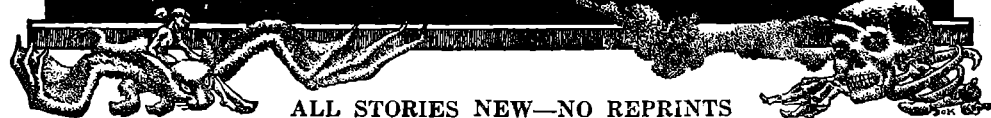


# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1943

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

## NOVELETTES

- THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA . . . . . Arthur Leo Zagat 34  
*He desperately wanted to see his son—but perhaps the boy was not to be found in this world*
- THE EAGER DRAGON . . . . . Robert Bloch 88  
*He was bequeathed a dragon's egg and thought the whole affair was ridiculous—until the egg hatched*

## SHORT STORIES

- QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER . . . . . Frank Owen 6  
*The flyer had fought with great courage against cruel enemies, but never before against such ageless guile*
- THE STATUE . . . . . James Causey 20  
*An innocent, lovely creation of art it was, with murderous hate in its pink marble heart*
- ONE-MAN BOAT . . . . . Alice-Mary Schnirring 27  
*Don't sail her alone, they warned, or you'll be shipmates with death*
- SAY A PRAYER FOR HARVEY . . . . . John J. Wallace 64  
*He was the little man who was there—anywhere he wanted to be*
- BINDINGS DELUXE . . . . . David H. Keller 70  
*It isn't polite to ridicule a woman. Nor is it at all safe, as you will find out!*
- SEVENTH SISTER . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 76  
*The elders laughed and remarked that nobody believed in conjures or voodoo any more—but under a quarter moon, who can tell?*
- McELWIN'S GLASS . . . . . August Derleth 105  
*The strange tale of a magician who discovers a sure way of seeing into the past and future—and wishes he hadn't*
- REPAYMENT . . . . . Seabury Quinn 112  
*The snakes resent wrong charming—the old man chattered—they will repay thee for this insult!*

## VERSE

- AFTER AN AIR RAID . . . . . Dorothy Quick 26
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS . . . . . Irwin J. Weill 68
- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB . . . . . 120

*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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LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

# One-Man Boat

By ALICE-MARY  
SCHNIRRING



*The boat called Gemini sold cheap . . . perhaps because she had murdered every previous owner.*

**T**HE yacht-broker stopped, his feet slipping in the cold mud of the boat-yard, and pointed to a sleek hull that lifted above them, balanced grace-

fully on its slender fin keel, and supported by wooden shearings.

"Now, there's just the boat for you, Mr. Chambers," he said, a little wearily. "Of

all the ones we've looked at, she ought to be ideal for you. She's fast, but not tender; you could take her anywhere—even for ocean work. And what's more, one man can handle her alone, easily."

Dell Chambers walked around under the stern of the boat, and read aloud the name stencilled in gold leaf on her counter: *Gemini*.

"She looks like a beauty," he said. "What are they asking for her?"

Hartman, the broker, consulted a sheet of paper that he took from his pocket. "That's the best part of it — she's dirt cheap. Only \$1,500."

Dell raised his eyebrows. "Dry rot?" he suggested. He took out his penknife, and dug it into four or five spots of the hull, then looked puzzled. "She seems sound enough."

"Dry rot!" said Hartman indignantly. "This boat is as sound as if she'd been built yesterday. As a matter of fact, she's only five years old."

"Then why," said Dell Chambers skeptically, "are they only asking \$1,500 for her?"

"Why, when you know the story, it's understandable," said Hartman. "The only thing I can't figure out is why she hasn't been snapped up long ago. You remember Carter, the millionaire who went broke and shot himself?" At Dell's nod, he continued. "Just before everything smashed, Carter had had the *Gemini* built, to his own design—cost him about \$25,000. When his estate was settled, this boat went up at auction, and was sold for—let's see—I think she went for about five thousand, \$5,200 maybe. The man who bought her was crazy about her—*he* used to sail her alone, by the way. Good sailor, too; Hendrickson. Remember him? Won one of the Bermuda races."

"Sure, I know who he is. Why is he selling her so cheap, though?"

