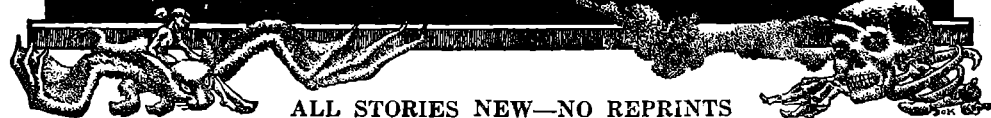


# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1943

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

## NOVELETTES

- THE TWO MOONS OF TRANQUILLIA . . . . . Arthur Leo Zagat 34  
*He desperately wanted to see his son—but perhaps the boy was not to be found in this world*
- THE EAGER DRAGON . . . . . Robert Bloch 88  
*He was bequeathed a dragon's egg and thought the whole affair was ridiculous—until the egg hatched*

## SHORT STORIES

- QUEST OF A NOBLE TIGER . . . . . Frank Owen 6  
*The flyer had fought with great courage against cruel enemies, but never before against such ageless guile*
- THE STATUE . . . . . James Causey 20  
*An innocent, lovely creation of art it was, with murderous hate in its pink marble heart*
- ONE-MAN BOAT . . . . . Alice-Mary Schnirring 27  
*Don't sail her alone, they warned, or you'll be shipmates with death*
- SAY A PRAYER FOR HARVEY . . . . . John J. Wallace 64  
*He was the little man who was there—anywhere he wanted to be*
- BINDINGS DELUXE . . . . . David H. Keller 70  
*It isn't polite to ridicule a woman. Nor is it at all safe, as you will find out!*
- SEVENTH SISTER . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 76  
*The elders laughed and remarked that nobody believed in conjures or voodoo any more—but under a quarter moon, who can tell?*
- McELWIN'S GLASS . . . . . August Derleth 105  
*The strange tale of a magician who discovers a sure way of seeing into the past and future—and wishes he hadn't*
- REPAYMENT . . . . . Seabury Quinn 112  
*The snakes resent wrong charming—the old man chattered—they will repay thee for this insult!*

## VERSE

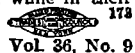
- AFTER AN AIR RAID . . . . . Dorothy Quick 26
- SUPERSTITIONS AND TABOOS . . . . . Irwin J. Weill 68
- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB . . . . . 120

*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*

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1942, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain.

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Vol. 36, No. 9

D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.

# Seventh Sister

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

THE night Seven Sisters was born, a squinch-owl hollered outside the cabin from sundown until the moment of her birth. Then it stopped its quavering cry. Everything stopped—the whippoorwills in the loblollies; the katydids in the fig tree beside the well; even the tree-frogs, burring their promise of rain as

*They came to her by night, bessed at her window and proffered silver  
in return for her magic.*



“The dogs sounded nearer.”

"sheet lightning" flickered across the black sky.

The row of slave cabins behind the Old Place looked ramshackled and deserted; had been deserted, for a fact, ever since Grant took Richmond. Daylight or a moon would have shown their shingle roofs fallen in and their sagging porches overgrown with jimson weed and honeysuckle. Only one cabin was livable now and inhabited. Dody, grandson of a Saunders slave, had wandered back to the Old Place, with a wife and a flock of emaciated little pickaninnies.

They had not thrived on odd-job fare in the city. So Dody had come home, the first year of the Depression, serenely certain of his welcome. He knew Cap'm Jim and Miss Addie would give them a cabin with a truck garden, in return for whatever sporadic labor was needed on the old run-down plantation smack on the Alabama-Georgia line.

That was in '29, six years ago. Miss Addie was dead now and buried in the family cemetery on the south hill. Most of the land had been sold to meet taxes. Miss Addie's grandson, Cap'm Jim, alone was left. Cap'm Jim was a baby doctor in Chattanooga. He kept the Old Place closed up except for week-end trips down with his wife and two young sons.

The red clay fields lay fallow and uncultivated. The rail fences had fallen, and even the white-columned Place itself was leaky and in need of paint. Whenever Dody or Mattie Sue thought of it, they had one of the young-uns sweep the leaves and chicken-sign from the bare sanded clay of the front yard. But aside from that weekly chore, they had the deserted plantation all to themselves, and lived accordingly. The children grew fat and sassy on yams and chitterlings. Dody drank more homebrew and slept all day in the barrel-slat hammock. And Mattie Sue cooked, quarreled, and bore another pickaninny every year. . . .

That is, until Seven Sisters was born.

That night a squinch-owl hollered. And somewhere beyond the state highway, a dog howled three times. More than that, one of the martins, nesting in the gourd-pole in front of the cabin, got into the house and beat its brains out against the walls before anyone could set it free.

Three Signs! Small wonder that at sundown Mattie Sue was writhing in agony of premature childbirth. Not even the two greased axes, which Ressie and Clarabelle—her oldest unmarried daughters, aged fifteen and seventeen—had placed under her bed to cut the pain, did any good.

