



Weird Tales

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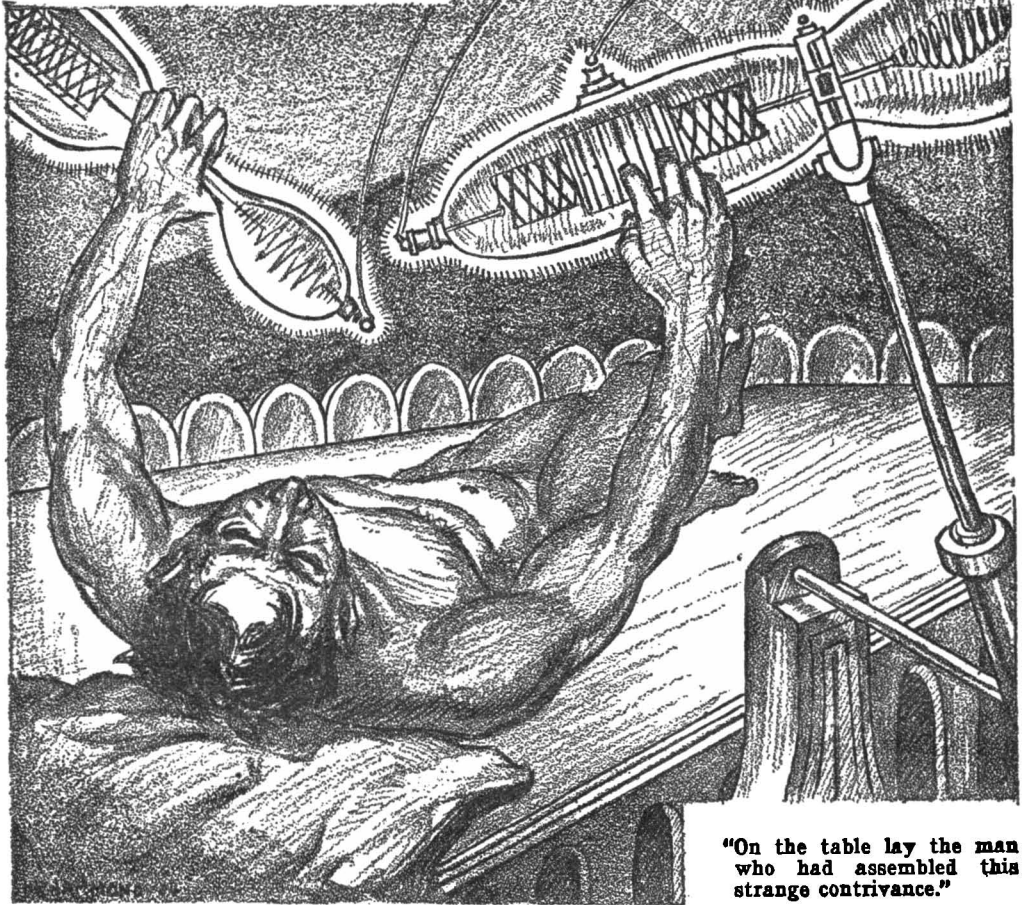
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Old Sledge

By PAUL ERNST



"On the table lay the man who had assembled this strange contrivance."

A strange piece of science-fiction—the story of an eccentric inventor who foretold the future by means of a weird machine

I HAPPENED to be out the afternoon old Sledge moved in. But I was not long in ignorance of his arrival. Mrs. Stong told me about it the moment I came back. In fact, she was waiting in the hall to tell me. She was a bit nervous.

"He's a very old man," she concluded. "He offered a big price and I needed the money, so I rented him the room next to yours. I hope you won't mind."

Mrs. Stong is more like an aunt to me than a landlady. She's a nice elderly woman, a widow, left a house and a tiny income by her husband.

"Mind?" I said. "I'm glad you've got another tenant. Why should I mind?"

"Well, he might be a bother to you," she replied, her mild blue eyes troubled. "I know you like things quiet when you work, and he might not be very quiet."

"But you said he was old."

"Yes, but he's going to work in his room, too, like you, only his work might be a little noisy. He's an inventor, he says."

"An inventor?"

"Yes. He had a lot of boxes and crates moved in. I don't see where he'll put all the things, big as the room is."

An inventor. I was doubtful for a moment. Perhaps he would hammer and drill metals all day.

