

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1951

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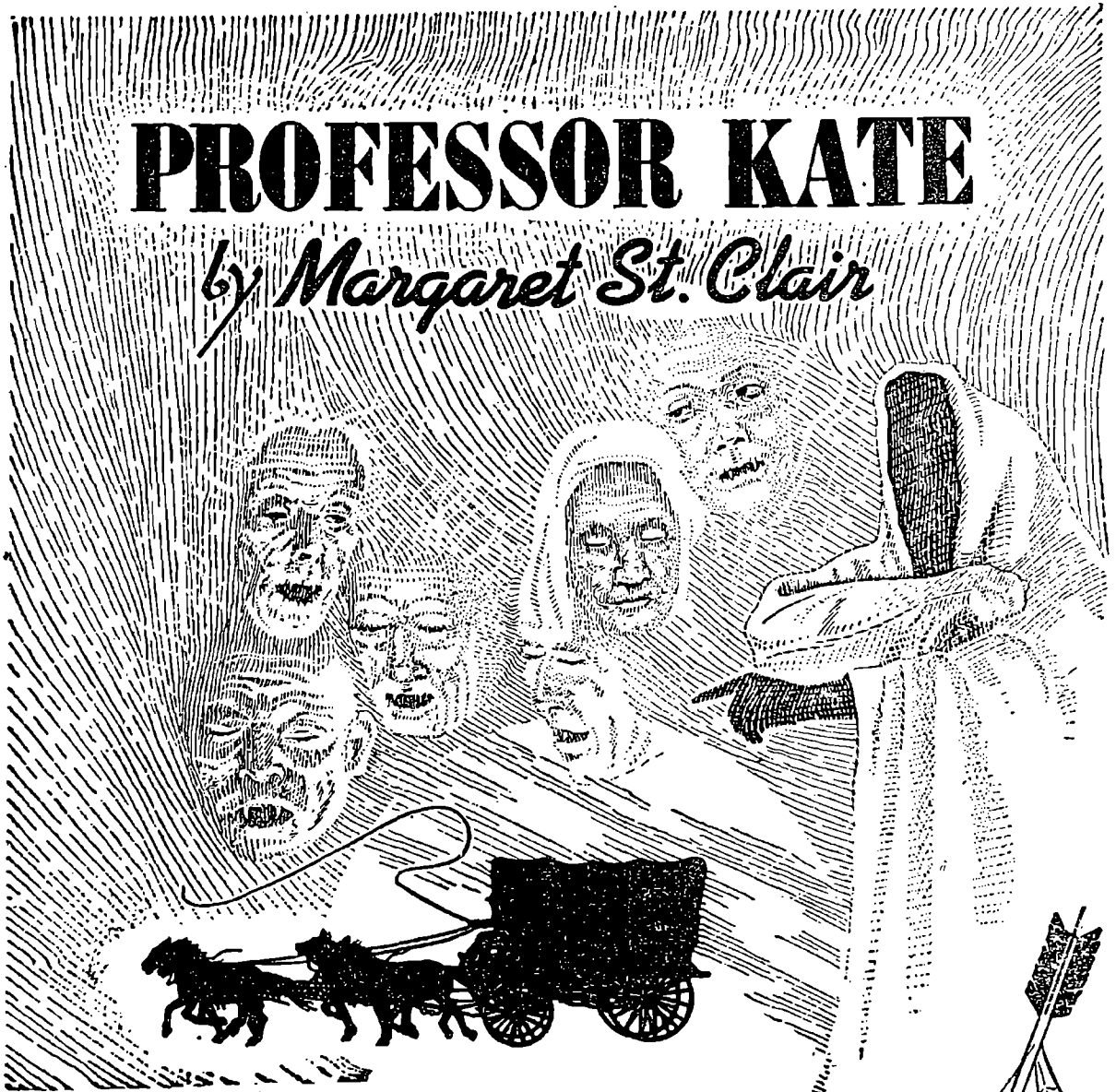
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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

The dead—don't you see?—the dead stick together.

