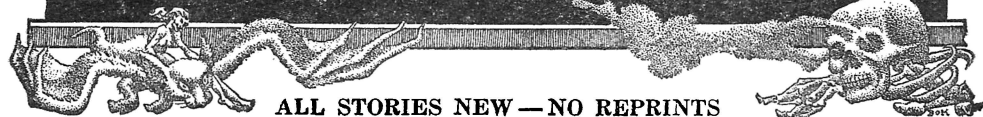


# Weird Tales



MARCH, 1945

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

## NOVELETTE

- LORDS OF THE GHOSTLANDS . . . . . Seabury Quinn 8  
*To be jerked out of the quiet restfulness of your grave and shipped across four thousand miles of water . . . but then any mummy might be called unlucky!*

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*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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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

# Second Childhood

By JACK SNOW

“**H**E HAS come back, John,” Miss Lucy stated simply with a faint smile. “All the way back over all those years—what a bridge of memory he has crossed!”

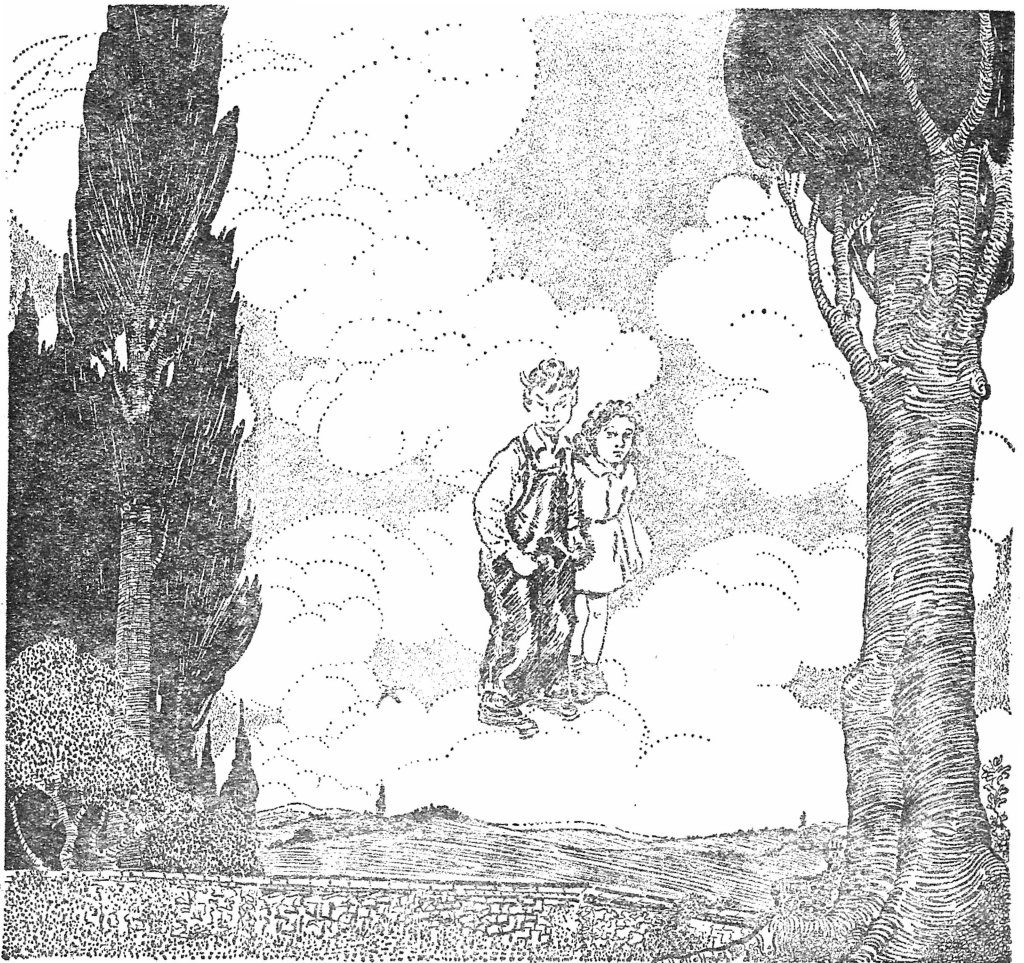
The old lady sighed, her voice sounding thinly in the dying garden like the memory itself of a voice, just as the ruined blossoms

and splotched leaves were silent mementoes of a once lovely garden.

