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CONTENTS

A "DIFFERENT" SCIENCE-FANTASY NOVELETTE

- THE BIG TERRARIUM by James H. Schmitz 2

It looked like Earth — but it was strictly "out of this world"!

EIGHT FANTASTIC SHORT STORIES

- THE EARTHMAN by Milton Lesser 39

Nobody on Tolliver's Planet liked freaks.

- TUNNEL 1971 by Charles Einstein 52

It would be the greatest subway ever built!

- THE NIGHT EXPRESS by Damon Knight 55

Time-tables were taboo on that streamlined special.

- MARK XI by Cordwainer Smith 62

The Menschenjager was the ultimate in warfare.

- MR. FRIGHTFUL by Charles A. Stearns 76

He was proud to be known as a Mad Scientist.

- THE 4D BARGAIN by Evelyn E. Smith 88

Everything that goes in doesn't always come out.

- THE MURKY GLASS by H. P. Lovecraft & August Derleth 100

A new story of unearthly wonder and interplanetary horror.

- MALE REFUGE by Lloyd Biggle, Jr 119

No armistice in the war of the sexes.

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MR. FRIGHTFUL

by Charles A. Stearns

There are still things in this world not yet classified by the zoologists — things like the Porglies that only a lunatic would admit existed. And that was why the man who called himself Mr. Frightful was proud to be known as a Mad Scientist!

SUBTLY, the adventure began at dusk, when Mindy crossed over into the forbidden ground of the old churchyard to look for Patino, her pet duck.

Strictly speaking, as Mindy's literal-minded, druggist father had observed, Patino was not really a duck, but a drake. Ducks quack; drakes do not. Patino had never quacked; therefore he was a drake. At any rate, being an industrious example of that ankle-nibbling species, he bit everyone in sight.

Cousin Marcia had arrived to spend the weekend with Mindy's parents, and Patino always considered her ankles a delicacy. Whenever he came near, Cousin Marcia was wont to scream—if there were any

protective males around—and hoist her skirts skyward, for her knees were fetchingly dimpled. But if there was no audience, she simply kicked the living daylights out of him with a minimum of histrionics.

Actually, Patino was a very sentimental drake—his nips were love-nips, his feelings easily wounded—and after several such unfortunate encounters this morning, he had gone off with ruffled feathers.

Choosing between hysteria and concerted action, Mindy had set out to look for him.

It was the first Saturday in April. The evening was warm, the breeze heady with the smell of growing things, and despite her anxiety she had felt giddy and springified until the high



old fence, and the still-naked forsythia, and the tall, gray markers were suddenly around her, shutting out spring, and time, and the breath of new life that had been in the air a moment before.

She had saved the churchyard until last because it was the dominion of Mr. Gaup, the mortician who lived next door. A bleak look had Mr. Gaup, and all of the neighborhood children were afraid of him.

He lived with his wife in a gloomy old house behind his funeral parlor, which had once been an Episcopalian church. The abandoned building had been converted from the use of the living to the needs of the dead, but the churchyard had not been touched, and remained a part of the past with its granite slabs, too familiar to hold any symbolic dread for Mindy.

Mr. Gaup was not a very successful mortician. The elbows of his black coat were shiny and his patent leather shoes were badly eroded, though the heels, never touching the floor, were as good as new.

Such poverty in a traditionally lucrative business must necessarily be viewed with suspicion, making business still worse. It was said that Mr.

Gaup's lack of popularity stemmed from the fact that he looked too much like an undertaker.

In truth, the Gaups were kind-hearted people who, in order to eke out their income in a Christian manner, selflessly took in sick and homeless old pensioners now and again, nursing each one faithfully until he was, as Mr. Gaup piously phrased it, "gathered Home to his Heavenly Reward".

For these charitable acts, the Gaups asked but little in return. Only the amount of the pension, and the pensioner's insurance made out to them, in order to cover burial costs. Oddly enough the insurance had always covered them. Just barely.

THE PATTERN of these sporadic acts of mercy, she recalled, had always been the same. Several years ago there'd been Mr. Schleyer. She scarcely remembered him. And after him, Uncle Billy Freeman, the dear old thing, who had bought her comic books, ocarinas and jigsaw puzzles, and had once told her that he was quite rich and had a big leather purse full of one-hundred dollar bills under his mattress.

