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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Rendezvous

By RICHARD H. HART

The story of a ghostly ferry-boat on the Mississippi, and an engineer who would not take a drink

TELL Marcel I said to hang on—that if he lets go I'll kick the daylights out of him! I'll be there as soon as possible."

Doctor Dumont spoke earnestly, although his words were light; they were meant to encourage the sufferer, to stiffen the will-power which alone could whip on the flagging heart until his arrival.

The doctor hung up the receiver with fingers slightly trembling and snatched his medicine case from a chair. He opened the little bag and glanced within it to make sure that his needle-set and a plentiful supply of digitalis were in their places. Then he seized his hat and rushed from the house; a moment's delay might mean victory for his ancient enemy, Death.

A plan of action—the only plan that might succeed—had popped into his head at old Etienne's first words. Etienne had said: "Mist' Favret is tak' bad, Mist' Doct'! T'ink probabl' you bette' come quick!" Etienne was only an unschooled Cajun, who "cou'n' read one w'd, if he's big as box-ca'"—but he loved Marcel Favret even as Doctor Dumont loved him, and there had been an agony of fear in his voice. The doctor had decided instantly that he must catch the westbound train.

The difficulty was that the train had already left New Orleans. It was at that very moment aboard the huge iron ferry-
barge being shoved across the Mississippi

by a puffing tug. Doctor Dumont would have to catch it, if at all, somewhere along the opposite bank.

As ill-luck would have it, he had chosen that particular week to have his car overhauled. He could telephone for a taxi, of course, but at that evening rush-hour too many precious minutes might elapse before it arrived. The street-cars were reasonably fast and dependable, and he knew that he could afford to run no risks. He would take one.

An up-river Magazine car rumbled to a stop just as he reached the corner, and he swung thankfully aboard. The decision as to which ferry to choose had been made for him; he would cross the river at Walnut Street, and try to catch the train at Westwego.

Unconsciously, he seated himself at the extreme front of the car, as if to be that much closer to his goal. Marcel Favret was his life-long companion and dearest friend, and his patient only incidentally. Favret, suffering an unexpected relapse, needed the administration of digitalis most acutely, and only Doctor Dumont might ascertain from his symptoms the exact dosage which would save him.

There was not the slightest use in looking at his watch, but the doctor found himself doing so constantly. At each single tap of the conductor's bell, demanding a stop, he ground his teeth impatiently. Each double tap, signaling renewed progress, caused him a sigh of relief. He must—he *must*—arrive in time.

Then, only five minutes' ride from Walnut Street, Disaster showed its ugly face. The street-car's bell emitted a shower of angry *clangs*; the motorman whirled back the controller and threw on the brakes. The car ground to a stop.

Doctor Dumont was on his feet instantly, trying to beat down a great surge of despair.

There was no need to ask questions. Squarely across the track sprawled a huge tank-truck with one wheel missing and a rear axle gouged into the pavement. The street-car was effectively blocked.

ACTING without volition, the doctor leaped down from the car and started walking rapidly along the street. The outraged passengers behind him might expostulate with motorman and truck-driver until they were tired; it would do them no good. As for him, he must catch the west-bound train across the river.

He had covered nearly two blocks at a furious pace when he realized the futility of his course. He couldn't walk to Walnut Street in less than twenty minutes, and he knew that his old legs would carry him less than half the distance if he attempted to run. He must find some other way.

At the corner, he turned abruptly to the left and made his way toward the Mississippi. He would have to find a boatman to ferry him across; surely there were motorboats in plenty along the levee. A motorboat he must have, for the river was high and its rushing current would carry a skiff too far downstream in the crossing. Even now, he could hear in the still night air the whistle of the train as it left Gretna. And he must catch that train.

The thought galvanized his tired legs; he crossed Water Street at a trot. He

dashed between rows of mean shanties and found himself upon a crumbling wharf. As he paused for breath, his gaze automatically wandered out across the swirling water.

Abruptly, he dashed a hand across his eyes as if to brush away an impossible sight. He had exerted himself too much, he thought. Otherwise how could he be seeing a steam ferry-boat at this point? Surely he wasn't as ignorant of New Orleans as all that!

But the sight remained, and to his ears came the confirmatory *pow-pow-pow* of the stern-wheeler. In eager amazement he heard the jangling of the pilot's bell and watched the boat glide smoothly up to the landing-stage. A moment more and he had sprung aboard.

The ferry-boat remained at the landing-stage for a minute or so, its huge paddle-wheel turning over at half speed. But no other passenger came aboard, and presently the bell jangled again and the boat swung out into the current. The paddle-wheel churned with an accelerating rhythm as the black water swirled past and the crumbling wharf fell farther and farther back into the darkness.

