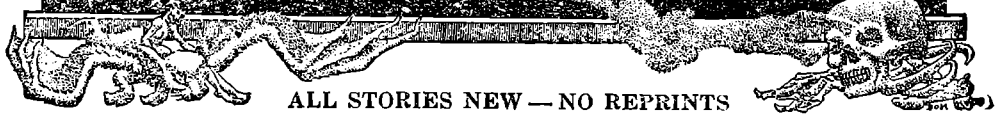


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1948

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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No Silence For Maloeween



BY PETER PHILLIPS

A whistling woman, a crowing hen,
Bode no good to gods or men. . . .

Old Proverb.

YOU'VE met them: happily quiet in a corner at cocktail parties, maybe, with the buzz and the clatter and the bright pervervid chatter flowing unheeded about them as they sit in silent abstraction.

Men who love silence.

What are they doing at such parties, these skulk-in-the-corner, hear-all-say-nothing types? Dragged along, plied with liquor to "bring them out," abandoned in despair when they merely get bright-eyed and pull themselves even further back into their shells. . . .

Most men fear silence as they fear death. They know that full silence is death. To

Most men fear silence as they fear death, for isn't full silence death

Heading by FRED HUMISTON

break it, they'll whistle in the dark, make music, talk.

In the final irony, they'll fire noisy guns to kill each other. If war were silent, they wouldn't make war. They need the courage of noise to brave the gates of the Great Silence. Brass trumpets, drums, war-cries.

But men like Gregor Maloeween, lovers of contemplation and the soft inwardness of difficult thoughts, cherish and seek silence. They don't fear it. That's why they don't fear death.

Mrs. Huldstrum grabbed a cocktail from a tray as it floated past in the hands of a cat-footed servant.

"I'd say it's a good thing they're getting married," she said, lifting the glass. "Anna will fetch him out of his shell."

Dian Matthieu looked back over a bare shoulder at Maloeween sitting quietly in a corner as usual.

"Do you think so?" she said with sweet malice. "Perhaps she'd prefer him to stay right inside his shell, where he won't see so much."

* * *

Anna Huygens had flirted her way around the whole university before she finally decided to settle down with Maloeween, reserved, brilliant professor of Astrophysics.

She wanted to vie with her mother as hostess in the small but socially cosmopolitan town where some of the finest brains in Europe were gathered to work and teach.

She was sly, beautiful, twenty-five—to Maloeween's forty—and the daughter of Alfred Huygens, ex-burgomaster, who owned a radio factory in the modern outskirts of the ancient town, and whose benefactions helped to keep the university going.

If she had been Maloeween's choice, it would have been a bad choice. But self-willed Anna did the choosing.

She wanted a solid, safe background to her social plans. Maloeween would provide it—big, thick-haired, heavy-browed, good-natured Maloeween, holder of an important Chair, popular in his own quiet way, and sufficiently tractable and absent-minded to leave all domestic and social arrangements to her.

And too preoccupied with the great abstractions of his science to notice—or care—

whether she carried on with a few minor flirtations or not.

* * *

THIS was the engagement party. And Anna was about to embark on her party-piece.

Vivacious, corn-haired Anna was possessed of—some said possessed by—a social accomplishment of a rather unusual nature. The gift would have been remarkable in a man. In a woman, it was trebly so.

It was the ability to whistle, to mimic the songs of various birds with amazing fidelity, and so to harmonize these thin, delicate strains of indeterminate melody with the notes of an accompanying piano that, with eyes closed, it wasn't difficult to visualize a bird-musician—thrush, blackbird or nightingale—perched on the shoulder of the pianist, intently following the printed music with bright eyes, yet not relinquishing in any degree the distinctive character of its natural song.

She stood now, whistling *Clair de Lune*. Maloeween forgot for a moment the problem in astrophysics that had been engaging his mind most of the evening.

He was intrigued by the variety of trills, flutings, warblings, and whistlings that emerged from her deliciously pursed and pouting mouth; by her taut, indrawn cheeks, lightly flushed with effort; by the throb of a tiny pulse in her throat as she fluttered tongue against palate; by the tightening of her delicate nostrils as she drew fresh breath; by the far-away look of vacuous ecstasy in her blue eyes.

Her *piece-de-resistance* was the nightingale, that songster acclaimed above all others in Europe.

Maloeween was quite happy at the thought of marrying this gay, pretty, talented creature.

"Charming," he said, as he joined in the applause.

* * *

He didn't realize the full, dreadful truth until after a short while after their marriage.