"Oh, Lawsy—Mammy done took bad!" Ressie whimpered.

She hovered over the fat groaning black woman on the bed, eyewhites large and frightened in her pretty negro face. Ressie had seen many of her brothers and sisters come into the world. But always before, Mattie Sue had borne as easily and naturally as a cat.

"Do, my Savior!" Clarabelle whispered. "We got to git somebody to midwife her! Aunt Fan . . . Go 'long and fotch her, quick! Oh Lawsy . . ." she wailed, holding high the kerosene lamp and peering down at the woman in pain. "I . . . I'se sho skeered. . . . What you waitin' on, fool? Run! . . . Oh Lawsy, Mammy . . . Mammy?"

Ressie plunged out into the night. The *slap-slap* of her bare feet trailed into silence.

The cabin's front room was very still. Save for the regular moaning of Dody's wife—and an occasional snore from Dody himself, drunk and asleep on the kitchen floor—there was no sound within. The other children were clustered in one corner, silent as young foxes. Only the whites of their eyes were visible against the dark. Clarabelle tiptoed about in her mail-order print dress, her chemically-straightened hair rolled up on curlers for the church social tomorrow.

Light from the sooty lamp threw stunted shadows. The reek of its kerosene and the smell of negro bodies blended with the pungent odor of peaches hung in a string to dry beside the window. Hot summer scents drifted in: sun-baked earth, guano from the garden, the cloying perfume of a clematis vine running along the porch rafters.

It was all so familiar—the smells, the night-sounds. The broken and mended furniture, discarded by four generations of Saunderses. The pictures tacked on the plank walls—of a snowscene, of a Spanish dancer, of the President—torn from old magazines Cap'm Jim and Miss Ruth had cast aside. The last year's feed store calendar, dated January, 1934. The gilded wreath, saved from Miss Addie's funeral, now decorating the mantel with its purple and gilt ribbon rain-marred to read: *ABID WI H MF.*

Even the childbirth scene was familiar to all of Mattie's children except the youngest. And yet . . .

**T**HERE was an eerie quality about the night, throwing the familiar out of focus. The young-uns felt it, huddled, supperless, in the corner while Clarabelle fluttered ineffectually about the bed and its burden. It was so hot and oppressive, with a curious air of waiting. Even a rumble of thunder along the horizon sounded hushed and furtive.

And the screech-owl's cry drifted nearer.

The woman on the bed writhed and moaned again. Clarabelle twisted her black hands together, bright with pink nail polish—relic of the winters spent in Chattanooga as nurse for Cap'm Jim's youngest. She went to the open door for a fourth time, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps.

Aunt Fan had a cabin down the road about half a mile, and had washed for the Andrews as far back as anyone remem-

bered. She was a church woman; in fact, one of her three husbands had been a preacher before he knifed a man and got sent away to prison. If anyone could help Mattie Sue in her extremity, it would be Aunt Fan . . .

The squinch-owl wailed again. Clarabelle drew a quick circle on the cabin floor and spat in it. But the moaning of her mother went on and on, incoherent, rising and falling as though in imitation of the owl's ill-omened call.

Clarabelle stiffened, listening. The hurried crunch-crunch of shod feet came to her ears at last. With a grasp of relief she ran out to meet the pair—Ressie, returning, and a tiny weazened old negress with a wen in the center of her forehead, jutting out like a blunt horn.

"Aunt Fan, what I tell you? Listen yonder!" Ressie whimpered. "Dat ole squinch-owl been holl'in' fit to be tied ever since sundown!"

The old midwife poised on the porch step, head cocked. She grunted, and with a slow precise gesture took off her apron, to don it again wrong side out.

"Dah. Dat oughta fix 'im. Whah-at Mattie Sue? My land o' Goshen, dat young-un don't b'long to git borned for two month yet! She been workin' in de garden?"

"Well'm . . ." Clarabelle started to lie, then nodded, contrite. "Seem like she did do a little weedin' yestiddy . . ."

"Uh-huh! So dat's hit! I done tole her! Dat low-down triflin' Dody . . ." Aunt Fan, with a snort that included all men, switched into the cabin.

Outside, the screech-owl chuckled mockingly, as though it possessed a deeper knowledge of the mystery of birth and death.

Ressie and Clarabelle hunched together on the front stoop. Through the door they could hear Aunt Fan's sharp voice ordering the pickaninnies out of her way

into the kitchen. Mattie Sue's regular moaning had risen in timbre to a shrill cry. Clarabelle, squatting on the log step of the porch, whispered under her breath.

"Huh!" Ressie muttered. "Ain't no use prayin' wid dat ole squinch-owl holl'in' his fool head' off! \ Oh, Lawsy, Clary, you reckon Aunt Fan can . . . ?"