The purse had been found,

but it was quite empty, Mr. Gaup said.

That had been the year that the potato bugs were so bad in Mr. Gaup's victory garden, and he had bought considerable Paris green from her father's drugstore.

And Josiah Marsh, the last, who, despite his last request, had been buried without his gold watch. Apparently he had managed to lose it just before his funeral. (That was a bad year for potato bugs, too.)

Each of these old men had loved life, and Uncle Billy, in particular, had rebelled against being Gathered Home, she recalled, and fought every step of the way.

Nevertheless, fate had struck them down, and now the Gaups had another boarder. It was said that he called himself Mr. Zee, and no one except the Widow Rasch, who owned a spyglass, had ever seen him, for he never left his attic room, and even, Mrs. Gaup complained, demanded that his food be brought up on a tray and left outside the door. Mr. Zee, whose origin was obscure, was the object of speculation.

But these dark thoughts did not concern Mindy, for the fate of Patino remained in question.

She had looked under all of

the forsythia and the bridal wreath that grew rankly in the churchyard, but there was no familiar blob of white, no amiable, drakish scolding sound, no greeting from out of the dusk.

And at last she brought up against the dark, lonely structure which had once been the vestry of the old church and now was used for the storage of old crates and cartons which had accumulated around the funeral home. (Once she had thought it contained stacks of coffins, row on row, and possibly carboys of formaldehyde, but that had been a childish fantasy.)

Still, it was no place to venture at dusk. Several of its windowpanes were broken, and gaped blackly. The door sagged on its hinges. Testing her courage, she opened it and went in.

And found herself suddenly face to face with him who had been standing, all the while, just inside in the shadows.

MINDY SPRANG for the door, stumbled and fell over a box, and gave a little cry of pain and terror.

"Ssh!" the little man said earnestly, picking her up and setting her on her feet. He had flowing gray hair and he wore a quaint old cloak such as she

had seen in historic prints.

Mindy wailed, "But I want my d—"

Savagely he clamped a hand over her mouth and held her, mute and trembling, for a moment, seeming to test the night sounds around them. She faintly heard the spring peepers over in Miner's duckpond.

"It's all right," he said at last, releasing her. "Now then, young lady, who are you, and why do you come here?"

"I'm Mindy, and I live next door. I'm looking for my duck."

"It isn't here. Only Mr. Frightful is here, and Mr. Frightful is not a duck."

"That's a very odd name. Is it *your* name?"

"It is the *nom de guerre* that I use when hunting Porglies, much as Edward Teach used that famous epithet, 'Blackbeard,' and Wetzal, the Indian killer bore the appellation of 'Deathwind.' It has a psychological effect upon the enemy, you know. Terrorizes them."

"What's your real name?"

"Benjamin Franklin."

Mindy giggled.

"Did you *giggle*?" he said. It was very quiet in the vestry.

"No sir," said Mindy.

"Are you quite certain that you did not giggle?"

"Only a teeny-weeny bit," Mindy said. Her lower lip began to quiver.

"Weeping will not help," the little man said. "Just try to be more respectful. I'm a Mad Scientist, you know." He drew himself proudly erect, giving his cloak a Napoleonesque drape.

"Ooh!" said Mindy, respectfully faking an accent of awe.

The grey little man had lapsed into a moody silence, and appeared to have forgotten all about her. She took a step toward the door.

"*You don't believe me,*" he said, so abruptly that his voice halted her in a state of near-suspended animation.

"Oh—oh yes," Mindy said, her eyes round as saucers. "I believe you."

"*Piffle!* You don't believe me; no one ever believes me. Why not admit that you never even heard of the Porglies, you hypocritical little snip!"

"Are they like Martians?" Mindy whispered.

"Indeed not. They're terrestrial in origin, and include a rather extensive, though almost unknown, order of humanoid invertebrates. They are, in fact, akin to the lepidoptera, and hence mimics of the highest degree."

"Oh," said Mindy, in complete bewilderment.

"Yes, and very nasty fellows, too. Completely amoral. As a matter of fact, I once wrote a scientific paper on Porglies and their habits—I was a professor of psychical research at one of the midwestern universities at the time. And do you know what *that* got me?" He glared at her with malignant intensity.