“Is that what you wished to tell me, Miss Lucy?” I asked. The fragile body, withered as a leaf, leaned to me for support as we walked slowly down the garden path. “Merely that memories of your childhood are growing stronger? That is not uncom-

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*We never really forget childhood playmates, nor they us. . . .*



Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

mon, you know, with people of your age. As you approach the end of your long journey," I added, "memory becomes brilliantly clear and vivid and you recall many childhood scenes that have lain buried for long years in the depths of memory."

"Yes, yes, I know," answered Miss Lucy. "But this is something more—something more, John, then just memory. Willie has come back. He is just as he was when I was a little girl and we played in this very garden through the long summer days. I see him, John; I talk with him."

"Just who is this Willie?" I asked patiently, knowing that it was far better for Miss Lucy to discuss these fancies with me, her doctor and friend of long standing, than to close them away morbidly in her aging mind.

"Willie was my childhood playmate—my only playmate. I was a very lonely child and lived a solitary life here in this huge old house. There were only Father, my governess and the servants for companions, and they were poor enough companions for an imaginative child." Miss Lucy paused, fumbling among her memories. "Of my mother I recall nothing. I know her only as she appears in the painting which hangs in the library: a forceful featured, stern-faced woman. Strange," Miss Lucy went on musingly, "that with all her strength she yielded so easily to death and died so young."

I could not help adding silently in my own thoughts, "And equally strange that this fragile wisp of humanity beside me should endure and persevere against death for so long a time."

"Was Willie the son of one of the servants?" I prompted.

Miss Lucy glanced at me in surprise.

"No, no!" she exclaimed with a bird-like little chirp. "I do not know really who he was. I know only that my earliest memories are of Willie. He was always with me. It is as though he had been born or had entered this world at the same time I did—accompanied me. Father and the others were at first amused when I told them about Willie. I was scarcely able to talk then. But as I grew older their amusement changed to impatience and then anger. They said I must stop all my foolishness about Willie. They never understood."

"You mean they never saw Willie?" I asked.

"Oh, no! He was much too clever to allow them to see him. He revealed himself only to me."

I sighed and faced the old lady. "Miss Lucy," I began, "do you mean to tell me that this Willie of yours was nothing more than one of those dream children that lonely boys and girls sometimes invent when they are deprived of human playmates?"

MISS LUCY'S faded old eyes opened wide with indignation as she replied stubbornly, "Now you are talking just like the others. I tell you Willie was very real—as real as I am. And," she concluded with triumph, "he has kept his word. He has done as he said he would—he has come back!"

"He told you he would come back?" I asked curiously.

"Threatened, rather," the old lady replied, staring into the shadows. "I can remember the scene as clearly as though it were only yesterday instead of seventy years ago. I was seventeen at the time. I had just met David and fallen in love with him. It seemed that within the space of an hour I had grown up, had stopped being a child and had become a woman.

"It was right here in this garden in the twilight of a far-away June night that I sent Willie away forever—or so I thought. I was to go to a ball with David that evening, and I was eager to begin dressing, so perhaps I was a little hasty and rude with Willie. I told him he must go away, that I was no longer a child. Oh, he was furious! He accused me of forsaking him for David. And really he was almost pathetic—so small and so angry as he turned from me and ran down the garden shouting to me that he would go, but that he would come back. There were actually tears in his black eyes—tears of rage," she added absently.

"Then Willie did not grow as you did; he remained a small child?"

"No," Miss Lucy replied, "Willie never changed. He was then and he is now just as I first remember him—a boy about seven years of age. He is dressed in the children's fashions of seventy years ago. Why," the old lady went on, the flicker of a smile

haunting her face, "he still carries that ugly stone hatchet that he loves so well. He calls it his tomahawk. It is the only toy he ever had. He used to play Indian with it here in this garden when I was a child. Poor little Willie, it was so long ago. At least *he* has been faithful. The years meant nothing to him." The old lady's voice drifted vacantly and forlornly into the thickening shadows of the garden.

