

Weird Tales

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Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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*... No matter what happened the door wasn't to be
opened till the time appointed*



Rapport

BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

MARCO the Mentalist was seated before his dressing-room mirror, cold-creaming the grease paint from his long bony face, when the note was delivered. He glanced at it, idly at first—for he was always receiving mash-notes from some fluttery female in his audience, fascinated by him because he had "read her mind" during his usual three-a-day performance. Nor was he bad-looking; glancing back at his reflection in the mirror,

he frowned slightly, aware of a pouchy dissipated sag beneath his eyes and under his chin. Not that forty-eight was too old for a stage and night-club mentalist with the arrogant good-looks of a fallen Lucifer—but it wasn't young, either. Another five years, of this, eating hurriedly in one-arm joints across from the theatre, moving from one town to another as his novelty in the present locality began to wane. . . .

His thoughts broke off sharply as his

piercing black eyes focused again on the note. *Elias Rutherford*, it was signed. A man, not a woman; and from the cramped old-fashioned handwriting, a rather elderly man. Marco, still rubbing cold cream into his face, read the first few lines more carefully—and sat up straight.

Dear Sir: (the note said formally, with a slight tone of amused condescension).

I attended your last performance tonight, and have decided that you are either a great psychic—or a very great fraud. I am a wealthy man, but not a happy one—the latter state due largely to the loss of my wife and our unborn child several years ago. If I had then believed in the power of one human mind to transmit thought to another, my wife and baby might now be alive. . . . But I did not then, and do not now, believe in such a psychic phenomenon beyond the realm of mere coincidence. However, I am willing to accept proof of anything that modern science has not as yet disproved. The possibility haunts me.

If you can give me indisputable proof that a normal human being of your choice can transmit or receive thoughts, from me or from some person of my choosing, I will give you my personal check for \$20,000. Will you call at the above address tomorrow at ten, if you elect to accept this challenge? If you decline, I shall assume that you are an ordinary stage-trickster, honest enough to admit it. If you try to fool me, however, I shall feel obligated to expose you to the press, and to the American Society for Psychic Research whose genuine efforts to separate the true from the false are not fully appreciated by the layman.

*Sincerely, your servant,
Elias Rutherford*

Marco sucked in a long breath, his eyes narrowing as they lingered on that \$20,000. Some old crackpot, he mused. Lonely and bored, brooding over the death of his wife—which, obviously, he half-believed he had “sensed” in time to warn her. He was always running into people like that; Marco laughed shortly. Naïve, wide-eyed innocents with long-winded tales of a “dream” they

had had of some relative at the very moment of his death. One would think they could recognize a coincidence for what it was—but, no! People worried about their loved ones dying a hundred times a day, but when it finally happened, and happened the very way they feared it was going to, nobody could convince them that they had not experienced a moment of “clairvoyance” or “telepathy.”

This Rutherford, Marco decided with a wry smile, was just such a fool; perhaps a bit more intelligent than the average, but nagged by regret that he had not given the idea more thought. It might be easy to convince him of something he wanted to believe, anyhow, the mentalist told himself, narrow-eyed. Just another rich old codger who had more of the worldly goods than he deserved—Marco scowled bitterly. Fat soft capitalist. . . ! Probably never had worked a day in his life. Never sweated to warm up a cold audience! Never lived on hamburgers between bookings, or slept in a railroad station because he didn’t have the price of a hotel room. . . !

THE mentalist stood up, mouth twitching slightly like that of a hungry cat stalking an unsuspecting bird on the garden walk. With swift hands that trembled a little in their eagerness, he wiped the cream from his face and strode out into the night-shrouded city. A way of collecting that \$20,000 had just occurred to him—a hole-proof way of proving that “telepathy” is a scientific fact, if one first puts the cart before the horse!

Hurrying down the dark street to the little hotel where he was staying this week, Marco stopped by a little bookshop, open all night for the convenience of late-abeds like himself. For some time he browsed about, then slipped a small volume under his coat. Paying for a second book, which he tossed into a trashcan on his way, the mentalist almost ran the rest of the way to his hotel, and locked himself in. There, assured of a complete privacy, he opened the book he had bought: a treatise on medical hypnotism and suggestion.