The older girl shivered but did not reply. Her eyes, wide and shining from the window's glow, swept across the flat terrain. Fireflies twinkled in the scrub pines beyond the cornfield. A muffled roar from above caught her ear once. She raised her head. Wing lights on a transport plane, racing the storm from Birmingham to Atlanta, winked down at her, then vanished in the clouds.

"Leb'm-thirty," she murmured. "Less hit's late tonight . . . Daggone! If'n dat ole fool don't shet up his screechin' . . ." She checked herself, sheepishly fearful of her own blasphemy.

Of course there was nothing to all that stuff her mammy and Aunt Fan had passed down to them, huddling before the fire on rainy nights. Signs! Omens! *Juju* . . . Cap'm Jim had laughed and told them, often enough, that . . .

The girl started violently. From the cabin a scream shattered the night. High-pitched. Final.

Then everything was still. The tree-frogs. The quarreling katydids. The whippoorwills. The muttering thunder. A trick of wind even carried away the sound of the transport plane.

And the screech-owl stopped hollering, like an evil spirit swallowed up by the darkness.

A FEW minutes later Aunt Fan came to the door, a tiny bundle in her arms swaddled in an old dress of Mattie's. The girls leaped to their feet, wordless, eager.

But the old negress in the doorway did not speak. She was murmuring something

under her breath that sounded like a prayer—or an incantation. There was a sinister poise to her tiny form framed in the lighted doorway, silent, staring out into the night.

Suddenly she spoke.

"Clary honey . . . Ressie. You mammy done daid. Won't nothin' I could do. But . . . my soul to Glory! Hit's somep'm funny about dis gal-baby! She white as cotton! I reckon yo' mammy musta had a sin on she soul, how come de Lawd taken her . . ."

Clarabelle gasped a warning. A broad hulk had blotted out the lamplight behind Aunt Fan—Dody, awake, still drunk, and mean. A tall sepia negro, wearing only his overalls, he swayed against the door for support, glowering down at the bundle in Aunt Fan's arms.

"Woods colt!" Dody growled. "I ain't gwine feed no woods colt . . . Git hit on out'n my cabin! I got eight young-uns o' my own to feed, workin' myself down to a frazzle . . . Git hit on out, I done tole you!" he snarled, aiming a side-swipe at Aunt Fan that would have knocked her sprawling if it had landed.

But the old negress ducked nimbly, hopped out onto the porch, and glared back at Dody. Her tiny black eyes glittered with anger and outrage, more for herself than for the squirming handful of life in her embrace.

"You Dody Saunders!" Aunt Fan shrilled. "You big low-down triffin' piece o' trash! I gwine tell Cap'm Jim on you! Jes' wait and see don't I tell 'im! Th'owin' Mattie's own baby out'n de house like she wont nothin' but a mess o' corn shucks! And Mattie layin' daid in yonder . . ."

Dody swayed, bleary eyes trying to separate the speaker from her alcoholic image.

"Daid? M-mattie Sue . . . my Mattie Sue done daid? Oh, Lawsy— why'n you tell me . . . ?"

His blunt brutal features crumpled all

at once, child-like in grief. He whirled back into the cabin toward the quilt-covered bed.

"Mattie?" the three on the porch heard his voice. "Mattie honey? Hit's your Dody—say somep'm, honey . . . Don't sully up like that and be mad at Dody! What I done now? . . . Mattie . . . ?"

Clarabelle and Ressie clung together, weeping.

Only Aunt Fan was dry-eyed, practical. In the dark she looked down at the mewling newborn baby. And slowly her eyes widened.

With a gesture almost of repugnance the old woman held the infant at arm's length, peering at it in the pale glow from the open cabin door.

"My Lawd a-mercy!" she whispered. "No wonder Mattie Sue died a-birthin' dis-heah one! Makes no diff'rence if'n hit's a woods colt or not, dis-head chile . . ."

She stopped, staring now at Clarabelle and Ressie. They paused in their grieving, caught by Aunt Fan's queer tone. The old woman was mumbling under her breath, counting on her black fingers; nodding.

"Dat ole squinch-owl!" Ressie sobbed. "I knowed it! If'n hit hadn't a-hollered, Mammy wouldn't . . ."

"Squinch-owl don't mean nothin' to-night," Aunt Fan cut in with an odd intensity. "Eh, Law, hit's jes' stomp-down nachel dat a squinch-owl'd come around to holler at dis-heah birthin'. Nor neither hit wouldn't do no good to put no axes under Mattie's bed, nor do no prayin'. You know why? Dis-heah young-un got six sisters, ain't she? Dat make she a seb'm sister! *She gwine have de Power!*"

Like a solemn period to her words, a clap of thunder boomed in the west, scattering ten-pin echoes all over the sky.

"Yessirree, a seb'm-sister," Aunt Fan repeated, rubbing the wen on her wrinkled forehead for good luck. "Y'all gwine have

trouble wid dis chile! Hit's a pyore pity she didn' die alongside she mammy."