"He's paying a fine price," said Mrs. Stong apologetically. "He's arranged to pay my electric bill, too. All of it. He says he'll use so much current that my part won't amount to anything."

"Of course it'll be all right," I told her. "His stuff can't be heavy or he couldn't install it on the second floor of a frame house. I don't suppose he'll make much noise. Glad you got the extra income."

I went upstairs then, and forgot the newcomer in a rush of work. I rather expected to see him when I went down to dinner; but he wasn't there. Mrs. Stong explained that he was going to take all his meals in his room. There would continue to be only the two of us at table.

About dawn next morning I woke up. A faint, deep humming noise was coming from the room next to mine. It was that which had wakened me. My new neighbor had evidently got his equipment, whatever it might be, set up and running. I sighed with relief. If that faint hum was all the noise his work produced I'd have no trouble. I went to sleep again, with the hum in my ears, idly wondering what made it.

I DIDN'T lay eyes on the newcomer for six days. And for most of that time I didn't hear him: he worked always at night, and the hum sounded only in the early hours before dawn.

Mrs. Stong continued to be nervous about him.

"There's such a strange, far-off look in his eyes," she said at breakfast of the sixth day. "And it's funny—he won't let me come into his room at all, not even to clean up. He says he'll take care of that himself. When I take up his meals I set the tray in the hall outside his door and then knock and go away. Later I come up for the empty dishes."

"So much less trouble for you," I said carelessly.

"Yes, but—you don't suppose he can be doing anything—anything criminal, do you?"

I laughed.

"He probably has a new perpetual-motion machine and is afraid somebody will see it and steal the idea."

That afternoon I saw him for the first time. We both came out of our rooms together, dressed for the street.

My first glance went past him and into his room. I was curious to see what made the hum. But the maze of unfamiliar equipment I saw told me nothing.

In the center of his room was a long, plain table. Over this were arched many hoops of copper, wired together, I think; I couldn't be sure. At each end of the table was a tall, flat cabinet of metal, painted black, with dozens of wires coming out of insulated apertures and connecting with the copper hoops. Sticking up at either side of the table was a long, narrow glass tube—a vacuum tube, probably—and these two tubes were slanted slightly as though one might lie on the table and manipulate them like gear-shift levers. To carry out that supposition, I got a hasty glimpse of a pillow on the end of the table nearest the tubes, and saw that the pillow was indented as though a head had recently rested there.

Then the door was slammed with such

petulant haste that I glanced at my hitherto unseen neighbor in astonishment.

The man, Sledge, who went to such lengths to keep hidden what seemed so trivial, was a queer-looking old codger. He was small and gnarled-appearing, with deep-set, dreamy black eyes and a wrinkled, clean-shaven face. He was well though soberly dressed and carried, strange to say, an umbrella. As it was the middle of our early summer dry spell and brilliantly sunny out, I reasoned that the umbrella must be a meaningless part of his standard going-out costume. Just another mark of eccentricity.

"Good afternoon," I said, drawing aside to let him precede me to the stairs.

He nodded curtly, carefully locked his door and started down the stairs. We went out the front door together, silently. Old Sledge was certainly no mixer.

On the sidewalk in front of the house I started downtown. Immediately Sledge started the other way, though I had a hunch he was going downtown too—simply wanted to avoid talking to me. You meet hermits like that, even in a city.

But when we had separated a few yards he stopped and called to me. His voice was rusty and reluctant.

"Going to be out all afternoon?" he asked, with what he must have thought was a smile.

I only nodded. Two could play that game of silence.

"Better take an umbrella, then," he said, "or have cab-fare in your pockets. It's going to rain at twenty-nine minutes past four."

I stared at him. There wasn't a wisp of a cloud in sight, and the paper had predicted continued sunny weather. Then I smiled inwardly. Here was evidently one of these old-timers whose rheumatism or bunions make them think they are infallible weather reporters. He was

drawing it pretty fine, though. Going to rain at twenty-nine minutes past four! It was a wonder he hadn't called the seconds, too.

"I'll risk it," I told him.

He growled something and went on his way. I went on mine, grinning. Queer, gnarled, crusty old fellow!

I CONCLUDED my business downtown and started, a little after four o'clock, toward the Grace Hotel, where a bunch of us spend a late afternoon once a week over beer and conversation.

As I neared the hotel I saw with mild surprise that it actually was clouding up. The old man's bunions were pretty good, at that. I hurried on my way.