He read all night, committing much of

the book to memory. And when, as the dingy light of dawn seeped in through his window, he drifted off to sleep, Marco was smiling. . . .

Promptly at ten o'clock, the great brass knocker on Elias Rutherford's front door boomed hollow notice of his arrival. Marco, in the only good suit he had, was ushered into a great paneled study, furnished in deep red leather. A fire was burning in the ornate fireplace, and a shriveled little man, with the cold gray eyes of a fish and a nose and pointed chin that almost met, was poking at the blazing logs peevishly.

As Marco entered, he turned and regarded him with the shrewdest expression the mentalist had ever encountered. He fidgetted, trying to smile and look at ease as the old man waved him to one of the deep chairs. But when, moments later, Elias Rutherford was still staring at him without uttering a word, Marco began to wish he had not come.

This, he realized abruptly, was not going to be an easy customer to fool. He swallowed twice, then in a matter-of-fact tone, began the spiel he had decided upon as a build-up. He had gone to some trouble to look up theories on telepathy, in order to sound convincing.

"Mr. Rutherford . . . May I trouble you for a pack of cards? A new pack, if possible. I am not," he smiled, "going to show you any magic tricks, believe me. I should merely like to give you the ESP test perfected by Dr. Rhine of Duke University. . . . You are familiar with it, perhaps? Cards are turned by one person, while another tries to receive the impression of their color or number. Thirty-seven right out of 52 tries is so far beyond mathematical chance as to indicate extra-sensory perception. . . ."

The old man nodded, to his dismay. With a shrug, he produced a sealed pack of cards from a small buhl cabinet and handed them to the mentalist with a manner as matter-of-fact as Marco's own.

"Oh, yes," Rutherford grunted. "Rhine. Dr. P. K. McCowan, of Dumfries. And Dunne, the English philosopher. I've studied all their pet theories. But, Mr. Marco, I may as well tell you that I have subjected

myself to every known ESP test. Ever since . . . since my wife, Nadja . . ." The old man's voice broke slightly, betraying the grief that seemed as poignant now as on that day years ago. "I . . . She was in a department store, buying me a small present for my birthday. She . . . she entered a self-service elevator—at precisely 3:15, I later learned. I was at home with a slight cold, dozing by the fire here in this same chair.

"Suddenly I . . . I began dreaming that I saw her walk through a small sliding door. There was a sign hanging on that door, a sign Nadja could not read because she was Polish and knew very little English. But . . . I am sure she sent me an *impression* of that sign, puzzled by it and by the fact that nobody else seemed to be using the elevator. . . .

"She took it, however." The old man brought out the words harshly. "And it fell five stories with her the moment she pressed the release button. The sign, of course, said: 'OUT OF ORDER, TAKE STAIRS.' Tell me," he broke off, fixing Marco with his cold eyes, "is it possible that my wife could read a sign without knowing what it said, and yet project its meaning to someone who could—to me? I . . . I *saw* that sign, you see. Let's say I *dreamed* I saw it, and I could have phoned the store in time to warn her not to take that elevator . . . *Or could I?*" Rutherford smiled drily. "That, Mr. Marco, is what I am willing to pay \$20,000 to find out! The balance of my estate will then be bequeathed to the American Society for Psychic Research—to find out *how* and *why* the transmission of thought is possible, and perhaps save others from the tragedy that I might have averted."

MARCO suppressed a smile. Then the old hellion was suggestible! He already half-believed in, or wanted to believe in, something that his logic told him could not be so. Also, he was obsessed with that "acid test" which, at some later date, he planned to give this charlatan who claimed to be able to broadcast and receive "thought-waves." Like a walkie-talkie set. (Which, actually, was the gimmick Marco and his

pretty blonde assistant used, to "transmit thoughts" from aisle to stage.) The rest of it was done with a clever system of signals: "And guess what? Guess. . . ?" The answer was: *A gold watch, girl's.* Then Marco, still blindfolded, "read minds" from the stage as his assistant picked up the written questions handed her by those who had "problems." She held them to her forehead, then read them aloud in a whisper to some third person seated in the audience, who then dramatically was allowed to tear up the paper. Up on the stage, Marco, hearing it read through walkie-talkie earphones set into his phony black-velvet blindfold, then answered the question, much to the mystification of all concerned.