RESSIE and Clarabelle, saucer-eyed, peered at their motherless newborn sister, at her tiny puckered face that resembled nothing so much as a small monkey. But she was *white*, abnormally white! Paler than any "high yaller" pickaninny they had even seen; paler even than a white baby. Her little eyes were a translucent watery pink. Her faint fuzz of hair was like cotton.

"De Lawd he'p us to git right!" Clarabelle whispered in awe. "What us gwine do wid her? Pappy won't leave her stay here—not no woods colt, and *sho* not no seb'm-sister! Will you keep care of her, Aunt Fan? Anyways, till after de funeral?"

The old negress shook her head. With flat emphasis she thrust the wailing bundle into Ressie's arms, and stumped down the porch step.

"Naw suh, honey! Not me! Hit say in de Good Book not to have no truck wid no conjure 'oman. And dat little seb'm-sister of yourn gwine be a plain-out, hard-down conjure 'oman, sho as you born! . . . Jes' keep her out in de corn crib; Dody won't take no notice of her. Feed her on goat's milk . . . Mm-mmm!" Aunt Fan shook her head in wonder. "She sho is a funny color!"

It was a month after Mattie's funeral before Cap'm Jim came down to the Old Place again with the boys and Miss Ruth. When he heard, by neighborhood grapevine, that Dody's new baby was being hidden out in the corn crib like an infant Moses, he stormed down to the cabin with proper indignation.

He took one startled look at the baby, white as a slug that has spent its life in darkness under a rock. Pink eyes blinked up at him painfully. The little thing seemed to be thriving very well on goat's

milk, but the corn crib was draughty and full of rats. Cap'm Jim attacked Dody with the good-natured tyranny of all Deep-Southerners toward the darkies who trust and depend upon them.

"I'm ashamed of you, boy!"—Dody was over ten years older than Dr. Saunders. "Making your own baby sleep out in a corn crib, just for some damnfool notion that she's a hoodoo! And of course she is your own baby. She's just an albino; that's why she's so white."

Dody bobbed and scratched his woolly head. "Yassuh, Cap'm? Sho nuff?"

"Yes. It's a lack of pigment in the skin . . . er . . ." Dr. Saunders floundered, faced by the childlike bewilderment in the big negro's face. "I mean, she's black, but her skin is white. She . . . Oh, the devil! You take that child into your cabin and treat her right, or I'll turn you out so quick it'll make your head swim!"

"Passuh . . ." Dody grinned and bobbed again, turning his frayed straw hat around and around by the brim. "Yassuh, Cap'm . . . You ain't got a quarter you don't need, is you? Seem like we's plumb out o' salt and stuff. Ain't got no nails, neither, to mend de chicken house . . ."

Dr. Saunders grunted and handed him fifty cents. "Here. But if you spend it on bay rum and get drunk this weekend, I'll tan your hide!"

"Nawssuh?" Dody beamed, and guffawed his admiration of the bossman's unerring shot. "I ain't gwine do dat, Cap'm! Does you want me for anything, jes' ring de bell. I'll send Clarabelle on up to look after de boys."

Dody shambled off, grinning. Cap'm Jim let out a baffled sigh. He strode back toward the Place, well aware that Dody would be drunk on dime-store bay rum by nightfall, and that the big rusty plantation bell in the yard would clang in vain if he wanted any chores performed. But he had laid the law down about the

new baby, and that order at least would be obeyed.

"A pure albino!" he told his wife later, at supper. "Poor little mite; it's amazing how healthy she is on that treatment! They won't even give her a name. They just call her Seven Sisters . . . and cross their fool fingers every time she looks at 'em! I'll have to say, myself, she *is* weird-looking with that paper-white hair and skin. Oh, well—they'll get used to her . . ."

Cap'm Jim laughed, shrugged, and helped himself to some more watermelon pickle.

Dody, with his fifty cents, rode mule-back to the nearest town five miles away. In a fatherly moment, while buying his bay rum at the five-and-ten, he bought a nickle's worth of peppermints for the young-uns. He bought salt, soda, and some nails.

Plodding back home up the highway, he passed Aunt Fan's cabin and hailed her with due solemnity.

"Us sho got a seb'm-sister, all right," he called over the sagging wire gate, after a moment of chit-chat. "Cap'm Jim say she ain't no woods colt. He say she black, but she got pigmies in de skin, what make her look so bright-colored. Do, my Savior! I bet she got de blue-gum! I sho ain't gwine let her chaw on my finger like dem other young-uns when she teethin'! I ain't fixin' to get pizened!"

"Praise de Lawd!" Aunt Fan answered non-committally, rocking and fanning herself on the front stoop. "Reckon what-all she gwine be up to when she old enough to be noticin'? Whoo-ee! Make my blood run cold to study 'bout it!"