PROFESSOR KATE

by Margaret St. Clair

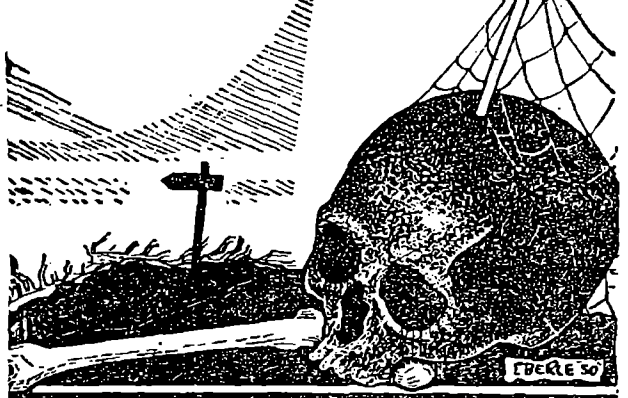


“**T**HE boy that directed us on this road, pa,” Kate said, leaning forward to speak to the man in the front seat, “—do you think he was real?”

John Bender Senior turned and regarded her. “What you mean by that, Käter?” he asked sternly. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the rumble of the wagon wheels.

Kate’s fingers moved nervously over the bosom of her shirtwaist. “Why that that he might be one of them we left in the orchard, back on the farm. This road ain’t like a road that goes anywhere.”

Her father’s lean face grew dark with



anger. “Stop dot talk, Käter. Stop your mouth.”

“Ja, stop it, daughter,” Mrs. Bender said. Her blue eyes were hard in her large white

face. "Is nonsense, unsinn. How could it be one of dem? Didn't we bind-dem to stay before we left?"

Kate sighed and sank back in her seat. Her brother John, who was sitting beside her (he was only her half-brother, she was wont to say with a touch of defiance), slipped his arm around her waist. "You're tired, Kate," he said. "It ain't them dead ones I'm afraid of. I'm afraid of a posse coming after us."

"Oh, do you think there'll be one?" Kate answered vaguely. Once more her hands were moving on her dress.

"Dead sure. Colonel York suspicioned us about his brother. They traced him as far as our farm."

"He didn't come back for the seance, though," Kate replied.

"No. But we knew he'd be back later for sure, with more men. Things was getting hot. That's why we left."

Kate laughed suddenly, a bold, ringing laugh. "Why we left! Didn't we look out the bedroom window that morning and see the ground heaving below in the orchard? Didn't you hear her little voice crying 'Mama! Mama!' the way she did when we buried her? Why we left!"

"I didn't hear or see nothing, Kate. I only said that to . . . to agree with you."

Once more Kate laughed. "You didn't hear anything? Why, you turned as white as a sheet!"

"As a ghost," her brother corrected after a moment had passed. "Make it a ghost, while you're doing it."

THEY jounced on. Bender, hunched over the reins, clucked now and then at the team. Once John said out of a long silence, "This here ain't much of a road, for a fact." Kate looked at him sideways without saying anything.

The sun began to sink. The air, which had been warm with spring earlier in the day, grew colder. A light breeze ruffled the long grass of the prairie. Kate, shivering, let John embrace her without resistance.

Old man Bender turned round to face them. "Hope we find dose houses soon,"

he said uneasily. "That boy said we'd get to them before night."

Kate raised her head from John's shoulder and looked him full in the eyes. His gaze wavered. He coughed and turned back to the team.

They stopped at last. "Is too dark to drive more," old man Bender said, his voice loud in the sudden silence. "Ve got to sleep here." He looked around the vacant flatness of the prairie, frowning, and then began to unharness the team.

John jumped from the wagon and then turned to help Kate. She was stiff from the long sitting; she almost fell into his arms. Mrs. Bender, meantime, was getting sacks and crocks of provisions out from under the front seat.

"Have an apple, son," she said, holding one out to the young man.

"No. I can't say as I care for the fruit from them trees."