He grinned now, eyeing Elias Rutherford warily. If he could fool a whole audience for cakes-and-coffee money, surely he could trick this senile old codger into believing that he, Marco, was possessed of a sixth sense! It all hinged on the old magician's trick of misdirection.

Smiling, more at ease now, he settled back in the deep chair and put his fingertips together in a pedantic manner calculated to impress even the most scientific-minded.

"Really, sir," Marco went into the act he had planned last night in his shabby hotel room, "there is nothing supernatural about telepathy and clairvoyance. We know that sounds and pictures can be transmitted by means of electrical waves broadcast by man-made machinery . . . yet we are unwilling to credit this same power to that most intricate of all machines, the human mind."

MARCO'S voice, casually, had sunk to a monotone. His piercing eyes were fixed on Rutherford's, holding them—while between his fingers he swung a small silver pencil. Back and forth it swung, back and forth, until the old man's eyes were impelled to follow its rhythmic motion. Intent on Marco's learned discourse, he did not seem to be aware of what the stage-trickster was trying to do. . . .

" . . . a radio, a human radio, that's what the mind is," the mentalist droned on. "It is simply a matter of finding someone whose mind operates on the same frequency

as one's own; the same wave-length, let us say. Many of us think in *words*, and can therefore transmit our thoughts only in words, or groups of syllables, or letters. Only another such mind could, therefore, be expected to receive its telepathic message. Other minds project *pictures*, rather than words; let us say, a television broadcast, to be picked up only by similarly trained minds. . . ."

Back and forth, the silver pencil swung. *Back, forth, back, forth. . . .* Old Mr. Rutherford blinked at it drowsily—and Marco suppressed a grin of triumph. But his soothing voice did not alter its monotone:

" . . . very simple, if we could only grasp the principle as we now understand the principle of radio-reception and transmission. We have at least invented a machine for measuring the wave-impulses of the mind; I refer to the encephalograph, used in tests for epilepsy and certain other types of insanity. Why is not such a machine used to experiment with psychic, as well as medical, phenomena of the mind? It well may be, and in the very near future! Insanity itself used to be considered a supernatural thing. A man was 'possessed of devils' when the electrical process called *thought* went awry. . . . Do you hear me, Mr. Rutherford?" Marco threw in softly. "Do-you-hear-me. . . ?"

The old man swayed slightly, eyes fixed glassily now on that swinging pencil. He nodded with the mechanical obedience of a marionette.

"I . . . hear . . . you. . . ."

Marco leaned forward, fixing the glazed eyes of the old man with his own compelling gaze.

"Repeat after me," he commanded softly. "Repeat: 'Tom, Tom, the piper's son . . . Stole a pig and away he run'"

"Tom . . . Tom . . . the piper's" Elias Rutherford, in a dull voice like a sleepwalker, repeated the nursery rhyme.

"Now!" Marco said quietly. "You will remember that—do you understand? Remember those words! They are the words you will use in the test, when you send them as a telepathic message to me. Understand?"

"I . . . understand . . ." Rutherford droned.

"Tomorrow night, at nine!" Marco commanded.

"At . . . nine . . ." the old man repeated, like an obedient child.

Then Marco made a small sharp sound, by snapping his fingers. The other blinked and started, rubbing his eyes. The mentalist smiled.

"Am I boring you?" he asked politely, as though nothing had occurred to break the trend of his conversation. "I mean, about the mind being a radio. It is quite possible that our minds are in tune—or *en rapport*, as the French say, Mr. Rutherford. If it so happens that my thinking-apparatus operates on the same frequency as yours, I am confident that you could send me a thought-message . . . oh, tomorrow night, let's say. At eight. . . ?" Marco suggested slyly.

"At nine," said the old man firmly, with a slight frown of puzzlement as he said it. "I . . . feel, for some reason, that it should be at nine."

