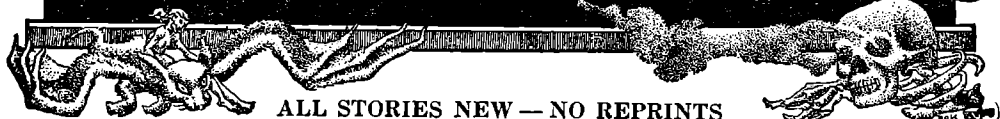


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

Cover by Matt. Fox

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"If you're a natural man, God save ye; but if you're a Thing o' the Darkness...."



BY SEABURY QUINN

EILEEN walked faster as she neared the cemetery. It was not like an Irish graveyard, this little Pennsylvania burying ground, not like the little acres planted to God's harvest which she had known at home. There was no church to send the music of its bells across the low green billows of its mounded graves, no yews and holly-trees in which the kind winds whispered slumber-songs, no lich gate at its entrance underneath whose gable the tired living and the peaceful dead might pause a moment in eternity ere they went diverse ways. Like most things in this

strange new land it seemed to be entirely functional. Just as no one ever thought of dropping into the cool, whisper-haunted shadows of the church for rest and prayer and meditation on a summer's afternoon, so no one ever thought of going to the cemetery save when friends or relatives were buried. No one ever thought of stopping there to kneel beside the grave of some loved one and whisper, "God give you rest and caring, dear soul!"

They seemed to dread the dead in America. At home it had been different. Kin-folk and friends and neighbors did not

change essentially when they moved from their cottages to the churchyard. But . . .

She drew her hooded cape more closely round her and walked faster as she reached the cemetery wall. Perhaps the dead were unfriendly in America. So many of the living were.

It was in 1918 that Chris Huncke met Sheilah Maclintock. He was a Pennsylvania Dutchman, big, blond, rather stolid, unimaginative, and very handsome in his American uniform. Sheilah was his opposite, small, black-haired, blue-eyed, as typically Irish as a sprig of shamrock. She was a member of the Women's Motor Corps, and piloted an antique Daimler with the expertness of a racing driver, making mock of London fogs, policemen, two-star generals and even second lieutenants with sharp-witted Hibernian impartiality. Christian fell in love with her at first sight, Sheilah needed several looks before she gave her heart and unswerving devotion to the big, inarticulate American.

He brought her back in 1919, rushed her round New York in a deliriously ecstatic honeymoon, then took her to his farm near Chambersburg, where he shed his uniform and the never-quite-convincing air of gay insouciance he had worn with it, and reverted to type.

His father and his father's great-grandfather had been farmers, sturdy folk who held their land by grant from Governor Penn and later stubbornly against both redskins and redcoats. Their ways were right and all their judgments true.

Sheilah stood it for as long as she could, which was not quite a year. The atmosphere of the old house, the seldom-opened "best room" with its horsehair furniture, waxed flowers and shell ornaments spread like a miasma over the entire place, stifling her. Who could sing songs of the mountainy men of Donegal or the leprechaun or the *gean canach*, the love-talker, with a picture of *Groswater* Huncke, dressed in broadcloth and scarved linen and bearded like a billy-goat, scowling disapprovingly down at her? Who could stand the dour, uncompromising religiosity of the neighbors?

She loved the out of doors, did Sheilah Maclintock, the soft, sweet rain, the limpid sunshine, the springiness of fresh green turf. One day as she walked home from the village the urge to feel the caress of the roadside grass against her feet was more than she could withstand, and so she dropped down on a wayside boulder to peel off shoes and stockings when who should drive by in his Stutz Bearcat but Emil Herbst, son of Max Herbst, the president of the savings bank.

Prohibition had not yet come to America, but foregleamings of its high morality had reached the county, which had voted dry at the last election. Consequently nearly every second shop in the village was a speakeasy, and when Emil gathered with other village *jeunes dorés* behind Gus Schwing's pool parlor that evening he had provocative things to say concerning Sheilah's pretty feet and legs and Sheilah's deportment on the public highway. The story of her escapade spread with fissionable swiftness through the village and surrounding country, and next morning Mrs. Friedrich Eichelburg was early on the telephone.