MRS. BENDER began to munch the apple herself. Kate had taken advantage of the distraction to withdraw from John's embrace and wander off. He looked after her, his forehead wrinkled. Then he began to help his mother with the preparations for the evening meal.

Suddenly Kate screamed. It was a high sound, not very loud. John dropped the bread he was holding and ran toward her.

He found her sitting on her heels, her black bombazine skirt drawn tightly around her haunches. She was holding a long thigh bone in one hand.

"It scared me when I first saw it," she said, looking up at him brightly. "The skull, I mean. And look, over there in the grass, there's another one."

John followed her gesture. He kicked the grass apart. After a short time he found the second skeleton, gleaming whitely even in the dim light. He stooped over, hunting, and came up at last with something in his hand.

"It was an Indian," he announced to Kate. "This here's what killed him. An arrow." He showed it to her.

She seemed to lose interest. "Oh, an Indian. Must of been a long time ago."

She cocked her head and listened intently. "John, I hear voices. Not like them on the farm, though. Maybe it's the Indians. Listen!" She held up a hand, warning him.

There was the rustle of the grass, the plaintive note of a mourning dove. "I don't hear nothing," he said. He pulled at his mustache.

"You woudn't 'fess up to it if you did," she said. She giggled. "I want to have a seance, John. Member how they called me Professor Kate in the Parsons paper that time I lectured there on spiritualism?" She rose to her feet and faced him. "Maybe a seance would quiet the voices. On the farm it used to. Professor Kate wants to have a seance."

He slapped her. His hand left a red mark on her face, but she made no sign of having felt it. "Stop it, Kate. You want to drive all of us crazy? Why stir them up? And anyhow, it ain't nothing. We'll sleep in the wagon tonight and tomorrow start early. It's only two Indians. Ain't you used to dead people?"

He took her by the hand and led her back to the wagon. Sighing, she stumbled after him. "Do you think we'll get to Vinita tomorrow, John?" she asked. "I'm so tired of riding. Father said we could leave the wagon and take the train once we got to the Indian Territory."

"Sure thing, you bet," he answered, without looking at her. "Get up early, ride all day. It ain't far."

John woke early, while it was still dark. He found water and washed in a cupful of it. After a moment he heard Kate getting down from the wagon. She came up to him, yawning and shivering.

He poured water for her and she scrubbed her face with a handkerchief. She straightened her hair with her hands. "How did you sleep, John?" she asked, putting her head on one side. "Did you rest well?"

"Naw. Why ask? I had dreams."

"Like my dreams, I guess. This ain't a good place. Listen, paw and maw are getting up."

They breakfasted on slabs of bread and cold pork. Old-man Bender harnessed up

the team and turned the wagon around. "We make a fine quick start," he said. "De stars ain't set yet. Before sun-up, we be back on the right road."

THE pursuers rose nearly as early as the Benders did. The Benders were moved by fear, the posse by hate. As Captain Sanders swung into the saddle, he said to the lieutenant, "Today or tomorrow, sure. We're getting close."

The lieutenant (he, like Sanders, had gained his rank in the Grand Army of the Republic less than ten years before) said flatly, "We're not going to take them back to the county for trial."

"No. You don't try rattlers. We found eleven bodies in the orchard. But what I remember most is the body of the little girl. She must have been still alive when they buried her." The sun rose. The day wore on. At noon the Benders stopped at a farmhouse for water, and learned that they were on the right road. They might be able to make Vinita by dark. Kate, sighing with relief, did not resist when John drew her down under the wagon seat.

Afterward they chatted idly over plans, what they should do with the money they had taken from the travelers who had stopped at the Bender farmhouse. John wanted to start a restaurant in Denison, Kate wanted to keep on with the seances and the lecturing. She spoke of the good luck she'd had curing deafness and epileptic fits. Or the four of them might buy another farm. Why not? They had plenty of rhino, John said.

As the sun began to wester, Kate dozed. She leaned against John, her body swaying to the steady jogging. Once she said petulantly, "Vinita sure is a long way off."

