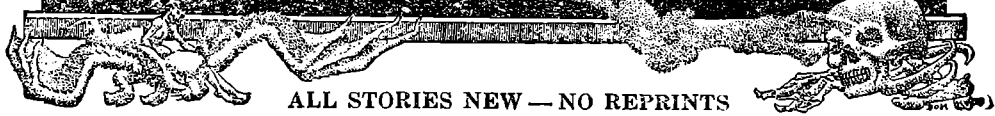


Weird Tales



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.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1948, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. 173

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

Vol. 40, No. 4

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

One Foot in the Grave

*You don't think of your feet much—until you lose one.
Then maybe it thinks of you!*

IT WAS all over. And now Henry was lying, comfortable and easy, between the cool sheets in the room off Doc Sandy's office. It was really amazing. There was scarcely any pain to it at all. As a matter of fact, Henry, staring at the pale, yellow ceiling of the bedroom in the doctor's house, felt actually more rested and quiet than he

BY DAVE GRUBB



Heading by JOHN GIUNTA

had felt in years. He smiled. All those months of talking safety to his men in the saw-mill—it was ironic. And then it came to him: how it had happened—his walking through the big, pine-fragrant lumber room with Ed Smiley, his foreman—his foot catching suddenly in a crack—the sudden, wild fear as he pitched forward headlong toward the great, whirring blade of the rip-saw—Ed's big hands grabbing his shoulder, throwing him, saving his life. Then the numbness in his foot and the sickness and that was all there was to it until now: Henry lying comfortably and quietly between the sheets.

Doc Sandy's face between him and the ceiling now.

How's it feel, Henry?

I'm all right, he could hear his voice saying, far away. I'm really all right. But you know something, John? It's a funny thing—I really can't understand how it could be.

What's that, Henry?

My foot, he said. The one that's gone. I can't understand how it could be. It—itches.

And it sounded so ridiculous that he laughed in spite of himself.

It not only itches, he said. But it feels cold. Especially the big toe.

THAT'S not strange, said Doc Sandy. That often happens, Henry. You see—the foot's still there in a way. And in a way it isn't. The part that's still there is in your brain. Or in your soul—it's a hard thing to explain—

Henry shut his eyes then and began to shake weakly with laughter.

What's funny, Henry?

I win that bet, John, Henry said. It's a technicality, I'll admit, but I win it. You can't deny that.

And he could hear Doc Sandy laughing and cursing and saying yes Henry was right, he had won the bet, and Henry shut his eyes, remembering the night the bet was made—the cold winter night—Henry and Doc Sandy playing three-cushion billiards in the Recreation Pool Room and drinking beer and talking about death. Doc Sandy had bet Henry that he would be under the ground before Henry would and Henry had bet him that it would be the other way around and they put down their cues and shook hands

on it and agreed that whoever survived was to pay for the other one's funeral.

Yes, Henry kept saying. I win. I win by a foot, John. And I intend to see you give that foot the best funeral that money can buy.

Then the doctor's nurse was giving him a drink; the glass straw was between his lips and the good, cool water was soothing to his parched throat. He could hear Doc Sandy lighting his old pipe and then he could smell the sweet, dry fragrance of the burning tobacco.

John, he said.

Yes, Henry.

John, I keep wondering a funny thing. I keep wondering which—which place my foot went to. It was part of me—so it must be part of my soul. It's a funny thing to wonder but I just can't help it. I mean—when the rest of me goes over—will my foot be waiting there to join me again? John, it gives you the funniest feeling in the world to think of a foot—a single, solitary foot wandering around eternity—waiting—I can't help wondering where it's gone and where it's waiting—in the Good Place or—

Henry shut his eyes and began to laugh again.

What's funny, Henry?

My foot! Henry laughed. I swear it, John. When I said that a second ago—when I said I wondered where it had gone—so help me, John!—it felt hot!

Nobody could have been nicer to Henry than his secretary Margeret and his foreman Ed Smiley were those next couple of weeks. Henry stayed on the cot at Doc Sandy's office until he was able to get around on crutches and there wasn't a single night that Ed and Margeret missed coming to see him and almost always they brought something—ice cream from Beam's Confectionery or maybe a big spray of sweet shrubs from Judge Bruce's backyard.

MMARGERET was a queer little person in her early thirties—blond and pretty in a way that nobody ever noticed particularly—living alone in the Bruce's boarding house on Lafayette Avenue—going to the movies every Saturday night with Ed Smiley and then afterwards having an ice-cream soda with him at Beam's. Henry, like many bach-

he could stand it no longer. It was late—past midnight—and Doc Sandy had gone to bed long hours before. Just the same Henry had to know.

He had to talk. He called for a long time before he heard the doctor's slippers whispering down the kitchen stairs.

John, he said. I know it's silly. You'll swear I've gone loco or something—

Want a sleeping pill, Henry?

No, he said. It's not that, John. I swear you'll think I've gone loco—

What, Henry?

It's just this, Henry said. I've got to know for sure. Did you bury it, John? I know it was just a joke at first and we kidded about the bet and all that and you said you'd had a little coffin made and buried the fool thing in back of the saw-mill under the puzzle-tree. You think I'm loco but—

I did bury it, Henry, said the doctor. I swear I did.