"As you wish," Marco agreed smoothly—trying not let a gleam of triumph in his eyes betray that his plan had worked.

Elias Rutherford had been hypnotized, neatly and completely. He had been given a post-hypnotic suggestion, which he would follow now without ever understanding why he did so.

TOmmorrow night, promptly at nine, the old man would "project" that nursery rhyme as his test-message, believing it to have originated in his own head—not that of the receiver! And \$20,000 would change hands—because old Rutherford could not help but be impressed by this startling proof of mental telegraphy. There might even be, Marco considered with a half-smile, ways to get the millionaire to bequeath *him* the balance of his estate, rather than some idiotic Society for Psychic Research! Crackpots! Seekers after sensation and bizarre amusement. These metaphysical groups went all-out to kid themselves, the mentalist thought wryly; but he himself, for all that he made his living with the so-called "black arts," was a materialist.

"Very well," he agreed now pleasantly, as though humoring Elias Rutherford in some whim, "nine it shall be. But . . . for your own sake, and for mine, sir, I must ask that you enforce certain test-conditions while the experiment is going on. Remember," his dark eyes twinkled, "I am a professional magician. There might be ways, other than through telepathy, that I could get hold of your message."

The millionaire smiled coldly. "I thought of that," he said drily. "There are many tricksters in the field. Oh, I know all about these table-tapping devices and cheese-cloth ectoplasm, used by professional mediums! And I have read that the great Houdini himself had a standing offer of one thousand dollars to anyone who could produce psychic phenomena which he could not duplicate by scientific means. You may consider me the same sort of hard-boiled skeptic!"

"Splendid!" Marco said smoothly. "I was hoping you would take that very attitude, sir. How shall we work it, then? In separate rooms? And under guard?"

"In separate rooms . . . across town," Rutherford snapped. "I will remain here in this library, with someone you can trust. A member of the police?" he suggested slyly, his keen old eyes fixed on Marco's bland countenance. "You would not object—since you say there is to be no question of fraud?"

Marco's expression did not waver. He bowed graciously, accustomed to eyes that were critical and observant of his every facial tremor.

"As you wish," he agreed. "And I shall be confined to, say, my own hotel room across town? I am not a wealthy man," he gestured apologetically. "It is a very small, dingy hotel—with no fire-escape at the single window of my fifth-story room. You may station a police guard outside the door, if you like, and tie or handcuff me to my bed. The phone will be in the hall, so there is no question of my conferring with any accomplice who might get hold of your message. But I must request that you write it down on a piece of paper, at the hour we agreed upon. Write it, reread it to yourself, concentrate on the word-picture it presents.

That way, perhaps I can receive your message in letters, words, or pictures—which ever type of thought-projection is most suitable as a means of communication between your mind and mine."

Rutherford chuckled, eyeing the mentalist with, almost, a grudging respect—the respect of one hard-headed realist for another of the same caliber.

"You certainly have your . . . your patter down to perfection!" he commented, amused. "One would think we were planning an actual scientific test in, say, wireless communication!"

"Perhaps we are," Marco answered him simply. "Perhaps we are, Mr. Rutherford. . . . Tomorrow night, then. At nine. I shall expect your . . . ah . . . friends from the police at my hotel promptly, a short time before that hour. I suggest, too, that you seal the doors and windows with paraffin, as an added precaution. They say," he drawled, "every man has a price—and how do you know your police guard could not be bribed?"

"I intend to pick one who can neither be bribed nor tricked!" the old man said. "You will not find me an easy man to hoodwink, sir! Not for \$20,000," he chuckled good-humoredly, "which it took me a great many years of hard work to acquire!"

Marco laughed, and bowed himself through the door of the great paneled room. Outside on the street again, as he signaled for a passing cab, his face hardened. Damned old miser! Well, tomorrow night he would shake him loose from some of

that "hard-earned" cash—\$20,000 of it—as easily as one could take candy from a baby!

AT EIGHT-THIRTY the following night, Marco the Mentalist was absent from his usual nightly performance of standing, blindfolded, on a spot-lighted stage and reading "thought-messages" sent by those in his audience.