As suspense and excitement subsided within him, Doctor Dumont realized that the air off the river was something more than chilly. He turned up his coat-collar and stepped through the door of the engine-room in search of warmth. He recognized the possibility that this was against the rules, but the fact that there were no other passengers aboard emboldened him. The little infraction would surely be overlooked.

"Pretty cool, tonight," he remarked to the engineer.

The engineer nodded without speaking. He was a big-framed man with an immense red nose. One of his legs had been cut off just below the knee and the

missing portion had been replaced with an old-fashioned, hand-carved wooden peg. It struck the deck with a dull thump whenever he moved about.

Doctor Dumont's feeling of relief impelled him to be sociable. He drew out his emergency flask.

"Prescription liquor—twelve years old," he said. "Have a drink with me."

He was wholly unprepared for the change which came suddenly over the engineer. The fellow's eyes opened wide, his nostrils dilated, and his lips drew back from yellow teeth in a grimace of frightful rage. He took two steps forward and raised a ham-like fist. Doctor Dumont backed prudently through the door without stopping to argue; he had seen madness often enough to recognize the gleam from those wild eyes.

At that moment came a fortunate diversion. The bell overhead clattered loudly, and the engineer sullenly allowed his arm to fall, then went back to his levers. Doctor Dumont replaced his flask and hastened around to the opposite side of the deck. The crossing was at an end.

A NARROW lane bordered with tall weeds diverged from the levee, and the doctor made his way along it at a brisk walk. A hundred yards farther along, he found himself at the highway. Roaring up the pavement came a west-bound bus; frantically the doctor flagged it down. Only when he was safely aboard did he realize that he had not paid his ferry-fee: in his haste he must somehow have missed the ticket office. He made a mental note to drop by sometime and pay the delinquent fare; notwithstanding the mad engineer, that had been one trip which was certainly worth the money.

He caught the train at Westwego with only seconds to spare. An hour later he was descending from it at the little town

where he had practised for so many years, and where his patient awaited him. He hoped fervently that he would be in time.

Etienne met him at the station with a little automobile; it seemed to the doctor that the wheezy motor quivered with impatience.

"How's Marcel?" he demanded as he climbed in.

"Wo'se," said Etienne. "I promise *le bon Saint* can'te long's my a'm if he's get bette'—but he's wo'se." He fed more gasoline to the now roaring motor.

The little car shot forward along the dark road and began a nerve-torturing race. It turned unbanked curves on slithering tires and missed trees, fence-posts and culverts by inches. At last Etienne threw his weight on the brakes and racked it to a stop.

Both men were out of the car before it had ceased to vibrate, and Etienne led the way into the house. They found Marcel Favret unconscious, and the old Cajun went down on his knees beside the bed as the doctor fumbled with the latch of his medicine case.

"I'm just in time," the doctor muttered, fitting needle to syringe with practised speed. "Thirty minutes more—perhaps even fifteen—and Marcel would have been done for. That ferry-boat came like a dispensation."

It was a long, tense fight, and although Doctor Dumont prided himself on his freedom from superstition he more than once seemed to feel the air about him stirred by unseen wings as he labored and watched over his patient. There was an acrid taste in his mouth, and it was as if restraining hands tugged at his every muscle. Never had his enemy appeared so loth to relinquish a victim.

But skill and devotion triumphed at last, and the presence of Death was no

longer felt in the room. The patient was breathing quietly and regularly when Doctor Dumont signed to Etienne to accompany him from the bedchamber.

"He needs nothing but sleep, now," said the doctor as he closed the door behind them. "And, while he's getting it, maybe you could scrape me up a sandwich. I've eaten nothing since noon."

"You bet," Etienne said, his brown old face aglow with gratitude and admiration. "I fix you somet'ing bette'. I fix you nice om'lette an' drip you pot *café*. Good *souper* fo' good doct'."

They went out into the kitchen, and while he skilfully cracked eggs and dropped them from their shells into an earthenware bowl Etienne asked the doctor how he had managed to catch the train. Doctor Dumont settled himself comfortably at the table, then recounted his difficulties and told of how they had been overcome.

ETIENNE shredded a clove of garlic and added it to the eggs. "You say you catch de *ferie* somew'ere aroun' State Street o' Jeffe'son Av'nue?" he asked. "You *certain* it not Napoleon o' Walnut?"

"Absolutely," the doctor assured him. "I didn't notice the name of the street, but there was a box-factory alongside the wharf where I caught the boat, and there's no such factory at either Walnut Street or Napoleon Avenue. I know that much about the city."

"Hoh — de box-fact'ry *ferie!*" exclaimed Etienne. He thoughtfully added salt, pepper, tabasco and fresh basil leaves to the mixture in the bowl. "You say de enginee' had a wooden leg?"

