

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1946

Cover by Pete Kuhlhoff

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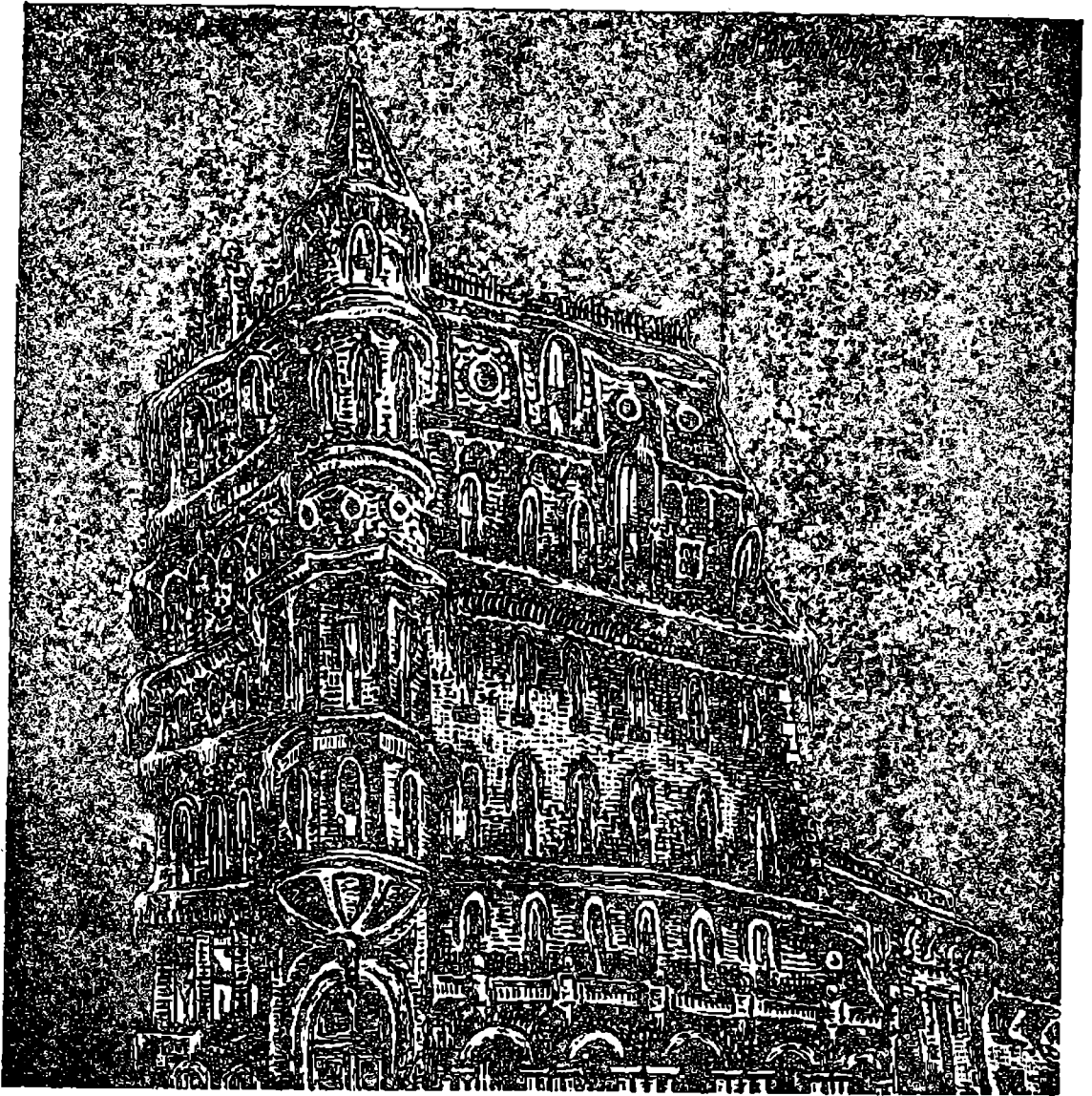
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*Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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# Six Flights to Terror