Instead, pleading sickness to the annoyed stage manager of his second-rate theatre, he waited in his room, heart pounding with excitement.

A knock on the door roused him. He opened it quickly, to find two plainclothesmen from the bunco squad standing there, grinning at him. One dangled a pair of handcuffs, whistling cheerfully, while the other went carefully over every inch of Marco's cheap little room, looking for mechanical devices such as a short-wave radio or wireless outfit.

The mentalist lounged against the cracked plaster wall while they searched, smoking lazily—and looking more than ever like a fallen Lucifer in his ornate dressing gown, with the smoke drifting up past his half-closed eyes and enigmatic smile.

One of the officers glanced at him. "What's this all about, Marco? The Chief sent us, but he didn't say what was the gimmick. Publicity stunt?"

Marco shrugged. "Something like that, Reilly. You'll know after it's over. Just be sure to seal me up in this room so even a termite couldn't get in. *And don't open the*

door, whatever happens. Not until ten o'clock. Understand? One hour."

"We got our orders," the detective grunted.

Some minutes later, Marco the Mentalist sat smiling on his unmade bed, with his wrists handcuffed to the iron head—alone with his thoughts. Or Elias Rutherford's, he mused, laughing silently.

The tiny room, with its now-sealed and locked door and window, had become stifling in the short time he had been waiting. Sweat beaded Marco's forehead and upper lip, but he leaned back patiently against the head of the bed, smoking and thinking.

Twenty grand! Just for sitting here, waiting for an old fool to "think" of a nursery rhyme his skillful hypnotism had already planted in his mind! The mentalist chuckled, dreaming of Monte Carlo, of the Riviera; of sleek blond women who would never give a second-rate vaudeville artist a second glance; of sunlight, and leisure, and long amusing hours that he could never have afforded, as a four-a-day entertainer. And it need never end!

Because, his thoughts leaped ahead eagerly, this need not be the only fraud he would perpetrate on some gullible, wealthy old coot! Why, he could establish a cult! The idle rich went for psychic nonsense, hook, line, and sinker. Telepathy! Why hadn't he thought of the hypnotic angle before? It was a natural, a lead-pipe cinch to pick from some idiot's mind a few words that had already been planted there!

The mentalist laughed softly, eyes half-closed as he lay on his bed, waiting and looking with amusement at that paraffin-sealed door behind which two minions of the law were waiting also. Thoughts! Nothing but thoughts—invisible, inaudible little electric waves, according to his spiel to Rutherford—could penetrate this fort of his own cleverness. Twenty thousand bucks! Twenty thousand. . . . Marco's eyes closed drowsily, dreaming of a ridiculous scene that was taking place in a big paneled library across town. An old man, earnestly scribbling a nonsense rhyme on a piece of paper. Concentrating on it, his withered lips

moving, his will focused on the idea of projecting the words through space to . . .

MARCO stiffened, wrinkling his thin arched nose. He sat up painfully, spread-eagled against the bed-head by his handcuffed wrists. For, quite suddenly, to his horror, he had smelled something. . . .

Smoke!

With a sharp intake of breath he glanced down at the bedclothes and saw a tiny tongue of flame licking hungrily at the sheets, at his wool overcoat recently cleaned with . . . Gasoline! He smelled the fumes of it now, as the flame reached it and glazed higher where the coat lay carelessly flung across the bed at his feet. He tried to kick it off, struggling to reach it, with his wrists straining against their steel shackles. . . . But the movement only served to fan the blaze.

It leaped higher, ate deeper, finding sudden food in the cotton mattress. Marco coughed and cried out hoarsely, drawing up his feet.

"Help!" he yelled. "Hey! You cops out there—my bed's on fire! Get me out of here. . . !"

For answer, the two plainclothesmen in the hall outside laughed lightly.

"No kiddin'?" one of them drawled.

"Yeah? The Chief said you might try to pull something like that," the other jeered. "No dice, Marco—we don't open this door till ten o'clock. And it's only nine-thirty-five. . . ."