Mindy shook her head.

"It got me put away," said Mr. Frightful sourly. "It got me the booby hatch, much to the delight of the Porglies, who revel in their anonymity. I had been their nemesis for years, you know, and I am sure they all breathed a sigh of relief when they heard that I was locked up."

"I'm sorry they locked you up," Mindy said.

"Pah!" said Mr. Frightful. "I can escape any time I feel like it. I have my scouts, young lady, who keep me informed on the movements of the Porglies. I got four last month."

"You did?" said Mindy. "Are you looking for Porglies now?"

Mr. Frightful's voice took on a tone of elaborate sarcasm. "Did you think I was hunting fireflies?" he said.

"No," said Mindy, "but—"

"There has been a Porglie hiding somewhere in this neighborhood for months; I am sure of it."

Mindy shivered. "Are they dangerous?"

"Quite dangerous after the spring ecdysis. I—" He suddenly cocked his small head to one side. "Sst!" he said. "Is that a car?"

Mindy went over to the window. "It's a car all right," she said, "and it's coming up the processional lane. Now there are two men getting out—and *they're coming this way.*"

"Quickly! How are they dressed?"

"In white uniforms, it looks like."

"Damnation!" said Mr. Frightful. "Be very quiet. Perhaps they'll go away."

But the two men had flashlights with which they kept searching the ground ahead of them.

"My cowboy boots must have given me away," Mr. Frightful whispered. "Don't make a sound."

MINDY TRIED hard, but there is something about imposed silence that makes the nose itch horribly. Or, to be charitable, perhaps it was the dust of the ages in that old

vestry that did it. She sneezed.

The flashlights stopped probing.

A voice shouted, "Come on out, Benjamin Franklin. We know you're in there!"

"Now you've done it," muttered the little man.

"Are you coming out, or do we have to come in after you?"

"I'm coming!" Mr. Frightful snapped. He gathered his cloak around him as if the night was suddenly cold.

"I'm sorry," Mindy whispered. "I didn't mean to give you away. I'll never forget you, Mr. Frightful."

"I'll be back," said Mr. Frightful haughtily. "Meanwhile, I'd appreciate it, young woman, if you kept your eyes open. You appear to have just a glimmer of intelligence, and I shall need *human* spies. Yes indeed. A Porglie in this season often—*Yes, yes! I'm coming!*"

Quite without leavetaking he was gone, and she went over to the broken window to watch them melt into the dusk, the small, erect figure between the tall guards.

The stillness of the old vestry was suddenly profound, and she became aware of something here in the darkness that

she had not recognized until this moment.

Fear.

The funny little man was gone, and with him that impossible tale of super-beings, or whatever they were, in the Earth. Porglies indeed! Mindy considered herself a sophisticate, much too old to believe in fairy stories.

Why fear then? Was it because he had sounded so dreadfully earnest in those last few moments before they had come for him?

Suppose that some obscure little scientist *should* one day stumble onto a minor race of intelligent beings who had somehow eluded the eyes of man for thousands of years—wouldn't he be so judged? Would anyone believe him? *Would anyone believe me,* Mindy thought, *if I should tell what happened tonight?*

The origin of her uneasiness was suddenly quite plain to her.

Mindy knew—subconsciously had known for several moments—that she was not alone in the vestry.

Someone — *something* — lay back there in the darkness, with mocking eyes upon her shoulder blades. Perhaps even now inching around through the shadows to get between her and

the door. Or stalking her from behind...

But what nonsense was that!

She stood very quietly in one spot and listened.

And presently came a slight rustling from among the crates and rubbish that were piled in that blackest corner over there. There *was* something back there! Mr. Frightful had been horribly right.

She sprang for the door and did not stop running until she was home in her father's lap.

TWO WEEKS dragged by without incident for Mindy, except that the days were growing longer, and the school term nearing its close. Patino had apparently disappeared forever, for none of the neighbors had seen him, though she made the rounds night after night. Her father, trying to cheer her up, said that he might have gone north with the wild ducks, but that was silly.

There was the possibility, however, that he had been run over by an automobile. Or stolen.

Of late she had found herself drawn, these light evenings, back to the neighborhood of the old vestry behind Mr. Gaup's funeral parlor, but she saw nothing unusual. Whatever

had been hiding there was either lying low, or else had gone.