The truth that Anna was incurably damned noisy.

She was, to begin with, a chatterer and gossip of considerable vehemence and stridency. Her voice could always be heard at

a distance above the high, shrill vociferations of a group of young people.

She was naturally noisy and obstreperous—yet not ungraceful—in all her movements. Although she was a slight person, with no trace of her mother's dumpiness, she walked on her heels, and her footsteps, particularly if she were on an upper floor, would reverberate throughout the house.

She would move things with loud assertiveness. She'd even been known to crack a saucer by the force with which she replaced an empty coffee-cup.

Even when she condescended to knit—a normally quiet occupation that she despised—she contrived to ply her needles with such taut-fingered vigor that their clicking filled the room.

She enjoyed the constant background of sound, produced by the radio, whether it was of music or speech. Her inexpert tuning would elicit a cacophony of eldritch shrieks and indelicate eruptions of noise.

And at all times, she would open her sweet mouth in song, or practise to perfect her whistling.

As a child—an only child—she had cried and stamped to gain the attention of a dotting, weak-willed nurse. To her parents, she had ever been a mere noisy brat, who would have benefited from a swift smack in the right place.

Now they were inured to it, her noisiness was no more to them than a natural accompaniment of exuberance and high spirits.

But in fact she was still essentially a noisy brat, afraid to be silent for long in case the world should forget her existence.

Why didn't Maloeween observe these things, draw back, renege on the engagement while there was still time? Simply because there was no reason sufficiently apparent to him why he should fight against the forces of society, expediency and love—for he was quite enamoured of his flighty songbird—that were driving him towards marriage.

He had other things to think about.

And with the optimistic detachment that pure scientists assume towards such mundane matters, it's probable that he hoped she would adopt a more becoming sobriety of demeanor after marriage.

In any case, Anna, dispassionately aware of her own failing, toned down her noisy exuberance during the engagement period.

* * *

During the honeymoon, Maloeween delighted Anna by making a great effort to overcome his normal reserve and behave in an extrovert manner. He even devised, on the spot, a mathematical system that nearly broke the bank at the casino in the Belgian coastal resort where they stayed.

He proved himself a quietly competent lover (with scientific thoroughness he had read a work on the technique of love-making loaned to him—as a joke—by a professor of psychology).

And he laughed at and permitted himself to be drawn into the noisy frivolings of his bride.

This is to make something quite clear: that Maloeween was a man, not an eremitic, intolerant savant.

* * *

BUT the honeymoon had to end, and they returned to their new home, a pseudo-Gothic monstrosity near the main university building—a wedding gift of Papa Huygens.

Then the trouble started. Even if the egregious Anna hadn't assumed, because of his behavior during the honeymoon, that Maloeween, under her influence, had discarded his quietness and reserve, she would have been noisy. It was part of her brash nature.

But believing that he had changed, she became more noisily self-assertive than ever.

She banged, she thumped, she shouted to the maid, she strode on her heels, she sang, she whistled.

At first his reproofs were mild, ineffective. "Please, Anna," he'd say. "I find it a little difficult to concentrate when you walk about so heavily and whistle quite so loudly."

"Silly boy," she'd say. "I must move about. And all my family walk on their heels. But you love my whistling, don't you? Hear—the nightingale!"

And she would pucker her rose-red lips and trill a cadenza.

His reproofs became less mild. But equally ineffective.

"Really, Anna, I must have a little quiet

when I'm in my study. I'm engaged on a very intricate calculation, and I've a lecture to prepare. Your whistle is so damned penetrating. And, by the way, I wish you'd turn off the radio when it's obvious you're not listening."

"All right." She'd swirl her corn-colored locks. "But do get your silly sums finished. There are some people coming this evening."

"Another party?" he sighed.

"Just a few friends. Sure you don't mind?"

He shrugged. Anna's parties were, of course, noisy. She insisted on dancing and musical games, even after formal dinners. Her personality was sufficiently strong to impose her own forms of amusement on guests. On one occasion she inveigled a silver-haired pedant of 77—Otto Schreimann, the Vienna neurologist—to indulge in her version of a Cherokee war-dance.

Indulging to the full her long-repressed desire to exhibit prowess as a hostess, her dinners and parties were frequent.

And she would not suffer Maloeween to remain away from them, in the quiet of his laboratory.

She'd seek him out there—it was a short distance from the house—and say: "You must come along, Gregor. Your guests have arrived."

"But my dear Anna, they're your guests. And in any case, if you had permitted me to work in my study this afternoon, it wouldn't have been necessary for me to come here this evening."