At sundown the posse reached a crossroads. Sanders dismounted to check the wagon tracks. As he grasped the pommel again he was frowning. "They've turned," he told the men with him, gesturing to the right. "They're headed back."

"Why?" asked the lieutenant after a moment.

Sanders shrugged. "The devil knows. May be trying to throw us off the track."

IT WAS quite dark when the wagon stopped, Vinita still unreached. Kate was drunk with sleepiness. John roused her and helped her out.

"Vinita?" she asked as she reached the ground.

"No, Kate. Not yet. First thing tomorrow, I guess."

She stood looking around her. The moon had not risen; it was difficult to see anything. Suddenly she gathered up her skirts and ran like a wild thing. After a moment they heard her screaming. "John! John! We've come back. This is the same place!"

When he got up to her she pointed at

the skeleton. She picked up the arrow and handed it to him. "They've brought us back to the same place."

He let the point fall from his fingers. "What do you mean? Who has?"

"The Indians. They wouldn't let us get away. They brought us back. The dead—don't you see, John?—the dead stick together."

He stared at her in the darkness. Then he grasped her by the shoulder and began to pull her after him with desperate energy. "Hurry! Hurry! The wagon! We've got to get away!"

But as they neared the wagon they heard a thunder and a plunging, and then old man Bender's voice crying despairingly, "Whoa! Whoa! Damn you, come back!"

"The team's run off," Kate said simply. "I knew they wouldn't let us get away."

He began to wrench at the wagon sides, tearing off planking. "We'll make a fire, a big fire. They can't get past it. And paw will get out the guns."

"That's right," Kate said, cheering. "And we'll stay awake, all of us. Maybe if. . ."

There were noises on the other side of the wagon as the night got older. Once old man Bender said, "What's dot whooping?" and Kate laughed.

The fire died down and was replenished with the wagon seats. Kate yawned, and then John and the others. He said, "We've got to stay awake."

About two in the morning Professor Kate realized abruptly that the others were sleeping. She ran from one to the other, shaking them, screaming their names. They wouldn't wake.

Morning came. John said, "Guess we must have gone to sleep, h'um, Kate?"

"I guess so. I remember dreaming. I'm awful tired."

John Bender yawned. "Well, anyway, we're all right. We was silly to worry. And look, the team's come back."

OLD man Bender was silently harnessing the horses. When he was done they climbed in the wagon. The front seat was still intact, but John and his sister had to sit on the floor. After they had driven for

about a mile, Kate said, "Where are we going, paw?"

"To—I can't call the name to mind, daughter."

"Bin—Binacia," she answered, stumbling over the syllables. "I wish we'd hurry up and get there."

"Stop it, Kate," John said. "We will."

In the afternoon Kate said, "I wish we'd pass some houses." Later, when it was almost sunset, she turned to her brother. "Do you know what's going to happen, John?" she asked.

"What?" he replied. It was the first word he had spoken to her since early morning.

"It's going to get dark. And then we'll stop and we'll be back by the Indians. Back by the ashes of our fire. Back where we spent last night." She began to cry.

"No. You're crazy. We must be almost to Venita."

"Venita? We'll never get there. We'll just keep driving, driving, driving. Something's gone wrong with time."

"Be quiet, damn you. I hear horses, voices." He laid his hand over her mouth.

Old Man Bender had stopped the wagon. "Something ahead," he said softly. "You two go look."

They stole forward, tiptoeing. "I can't see good," Kate whispered.

"Hush. It's men with horses. They're bending over something. But I can't see what they're doing. There's a mist."

Kate had turned away. "Let's go back to the wagon," she whispered.

"Why? I want to know what they're doing."

"Oh, I know already."

"Then tell me."

"You know without telling. What they're bending over—"

"Is us. Is our bodies. No! No! I won't have it!"

She was wringing her hands and wailing. "Oh, but it is! Last night—last night the Indians didn't let us get away," said Professor Kate.