In the window of the Grace Hotel lobby is a big electric clock. I paused under the shelter of the portico to check my watch with the clock, as I always do.

The brisk drumming of the beginning rain sounded on the metal roof of the portico.

It was precisely twenty-nine minutes past four o'clock.

I HAVE never known a man so solitary as old Sledge. No friends came to see him, and as far as I know he went out to see none. He spoke to Mrs. Stong only when he wanted something, and nodded to me only when we chanced to meet in the hall. I probably never would have made his acquaintance, before the end, had it not been for two things.

The first was an ailment of his.

I was going downstairs to dinner one evening when I saw him climbing up. He was coming slowly. His left hand was clutching at his heart so hard that the fabric of his coat was wadded in his fingers. His breath was whistling painfully from his twisted mouth. His eyes were closed.

I ran down and caught his elbow.

"Heart," he whispered. "Bad. Very bad. Not much longer to finish with my work. . . ."

I helped him up the stairs. At his door I tried the knob. The door was locked, as usual.

"Give me your key," I said. "I'll help you in and get some water——"

"No, no!" he panted. "You can't go in. Nobody must go in. I'll be all right."

He leaned on my arm, his seamed old face gradually showing less distress. Finally he took a deep breath and stood alone.

"I'm all right now. Thanks." He drew out his key with trembling fingers and inserted it in the lock. "Thanks."

Plainly he waited for me to go away from there. He was so very worried for fear someone would get a glimpse of whatever it was he guarded so sedulously!

The second thing that undermined his hermitic reserve was the fact that I was a writer and he conceived the notion that he had need of me. The oddest thing!

A few days after old Sledge's heart attack I was laying out my afternoon's work when a knock sounded at my door. I called, "Come in," thinking of course it was Mrs. Stong. But it wasn't. It was my mysterious neighbor.

He stood hesitantly in my doorway, his leathery face wrinkled in the grimace he used for a smile. He was as nervous as an animal about to walk into a trap. I could see it had been years since he had thus sought a person out.

"Come in," I invited, leaning back from my work table. "Have a chair."

He came slowly in and sat down in the chair facing my table. The afternoon sun, slanting in the window, shone on his veined old hands, which rested on his bony knees. The skin of his hands was almost slate-colored, I noticed, as is the

skin of many sufferers from heart trouble.

"What can I do for you?" I asked him.

He spoke at last, his voice rusty, grating.

"You are a writer? A commercial writer?"

I nodded, and loaded and lit a pipe, wondering what was in his mind.

"Are you open for more work now?"

"Wide open," I admitted. "Why?"

"I wondered if you would collaborate with me," he replied.

"Collaborate on what?" I asked him.

"A history," he said. "I'm writing a history of the world."

I stared at him in some surprise through the blue wisps rising from my pipe. Where could writing a history of the world fit in with the queer hum coming nightly from his room?

"That's a pretty big job," I remarked. "It would take a long time."

He nodded. "I've worked on it for ten years already."

"Where do you plan to start? At the beginning of creation as theorized by the latest geologists?"

"No, no. I plan to start with the present. You see, I'm not writing a past history of the world. Many have done that already. I'm writing the *future* history of the world."

The room was very quiet for an instant. I stared into his eyes. Save for the far-seeing look Mrs. Stong had commented on, they didn't appear abnormal in any way. But his words . . .

A little chill crept down my spine.

"I'm afraid I couldn't take on so long a job," I said cautiously.

"If it's a question of pay," he replied, "you may name your own figure. I can get money in plenty. In fact, I could be a billionaire if I liked. That is one of the powers given me by my invention."

I LOOKED away from him. I had realized that old Sledge was very eccentric. But this!

Delusions of grandeur! The poor inventor, living in an obscure boarding-house and dreaming he has the key to billions! They have a name for this sort of thing.

"What is this invention of yours?" I asked, clearing my throat.

His lips set like a trap, but after a moment they relaxed.

"If you are to work with me," he admitted, "you should know. But I will only tell you this much. It is a device that enables me to read the future."

"It would have to be very accurate to allow you to write a future history of the world!"

He scowled. "You should know—if you happened to notice what time it started raining the other afternoon."

Again I looked away from him. And again I felt the small chill go through me. I had not forgotten that afternoon. But it had been a guess on his part, of course. A remarkable guess, I would concede; but only a guess.