On a Thursday evening, however, near the end of April, she was surprised to find an old friend skulking in the bridal wreath beyond the wooden fence. It was Mr. Frightful.

They did not have long to talk. Mr. Frightful said that he was still determined to smoke out the Porglie, wherever it was hiding, and she told him about the noise in the vestry. Then a station wagon came into the driveway and the two men in white uniforms got out and took Mr. Frightful away.

Two nights later he was back again, but this time she didn't even get to see him. Mr. Gaup had discovered him first and made the authorities promise to lock him up more securely hereafter, as this was a law-abiding community, and they did not want a maniac prowling around. The men promised to send Mr. Frightful upstate to an escape-proof institution.

Mindy knew that she would never see him again, and it was a low point in her life. Patino was gone; the neighborhood rather quiet, and a pall over the Gaup's household, she knew, for it was said that the strange old man, Mr. Zee, was quite ill and sinking fast. Mr.

Gaup bought four pounds of Paris green from her father that week.

On Low Sunday, Mr. Zee was quietly Gathered Home.

MR. ZEE'S death certificate, the neighborhood learned without surprise, had been made out by old Doctor Bentry, a tobacco-chewing atavist of whom Mindy's father had once said that he would as soon be guillotined as let old Horse Bentry lay scalpel to *his* tonsils.

Later that same afternoon, Doc Bentry told some of the men in Benson's Bar that it was the damndest case of dehydration that he had ever seen. The skin of the old man was like parchment, but it was stretched tight, like a shirt that was too small. No apparent dropsy, though. It was a caution, Doc Bentry said, what heart trouble could do to you.

Also, Mr. Zee had worn an enormous ruby ring that had caught the doctor's eye. Bentry had done almost everything, they said, before he'd bought his medical license in Missouri twenty years ago and settled down, and he knew a good stone when he saw one.

He said that he figured to go over and sit up with that ring

all night to make sure that it didn't get lost, like Old Man Marsh's gold watch.

So it was that when Mindy's father sent her over to the Gaups', just at bedtime, to take them their evening paper, which had been thrown by mistake on her own lawn, the three of them, Mr. and Mrs. Gaup and Doctor Bentry, were having a wake in the reception room over in the funeral parlor.

Carefully avoiding the old vestry, she went around to the front and knocked on the door.

Doc Bentry opened the door, and she could see that he had been crying, for his nose was very red. She gave him the paper, and looked past him at the dark, dusty drapes that fell from the central table of the bier itself. It was pretty scary.

"Ever see a corpse?" said Doc Bentry, hiccupping slightly.

Wide-eyed, Mindy shook her head.

"Come on," Doc Bentry magnanimously invited, "I'll take you over."

Mr. Gaup opened his mouth as though to protest; then tightly closed it, glaring at Bentry with a helpless fury.

The face of Mr. Zee *was* like parchment, if one can imagine parchment with a green-

ish tinge. But her fascinated eyes roved down to the pale hands, folded across the not-too-clean white shirt, for upon one of the long fingers glittered a red stone of awesome luster in a curious setting that was like a huge beetle in its general shape, and must have, like her father's masonic ring, some talismanic significance.

If anyone left the room for a moment, the ring was likely to fall down among the crepe or something, and get lost.

"Send that child out of here," snapped Mr. Gaup at last.

"Go lay an egg," said Doc Bentry. But to Mindy he said, "You'd better skedaddle, kid. I must be drunker than I thought." And he rubbed his hand over his face.

The atmosphere was not friendly. Doc Bentry suddenly seemed to wear an evil leer on his shapeless face; Mr. Gaup's attenuated visage seemed longer and more sinister than ever before, and his wife's eyes were the coldest that she had ever seen.

And all of them were looking at her—the intruder. Mindy ran.

Outside, the cool breeze felt friendly and familiar against her cheeks as she started across the old churchyard toward her

own back gate. But far down by the streetlight, a figure came into her field of vision, walking fast, now and then glancing over its shoulder.

Presently she could make out the features. It was Mr. Frightful.

"THERE YOU are," he said, when he spied her.

"Yes," agreed Mindy, staring as though at a ghost.

"You are surprised to see me?" Mr. Frightful snorted. "Let me tell you that these maximum security institutions are not what they *used* to be."