"Oh, he doesn't own her any longer. He

only kept her about one season, and then he sold her to a fellow from Larchmont. That was a very sad thing."

"What was a very sad thing?"

"Why, the Larchmont boy—he was only about twenty-five—took her down from Block Island, where Hendrickson had been keeping her (he has a summer cottage there, you know), and he was drowned. He was all alone on board, and apparently caught his foot on a sheet or something and went overboard. The *Gemini* was picked up by the Coast Guard the next day—the day after he left Block Island—with her mainsail and working jib set, but nobody on board. The tiller was lashed, and she was holding her course, pointing into the wind. But nobody was on board."

The dusk was beginning to close in, and the damp air, blowing in from Long Island Sound, was chilly. Dell shivered, and drew his coat around him.

"Poor kid," he said. "Who owns the boat now?"

"His family," Hartman replied. "Naturally, they want to get rid of it. The boy's body was never found, by the way. You can imagine that the sooner they see the last of her, the better pleased they'll be. But in spite of that, she's a sweetheart of a boat. Do you want to go on board, look her over?"

At Dell's response of "Sure!" Hartman looked around for a ladder; found one leaning on a neighboring yawl, and bore it in triumph over to the *Gemini*, propping it against her side. "I'll go up first and unlock the padlock on the companionway," he called to Dell from halfway up the ladder. "Better take it one at a time—this ladder is sort of rickety." His feet landed with a thump, as he jumped into the cockpit. "Damn!" he swore. "I've lost the key. Come aboard, anyway, and I'll yell for the night watchman. He comes on duty about now, and maybe he has

one." As Dell clambered up, the broker shattered the silence of the twilight boat-yard with a rousing yell. "Svend! O-oh, Svend!"

At the second repetition of the call, a faint answering hail came from a far corner of the yard; and, at length, they could see the uncertain gleam of a flashlight reflected on white topsides about a hundred yards away.

"Vat you vant?" came a Swedish-accented voice.

"Hello, Svend; it's George Hartman. Have you a key to the *Gemini* in the office? I seem to have lost mine, and I want to show Mr. Chambers, here, what she's like inside. He's thinking of buying her."

The flashlight's track came nearer, and was suddenly thrown on the deck of the sloop, picking up Hartman and Dell in its rays; feebly, since it was not yet actually dark. Even by straining his eyes, Dell could not distinguish the features of the night watchman.

"Naw. We bane no key. Is better you look at her in daylight, anyway."

Hartman spoke impatiently. "Listen, Svend; I'm sure I saw a key for this padlock in the office last Saturday, when I was up. Be a good egg, and go look for it. It's getting late, and Mr. Chambers and I want to take a look at the boat and get back to town."

"Office is locked. Is better you look tomorrow." Without even bothering to listen to Hartman's reply, which was profanely disgusted, the watchman turned and walked away, the strengthening light from his flashlight bobbing on the ground and the looming hulls.

Dell shivered again, uncontrollably. "Look, Hartman; I appreciate all of the trouble you're going to, but it *is* getting late, and damned cold, too. I want to see the inside, but what about coming up with me tomorrow afternoon, about four-thirty? Then we can take our time about it."

"Okay," the broker agreed. "I'll pick you up at your office at four, and we can make it up here before it gets dark. Come on, then; I'll drive you back to town."

"SHE'S really a beauty," breathed Dell, as, tired and stiff from his exhaustive inspection of the *Gemini*, he sank down on the upholstered bunk in the main cabin. "If she sails the way she ought to, Hartman, you've sold a boat."

"I tell you, Chambers, she sails like a streak," Hartman assured him earnestly. "She hasn't been raced since Carter built her—owned her, that is—and most people have forgotten it, but Carter piled up a swell record with her in the Handicap Division in his first season with her. His only season, poor guy. If he had raced in the whole series, you'd have heard more about *Gemini*."

"Well, what the devil!" said Dell, with sudden decision. "I don't see how I can possibly go wrong. Subject to survey, Hartman, she's mine; and I'll give you my cheque for her right now, to make sure nobody else gets her."

