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CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1935

Number 3

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Blue Woman"</i>		
The Blue Woman	John Scott Douglas	274
<i>The eerie mystery of a beautiful woman whose body glowed in the dark</i>		
Night Song	Hung Long Tom	291
<i>Verse</i>		
The Carnival of Death	Arlton Eadie	292
<i>A ghastly adventure with a Golden Mummy, and strange death that walked by night</i>		
The Man Who Chained the Lightning	Paul Ernst	317
<i>Another amazing story about the sinister Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal</i>		
Vulthoom	Clark Ashton Smith	336
<i>A terror-tale of frightful tortures and ery horrors, and a doom that menaced Earth</i>		
Satan in Exile (end)	Arthur William Bernal	353
<i>An astounding weird-scientific story about a daring brigand of the space-ways</i>		
Vampires	Dorothy Quick	367
<i>Verse</i>		
The Shambler from the Stars	Robert Bloch	368
<i>A blood-freezing horror was evoked from Ludvig Prinn's terrible "Mysteries of the Worm"</i>		
One Chance	Ethel Helene Coen	376
<i>A brief tale of horror and the plague in New Orleans</i>		
The Toad Idol	Kirk Mashburn	377
<i>The story of a dread stone fetish from an Aztec temple</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Monster-God of Mamurth	Edmond Hamilton	381
<i>An ery, creepy, goose-flesh story from an early issue of WEIRD TALES</i>		
The Return of Orrin Mannering	Kenneth P. Wood	394
<i>A brief story of a jail-break and its ghostly sequel</i>		
The Eyrie		395
<i>The readers express their opinions</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

One Chance

By ETHEL HELENE COEN

A brief tale of horror and the plague in New Orleans

IT WAS the terrible summer of 1720. The plague hung darkly over shuddering New Orleans. Its black wings beat at every door, and there were few that had not opened to its dread presence. Paul had seen his mother, father, sisters and friends swept down by its mowing sickle. Only Marie remained for him—beautiful Marie with her love for him that he knew was stronger than any plague—the one thing in all the world that was left to sustain him.

"Let us fly from this accursed place," he pleaded. "Let us try to find happiness elsewhere. Neither of us has a tie to bind us here—is not your sister to be buried this very day? Ah, Saint Louis has seen many such scenes in this last month—we will fly to Canada and begin all over."

"But, my darling," she protested, "you forget the quarantine: no one is allowed to enter or leave the city; your plan is hopeless."

"No—no—I have a plan—such a terrible one that I shudder to think of it. Here it is——"

While he rapidly sketched their one desperate chance Marie's face blanched, but when he finished, she agreed.

The daughter of the mayor had died that morning. A special dispensation had been secured to ship her body to Charleston for burial. The body rested in its casket in Saint Louis Cathedral and was to be shipped by boat that night.

At six o'clock that evening the cathedral was empty save for its silent occupants awaiting burial. The tall wax tapers

glimmered fitfully over the scene of desolation. Paul and Marie crept in and went to the casket of the mayor's daughter. Paul rapidly unscrewed the wooden top, removed the slight body, put it into a large sack; and Marie, nearly swooning from terror, got into the coffin.

"Here is a flask of water," Paul whispered, "and remember—not a sound, no matter what happens. I shall sneak aboard the boat before it sails at nine. After we are out for half an hour I will let you out of this. It is our only chance."

"Yes, I know," Marie whispered chokingly. "I shall make no sound . . . now go . . . the priests will soon be back, so one last kiss, until we are on the boat."

He kissed her passionately, then loosely screwed the top on the casket.

Stealing with his awful burden to the yard in the back of the cathedral he remembered a deep, dried-up well in one corner of the yard. Just the place to dispose of the body.

"God rest the poor girl's soul," he thought; "she, wherever she is, will understand that I meant no sacrilege to her remains, but this is my one chance of happiness . . . my only chance."

His task ended, he climbed the iron wall and walked rapidly up Pirates Alley and wandered over the Vieux Carré until eight-thirty. Thank God—it was time to try the success of their daring venture. His head whirled and his heart beat like a trip-hammer as he slipped onto the boat unobserved by any but the dock hands, who probably considered him one of

their number. He secreted himself in a dark corner and waited. After centuries had passed, or so it seemed to him, the boat started moving. It would not be long now. He did not stop to think what would happen when they were caught—that would take care of itself.

Ah—voices, coming nearer and near-

er. From his corner Paul could distinctly see the silhouettes of the two men who were approaching.

"Yes," said one, "it is sad. The mayor is broken-hearted—we were going to take her body to Charleston—but the mayor had her buried from Saint Louis just after the sun went down."