BY MANLY BANISTER

**T**HE building was known in the city as the Heathcliff. No one could tell, without consulting the records, just how long it had been empty. It stood six stories above a corner lot, and for a couple of generations had frowned down upon the ebb and flow of city traffic at the cross-street. Its red brick facing, once grand,

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

*It was a dead thing, and dead things should be buried—  
but how do you bury a building?*

was weathered now; sandstone cornices, copings, and window-sills were chipped and eroded by the elements, crusted with an accumulation of pigeon-droppings.

Roman-arched windows stared blindly with grimed panes. The corner was semi-cylindrical, topped with an angle-tower. Its bizarre style of romanesque architecture made of the Heathcliff an alien thing, as though it had been lifted bodily and transported here from its haunted place deep in a mysterious part of Europe.

Clem Lewis hated the building. It was a dead thing, and dead things should be buried. He hated it, too, because whenever he lifted his eyes from his work, it was there, cater-corner across the street, immense, brooding, sombre, and its many-windowed stare challenged his own with a sullen and unspeakable nastiness.

In Clem's mind, the Heathcliff had assumed a personality; rather the building had *impressed* its personality upon Clem's consciousness. There were dozens of buildings in the city he could look at and admire. There were hundreds he could scorn for meanness. There was one he could hate for the inimical life he fancied pulsed in its weathered structure.

Not that Clem Lewis believed the building lived. Not at first. Clem didn't have that much imagination. But it seemed to him that a spirit of malignance permeated the gloomy pile, reached across the street between them, and locked his uplifted glance in a silent struggle of will. He was repelled by it.

A glance at that sombre facade produced a response that was almost irresistible, an elemental urge that appealed to the baseness of his soul, to the part of him that could forswear light and reason and could grovel abjectly with fear of something unknown. The surface of his mind rejected the urge. The deep, murky coils of his subconscious responded to the eldritch call of the building as a violin string responds to the rasp of the fiddler's bow.

"Weird old pile of bricks," Clem one day told the office at large. "It ought to be torn down."

He fell silent from the sudden thrill that shot through him. Did the thought delight him? Or was the thrill a warning, an ac-

knowledgment that he felt the subtly expressed resentment of a thing, an entity, that could read his thoughts?

Clem's attitude toward the building did not really congeal into a concrete feeling of loathing until the night he met Ann Summers. He didn't know that was her name at the time. He found it out later. She plummeted into his arms out of the lobby of the Heathcliff, a part of the building still in occasional use. She struck him with such hurried force he had to fling his arms about her to keep them both from tumbling to the sidewalk.

IT WAS as late as ten o'clock, and the wan shine of the street lamps made glittering highlights on the rain-wet street, piled moist shadows in the roman-arched entrance to the Heathcliff. He saw her face in this light, pale and strained-looking beneath its essential prettiness. Her large, dark eyes were opened wide, fixed with an expression of terror that was familiar to his experience. And while he held her momentarily, she clutched tiny, white hands at the sleeves of his topcoat, and her knuckles stood out whiter still than the flesh around them. The drizzling rain moistened chestnut curls, gathered in a damp film upon her fear-grayed cheeks and pertly turned up nose. It stood in glistening beads upon the little red felt hat she wore. Clem caught his breath first.

"Uh, I beg your pardon, miss."

The girl drew back at the sound of his voice. She still clutched the topcoat, and her arms began to shake while her eyes searched his face and the fear slowly went out of them.

"You're cold," he said for lack of anything better to say.

She cast a quick, still-frightened glance into the yellow-lit lobby of the Heathcliff, looked back into his face and forced a pallid smile.

"No. I—I'm sorry I bumped you. I wasn't looking."

She made as if to draw away, but he held her.

"Something is wrong," he said flatly. "You came dashing out of that place like a league of devils was after you. Maybe you need the police?"