"But I didn't disturb you . . . ?"

"Your whistling—"

"I was practicing, Gregor. You wouldn't call that a *noise*? Listen—a blackbird!"

And, with unexpressed resignation, he would return to the house.

Anna's personality, always marked, flourished and grew strong in exertion against Maloeween, the man of peace.

He wasn't dominated by her. His own will was too strong. But he became, in a sense, subdued, as a nation which offers only passive resistance might be subdued by an enemy.

Rather than assert any measure of authority when she was in a particularly noisy mood, he'd retire to his study or laboratory

or even, at night, stroll around the deserted lecture-rooms and halls of the main university building.

But Anna wilfully misconstrued his desire and need for peace and silence as mere lack of concern for her and a wish to escape. And, lacking severe rebuke, she'd force herself upon his attention in the same way she had forced herself upon the attention of her doting nurse.

She was, in short, jealous of his work.

With his stolid Slav-Netherlands blood, he was not of a nervous temperament. But in the mental conflict between his desire for peace and his disinclination to fight for it, his nerves suffered.

THEIR derangement took the most vicious form possible in the circumstances: his auditory nerves were affected and he became hypersensitive to sound, not only to volume—he could hear the ticking of a small clock at fifty feet—but to tonal quality, so that harsh voices irritated him, and the dissonances in contemporary and jazz music were almost unbearable.

Anna was fond of such music.

Sounds were conveyed in such degree and quality to his brain that their impress became retroactive, and he would "hear" them again long after they had ceased. A musician will say that he can "hear" music in all its orchestral complexity when reading a familiar score.

In the same way, Maloeween would "hear" all the noises incidental to a set period of activity, recorded by his brain with detailed fidelity and in correct sequence.

After one of Anna's parties, while on the verge of restless sleep, he would hear again, dimly but distinctly, the greetings, the clamorous gossip, the shuffle and beat of feet to a blaring swing band, the noisy games, the loud and lengthy farewells.

And all interspersed with Anna's mimicry of bird-song.

When this first happened, he sat up in bed and cried: "Anna! Your damned friends have drifted back. Haven't they any respect for privacy and peace? Get them out of here before I bounce them out on their necks!"

If, in fact, they had returned and Maloeween had forced himself out of his pas-

sivity to deal with them, Anna might have learned a lesson. And she might still be alive.

But you can't get tough with noises in the head.

Anna said: "You've been dreaming, Gregor."

"But listen—"

"Nonsense, silly boy. You probably heard a party of drunks outside in the street. It's silent now, anyway."

But there was no silence for Maloeween.

Whether the noises he heard were purely subjective, or a neurological phenomenon, is a question for experts.

Rationalists might say that all the noises from first to last, before and after Anna's death, had a mental or nervous origin.

They would also say that Gregor Maloeween murdered Anna. But he was a reasonable and reasoning man. Even in the final extremity, when exhortations had failed, when a private appeal for the intervention of her parents had met with amused deprecation, would he not have considered separation, desertion, divorce, or even slapping the hell out of the fool girl, rather than murder.

Unfortunately, Anna believed that he had murdered her.

And she expressed her conviction of this in such a manner that Maloeween himself, despite the strivings of his reason, came to fear that he had done so, that a sternly-suppressed wish to silence her had contrived to express itself in action.

He remembered that, as he handed her the sleeping-draught, his mind had been invaded by a sudden terrible hope that she would sleep and be silent forever.

His hand had shaken with the very effort to disavow the uninvited thought.

At the inquest, he said: "The drug was originally prescribed for me, as I was sleeping badly, and compounded in fair but unspecified quantity at the university pharmaceutical laboratory. I'd taken larger doses myself, with no bad effects. When my wife asked me to make up the draught for her, I told her 'You shouldn't need such things, Anna. I shan't make it very strong.'

"I can only conclude that, in my momentary absence, thinking that I had made it too weak, she increased the dose."

THAT, with details, is what he said. How could he say: "I may have given her a lethal dose. It wasn't my conscious intention to do so, but a wish may have been father to the deed . . . ?"

The equivalent of an open verdict was given by the coroner.

The inquest was held in a police office that faced the Old Square of the university town, a secluded, paved expanse bordered by ancient buildings and centuries-old elm trees.

After the inquiry, Maloeween stepped out alone into the wintry sunshine.

Behind him, in the corridor outside the police office, small groups of whispering people had gathered.

He felt the pressure of their whisperings and glances against his back. Mr. and Mrs. Huygens, his in-laws, held back so that they would not have to accompany him.