Mindy was willing to concede that point. "But why do you keep coming back here, when they always look here the very first thing?"

"Because," said Mr. Frightful, with a tone of outraged calmness, "as I have told you until I am sick of it, there is surely a Porglie frequenting this neighborhood. He must be found, and I fancy that we have not much longer. Now, let us go over to the vestry, where we can talk without fear of being interrupted, if talk we must."

"All right," said Mindy reluctantly, "but there's still a lot I don't understand about this thing. I haven't got any-

thing against the Porglies."

"An idiot could grasp it. I mentioned ecdysis before, which is a bursting of the old skin or shell. Porglies, degrading nature, combine it with an odd sort of multiple palingenesis, which, I'm sure you will agree, is adding insult to outrage, even if there were nothing more against them."

"Are they like caterpillars?"

"A Porglie does not turn into a butterfly. The phenomenon is more nearly analogous to the transformation of larvae to the pupa stage. Have you ever seen a cocoon burst in the autumn?"

"Ugh!" said Mindy, shuddering.

"You may well exclaim 'ugh,'" Mr. Frightful said. He took a funny-looking thing out from under his coat. It resembled a big camera with a long, telescopic lens. But not very much.

"What on earth?" exclaimed Mindy.

"It is a Porglie emulsifier," answered Mr. Frightful shortly. He did not elaborate, for they had reached the vestry.

"If you don't mind my saying it," said Mindy, "I don't think we ought to go in there just now. They're having a wake up in the front. They

might hear us."

Mr. Frightful started visibly. "A wake?" he said.

"Sure. Mr. Zee, the Gaup's lodger, died, and they're sitting up with his ruby ring."

"The fools!" hissed Mr. Frightful. "It's exactly what he wanted. Even now, we may be too late to save them. Come on!"

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"Don't you understand, Zee is our quarry. He *must* be. It is a typical Porglie name and a typical, vile Porglie set-up."

"You mean Mr. Zee was the Porglie? But he's dead." Mindy felt an immense relief. "I guess I'd better go home now, if you don't need me any more. It's kind of late."

"Not dead," said Mr. Frightful.

"What?"

"Only in the pre-ecdysis period of dormancy, which lasts just a few hours." Rapidly he was making adjustments upon the various switches and triggers of his emulsifier with fingers that seemed ominously deft and practiced.

"He looked dead to me," argued Mindy. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he was pretty full of Paris green."

"A mere cocktail to a Porglie." Mr. Frightful pushed

open the door to the vestry. It creaked a little. "Shh!" he said.

Their goal appeared to be a narrow finger of light which emanated from beneath the door in the front of the vestry, for Mr. Frightful stalked it with the cunning of a veteran Porglie hunter, and Mindy, frightened quite out of her wits, tiptoed after.

Mr. Frightful brushed back his dank hair and put his ear to the door. There was not the slightest sound from the funeral parlor. The silence was unnatural.

She watched his hand close upon the doorknob, ever so gently, and inch it open, slowly, slowly, as the entire vestry behind her became flooded with light.

Something over in the corner, disturbed by that light, made a rustling sound. There was a movement of something white between one of the crates and the wall, and a familiar shape waddled out into the beam of light cast through the door.

It was Patino, walking rather proudly, for a convoy of eight yellow ducklings followed after.

BUT MINDY'S glazed eyes had scarcely time to take in this incredible scene of domesticity, for Mr. Frightful's hand had gradually closed upon her wrist with a vise-like grip.

"Listen carefully," Mr. Frightful said. He was standing between her and the door. "You shall be my witness. Take one quick look inside, and then you must leave. Remember that the newborn are not always pleasant to behold."

Mindy remembered the ravenous little caterpillars that had devoured the leaves of the elm in her back yard.

"Now then," said Mr. Frightful. "One look only."

One look was quite enough. Mr. and Mrs. Gaup and Doctor Bentry had quite vanished. Unless you could count a patent leather shoe, a comb, a lock of hair on the floor. There were Porglies all over the place. Dozens and dozens of little Porglies.

Mr. Frightful leveled the emulsifier. It was not going to be very nice.

One of the Porglies burped.

"Quack," said Patino.

Mindy went outside and waited.

THE END