**D**ODY shivered, clutching his store-purchases as though their prosaic touch could protect him from his own thoughts. If there was any way to get rid of the baby, without violence . . . But Cap'm Jim had said his say, and there was

nothing for him to do but raise her along with the others.

It was a fearful cross to bear. For, Seven Sisters began to show signs of "the Power" at an early age. She could touch warts and they would disappear; if not at once, at least within a few weeks. She would cry, and almost every time, a bullbat would fly out of the dusk, to go circling and screeching about the cabin's field-stone chimney.

Then there was the time when she was three, playing quietly in the cabin's shade, her dead-white skin and hair in freakish contrast with those of her black brothers and sisters. The other pickaninnies were nearby—but not too near; keeping the eye on her demanded by Clarabelle without actually playing with her.

Willie T., five, was playing train with a row of bricks tied on a string. Booger and Gaynelle, twins of eight, were fishing for jackworms—poking a blade of grass down each hole and jerking up the tiny dragon-like insects. Lula and Willene and Buzz, aged twelve, nine, and thirteen, were engaged in a game of squat tag under the fig trees. They were not paying much attention to their queer-colored youngest sister, though from time to time she glanced at them wistfully.

Willie T. it was who happened to look up and see the bird clumsily winging along overhead in the clear June sky. He pointed, not greatly interested.

"Look at dat ole shypoke!" Snatching up a stick, he aimed it at the flapping target, closed one eye, and shouted: "*Bang! Bang! Bab-loom!*" in imitation of Cap'm Jim's rifle. The bird flew on.

The other children glanced up idly. Only the little albino, lonesome and longing for attention, feigned interest in this byplay. Squinting eagerly up at the distant bird, she pointed the old chicken foot with which she was playing, and trebled in mimicry of her brother: "*Bang, bang! Boom!*"

And a weird, incredible thing happened.

The shypoke, flapping along, wavered suddenly, one wing drooping. With a lurching fluttering motion it veered—then fell like a plummet, striking the ground not three yards from where the little girl sat.

Willie T. stared. The bird was dead. There was blood on its feathers.

**I**N A stunned, silent, wide-eyed group Mattie's other children backed away from their ghostly sister. She blinked at them, her pinkish eyes squinting painfully in the sunlight.

"*Bang-bang . . .*" Seven Sisters repeated in a hopeful undertone.

There was a shuffle of running feet. Her lower lip quivered when she saw that she had been left alone.

She was always alone after that, partly because the other children shunned her, and partly because she could not see well enough to run after them. She had developed a peculiar squint, holding her tow-head to one side, slit-eyed, upper lip drawn back to show her oddly pointed little teeth. For a "seven-sister," she tripped over things and hurt herself twice as often as her brothers and sisters who were not gifted with supernatural powers.

Cap'm Jim, on a flying visit to the plantation one Sunday, had noticed the way the child kept always to the shadowy places.

"Weak eyes," he pronounced. "Typical of albinos. Have to get her some special glasses . . ." He sighed, mentally adding up his vanishing bank account. "Oh, well—time enough when she starts to school. Though, Lord help the little thing at recess!"

That preference for shadow was given another connotation by dark-skinned observers.

"Dah! Ain't I done tole you?" Aunt Fan was triumphant. "See jes' like a cat in de dark, but can't see hardly nothin' in de daytime. Yes sirree—she a plain-out,



hard-down conjure 'oman, and I knowed hit de first time I sot eyes on her!"

By this time, the lone screech-owl which had attracted Seven Sisters' birth had become seven screech-owls, hovering in a ring around the cabin to demand Mattie's soul in return for the new baby's "Power."

This "Power" mystified Seven Sisters, though she did not doubt that she had it. Clarabelle and Dody had told her so, ever since she could understand words. Now, a thin too-quiet child of six, she accepted the fact as simply and sadly as one might accept having been born with an interesting club-foot. But, because it was the only way in which she could attract attention—half fear, half respect—the little albino drew on her imagination, and did not herself know where fact ended and fancy began.

The other children jeered at her but were frankly envious. The elders laughed and remarked that nobody but "ig'nant country niggers" believed in conjures any more.

Secretly they came to her by night, and hissed at her window, and proffered silver in return for her magic. Seven Sisters never saw any of the money, however, as the business was always transacted through Clarabelle or Dody.

Some of the things they wanted were incomprehensible to her at first. *Mojoes*—tiny bags of cloth that might contain anything at all, plus the one thing only she possessed: "the Power." In Atlanta, in Birmingham, and Memphis, especially in Harlem, a good one might sell for as much as ten dollars. These, according to whatever words the conjurer mumbled over them, were able to perform all sorts of miracles for the wearer—from restoring the affection of a bored mate to insuring luck in the numbers game.