"It's a deal," said Hartman, producing a fountain pen as if by legerdemain. "And I think you've made a very smart buy, Chambers. I tell you, if I had \$1,500 to spare, I'd have bought her myself as a speculation. I bet I can sell her for you tomorrow for double the price."

"I don't want to sell," laughed Dell, signing his name to the cheque. "When I buy a boat, I stay with it. You know, I had my last boat for five years. She was smaller than *Gemini*, though; only twenty-eight feet. *Gemini* is thirty-five feet overall, isn't she?"

"Thirty-five overall, twenty-one water line," corroborated the broker, folding and pocketing the cheque. "Well, what do you say—shall we have a drink to your new boat?"

"Absolutely," said Dell, rising. Outside,

it was growing rapidly darker. Suddenly Dell peered through the dusk, wrinkling his forehead as he tried to see through the companionway opening. "Is that somebody in the cockpit?" he asked. Hartman looked, too. "I can't see anyone—might be Svend, of course," he responded. "He comes on about this time, and he may want to see who's on the boat. He loves all these boats as if he owned them; the tubs and the smart sailers, regardless," he laughed.

But when they climbed into the cockpit, it was empty. "A trick of the light," said Dell carelessly. "Lock her up, and let's go."

"You lock her up," said Hartman, presenting him with the key and smiling.

"It's your boat, you know."

Dell, his head close to the padlock, protested half-earnestly, "I don't like the way you laughed when you said that. Come clean, Hartman—did you sell me a dog?"

THE broker appeared honestly surprised. "I didn't laugh. I swear, this boat is the buy of the year. I really meant it when I told you I could sell her for you again at double the price you paid. Look—here comes Svend; ask him. I think he crewed for Hendrickson the year he had this boat: anyway, I know he's sailed on her."

They clambered down the ladder, one by one, and greeted Svend. Hartman prodded the Scandinavian for his opinion of the *Gemini*. "She's a smart sailer, isn't she, Svend? Fast, easy to handle?"

"Yah."

"Sound hull, good sails? By the way," turning aside to Dell, "she has two complete sets of racing sails in the locker; good ones, made by Ratsey."

"Yah."

"Good God, Svend; can't you say anything but 'Yah'?" Hartman protested, a little annoyed. "What do you think of her? Mr. Chambers has just bought her, you know."

SVEND made a sudden movement, instantly suppressed. "So? You have man on board, keep deck washed, brass polished?"

"Sorry," Dell laughed, "I know she deserves it, but I can't afford to keep a man on board. I'll have to keep her up myself."

"Is better you keep man with you," the Scandinavian said obstinately. "Not good to sail her alone."

Dell looked at Hartman. "I thought Carter sailed her alone, and Hendrickson?"

"Certainly they did," he replied, indignantly. "She's a one-man boat; designed to be."

Svend, surprisingly, gave a short laugh, sounding as if it hadn't been used very often. "Yah," he said, turning on his heel, "she a vun-man boat, all right. But I don't want to sail her alone."

The two of them looked after his retreating figure. "Now just what do you make out of that?" demanded Dell.

Hartman shook his head. "I think he's bats," he said simply. "I've seen him take a seventy-foot schooner out single-handed in a forty-mile blow, just for the hell of it."

But Dell looked thoughtful. "I think I'll call up Hendrickson, and ask him. After all, he sold her after only one season."

"But he got a good price for her, Mr. Chambers! The only reason she's going for the ridiculous price you paid for her is because that boy's family can't bear to see her around, and they have plenty of money; they can afford to throw an eight thousand dollar investment out the window."

Nevertheless, Dell did speak to Hendrickson. He didn't call him up, because, as the spring wore on, and he worked on the *Gemini*—painting, scraping, varnishing—he fell more in love with her every day; but one day, as he was putting the

final lick of varnish on the mast, he was hailed from the ground. He looked down, to see a big man standing there, his head thrown back to look up at Dell.

"Hello! You bought the *Gemini*?"

"Yes," Dell smiled. "Won't you come aboard?"

"No thanks—I know her well. Owned her myself once."

"Say!" Dell put the varnish brush carefully in an empty can on the deck. "You must be Hendrickson, then!"

"Yep."

"Gosh, I've wanted to talk to you. Mind if I come down and ask you a few questions? That is, if you're sure you won't come aboard?"