"My predictions are bound to be accurate," he went on calmly, "because, really, they aren't precisely predictions. They are descriptions of first-hand observations. I can live through any period in the future I choose. Up to five hundred years, that is," he added, seeming to talk to himself more than to me. "To go beyond five hundred years I'd have to use more power. I don't think my heart would stand it."

"So you can read the future," I said. Poor old fellow! But he seemed mild enough to reason with. Anyhow, I thought I'd try it. "But if you could do that you could have a fifty-room palace and an army of servants and the world's finest laboratory to work in."

He nodded coolly.

"I told you I could have billions. But when a man has only to stretch out his hand to take the wealth of a Midas, he finds the acquisition of wealth meaningless. I am quite contented here at Mrs. Stong's, where wholesome food is served me regularly and I'm at peace to explore the future and write about it. As for a laboratory—ordinary house current will run my electrical equipment as far as I dare venture. Now and then I do need money, naturally. When I do, I get a few thousands from the stock market. For example, I'm going to take some money from General Coppers, common, in the next month. General Coppers is now thirty-two. One month from today, on August sixth, General Coppers will close at forty-one and one-eighth. There's a tip for you, young man."

For a moment, so lucid and matter-of-fact were his words, I felt doubts about his unbalance.

It will rain at twenty-nine minutes past four, he had said. And at twenty-nine minutes past four it had rained! General Coppers will close at forty-one and an eighth on August sixth, he said now. Was it possible——?

I told myself not to be a fool.

"What will the weather be like tomorrow?" I asked, almost afraid he could tell me—and be right about it. Two such episodes would make me question my own good sense!

"How should I know?" he snapped. "With the destiny of nations spread before me, do you think I spend my time predicting the weather? I only find out what the weather will be like when I plan to go outdoors. And I only do that because I am old and must take care of my health."

"Sorry," I murmured.

He growled something, testily, and

then said: "Well, will you take the job?"

"I'll think it over," I said soothingly.

He got to his feet and started toward the door.

"I can't see why you should hesitate," he flung over his shoulder. "If you collaborate with me, you will be the only man on earth besides myself who will know the future in store for the world. That is a rare chance to throw away, young man."

But at my door he stopped and came slowly back.

"Here," he growled, taking from his pocket a single sheet of paper. "This is the first page of my history. Read it, see how much needs to be done to make it look right, and tell me in the morning what you decide. If you want to work with me, I'll turn over the first chapter then."

HE NODDED curtly and was gone, leaving me to stare at the scrawled writing on the sheet of paper.

A Future History of the World
by Amos W. Sledge

Thus, bluntly, it opened. And it went on with equal bluntness:

Japan declared war on Russia on April 12th, 1935, at eight-thirty a. m. Japanese troops, concentrated along the Manchurian border, moved promptly into Siberia. English private interests were threatened. England and Italy joined forces with Russia. Germany came to the aid of Japan, while France debated whether to fight against Germany, her ancient enemy, or line up with Germany and Japan in the hope of winning the Italian Riviera and Tripoli as booty in case of Japanese victory. At three in the afternoon of April 15th, racial hatred of Germany won and France declared war against Japan. . . .

Such was the bald beginning of Sledge's *Future History of the World*. There was nothing very remarkable in it. Many men have predicted war between Japan and Russia, with world war to follow—though none, as far as I knew, had set the exact hour for war's declara-

tion. It took a harmless crank like Sledge to do that.

Still, he had said it would rain at twenty-nine minutes past four. . . .

But again I told myself not to be a fool. Some people are affected by coming changes of weather. Sledge happened to be one of them. Feeling rain "in his bones", he had set the probable time when it would start—and had happened to hit it. That was all. Indeed, he might not have hit it, at that. It might have begun earlier and I had not seen the first drops. It might have started earlier or later in other parts of the city, and happened to begin at the predicted moment only in the section where I was. No, the whole thing was crazy, of course. As crazy as old Sledge must be.

Still, it was amusing to speculate on the power that would belong to a man who really could read the future.

Truly the wealth of the world would be his. He could break the bank at Monte Carlo permanently. He could pick every winner of every horse race (something that made me sigh wistfully). He could take countless millions from the stock market. He could be a king, an emperor, lord of the earth. . . .

But one thing such a man certainly would not choose to be. That was an obscure boarder living in genteel poverty in Mrs. Stong's frame house!