You swear it?

I swear it, said the doctor. Look here, Henry. Get a grip on yourself! You're going to be up and around in a day or so—on crutches for a while—then we'll get you a foot that'll be as good as new! You'll never miss it!

Henry shut his eyes and pressed the back of his head hard into the pillow. His hands were wet with perspiration.

It's funny you're saying that, John. It's very funny.

What's funny, Henry?

That I'll never miss it. It's very funny—your putting it like that. It's what's been going through my head all night. The feeling that—that somehow—*it misses me.*

There wasn't much trick to the crutches after a few days. It was a little hard getting the knack of them at first but, within a week, Henry was getting around almost as easily as before. And within two weeks he was able to get up and downstairs to his room over the mill office without any help at all. In a month the place was healed enough so that Doc Sandy was able to fix him up with an artificial foot. Henry felt a little better about it and began to get his sleep at night now that he knew the doctor had really buried the thing. Then one day he began to worry again and asked the doc-

elors, often fancied himself quite a match-maker and he was fond of reflecting that, had it not been for him, Ed and Margeret would never have met. He was continually asking the girl when she was going to get married and Margeret, at this, would blush warmly and busy herself in the papers on the desk. Henry never teased Ed about it—knowing, as a man, that Ed had his own good reasons for waiting. But it was something he thought about a lot during those two weeks in bed. And it was a pleasant relief—to think about this—nights when his foot would not let him sleep—nights when the plagued, absent thing felt so cold that he could have sworn that it wandered alone among the mountains of the moon—nights when the rain hurled itself against the windows of the doctor's house and Henry, shivering in the warm cot off the doctor's office, could feel the cold, dreadful wet of the March night between his toes. One night

tor to take him down back of the saw-mill and show him the little grave.

You're the damndest fool I ever did see, Henry! Doc Sandy said, laughing. Getting all upset over a fool joke.

Did you put a shoe on it? Henry said, staring solemnly at the little mound under the puzzle tree.

Certainly, said the doctor. And a brand-new shoe at that—the pair you bought at Jim Purdy's sale the week before the accident. Never been worn.

Is there a sock on it, too? whispered Henry.

Damn it all, man—!

Is there? he said.

Yes! cried the doctor. Yes, damn it, there's a sock on it!

You didn't put it on straight, Henry said, shaking his head a little sorrowfully. You put it on crooked, John. It pinches my toe!

THAT night it began. Night was the time when it always happened. Henry would go to bed, knowing that he was perfectly sane, knowing that the thing could not be true. Yet it was true. It was happening. It was as real as life itself. Sometimes it would be just a pressure on the sole—as if he were standing somewhere, waiting for a train perhaps. And then it would begin—the gentle, pulsing padding—the lift and fall of walking—the easy thud of brick pavement beneath the foot—the soft crush of leaves or grass. And Henry would lie quaking and sweating beneath the quilt and stare with wild sorrow and horror into the shuddering dark. The foot—his foot—apart from him—was walking somewhere—going some place—living its own life without any help from him. Then he made another discovery that seemed more incredible and awful than any of the rest of it. It was that the foot always seemed to be going the same distance—walking along the same ways—the same street. Henry got so that he could count the number of steps on the brick pavement and then, after a pause, steps soft and yielding beneath the heel, then another pause and something different again—wooden floor perhaps—then the slower, measured climbing of a stairway.

One night after it had stopped Henry

sprang from his bed in a frenzy of fear. Snatching his clothes from the back of the chair by his bed he dressed quickly, lighted the oil lamp and went out back to the puzzle tree. Fetching a shovel from the toolshed behind the saw-mill he began to dig. When the spade scraped on the wooden box Henry's heart flew to his mouth. Digging, clawing with his hands, panting and perspiring like a man in a fever, he dragged the little box into the lantern light, pried off the lid with the tip of the spade and stared within. For a moment he was sure he had lost his mind. He lifted it out and looked closely to be sure. The sole. The sole of the brand-new shoe from Jim Purdy's store. He remembered the day he had bought those shoes. He had never worn them. But the sole. It was scuffed and scratched. Worn.

They were shooting pool that afternoon in the Recreation—Henry and Doc Sandy.

Henry, said the doctor, chalking his cue-stick and squinting low along the cushions for a massé shot. Ed Smiley was in to see me this morning.

Ed? said Henry. Doesn't look like there's anything wrong with him. He's the perfect picture of health!

Doc Sandy shot and missed.

It wasn't about himself that he came to see me, Henry, he said. It was about Margeret. Your Margeret. She's not well, Henry. I'll tell you frankly—I prescribed a couple of weeks' vacation. She's run down—nervous. Ed said he didn't want to ask you and you know Margeret. She'd never ask you.

I hadn't noticed her, Henry said. I really never pay any attention to her, John. You know how it is. You just take somebody like Margeret for granted—year after year. Sure! Sure, I'll give her two weeks off—a month if she needs it! Thanks for telling me, John.