"No, listen!" Marco shouted, half-laughing. "This is no gag; I set fire to the bed with my cigarette. Get me out of this. . . !"

Laughter. A few jesting catcalls from the men outside his door.

Marco's smile vanished. Sweat that was half from the mounting heat, half from horror at his predicament, popped out on his face and ran down his quivering mouth. The wicked little flames were ringing him in now, creeping toward his drawn-up feet. Smoke billowed from the charred bedclothes, stinging his eyes and nose so that he could hardly see. Coughing and gagging, straining at his handcuffs, Marco screamed.

"Please! For God's sake! I'm not kid-

ding . . . I . . . I'm burning to death! I . . . can't breathe . . . !

Laughter, ribald and derisive. One of the men was even going away. Going down-stairs for a drink; a cool bubbling drink. . . . Marco gagged, swallowing smoke. His throat was raw now, his eyes streaming. The tiny sealed room had filled to the ceiling with black, stifling clouds. And the mattress blazed, scorching his shoes now, singeing the hairs on his legs. Like a mocking red-and-yellow demon, the fire reached for him with graceful hands that blistered his face . . . that . . . that seared his staring eyes. . . .

"Rutherford!" he screamed, insanely. *"Rutherford—help me! I'm . . . burning! I'm . . . burning . . . Rutherford, help! Help . . . !"*

The fire reached, enfolding him in its red arms. Marco screamed, a long tearing sound of agony . . . through which, it seemed, somewhere, that he could hear a bell ringing. A phone. . . . A telephone bell . . . ringing and ringing, with frantic insistence. . . .

HE AWOKE, painfully, in a hospital bed; awoke to darkness, and the pungent smell of antiseptic, and the low murmur of a doctor's voice conferring with a nurse. There was, he dimly recognized, also another voice—an old man's treble, sharp and sour.

"Doctor, will he. . . - How much of the body surface was burned?"

"About a third. Oh, he'll live, I think. But . . . even with plastic surgery. . . . Well, he won't be a pretty sight."

"What a pity!" The nurse's voice. "He was . . . awfully good-looking. I . . . I saw his act on the stage last week. Wonderful, isn't he? I mean, golly, the way he just reads your mind. . . !"

AT HER thrilled tone, gullible and utterly mystified, Marco the Mentalist almost smiled through his agony and tried to stir. Why . . . why, he was a mass of band-

ages! What . . . where . . . ? Who was the gauze-swaddled mummy?

He remembered, groaning. The hoax, the great hoax by which he was to have fleeced an old man of twenty thousand dollars. It was gone now. And . . . and his face; his arrogant good looks, his charm, his stage magnetism—all that was gone, too! Marco whimpered deep in his throat, cursing himself, cursing his own avarice.

And then:

"Wonderful?" old Rutherford's voice was murmuring, oddly, in answer to the young nurse. "Why . . . yes, my dear. I believe Marco was genuinely able to transmit and receive thought. I shall, of course, pay all his hospital expenses—since, in a way, his disfigurement is my fault. And he will receive my check for twenty thousand as agreed. Tell him that the moment he awakens, will you, Doctor? It . . . it might console him. And I owe it to him. A . . . sort of bet."

"Twenty thousand?" the nurse gasped. "He won it, Mr. Rutherford?"

"Yes. Marco proved that telepathy is possible . . . and practical, even under test-conditions," Elias Rutherford answered softly. "I . . . I am convinced, personally. And . . . I shall leave my fortune to the ASPR for further research into . . . what well may be a new branch of science, rather than a mere superstitious theory. Marco and I did send and receive a telepathic message," the old man muttered. "Although . . . in reverse. I was transmitting to him a silly bit of nursery rhyme, which I intended using as a test-message . . . when all at once, very clearly, there came into mind a picture of Marco handcuffed to his bed, surrounded by flames! I . . . I . . . It was so vivid an impression that I could not restrain an impulse to phone his hotel—and thereby saved him from a horrible death. So, we did succeed in establishing . . . a *rapport*."

Under the bandages Marco's burned face contorted. Muffled sounds came through the gauze that covered his blistered mouth.

He was laughing, wildly. . . .