I grinned, and turned back to my own work, with the sample first page of Sledge's ridiculous *History* tucked in my table drawer. At the same time I heard the now familiar hum begin from the freak mechanism in Sledge's room. Was he lying on the long table now, under the arching copper hoops, with his hands grasping the long vacuum tubes that looked like bulbous gear-shift levers? Was the old fanatic reckless enough to let electricity course through his feeble

body in some complicated form, and was it the current which formed in his mind hallucinations of events to come?

It was the first time I had heard him work in the daytime; but it didn't bother me any. I put him out of my mind and began to peck at my typewriter keys, getting in some good hours before Mrs. Stong called me to dinner.

It was shortly before midnight when I went to bed. I thought the hum of Sledge's bizarre mechanism sounded louder than usual. But it was an idle thought, and with the thinking I fell asleep. . . .

I WOKE in hell.

Pain, such pain as I had never dreamed could be borne, swelled within me; swelled, and exploded with each beat of my heart, to flood through every atom of my body.

I tried to open my eyes and could not. The small muscles motivating my eyelids seemed to be paralyzed. I could only lie still, racked with agony.

Where was I? What had happened to make me like this? A century seemed to have passed since I had fallen asleep—a century filled with experiences that would be for ever beyond reach of memory.

A rustle of fabric sounded beside me, and a loud rattle, as if someone in a stiff dress had moved and had laid down a newspaper. Then came footsteps and a voice. A man's voice.

"Is he still the same?"

A woman's voice: "The same. The effects of the last hypodermic have not worn off yet."

"So I see."

"Has he a chance?"

The man—the doctor—answered: "No. He can't live more than a few hours. It's a marvel he's lived this long—I've never seen a man so badly burned."

"I know," the woman murmured. "What a terrible accident! I've been reading more about it in the late edition. The most horrible part, perhaps, is that it should have happened the day before Christmas. All those people, planning their holiday, happy, with no idea of what the future held——"

"Which was a boon," the man's voice cut in. "Better to be struck down without warning than to know your fate in advance and die a hundred times in anticipation. Mankind's greatest blessing is that it can't read the future."

There was a pause; then the woman's voice came pityingly: "This unfortunate will be out of his torment soon, anyhow. Have his relatives been notified?"

"Apparently the only family he has is an uncle in Boston. A Mr. John Pendleton. I telegraphed him and he is on his way, but he can't get here in time."

I tried to speak. This was *I* they were talking about. *I!* An unfortunate soon to be out of his torment? Only a few hours more to live? I tried to shout that it was a lie. What in heaven's name had happened?

There was a shuffle of footsteps.

"Give the poor devil another injection in a few minutes," the man said. "He'll need it."

Brisk footfalls died away. I heard the paper rattle again, as if once more it had been picked up.

With an enormous effort I opened my eyes. I could only see out of one of them.

I saw white enameled bars a few feet away—the foot of a hospital bed, I guessed. I saw a body swathed in mummy wrappings of white, stained through here and there with some oily salve. I saw a hand and arm so bandaged as to look like the limb of a crudely sculptured snow-man. *My* body! *My* hand and arm!

What had happened to me?

I glanced sideways out of my one good eye. I saw a woman in a nurse's uniform sitting in a straight-backed chair reading a newspaper. Her lips were pursed and her eyes were moist.

Her elbow rested on a small night-table, which was barely within my range of vision beside my bed. A small lamp on the night-table shone on an array of bottles and a big jar of some yellowish ointment. There was a watch, too, an old-fashioned one with a hunting-case. The watch lay on its back with its front snapped open. I couldn't see the face of it, but I could see the back of the opened lid. It was elaborately designed in different-colored gold. There was a hunting-dog in red gold standing with one front paw raised in a spray of green gold grass. The background was plain yellow gold. I'd never seen the watch before; it meant nothing to me.

Intolerable thirst tortured me.

"Water," I tried to say. But I couldn't make my lips move.

Hospital bed, night-table, nurse, everything swam in a mist of pain and thirst.

The light shone squarely on the back page of the newspaper, which was hardly a foot from my face. It shone on the date line, particularly. December 24, the date line said. December 24, 1935.

This was delirium, I thought weakly. I had fallen asleep on the night of July sixth, 1934. But the pain in me, which had increased with each labored thud of my heart, crowded out such unimportant things as date lines.

"Water," I tried again to say. "Water."