As Maloeween, a dark, big-headed figure, feeling empty and strangely alone, paced slowly across the Old Square towards his non-silent home, he heard the singing of a bird.

The soft, sweet, insistent, unmistakable trilling of a nightingale, clear and high through the noon-time hush of the Old Square.

Maloeween looked up, his great brow furrowed, turning his head from side to side to locate the sound.

But it came not from one direction, nor from many directions, but from no direction. Limbo has no direction.

And nightingales don't sing in winter.

Anna was not satisfied with the inquest verdict; and her miserable soul had not found silence.

Maloeween stopped, pressed his hands to his ears. But the keen, thrilling sound—a joy, if it was not a mockery and a torture—could not be stifled that way.

He hurried on. And as the noise of his footsteps increased, the singing became faint, a mere wraith of song, and when he reached and walked amid the traffic and noise of the High Street, it stopped abruptly.

His breathing was quick, his thoughts wild, unsteady: "I need a sedative. . . . The inquest upset me. . . . It's just a repetition in my brain of a sound that has ceased. . . .

I must work, work hard, lecture, write, give myself no time for crazy fancies . . . subjective, purely subjective . . . when I walk, make noise, occupy myself, the singing goes . . . it's simply a slight derangement, and work is the cure. . . ."

He was partly right. Work was the cure. So long as it involved noise.

When he was lecturing, talking, listening to conversation or music or using the old and clattering typewriter in his study, the song of the nightingale faded away.

Because subtle and wicked Anna, uneasy in Limbo, had conceived this fiendish irony—that Maloeween, lover of silence, should be compelled to seek the distraction of noise in order to still the demonic song of the nightingale.

SHE conserved her etheric energy for those times when silence was imposed on Maloeween, by night and the approach to sleep.

Even sleep itself, deep, drug-induced sleep, was not peace, for Limbo knows no barriers.

And in fitful vivid dreams Maloeween not only heard the song but saw, malicious yet beautiful, the face of Anna, red lips puckered, taut cheeks lightly flushed with the effort of whistling, her blue eyes wide—-not vague, as they were in life when she practiced her mimicry, but ecstatic, exultant, staring at him.

From such a nightmare he would awake, forcing his eyes to open, his limbs to move; and, heavy with lethargy and deadening but useless drugs, he would go to the radio and tune in any station that might still be on the air.

The unholy bird-song would then stop for a while.

Once, at midnight, with the shrill song keening through his brain, seeming to set the very threads of his nerves trembling to its vibrations, he dressed and went out into the cold night.

He walked quickly through the sleeping town, his frantic footsteps clattering through the deserted, narrow streets, sounding metallic and hollow along cobblestoned alleyways, echoing from blank, indifferent walls.

Exhausted, he stopped and leaned against

a shop window. But as a hush closed in on the dark street, a chill wind fluttering down from the roof-tops brought the song of the nightingale, infinitely mocking, from the depths beyond the earth.

Maloeween, his eyes filled with tears of exquisite pain, looked at the pale stars. Helpless rage welled up in him. He stamped and beat his feet on the sidewalk in a mad tattoo, a fierce, puppet-like, jerking dance that bruised his heels and jarred his bones.

And he shouted aloud in a voice of sudden dreadful power: "Silence! Silence! Silence!"

When the sound of his crazy, petulant jig—like the monstrous tantrums of a lunatic child—had died away, there was silence for a moment.

He listened, heart thumping, one hand to his neck, the other blindly thrust out as if to ward off a blow.

A helmeted policeman, who had heard his shouts, strolled out of an alleyway nearby, saw him standing there, a tall, heavy figure in a black cloak.

In the pale, unfriendly light of a single street lamp—gas was still used for illumination in the ancient center of the university town—Maloeween's big face was white, his eyes black polka-dots staring in horror.

The policeman came up softly, touched his shoulder, said kindly: "You look sick, sir. Anything I can do?"

Maloeween grasped his arm fiercely. "Listen."

"I don't hear a thing."

"Faintly, far away, coming closer—a nightingale. You must hear it!"

The policeman said: "Nightingales don't sing in winter."

Maloeween turned to him, lips sliding back over teeth in a fearsome grin. "This one does. Winter, summer, night and day, dawn, noon and sunset, sleeping and waking. No silence for you it says, tweet-tweet, chirrup-chirrup, make noise, tweet-tweet, talk, chirrup-chirrup, sing, dance, bang, thump like she used to do, tweet-tweet, and then I'll stop, then you won't hear my beautiful song, the song of the damned. . . . Hear my sweet song, says the beauty in hell, trilling away with her lovely lips. Listen, she says, listen—the nightingale—

you love the nightingale, don't you? Tiny brown bird with the wonderful voice, tiny brown demon with the voice of purgatory!"

