well, I'm certainly in sympathy with it. You've given me my first taste of freedom in a long time."

"Is that so? Well I'm very glad —" The room was clear, now and Arthur's eyes were functioning — functioning almost too well, he thought, as he beheld the apparition that had moved in on him. Something the like of which had never before visited him.

It had stringy hair, wore a small postage stamp of an apron, and was clad mainly in vari-colored

scales. The arms, legs, and torso appeared to have been assembled toward the end of a long day in a factory where the employees kept their eyes glued to the clock after four-thirty — a slipshod job that no inspector would have ever passed except one who was also watching the clock. Certainly, there was no pride of workmanship in whoever had thrown this



"Spring positively does something to me, Miss Gorkle."

one together. None whatever.

But Arthur Dittman was instinctively kind, and except for the sudden break in his words, he gave no sign of personal shock.

The apparition was observant, however. "You don't like me."

"Oh — on the contrary. I was just — ah, startled. What are you — a genie of some sort?"

"You mean can I grant you a wish?"

"Three wishes is usually the accepted form."

"I'm sorry. None of us ever had any such power. The old-story tellers and myth-makers were, first of all — human beings, and were inclined to color things up a little." The monster's sadness increased. "As a matter of cold fact, we aren't good for anything I can think of."

Arthur Dittman, conditioned as he was to unusual physical contours, stepped closer to his visitor and studied the face. "That — ah, is your face, isn't it?" he asked.

"Of course. Isn't it where faces usually are?"

The visage did have redeeming features, Arthur thought. The surrounding wattles were a delicate pink, and the irises of the eyes were arresting in their lavender brightness. "I still don't see how I achieved —"

"It may surprise you, but the key ingredient of your chemical

formula was the alcohol."

"Is that so? You surprise me."

The monster sighed. "I was fortunate in materializing for a scientist."

"An amateur," Arthur said, but blushed with pleasure, nonetheless.

"A man with the impersonal scientific approach, regardless. Usually we're given a pretty bad time by the people who materialize us. They scream, dive under the bed, try to climb up the wall."

Arthur was puzzled. "Why should they do that?"

"It's just that very few of them expect us. Although how they can expect anything else after —"

Arthur Dittman pointed suddenly. "Wait a minute. It occurs to me — You mean it doesn't matter how or where the formula is concocted?"

"None whatever."

"It could be in a man's stomach or in a retort?"

"It could be anywhere."

"And when you come you often find your host in — ah, very bad shape?"

"We usually find them drunker than fifty tankards of ale."

"Then you're wrong — you're very wrong about being useless and having no purpose in the scheme of things. Obviously you are manifested on this plane to show people the error of their ways!"

The creature shrugged. "That

may be true, but it's a sad, thankless job anyhow. Always misunderstood and goggled at — when all we want is a little kindness — a little consideration —”

“Are there — very many of you?”

“Oh yes — quite a number. We take turns in coming. Always hoping against hope that the next trip will be different — that our host won't go into a coma or jump out a window, or call for help.”

“Well, I certainly don't want to seem boorish. Possibly we could sit and chat a while. You could tell me about your world and —”

There was a sudden banging on the door. Martha's voice. “Arthur? Have you got a woman in there?”

Arthur flinched at the sound. The monster asked, “Who's that?”

“My wife.”

“Arthur! Answer me!”

Mr. Dittman glanced, somewhat perplexed, at his visitor. “Are you a — ah, that is — a lady?”

The rose wattles deepened in color. “Why, yes. My name is Elizabeth. I chose it myself.”

Arthur looked at the door and called, “I'm occupied at the moment, my dear. If you'll come back a little later —”

Martha's snort of indignation could easily have blown the door open if she had not already thrown her weight against it. The panel flew back and she came into the

laboratory. She took two steps forward and came to an abrupt halt. She loosed one inarticulate scream and fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Arthur moved toward her. A second gargled scream stopped him. He turned. Elizabeth was also stretched on the floor, out cold from sudden shock.

Arthur was filled with an understandable confusion. His loyalties of course were toward Martha, but the scientist in him forced his attention in the other direction. He knelt beside his fallen visitor and observed her complexion. It was only faintly pink. Obviously her reaction to sudden fright differed little from that of a human.

But her recuperative powers were greater and she opened her eyes almost immediately. “Good heavens,” she muttered. “What was that?”

“My wife,” Arthur said a little stiffly.

“I'm sorry. It was just that —”

“I understand. Are you feeling better now?”

“I'll be all right. It was just the sudden shock. But it did me good. It did me a great deal of good.”

Elizabeth got to her feet and studied the still-prone Martha. “It just goes to show that there is good in everything. When we're put in a position where we can understand how the other fellow feels —”

"I don't think I quite follow you."

"It's just that one illustration — one experience — is worth a thousand words."

"Can't you make it a little clearer?"

"It's quite apparent. For years, I've been feeling bad when I materialize to the formula and see some wild-eyed human take one look at me and try to crawl into the woodwork. But now I'll understand. Now I've been on the receiving end. Now I know what it's like to have a monster come thundering toward me when I'm not prepared. I reacted just as they do. In the future I'll understand and have more charity."

"Then your trip wasn't wasted."

"No indeed. I'll return with a lighter heart. If your wife can live with that face, I can certainly — oh, I'm sorry! That was boorish of me."

"It's all right. I know you were speaking impersonally."

"Thank you. And now I must get back. It's been pleasant — very pleasant."

Arthur watched Elizabeth with marked interest. "I'm sorry you have to leave, but I'll be very interested in seeing how you do it."

Elizabeth almost smiled. "Always the scientist. It's very simple, really. All I do is relax."

She proceeded to demonstrate, loosening her muscles, sinking gently to the floor, and finally be-

coming a blob of protoplasm that turned transparent and vanished.

Martha stirred and opened her eyes. They focused groggily as she sat up. "Is — is she gone?"

"Yes."

Martha got slowly to her feet. A change had come over her; a new soberness; a fear. She said, "Arthur — dear. I — I didn't realize I'd driven you so far."

"Driven me?"

"I know I've been disagreeable — that I've been selfish — but I didn't realize —"

"Realize what, Martha?"

"That you were looking elsewhere for feminine companionship."

Arthur's eyes popped. "But you fainted, woman! Are you trying to tell me that —?"

"It was the shock of realizing the truth. I didn't think you'd really do it. I guess I was too sure of myself, darling. But when I saw her, it floored me. Another woman! Here in our house!"

Arthur Dittman looked a trifle dazed. "I guess it's all in the point of view," he mused.

"Arthur, I'll make it up to you. If you'll give me a chance —"

He looked at his wife and smiled. After all — with the mustache shaved off her personality — He said, "It's all right, dear. I'll brush up the laboratory and then we'll go to bed."

And, strangely enough, the prospect seemed almost pleasant