"Yes. And, if you ask me, the old devil's crazy as a bat."

"Hmmm. Maybe. Hmmm." Etienne whisked the omelette to a creamy froth,

then turned it into a skillet under which a low fire burned. "You want I should tell you 'bout one-leg' enginee' w'ich wo'k on box-fact'ry *ferie?*"

"Go ahead," said Doctor Dumont, his eyes on the omelette.

Etienne chuckled. "A hom'lette mus' cook slow," he said.

He put a lid on the skillet and took up a small coffee-pot.

"It all happen' w'ile I living in Nyaw-lins," he began. "I living on Magazine Street, an' wo'king ove' at *sirap* fact'ry. I have to cross rive' two time eve'y day on box-fact'ry *ferie*. Enginee' on boat name' Leblanc. Big man wit' red head."

"The engineer on the boat tonight had red hair," put in Doctor Dumont, looking up momentarily.

"Yeah?" The old Cajun poured boiling water over the dark-roasted coffee and chicory and set the pot on the back of the stove to drip. He resumed:

"Enginee' Leblanc like w'isky too much. All time he have bottle in's pocket. Drink, drink, drink; all day long. Not get so ve'y dronk, but drink too much. One day he's not pay 'tention to pilot's bell, an' not reverse hengine quick 'nough—bump landing float ha'd. *Cabam!* Leblanc' own brothe' is was standing on float, waiting fo' *ferie*; bump make him fall off an' drown."

"You mean that he caused his own brother to drown?" demanded the doctor.

"Yeah. He's brothe' is can swim, but bump head on piling, is knock out. Neve' come up. Dey is not find him fo' two hou's."

"Did that stop the engineer's drinking?"

"*Non!*" snorted Etienne. "Not'ing is stop him drinking. Two week afte' he's brothe' drown, he drinking some mo' an' put's foot unde' connecting-rod. *Bam!*"

Mash foot *comme ça!*" He crushed one of the egg-shells in his brown fist.

"I see," said the doctor. "Gangrene—and amputation. That is how he acquired his wooden leg. What happened then?"

"One night w'ile he's in *l'hôpital* he's brothe' come to him an' tell him——"

"You mean another brother?" interrupted the doctor.

Etienne folded the omelette dexterously and transferred it to a platter. He poured out a cup of coffee and set platter and cup before the doctor before he spoke.

"*Non*. Same brothe'. Brothe' tell him if he's not stop drinking so much w'isky he's going be sorry. Going be sorry long's he's live—an' lots long'."

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed the doctor, pausing in the act of putting his fork into the savory omelette. "You're getting all mixed up. First you say his brother was drowned, and then you say his brother came to him while he was in the hospital. I don't understand what you mean."

"Maybe you un'e'stan' mo' bette' w'en I'm finish'," Etienne returned. "W'en Leblanc get out of *l'hôpital*, wit' he's wooden leg, de *ferie* comp'ny is not want him to wo'k fo' dem some mo'. But he's tell 'em he's going get lawye'—bigges' lawye' in Nyawlins—an' sue 'em fo' big *dommage* fo' lose's leg in accident. Den *ferie* comp'ny is say he can go back to wo'k if he's not sue 'em.

"He's not drink much fo' one-two

week afte' he's go back to wo'k. Den one day he's got he's bottle again, an' a big crowd of people is going ove' rive' to ball-game. Mus' be dey is hund'ed men an' women on *ferie*-boat. Leblanc is drink too much, an' not watch he's wate'-gage. Steam-gage go all way round. Den Leblanc is tu'n mo' wate' into boile'—an' she's blow up. *Ca-bam!* People dat's not kill' is drown'. Eve'y one. Leblanc too."

"Another kind of drunken driver," commented Doctor Dumont, turning from Etienne and attacking the omelette with vast appetite. "It was a good story, all right, but you got mixed up about the brother who was drowned coming to the hospital. The way you told it, it seemed as if he came to the hospital after he was drowned."

"He *did* come afte' he's drown'."

The doctor swallowed a huge draft of the black Louisiana coffee, wiped his mouth, and set down the cup with an air of satisfaction. Then he said reproachfully:

"I'm surprized at you, Etienne: telling me a story like that. What did I ever do to deserve it?"

"Do?" echoed the old Cajun, shrilly. "W'at you do? You tell me you cross de rive' tonight on box-fact'ry *ferie*, between Walnut an' Napoleon—di'n't you? It's twenty-fi' yea's, dis ve'y mont', dat Enginee' Leblanc is blow up boat wit' hund'ed people on him—an' dey ain' been no steam-*ferie* on dat pa't of de rive' since!"