"Come on down," said Hendrickson, pleasantly. "No, I won't come aboard, thanks."

Dell clambered down, scrubbed at his hands with a once-good handkerchief that now resembled a second-rate paint rag, and stuck out his hand to the six-foot racing man.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you," he said, a little diffidently.

"Heard a lot about you, of course. Tell me; you owned the *Gemini* for a year, didn't you?"

"I sailed her one season, yes," Hendrickson assented.

"Why did you sell her—is there something wrong with her? Doesn't she handle well, or—or what? I understood that her original owner and builder designed her to be sailed single-handed, but Svend Andersen—the watchman here, who seems to know boats—says *he* wouldn't sail her single-handed; yet I hear he's a very good man on a boat. I meant to call you up and ask you, but—well, working on her, and one thing and another, you sort of get to know a boat, and I feel that she must live up to her lines. What's the story?"

Hendrickson was silent for a moment. Obviously a little embarrassed,

and equally obviously with something on his mind, he scraped with his foot in the dust for a second or two before answering.

"Well—you're right about her sailing qualities. Carter built her to be sailed alone—he wanted to sail by himself, get away from all his hangers-on. You know how it is with a man with a lot of money. Gets tired of all the dead-beats and moochers, and wants to get off away from everything, and there's nothing like a boat for that. She sails like a charm. Point, reach, beat—anything you want, she'll do. But I sold her—"

"Why?"

"Why—oh, hell, Mr.—what's your name? Chambers? Mr. Chambers, if I told you why, you'd say I was a screwball. But it's the reason I came over here today, to see you."

"To see me?" Dell parroted, stupidly.

"Yes. Svend—he used to crew for me, you know—told me you'd bought her, and—well, knowing what he knows, and I know, about her, he thought I ought to talk to you, anyway; even if it doesn't do any good."

Dell was dumbfounded. "Know about her? What? Dry rot?"

**H**ENDRICKSON moved impatiently. "No, her hull is as sound as a dollar. It's—oh damn it; I tried to tell the kid who bought her from me, but he wouldn't listen. But I've got to try, anyway. What about coming over to the Paradise Bar for a drink with me, and letting me talk to you for about fifteen minutes?"

"Why—that would be swell," said Dell, slowly.

But after the fifteen minutes, and fifteen more like them, had elapsed, Dell was not only still puzzled, he was a little alarmed; not for himself, but for Hendrickson, and Hendrickson's sanity. The famous sailor knew it, too; and twisted his mouth in an

unhumorous smile, as he called for another Scotch.

"Well," he said, shrugging, "that's the story. Each time I sailed her alone, I had some sort of an accident. Look: once the topping lift broke, and the boom only missed killing me because some sixth sense—which you get, when you do much sailing—told me to jump. And I jumped. The second time, I was sailing through The Race, and I tell you the tiller was wrenched right out of my hand. She was heeling well over, and I was sitting on the coaming of the cockpit; and the sudden shift threw me completely off balance. If I hadn't caught at the backstay and held on to it, I'd have been over the side—alone, at night, and in the makings of a nasty storm. The third—now listen to this, Chambers—I'm not drunk, and I wasn't drunk then, and, what's more, I've been sailing boats since before you were born; the third time, *something pushed me* when I was putting up my port running-light. I'd left it pretty late, and it was almost pitch-dark. I'd lashed the tiller, of course; went below and filled the lights, and was just tying the marlin around the stay when something pushed me—hard—right between the shoulder-blades. And that time I went over, but I was towing the dinghy, and I managed to grab hold of it and get in it.

The boat kept on sailing, of course, with the tiller lashed, and I had the devil's own time to get back on board her, but I made it. And the first thing I did was to head for the nearest harbor—Greenport, it was—and drop the hook there. In the morning I went on shore and hired Svend, who was working as a rigger in the shipyard, and I took damn good care that there never would be a fourth time. Because the fourth time he might have done it."

"Who? Done what?" said Dell, cautiously.

Hendrickson made a strangled noise that

managed to express fury, contempt, and resignation.