Seven Sisters, with the precocity of all outcasts, caught the idea early. Like the little girls who started the witch-scare in

Salem, she felt pains and saw apparitions for the bug-eyed approval of kin and neighbors. She made up words and mumbled them on every occasion, squinting weirdly and impressively. She hummed tuneless little chants, in the eerie rhythm of all darkies. She memorized the better-known household "conjures"; such as, burying three hairs from the end of a hound's tail under the front steps to keep him from straying. With ready wit she invented new ones, then forgot them and supplied others on call.

True, most of these tricks had, at one time or another, been subtly suggested by Aunt Fan or Clarabelle as the proper procedure for a "seven-sister." But the little albino, pleased and excited by any substitute for affection, threw herself into the part—a pale wistful Shirley Temple in the role of Cybele.

She wanted to be admired, however. She did not want to be feared.

But even Clarabelle, who loved her in the skittish way one might grow to love a pet snake, gave her a wide berth after the incident of the stomach ache.

**I**T HAPPENED one sultry August day when Dody came stumbling into the cabin, drunker than usual and in a nasty mood.

"Whah dat low-down triflin' Seb'm Sister?" he bellowed. "Whah she at? I'm gwine wear de hide off'n her back—takin' dat four-bit piece from Ole Man Wilson for a huntin' mojo! Hidin' it fum her po' ole pappy what feed her! Whah she at? . . . Young-un, you come out fum under dat table! I sees you!"

The other children, gnawing pork chop bones beside the fireplace—thanks to the sale of a "health mojo" purported to contain the infallible John the Conqueror root—stirred uneasily. In this mood Dody was apt to throw things at anyone within range. But it appeared that Seven Sisters, quak-

ing under the table, was the main object of his wrath tonight.

"Come on out, you heah me?" Dody snarled, grabbing up a stick of lightwood from the hearth and advancing toward the culprit. "I'm gwine whup you good! Stealin' my four-bit . . ."

"I . . . done lost it, Pappy. . . ." Seven Sisters' childish treble was drowned out by his bellow of rage. "Don't whup me! I drapped it in de field. I couldn' see where-at I drapped it—I'll go git it . . ."

"Now you's lyin' to me!" Dody roared, waving his club. "Come on out! I'll learn you . . ."

The other pickaninnies, fascinated, stopped gnawing their chop bones for an instant to watch, their greasy black faces gleaming in the firelight. Dody jerked the table aside. Seven Sisters cringed. Then:

"Don't you hit me wid no stick!" the frightened child shrilled. "I'll put a hod-doo on you! I'll . . ."

Dody lunged, and fell over the table. His stick whistled dangerously close to the child's tow-head.

The next moment Dody was groaning with pain, doubled over, hugging his stomach. Sweat stood out on his black face. He stared at his weirdly white daughter: backed away, thick lips trembling. Seven Sisters made a dive through the open door and out into the friendly night.

Cap'n Jim happened to be at the Place that day; it was a Sunday. He rushed Dody to the nearest city in his car. Appendicitis, Cap'm Jim called it, to the man at the hospital. He and Miss Ruth had a good laugh over Dody's version of the attack.

But after that, Clarabelle stopped giving her little albino sister a playful spank when she was naughty. No one would touch her, even in fun.

"I done tole you!" Aunt Fan intoned. "Do, Moses! Puttin' a hoodoo on she own pappy! Dat ole Sab'm Sister, she jes' born to trouble! She *bad!*"

For more than a week thereafter, Seven Sisters hid in the woods, creeping out only to sneak food from the kitchen. She was deeply frightened. So frightened that when Cap'm Jim came to bring Dody back from the hospital, she ran from him like a wild creature. If she had not tripped over a log and knocked the breath from her slight body, he would never have caught her.

DR. SAUNDERS helped her up and held her gently by the shoulders, marveling anew at her negroid features and cotton-white hair and skin. Her single garment, a faded dress which had not been changed for eight days, hung half off one shoulder, torn and filthy. She was trembling all over, squinting up at him with white-lashed pinkish eyes dilated by terror.

"Now, now, child," the tall bossman was saying, in a tone as gentle as the grip of his hands. "What have those fools been telling you? That it's your fault about Dody's appendix? Well, Heaven help us!" He threw back his head, laughing, but stopped when he saw how it frightened his small captive. "Why, don't be scared. Cap'n Jim won't hurt you. Look here—I've got a present for you! Don't let the other young-uns get hold of it, you hear? Just hide it and play with it all by yourself, because it's yours."

The little albino stopped trembling. Gingerly she took the proffered box and gaped at the treasure inside. A doll-baby a foot high! With real hair, red hair, and eyes that opened and shut. When she turned it over, it gave a thin cry: "*Ma-ma!*" Seven Sisters giggled.

The cap'm chuckled. "Oh, I don't reckon you want this old doll-baby," he made a pretense of taking it back, eyes twinkling. The child clutched at it. "You do? Well, then, what do you say?"