As she took up the receiver Sheilah heard the sequenced clickings of a dozen others being lifted. Everyone on the line was indulging in a little morning's eavesdropping.

"Good morning, Mrs. Huncke," her self-appointed mentor greeted. "I feel it is my Christian duty to tell you—" then for the next half hour she discoursed upon the differences between American morality and the loose-reined mores of decadent Europe.

"*Ochone!*" exploded Sheilah when she could wedge a word in. "Your Christian duty is it, ye *sibronsuch*? Faith, 'tis meself that's after thinkin' ye'd be servin' both your God and neighbors better if ye kept your sharp nose out o' other people's business!"

THE ladies of the congregation didn't quite draw their skirts aside as she passed after that, but she was not invited to their *kaffee klatches*, nor to help with the church suppers, nor serve on their committees. Perhaps it would not be quite accurate

to say that they sent her to Coventry, but certainly they consigned her to Birmingham.

And so, before a year had passed she packed her scanty wardrobe, for she'd take nothing Christian's money bought, and set out for the home she'd left six years before when she went off to do her bit in the Great War.

She hitch-hiked as far as Harrisburg, and there she found employment as a waitress and saved every spare penny till she had enough to pay her steerage passage back to Galway. She left no note of farewell, and if Christian made an effort to find her it was not apparent. The ostracism which the neighbors had visited on his wife had extended to him; he was a gregarious soul, and life had not been pleasant on the farm since Sheilah came. When the days stretched into weeks, and the weeks to months, and still no word of her, he gradually accepted the verdict that she was "no better than she should be," and found contentment if not happiness in a second marriage.

Sheilah shared a cottage with her aged Uncle Brian, cooked his meals and washed his clothes and worked his patch of garden, for he was infirm with rheumatism, and also something of a *sliveen*, which is to say he was a man who'd rather take his ease than not, and didn't worry overmuch if the weeds grew waist-high. It was a bleak, bare spot on which the cottage stood, all day and night they heard the angry surges of the Atlantic, in summer there was salt spray in the air, in winter there were bitter winds and storms. Before she'd been home two months Sheilah gave birth to Christian's child, a daughter whom she named Eileen.

She had small traffic with the country folk, and they in turn were reticent, respecting her privacy. If on occasion neighbor women speculated over a pleasant scandal-flavored dish of tea that she was neither wife nor widow, they kept their speculations to themselves and caused her no embarrassment.

Each night when Sheilah knelt to pray she begged, "God keep and prosper him," and when she rose from her knees it was with that sick, awful feeling of emptiness

which one who has not lost the thing that she most loves cannot know. "*Ul'agone, avourneen*," she would whisper, "we loved each other so! Where did all the beautiful, sweet love go? Why did you ever let 'em take you from me—and me from you?"

Then one night when she had reached thirty-eight and looked at least fifteen years older, Sheilah heard the Woman of the Shee sing underneath her window, and knew her time was come. "I'm goin', pulse o' me heart," she told Eileen, "and it's precious little I can leave ye. In the ginger jar fornenst the clock's a hoard o' twenty pounds. 'Twill care for my buryin' and pay your passage to your father in America, and for the love he bore me when we two were wed he'll take ye in and look after ye. Bid him a kindly greetin', child, and tell him that I loved him to the last."

It seemed to Christian time flowed backward for him when Eileen arrived. She had blue-black Irish hair and intensely blue eyes; her skin was like damask, glowing, warm; even the dimple in her pointed chin and the soft-lipped, tender smile of her were reminiscent of her mother. He felt as if Sheilah had come back to him, and the old love woke and stirred the spiced embalmings in its tomb. She was his daughter, yes, but she was something more, she was the reincarnation of the first and only real love of his life.