"Carter, you fool!" he almost howled. "Carter, Carter, Carter! The man who built the boat for himself—who wanted to sail her alone! Listen, Chambers," he said, with a desperate calm, "a man can get damn close to a boat, any boat—and when it's a boat that he's put a lot of himself into, as Carter did into the *Gemini*—Good Lord!" he interrupted himself, impatiently. "The name alone ought to be a clue!—well, then *anything* can be true. How old are you? Twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? I'm fifty-one, and I've been sailing boats all my life; and there's a lot more to sailing than knowing when to shorten sail, and how to tie a running bowline, and whether Dreisenstock is a better system of navigation than Marc St. Hilaire. You think I'm bats—sure, the topping-lift just let go. *I had put all new running rigging on the Gemini when I bought her.* And I suppose it was a rip-tide that tore the tiller out of my hands in The Race. And the rip-tide brought her about on the other tack, too, I suppose. All right, all right: but what pushed me over the side? Imagination?"

Dell hesitated, and Hendrickson gave vent to another wordless ejaculation.

"All right, Chambers. I'm sorry. Naturally, you don't believe me. But please, for God's sake—for the sake of my peace of mind—promise me not to sail her alone, especially at night? You must have lots of friends. Surely it wouldn't be a hardship for you to take another fellow along?" In a voice that was almost a groan, he said. "That kid—he wouldn't listen, either. I did all I could, but I still feel responsible."

By now, Dell was really embarrassed. "Why, sure, Mr. Hendrickson—I'll promise you not to sail alone at night, if it will make you feel better. It's not often that I do, anyway—too many people are always inviting themselves along. But honestly,

don't you think that you're exaggerating—"

Hendrickson sighed, and tossed off the rest of his Scotch. "Listen, boy," he said, rising from the table, "never mind what you think about me. Just stick to your promise, and get someone to sail with you" With a nod, he was gone.

DELL was disappointed for a moment when he read the telegram from Mark, saying, "*Unable meet you Saturday City Island. Join boat Port Jeff Sunday*"; but he was chiefly disappointed because he had wasted the whole morning waiting around for Mark. The prospect of a leisurely and solitary sail to Port Jefferson was pleasant, rather than otherwise; and if he had kept his promise to Hendrickson all summer, it was due to circumstance and too many friends, rather than conscientiousness—and certainly not to belief. In fact, the ship was satirically known to most of his friends—to whom, over a couple of drinks, he had unburdened himself of the racing man's solemn warning, as they termed it—as the Flying Dutchman; and the only sentiment that stirred Dell's mind when he infrequently thought of it was one of embarrassment.

His provisions were on board; the *Gemini* was all set to go, and there was a fair wind. He rowed himself out in the dinghy, made fast the painter, and hoisted the mainsail and jib; then—cursing at Mark for not being there to help—laboriously hauled up the anchor, which seemed to have turned into a two-thousand-pound mushroom, instead of a sixty-pound kedge.

Finally he broke it out, and, leaving it hanging on the bow, raced back to the cockpit, made fast his main sheet and jib sheet, and put the *Gemini* on her course.

It was a broad reach; the best sailing for almost any boat, and sheer perfection for the racing sloop. The breeze was rather light, but she slipped along at a comfortable five knots; and, as it began to get dark, the wind freshened. Soon Dell decided to put on his pea-jacket; and, while he was below, make himself a sandwich and fix the running lights. He lashed the tiller, looked to see that no tugs or other boats were on his course—as a matter of fact, the only other craft to be seen was a schooner some three miles to port, tacking away from him—and went below.

By the time he came back on deck, it was almost completely dark. The wind was a steady southwester of about fifteen knots, and had brought with it, as a "smoky southwester" often does, a little mist. The wisps of fog trailed over the water, curling around the shrouds and in the cockpit; and Dell hastened to put up his running lights. Those secured, he turned to go back to the cockpit and unlash the tiller—and stopped short, a scream frozen in his throat and a chill not brought by the fog shivering through all his body, at the sight of two lambent, pale-green eyes on a level with his own, about two feet away. Instinctively, Dell stepped back. His sea-boots slipped on the wet deck, and, as he lost his balance, he clutched for the shrouds, and missed them.

It is possible to swim in sea-boots and a heavy pea-jacket—but not for very long.