Seven Sisters ducked her head shyly. "I

don' care," she whispered—polite rural South for "Thank you!"

Dr. Saunders chuckled again. "That's a good girl." He stood up; gave her a careless pat. Then he strode off toward the Place, frowning over his own problems—not the least of which was mother-in-law trouble.

He and Ruth and their two boys had been so happy in their touch-and-go way. Then his wife's mother, a forthright lady from Oklahoma, had descended upon them and decided to run their lives with a new efficiency. With her customary dispatch she had found a buyer for the old Saunders plantation, and was now raging at her slipshod son's reluctance to sell.

Even Cap'm Jim had to admit that the price was half again as much as the property was worth. Besides, his practice in Chattanooga had been dwindling of late. A mother-in-law could point out such matters so vividly . . . !

Seven Sisters blinked after his retreating back. Keeping to the shade of the pine coppice, she followed the tall white man a little way, the doll squeezed tightly against her soiled blue-gingham dress. Cap'm Jim waved at someone, who met him in the orchard—a pretty red-headed woman. They went on to the house together, arms about each other's waists. Seven Sisters watched them until they were out of sight.

Thereafter she listened attentively whenever Dody or Clary spoke of the Cap'm. She grew to love anyone that he loved, and to hate anyone that he hated, with a dog-like loyalty. In her child's mind, Good became personified as Dr. Saunders, and Evil as either the sheriff or Old Miz Beecher.

It was common knowledge about the mother-in-law trouble. Clarabelle, who cooked all year round for the Saunderses now, had passed along every word of the quarrel.

"Us'll git turnt out like white-trash if'n

de Cap'm sell de Place," Dody mourned. "Dat old Miz Beecher! Do, Law! Dat ole 'oman means as a cottonmouth! She don' care what happen to us niggers, nor nobody. Miss Ruth sho don't take after her none. I wisht she'd fall down de steps and bus' her brains out, so she wouldn't plague de Cap'm no more! If'n he don' sell come Thursday, Thanksgiving, she gwine jes' make his life mis'able!"

Seven Sisters listened, huddled apart from her black kin in a shadowy corner of the cabin. Her little heart began to beat rapidly as a mad idea crept into her tow-head. Without a sound, she slipped out into the frosty night of mid-November.

There was a thing Aunt Fan had hinted to her one day—or rather, to Clarabelle within her hearing, since no one ever spoke directly to a seven-sister in idle conversation. Something about a . . . a *graven image*. There was even, Aunt Fan said, a passage about it in the Good Book, warning all Christians to steer clear of the matter.

But Seven Sisters was not a Christian. She had never been baptized in the creek like the rest of Dody's brood. Nothing hindered the plan. And . . . it sounded remarkably simple.

". . . whatever you does to de image, you does to de one you names it!" Aunt Fan's solemn words came back to her clearly. "Jes' wrop somep'm around it what dey wears next to dey skin—don't make no never-mind what hit is. And dat's de conjure! Eh, Law, I seed a conjure man do dat when I was married up wid my first husband. And de 'oman he conjure drap daid as a doornail dat same winter. . . . And dey do say as how hit were a big black cat got in de room whah dey was settin' up wid de corp. Hit jump up on de bed and go to yowlin' like ole Satan hisself! Yes sirree, dat's de Lawd's truth like I'm tellin' you!"

Seven Sisters, picking her way easily

through the dark, slipped into the pine coppice. After a moment, heart pounding, she dug up something from under a pile of leaves. A faint sound issued from it, causing her to start violently—"Mama!"

LIKE a small white ghost, the child then ran through the peach orchard. The Place, dark now since Cap'm Jim had gone back to Chattanooga, loomed just ahead. Seven Sisters found what she was looking for, under the steps of the isolated kitchen—an old piece of silk nightgown that she had seen Miss Ruth's mother herself give Clarabelle as a polishing rag for the flat silver. The older girl had used it and flung it under the kitchen steps. Seven Sisters retrieved it now furtively, and padded swiftly back through the orchard.

Deep in the pine coppice, lighted only by the filtered light of a quarter moon, she sat down cross-legged. For a long time she stared at the lovely thing Cap'm Jim had given her, the only thing that had ever been truly her own. The hair was so soft, the glass eyes so friendly. But now the doll had taken on a new personality, a hated one. Seven Sisters glared at it, shivering a little.

Then, deftly, she tied the silk rag about its china neck, and stood up.

"Ole Miz Beecher—you's ole Miz Beecher!" she hissed with careful emphasis; then clarified, against all mistake, to whatever dark pointed ears might be listening: "Miss Ruth's mama. Cap'm Jim's wife's mama. Dat's who you is, doll; you heah me? Ole Miz Beecher . . .!"

With a fierce motion she banged the poppet hard against a tree trunk. The china head broke off and rolled at her bare feet.

"Ma-ma!" wailed the headless body, accusingly.