For a brief time we were both silent, lost in meditation. Then, feeling the chill and dampness of the garden as evening drew on, I escorted Miss Lucy to the house where I left a mild sleeping potion for her and cautioned Hannah, Miss Lucy's housekeeper and companion, not to leave her charge too much alone—melancholia and hallucinations grow out of solitude and loneliness. With that I departed for my home where I was long overdue for dinner.

AS I walked the short distance to my own comfortable house, I reflected on Miss Lucy's unhappy life. As family physician and friend, I had known Miss Lucy as long as I had known anyone. Always everyone had referred to her as "Miss Lucy" and as "Miss Lucy" I, first as a child and then as a man, had known her. My earliest memories of her were of a beautiful but sad-faced woman in her early thirties. The death of her sweetheart in a tragic hunting accident a few days before the day set for their wedding had blighted her entire life. She had shut herself up in the gloomy house and lived out her days as a lonely recluse. And now this was the end. She was turning back to her childhood, seeking the companionship of that first friend—an imaginary child playmate.

"Truly," I ruminated, as I walked swiftly through the damp of that darkening October evening to the beckoning cheer of a hearty dinner and a warm fireside, "this was a splendid example of the evolution of the life span, moving from childhood to adulthood and back to childhood again—the completed circle." As I stepped over my threshold, and was greeted with the aroma of dinner waiting to be served, I forgot for the time all about Miss Lucy wandering in her dead garden with her pathetic imaginings.

FROM that time on I made it a point to look in on Miss Lucy at least once a week. Not that she needed medical care. But I knew that I was her only visitor, and someone from outside her own small world was necessary to keep her from sinking too deeply into her dreams. To all outward appearances my aged patient remained unchanged. And yet, I found myself disturbed by something in her manner—a furtive restlessness, an unexpressed apprehension that lurked in her tired old eyes.

At last one day I asked Miss Lucy the question, the answer to which, I felt sure, would explain the old lady's uneasiness. "Have you seen Willie lately?"

Miss Lucy started, then folding her thin hands, she regarded me quietly from pale gray eyes set in a lace filigree of tiny wrinkles.

"Yes, John," she murmured, "I see him quite often now. He comes to me almost every day. And, John, he—he is so very angry with me!"

"Angry?" I asked. "Why should you imagine he is angry with you?"

"Because I will not go away with him," Miss Lucy stated simply. "Willie says that he can make me a little girl again and that we shall be able to play in the shadows in the garden just as we used to so many long years ago—if—if I will go away with him."

"But this is nonsense, Miss Lucy," I said firmly. "You are letting your imagination run away with you."

"You do not know Willie," replied Miss Lucy stubbornly. "He wants a playmate. I have kept him alone for a long time—all those years when I sent him away from me. He will not stay alone any longer."

"But you really don't believe," I began, and then broke off with a smile. "Come, Miss Lucy," I said, adopting the condescending tone one uses with unreasonable children, "this imaginary child of yours is claiming altogether too much of your attention. You must think of other things."

Miss Lucy stared at me with empty eyes like a ghost.

"Imaginary? Other things? There are no other things in my life," she said hopelessly. "Willie is the only reality left."

And then she went on as though I hadn't spoken. "You don't know Willie," she re-

peated persistently. "Willie is not like other children. He is not *good*. There is something strange about him — something I never could quite understand, although he has tried to whisper to me about himself, and then his manner and tone frightened me so that I would not listen. The first time he tried to tell me I was only a little girl and could not have understood. Nevertheless something of the evil of his words I must have sensed, for I clapped my hands to my ears and burst into tears. No, Willie is not like other children. I believe him. I believe he can do what he says. He can take me away with him and make me like himself if he wants to—only, I am afraid." Miss Lucy's voice had subsided to a whisper as she finished this strange speech.

I realized the uselessness of arguing with the old lady in her present state of mind. I recognized symptoms of cumulative hallucination indicating extreme ageing, and—I believed—dissolution of her mind. I concluded this visit by instructing Hannah to keep a close watch on her mistress.

The occasion of my last visit to Miss Lucy found me making my way hastily to the old Victorian mansion in answer to a phone call from Hannah, saying that Miss Lucy had not risen that morning as was her custom, but had remained in bed all day. I had been absent from my office making calls and had not received this message until nearly evening. Hannah said Miss Lucy was in no pain. She was only very weak and tired. From these symptoms I knew that my patient was suffering from no other malady than old age. I knew, too, that the end was near.