And because he loved her he was harsh with her. Her every little fault was magnified because it seemed to detract from the ideal of perfection he imagined her to be, and he was heavy-tongued in his scoldings.

But if Christian lashed his daughter with scourges his wife Beulah scourged her with scorpions. If Beulah Huncke had once been pretty nothing in her makeup testified to it. Everything about her was sharp with cutting sharpness. Her thin shoulders, her small, bright, vindictive eyes, her narrow profile, her thin, long hands and feet revealed her as a woman of edges, not curves. She wore her hair in a small knot at the back of her head, and drew it back so tightly that it seemed to make her eyeballs pop; her voice rasped like a file on steel, as if there were a grit of malice in her throat. Heaven had

denied her offspring, and this frustration added gall and wormwood to the acid of her nature. In Eileen she found someone on whom she could vent her spite against life.

That afternoon she had been more than usually unbearable. "I s'pose you figger on settin' 'round and waiting for your pap to die and leave the farm to you?" she asked Eileen. "Well, leave me tell you, Missie, you'll never get an inch o' *this* land. I'll see to it that he cuts you out o' his will. And meantime there'll be no idle hands around here. I need some things at Eberhardt's. Go get 'em for me. Right away, not next week." She handed Eileen a small shopping list—thread, needles, pins, little, unconsidered trifles that could be packed in a pocket—and, "Now, off you go," she ordered, "and see that you get back by supper time. No traipsing off with men, the way your mother—"

"Leave my mother out o' this, ye *collich*," Eileen broke in with a wrathful sob. "'Tis a thing you're not fit to soil her name with your foul tongue!"

THEY said that ghosts walked in the little cemetery after sunset. Ghosts of the men who lay in Rebels' Rest.

Eileen had heard a dozen different versions of the story, yet all were substantially the same. How John McCausland's men had ridden into Chambersburg that morning in July of '64, levied a tribute of a hundred thousand dollars on the town, then burnt it to the ground and rode away with shouts of laughter. By God, their cause might be a lost one, but they, at least, had singed old Grant's whiskers! And then the tale went on to tell how the militia and the enraged farmers poured a spilth of lead on them as they rode pellmell to rejoin Jubal Early, how saddle after saddle had been emptied, so that where six hundred laughing, roistering bully boys had ridden into Chambersburg that morning a scant five hundred reached McConnellsburg.

Death had wiped out animosities, so when the rebels had retreated the farmers gathered up their dead and laid them side by side with demurely folded hands on

their breasts and caps pulled down upon their faces, and when a plot had been marked off for them in the graveyard old Pastor Brubaker had read his office over them.

They had been buried properly, those wild Virginia lads, with prayer and Scripture reading, aye, and a word of forgiveness from the pastor, but still men said they could not rest. Some said they found the cold earth of this northern country a hard bed; some—and these were the majority—declared they hungered for revenge.

The whispering night wind chased the clouds that clawed with ghostly fingers at the newly risen moon as Eileen reached the cemetery gate, and for an instant everything was almost bright as noon, then a black cloud wrack slid over the moon's disc, and shadows obscured everything.

She felt everything inside her coming loose, and had no notion what to do about it as the cloud-curtain moved away and she saw a form by the grilled gate of the graveyard.

It was a man—or shaped like one—a slim and neatly built young man with sunburned cheeks and a thin line of dark mustache across his upper lip. He wore a gray suit and long boots, a yellow kerchief looped about his neck, and a little yellow cap with a black leather visor was set jauntily upon his curling hair.

"Ovoch!" Eileen felt the hot breath churn in her throat. "If you're a natural man, God save ye, sir; but if you're a Thing o' the Darkness, Christ's agony between us!"

"Faith, 'tis a long time I've been waitin' for a civil word!" The young man smiled and raised a hand to his cap in semi-military salute. "Thank ye kindly for your courtesy, me dear. I could not spake till I was spoken to, an' though I've waited more nor eighty year before this selfsame gate the only greetin' I've received until jist now has been a frightening squeal."