"Come along, sir. You'll wake the street up, shouting like that. There are people sleeping in these houses."

The madness went out of Maloeween's eyes.

"Sleep?" he said. "Do you know how long a man can go without sleep? Not long. He just dies. He can go longer without food than without sleep. Death is not sleep. Death is silence, except in hell. That's where that nightingale is—in hell. But I don't want to die. I don't deserve to. She's trying to kill me, to make me kill myself. I won't."

He released the policeman's arm. "Is there an all-night cafe, a dirty place, a noisy place, where I can get a drink?"

"Not in this part of the town."

"Wherever it is, take me there, officer." Maloeween pulled out a note-case.

The policeman frowned, then shrugged and took the money. The big fellow didn't look like a drunk. . . . Well-dressed, respectable—a university professor, maybe. Well, if he wanted a drink, it was a policeman's job to know all the all-night bistros. . . .

Maloeween said: "Please talk, officer, as we walk along. Tell me about yourself, your job, your family, where you live."

* * *

THE cafe was dirty, but quiet.

Two or three students on a jag who had drifted in from the regular places after they closed, railwaymen from the nearby yards who hurried in from duty to snatch a quick cognac, lorry-drivers, a couple of apache types, three weary, cheap-scented prostitutes. . . .

One of the women came over, helped Maloeween finish a bottle of pernod. She talked brightly for a while, then gradually relapsed into drunken silence.

Tears of self-pity welled from Maloeween's red-rimmed eyes.

He sobbed, banged the table with his glass. "Talk up," he shouted to the faces that seemed to loom around him in the smoke-hazed gloom. "Sing, play. . . . Make more noise, can't you? Is this a graveyard?"

Later, when the unaccustomed liquor

took its effect, he slumped over the table, head on outflung arm, and slept, mouth loosely open, snoring.

He awoke to the stale smells of the bistro at dawn, slouched out into the chill half-light of the streets.

The sweet song of a nightingale floated on the still air of the new day, to greet him.

He went back to the cafe the next night, repeated the performance.

Then, every night. Until students muttered about his rapidly-worsening appearance, his haggard face, his untidy clothes.

The university authorities said: "Overwork. You need a rest."

Maloeween said: "No. Work is the cure. I cannot work enough."

But he tried to break the habit of going to the bistro and drinking himself into a stupor. One night he stayed at home and listened to the music of Mozart—the Magic Flute.

But it seemed that Anna was still able to harmonize, for the sound of the flute faded, and its place in the orchestration was taken by the thin warbling of a nightingale, improvising perfectly in rhythm and counterpoint, yet retaining its characteristics as bird-song.

Maloeween switched off the radio and went upstairs to the bathroom. The nightingale sang on.

He took up his old open razor, brought the edge to his throat, his hand shaking with infinite weariness. . . . And the warbling of the bird stopped abruptly.

Anna did not want him to die. Not that way.

* * *

Maloeween consulted a former colleague at another European university, an alienist of international repute, who told him: "I can't help you. I suggest you see a priest. Or, perhaps, a student of the occult."

* * *

Maloeween saw an occultist, an old creature wise in evil, who received him in a darkened room, and said: "Tell me nothing of yourself yet. Let me listen for a while to your presence."

Then, after a few moments, the old man said: "I can hear something, a sound that accompanies you. It is the song of a bird."

But he could do nothing for Maloeween.

Maloeween stood in a large, panelled room amid many accusing eyes. When asked to repeat his admission of guilt for the court records, he did not address the judge.

He looked up at the ceiling of the courtroom, and said: "Very well, I killed you. I admit it. Now go. Give me silence. Give me peace."

* * *

Maloeween stood beneath an open sky, on a wooden platform. The very air about him trembled with the triumphant song of a nightingale.

He stared at the bleak sky and cried: "Accursed woman! Accursed bird! You've got what you wanted. Surely you can't follow me now? Stop, in the name of God, stop!"

And he would have shaken his fist, but his hands were tied behind his back.

Then the air rushed about him; and the song of the nightingale ceased; and the gates of the Great Silence opened before him.

And even as he walked through them to an eternity of peace, Maloeween was grateful to the hangman who had just released the trapdoor beneath his feet.