Hannah met me at the door, asking me to go directly up to Miss Lucy's room. Hannah had left her only a minute before and now hurried away to the kitchen to prepare some warm broth for her patient.

**I**T WAS later afternoon of a damp, gray day in early February. As I softly opened the door to Miss Lucy's room, a ray of winter sunlight fell chillily across the faded carpet.

Instantly I stopped, frozen in the doorway with shock and amazement. What I saw was no trick of the wan winter sunlight, of that I was sure. For the merest fraction

of a second there flashed before my vision the unmistakable forms of a small girl and boy. The boy's right hand clasped the left hand of the girl. Both children were dressed in the clothing of generations ago; the boy in knee breeches and velvet jacket with lace collar, while the girl wore a pinafore and her flaxen hair was done in two tight little pigtails. In that split second in which I glimpsed the figures, their backs were to me, and they were running to the window through which the rays of the last cheerless sunlight of the short winter day poured. I experienced an overpowering and unforgettable sense of revulsion as the figure of the little boy flitted before me. He was short and squat, and his body in some manner conveyed a hint of deformity without actually revealing any misshapeness. His child clothing somehow did not fit properly as it would a normal child. It was as though the garments were masking or cloaking some abnormality. His black hair hung lankly down his back, and around his head there seemed to hover a nimbus of evil. In his free hand the boy grasped an ancient stone hatchet—his plaything. It flashed through my mind that he was more of an imp or gargoyle than a human child. While my eyes blinked in amazement, the two visions winked out of existence like dancing motes in the sun's rays.

Shaken by this apparition more than I cared to confess, I turned after a moment to the bed. One glance told me that Miss Lucy was dead. She lay with her head turned to a peculiar angle, and her right arm thrown up across her forehead in a gesture curiously suggesting defense.

Reaching with one hand under her head to straighten it on the pillow, I removed her arm from her forehead with my other hand. As I did this, that happened which will haunt me until my dying day.

As I gently lifted Miss Lucy's arm from her forehead, thin trickles of blood descended like a red veil over her brow, and, as my other hand simultaneously sought the back of Miss Lucy's head, the long, fine filaments of her soft, silver hair and the delicate, parchment-thin scalp from which they grew came gently loose in my trembling hand.

## Lured from "Retirement!"

SOME months ago we got a several-page letter in our offices commenting on WEIRD TALES and its contributors. At the end the author, Jack Snow, modestly admitted that he had once sold two little shorts to WEIRD, in 1927 and 1928. Naturally our curiosity was aroused, we looked him up and found him ensconced just across the street from us (literally), a writer with the National Broadcasting Company.

In the course of subsequent conversations we said half-humorously that since he knew so much about "weird" tales (he really does) why didn't he sit down and write one? Which is just what he did and the result—well, you've read, or will read, "Second Childhood" yourself.

Here is what Mr. Snow has to say about himself:

Earliest memory goes back to a day before I could walk or talk when my grandfather, a dentist, fascinated me with a saucerful of quicksilver. A little later I used to watch for the ice-cream wagon which appeared each afternoon rolling down the street from a point three blocks distant, where I could dimly discern a pole—the North Pole then, and logical origin of the ice-cream man. Later it became a barber pole. Life has been like that ever since.

In early 1920's worried family to death by clambering over the roof erecting radio antennae. Began writing a radio review column for a newspaper while attending Central High School at Piqua, Ohio—hometown I proudly share with the Mills Brothers and ace Don Gentile. Sold two shorts to WEIRD TALES several years later and have not missed reading more than a half-dozen issues of the magazine

since its inception. Worked for various radio stations, landing at NBC in 1943 after fourteen months in the Army. A lifelong admirer of L. Frank Baum and his Oz books, I have a huge collection of first editions and have gathered photographs, scrap books, personal letters, etc., which will become a part of a forthcoming Baum biography. Have written a new Oz book, now published, and hope to do one each year in the Baum tradition. Favorite authors are: Baum, Walter de la Mare, Arthur Machen, Frank Owen, Seabury Quinn and Ray Bradbury.

*Jack Snow*