"God save us all," Eileen quavered, "you're Irish!"

"As Irish as they come, me jewel. I'm Teig McCarthy—Teig O'Shane McCarthy, late—too late, God knows!—o' th' parish o'

Clondevaddock in th' County o' Galway."

Fear slipped from Eileen as a wave slides off the beach: "And whatever are ye doin' here, poor creature?" she asked.

"*Ochone*, 'tis a long story, so it is, yet not so long as I could wish for," answered he with an infectious grin. "'Teig, *avick*,' me father—may th' turf lie lightly on him!—says to me, 'there's naught but mortgages to be raised on th' ould place, an' precious few o' them. Ye'd best be goin' to Ameriky to seek your fortune, as your Cousin Dion did.'

"So off I goes like any silly goose o' Westmeath, an' prisently I comes to rest on Mither Dabney Fortesque's plantation in Virginny. There's war abrewin' in th' States, an' prisently they're callin' ivery able-bodied man to th' colors. You know how 'tis, pulse o' me heart; a fight's a fight to an Irishman, an' divil a bit cared I which side I fought on, so long as they were givin' me a horse to ride an' three meals ivery day an' now an' then a spot o' pay.

"Then off we rides, an' prisently we comes to Chambersburg where we scares th' Yankees out o' siven years fine growth before we sets th' town ablaze about their ears. But as we rides away one of 'em gets me in th' chist wid his bullet and drops me deader nor a herring! Ah, well, I don't know as I should complain. 'Twas war, an' if he hadn't shot me 'tis altogether likely I'd ha' shot him. At any rate, they gave me decent buryin', an' here I've been for more nor eighty year—"

"But why is it you're walkin' now?" Eileen demanded. "Is it that ye have a debt unpaid, or sins upon your soul—"

"Whist, dear one, don't be talkin'!" he broke in. "We're a queer lot, an' a lonesome lot, we dead folk from th' *Innis Fodhla*. Were you yersilf in some strange land for eighty year an' more, an' niver able to go back, there'd be a hunger on your soul for news o' home. Isn't it so?"

"It is!" Eileen agreed fervently. "And ghost or man, 'tis glad I am I've found ye, Teig McCarthy, for 'tis meself that comes

from County Galway, with the heart o' me a-breakin' to go home."

IMIMPULSIVELY she put her hands out to him. "*Och*, Teig McCarthy, can't you see me heart is hollow with homesickness?"

"Hold hard, Eileen *alannab!*" he warned. "I'm yearnin' for ye like a drunkard for his draught, but if ye put your lips to mine ye join me. Mind ye, girl, th' quick an' dead can't mingle, an' th' dead may not come back!"

"No matter, Teig *avourneen*," she breathed softly. "No—matter—" Her voice sank to a muted whisper and her eyes closed as she leant toward him with parted lips. "Ah, Teig, Teig McCarthy, ye jewel o' the world!"

Slowly, deliberately, he drew her to him, put his arms about her, kissed her on the mouth. He kissed her slowly, bending her head back against his arm till she felt weak and helpless, and glad to be that way at last. A cloud-veil crept across the moon like a blind being drawn, and darkness spread over the landscape. All about them was the scent of pine trees and the stillness of the night.

Supper time came at the Huncke farm, but no Eileen. Night passed and morning dawned, cool, clear and lovely, with limpid, bright pellucid air and sunlight sparkling over everything. But no sign of Eileen.

With dogs borrowed from the sheriff's office they traced her from the village to the cemetery, and at the gate the hounds gave little frightened whimpers and cringed against the deputy.

There was a susurrus of gossip at the next meeting of the Ladies' Sewing Circle. "The cemetery, eh?" Mrs. Thea Hauptmann shook her head like one who fears—and hopes for—the worst. "The cemetery. H'mm. A nice, secluded, woody place. Like mother like daughter, I always say. You listen to me once. That girl went off with someone!"

Which was unquestionably so.