Only a faint moan came from my lips, and I saw the nurse move swiftly. My sight was so hazed over by now that all I could distinguish was a moving blur of white. Then I felt a slight sting, and sank into a coma. . . .

A SPLINTERING crash sent me flying out of bed before I was half awake. I was on my feet almost before my door, broken from its hinges, hit the floor.

Stupefied, I gazed down at myself. Where had the swathing bandages gone? And the awful pain? For I was dressed in ordinary pajamas, and was perfectly well, as I had been when I went to bed in Mrs. Stong's house.

But now I saw that once more I was in her house. In my room. Not in a hospital cell on a white iron bed. And the hall was filled with voices, and a man in a fireman's hat and oilskins was stepping over my wrecked door toward me.

"We thought you were dead," he said hurriedly. "Come on—snap into your clothes. I think we've got the fire under control, but you can't always tell."

I coughed then, and realized that the room was full of smoke.

"What happened?" I yelled at the man, who, having finally waked me from my trance-like sleep, was already leaving.

"The old guy in the next room set the house on fire," he called over his shoulder. "Short circuit in some crazy electrical junk of his."

He hurried out. I could hear the swish of some fire-extinguishing fluid as I threw on some clothes.

The blaze was out when I got to old Sledge's room. The blaze was out, but it was a marvel the whole house hadn't gone up in smoke.

The place was completely gutted. Sledge's bed was nothing but charred boards and a bare spring. The legs of his desk had burned through and the desk-top had crashed to the floor to scatter a great heap of burned writing-paper. Rugs, drapes, everything inflammable, were gone.

My gaze jerked to the center of the room where Sledge's curious apparatus

had been set up. There wasn't much of it left intact.

The two tall, flat cabinets which had been at each end of the table lay on the floor, battered and crushed by the feet of the firemen. The copper hoops that had arched over the table now sagged every which way. The two long, slender vacuum tubes were broken, and the delicate, close-packed grids and filaments which the glass had housed were hopelessly fused together.

And on the table, as on a bier, lay the man who had assembled this strange contrivance. Old Sledge, his body charred and stark, a sacrifice to his monomania. The man who foolishly claimed he could read the future.

I went to the charred desk and stooped over the heap of ashes that had once been a foot-thick bundle of manuscript. One corner of one sheet remained.

"Chapter Nine, *Future Hist*——"

That was all.

No, it was not quite all! The wall between this room and mine was more damaged than any other wall, indicating that the short circuit had started the fire within a few feet of where my bed was placed. . . .

I HAVE done very little work since that night. I have done little of anything—but think.

What happened in old Sledge's room before the fire? Did his heart fail as soon as he started the current coursing through his body on leaving me that afternoon? Did that current then slowly build up so that, by the time I retired, it was intense enough to reach my bed and give me, too, the power to live for a short while in the future? Was my fragmentary interlude of torture on a hospital bed a true glimpse into my future?

Impossible! Nonsense!

Sledge was mildly insane. His "invention" was a meaningless tangle of wires. My experience of seeming to lie dying of burns from some inexplicable accident was only a dream, a nightmare brought on by the smoke in my room and the crackling of fire near me. It must be that. It *must* be!

Because, if it isn't, I have been given my death sentence: that I shall die in agony before next year is out.

But such thoughts are absurd. Assume old Sledge's mechanism could place one into the future. Assume the mechanism, without its master's control, could radiate enough of its mysterious power to drag me into the time-to-come. Is it logical to suppose that, of the many other hours that might have been revealed to me, my death-bed hour should chance to be hit upon? No! . . .

Ten days ago I got a letter from my Uncle John in Boston. "While going through an old dispatch box," he wrote, "I came upon this watch of your father's. I don't think you ever saw it—he died when you were so small—but I send it to you in the same mail, under separate cover, as a keepsake."

The watch is an old-fashioned gold one with a hunting-case. On the front of it is a hunting-dog, in red gold, standing with lifted forepaw in a spray of green-gold grass.

I must have seen the watch when I was a child, and have forgotten it till subconscious memory resurrected it in my odd dream. For it was all a dream, of course. I repeat that. I'm not going to die horribly on the day before Christmas of this year. I'm not! The whole thing is a fantasy born in the sick brain of a man who fancied he was a supreme inventor. Old Sledge was mad, I tell you! Mad! . . .

Today is August sixth. General Cop-pers closed at forty-one and one-eighth,