Seven Sisters dropped it as though it

were red-hot. She backed away, rubbing her hands on her dress like an infant Lady Macbeth, and shuddering in the Indian summer chill. Panting, shaken, she turned and ran back to the cabin.

But she paused in the half-open door.

Excited activity was going on inside. Aunt Fan was there, puffing with importance and fumbling for her box of snuff. Dody was shouting questions, wringing his big hands. Clarabelle, Ressie, and the others were milling about like a flock of chickens, clucking and squawking in chorus.

". . . and de phome call say for you to clean up de fambly lot on de south hill," Aunt Fan made herself heard shrilly. "She gwine be buried fum de Place like Miss Addie. . . ."

"Oh, Lawsy! Ain't it awful?" This from Ressie.

"Sho is, honey," Aunt Fan agreed complacently. "I don't reckon de Cap'm 'll ever be de same, hit was so awful. I don't reckon he care what become of de Place, nor nothin', he so cut up about hit."

"Lawd he'p us!" Dody shouted for a fifth time. "When it happen? How come?"

"I done tole you," Aunt Fan repeated, relishing the drama of her words. "Truck run slap into 'em. She was plumb flang out'n de car. Cap'm wont even scratched up. But it broke her pore neck. . . ."

The child in the doorway caught her breath sharply. The conjure had worked! So soon? A little knot of nausea gathered in her stomach, in memory of the china head rolling against her bare foot. Then an angry thought came.

"Aunt Fan— Cap'm ain't gwine bury dat ole 'oman in de fambly lot, is he?" Seven Sisters piped above the chatter. "Not dat ole Miz Beecher. . . .!"

The excited group barely glanced at her, impatient of the interruption.

"Miz Beecher?" Aunt Fan grunted.

"Law, chile, hit ain't ole Miz Beecher what got killt. Hit was Miss Ruth . . ." The aged negress went on with her narrative, dwelling on the details with relish. "And de man tole Marse Joe Andrews over de phome . . . Eh, Law; he say de Cap'm jes' set dah by she bed and hold she hand. Don't cry nor nothin'. Jes' set dah and stare, like he daid, too. . . ."

Seven Sisters heard no more. A sound like falling timber roared in her ears. Through it, dimly, she thought she heard a screech-owl's quavering cry—eerie, mocking, malicious.

SHE turned and ran. Ran, blindly sobbing. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth! She had forgotten Miss Ruth's hair was red, exactly like the doll's. And . . . that soiled bit of nightgown might not have been old Miz Beecher's at all, but Miss Ruth's. Cap'm Jim's Miss Ruth. . . .

Beyond the cornfield the black woods opened up to receive the small ghostly figure, running like an animal in pain; running nowhere, anywhere, into the chill autumn night.

Sawbriars tore dark scratches in her dead-white skin, but Seven Sisters did not feel them. She ran, careening into tree trunks and fighting through scuppernong vines, until the salt taste of blood came into her mouth. Twice she fell and lay in the damp leaves for a long time, her thin shoulders racked with sobs.

"Oh, Cap'm! Cap'm Jim . . . I . . . I didn't go to do it!" she whimpered aloud once. "I didn' mean to! I didn'—hones' I didn' . . ."

At that moment she heard the dogs baying.

Tense as a fox, she sat up and listened. Was it only Old Man Wilson, hunting with his pack along the north ridge? Or was it . . . the Law? A posse, with guns, following the deputy sheriff and his two

flop-eared bloodhounds through the canebrake. Following a trail of small bare feet. *Her feet . . .*

The little albino sprang up, her flat darkey features contorted with panic. Harrowing yarns crowded her memory. Of the time Aunt Fan's preacher husband had hid in the canebrake for eight days, with the dogs baying closer and closer. And Aunt Fan's husband had only cut a man with his razor, while *she . . .*

Just then she heard the screech-owl, right over her head.

Seven Sisters was running again, goaded now by the spurs of terror. But now the very woods seemed hostile. Gnarled branches snatched at her cottony hair and tore a jagged flap in her gingham dress. Old spider webs clung to her face. The dogs sounded nearer. Once more she tripped and fell, panting, but sprang up again with a scream as something slithered out from beneath her arm.

The screech-owl tittered again, from somewhere above her. It seemed to be trailing the ghostly little fugitive, so white against the ground.

Seven Sisters ran on, blindly, staggering with exhaustion. Once she cried out in her terror—oddly, the very name of the one she was running from:

*"Cap'm . . . ! Cap'm Jim . . ."*

Of a sudden the ground dropped from beneath her feet. She pitched forward, and felt herself falling into space. Dark icy water rushed up out of nowhere to meet and engulf her . . .

Mist rose from the cornfield in front of Dody's cabin. Dry leaves rattled. The gourds on the martin pole swung in the wind.

Somewhere a screech-owl quavered again, far away, in the direction of the creek—whose muddy waters had washed away the sins of many a baptized little darkey.