SUPPERTIME. Walking home down Lafayette Avenue. Poor little Margeret. Henry felt like a slave-driver. Never realizing what a drab little world it must have been for her all those years—day after day in that glum, dingy office, laboring over the books in that proper, lace-like little hand of her's, keeping his office neat and dusted. When Henry opened the office door he heard her. She was crying. Then he saw

her: slumped among the papers on the desk, her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Henry stood there wondering what to do; feeling terrible about it. He cleared his throat.

Margeret, he said. Margeret.

She stood up slowly and turned, facing him. Her face was streaked and wet with tears—plainer and more homely than he had ever seen her—the face under the washed blond hair tired and old.

Don't touch me, she whispered. She was shuddering violently and clutching her handkerchief into a tight wet ball. Don't come near me! Let me alone! Oh, when will you let me alone!

Henry felt behind him for a chair and sat down with a thump.

I—I don't understand, he began. What do you mean, Margeret? Let you alone—

What do I mean! she whispered. What do I mean! You ask me that! You dare to ask me that!

I—I don't— I don't understand, he said. He reached in the pocket of his alpaca coat for a handkerchief to mop the perspiration from his upper lip.

She seemed almost crouching; ready to spring on him.

Last night, she whispered fiercely, the knuckles of her thin, red hands shining white with rage. Last night!—the night before last! How many nights! Lying there listening for your footsteps on the pavements—the creaking of the gate—your footsteps on the tan-bark walk—then lying there waiting for your footstep on the stairs. Those nights! My God! The things you told me—the things you promised me! You said we'd be married! You said—you said you'd kill me if you ever lost me! You ask me what I mean! Those nights! In my room! In my arms!

She sprang forward and struck him across the face with the flat of her hand. Henry didn't feel the blow. He sat staring through the girl—beyond her.

My—footsteps? he whispered.

She was on the floor now, at his feet, covering his hands with kisses.

I'm sorry, she wailed. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that! Oh, I didn't. For-

give me, dearest! It's just that—I couldn't stand it! I couldn't! At first—the first night—I thought it was a dream when I heard your footsteps and then the door opened and I saw it was you—It was like seeing a ghost. I couldn't believe it. Those nights—they've seemed like a dream—unreal, wonderful!

My footsteps? he whispered again, rising, pushing her away from him, stepping over her sobbing, shaking shoulders and walking like a sleeper out the door and up the steps to his room. He lay down with his clothes on and stared unseeing at the ceiling, moving over the yellow, guttering light of the gas flame by the bedroom door.

A soul within him—a hidden, secret other him—a tenant of his heart that the foot had claimed its own and taken with it to the grave! Margeret. He had never so much as looked at her. He had never seen her. She was a piece of furniture. A desk. A chair. A ledger with the lacy, sorrowful love letter of commerce on its pages.

My footstep, he said aloud to the walls.

Footsteps. Down the pavement of the shady street in the secret moment of the night—footsteps up the tanbark walk of the Bruce's boarding house—footsteps up the stairs—the hesitation and then the open door.

Then he was hearing her flat, tired voice—still and composed now. He turned his head on the pillow. She was standing in the bedroom door—looking at him. She had on her cheap little flowered hat and the coat with the touching curl of dusty fur about the collar.

I'm sorry to bother you again, she said. I won't bother you any more. You won't ever have to bother with me again. The books are in order. I'm leaving town with Ed Smiley tonight. He's going to marry me.

THEN she was gone. Henry listened to her quick footsteps going down the stairs. The street door slammed and the clock in the town hall struck six times. He lay back—sad, regretful but at the same time relieved. It was all over now. Perhaps tonight he could sleep. Sleep! That El Dorado of peace that he had long ceased hoping for. Henry shut his eyes. He had stopped trembling. It was dark outside the

window—the heavy wine dark of early April. Then in a moment it began again.

Footsteps. The foot. Fast now. Faster than it had ever been. Along the damp pavements of the small-town night. Running. The thud was almost painful on his sole. Then a pause. Then the running again—up the springy, yielding softness of tanbark—under the trees bursting with dark greenness in the moonless April night. Up the wooden steps—two—four—six—eight. Henry shut his eyes and clenched his teeth against the scream that struggled in his throat. Ten—twelve— The landing now. Up the hall— His fingers tore through the linen sheet beneath him. The door—the open door. He felt he was fainting—his eyes started from his head. Then it began—not on the sole now but on the toe—a smashing, violent rhythm on the toe of his foot—a remorseless, brutal thudding that made his leg ache to the very hip. Then it stopped. The padding, running thud again—down the steps—through the tanbark—through the dark—the mossy pavements of the April night—then, at last, like a benediction it was still.

He lay on the bed for a long while before getting up. Then he went slowly down the stairs, down the path to the shed, down to the puzzle tree with the spade in his shaking fingers. Like a madman he dug. His fingers ached and the nails broke as he clawed the box from the earth, ripped the wooden lid loose and stared at the thing within. He was standing there at dawn when Doc Sandy and the sheriff came down the path. Not moving. Just standing looking at the foot in his hand and the shoe—its toe all dark with something sticky and some wisps of washed blond hair.