She laughed shakily, "No, certainly not the police! They might arrest *me* for trespassing!" She took a quick breath and released it with a fluttery sigh. "I'm being silly. You'll never forgive me. Now, let me go, please."

Clem let her go. She walked unsteadily a few steps, then seemed to gather assurance in her pace and continued rapidly, high heels tap-tapping on the pavement. The wind whispered softly along the weathered facade of the ancient building. The city stirred and grumbled around him in nocturnal passivity. He shrugged and continued his way, thinking of the dismal structure and of the strangely beautiful young woman it had expelled into his arms.

He waited at the next corner for a street car. When one came along, he found that, for no accountable reason, he was shaking. He was still shaking twenty minutes later when he let himself into his darkened apartment.

A couple of slugs of whiskey claimed him sufficiently for a shower and a try at sleep. He dreamed. He dreamed the girl again came flying out of the repulsive maw of the building into his arms. He held her, held her tightly against an insidious force that pulled and worried at her, tried to drag her back into hideous darkness fraught with a pulsing menace of unguessable horrors.

He awoke with a start, pajamas sweat-soaked, and got shakily out of bed. Before he could twist the lamp and shed comforting light upon the room, his glance strayed to the pale oblong of the window. His chest tightened with foreboding. Something was out there—something he had to see. He went to the window and stared . . . and reeled . . . and he could not stop staring. The space across the street, usually occupied by a row of small bungalows, bulked now with black shadow, a gruesomely distorted shape that fanned upward against the stars in a clearing sky—a faint fantasmic illusion that bore the unmistakable outlines of the Heathcliff building.

As Clem Lewis stared, eyes frozen with terror in the pallid mask of his face, the building stared back, grim, many-eyed, cery and threatening.

The air whistled from Clem's lungs, and he staggered back, thrusting himself away

from the sight. But he had to look. He dragged his eyes around in their sockets. The light of a crescent moon glittered on the damp roofs of a row of neat little bungalows.

THE office staff whispered behind Clem's back. They talked about his service in the war, and wondered if it had affected him. He's so *strange*. He's so *nervous*. Do you suppose he's got combat fatigue, or whatever it is veterans of the combat zone are supposed to have? Clem needs a *rest*. Maybe he went back to work too *soon*, after he got out of the service.

The whispers reached the main office. Job Mortenson, general manager, had Clem in his office and off-hand gave him a week's vacation.

"You're working too hard," he said in a kindly tone, "and not getting enough sleep. Get away from the city. Spend a week in the country and rest up. The company can spare you right now, and your pay will go on as if you were here."

Clem was tempted to refuse. But you didn't refuse a week's vacation with pay. And you didn't tell the boss you weren't overworking, even when you had hardly enough work to keep you busy; certainly, not enough to keep your mind from gnawing at the dreadful, startling knowledge *that you had a building following you!*

Was his mind slipping, Clem wondered? He remembered men carried screaming from the battlefield, minds more horribly fissured and bleeding than their bodies could be and live. For a week now, the Heathcliff building had mercilessly stalked him. At least once each night it positioned itself across the street from his apartment and watched him, called to him through the tangled communication maze of his subconscious until he responded by going to the window and revelling in horror at the sight.

Once he had dressed hurriedly and bolted from the illusion. Down the street was an all-night hamburger stand, and he had closed himself within its steamy warmth and tried to calm his shaking nerves with hot, black coffee. And while he sipped at the thick lip of the mug, the building had searched him out. Looking out through the misted windows, he saw it there across the

street, looking in upon him with its many-windowed gaze.

He was never alone any more. The building always pursued him. He could neither avoid it nor leave it behind. Going away from the city might bring relief. Where should he go? He closed his mind on the thought. He dared not think the name of the place that sprang to his mind. The building would read his mind and follow him there.

He packed, called a taxi, and directed the driver upon a roundabout course toward the station.

He met her again there. . . lovely, frightened Ann Summers. He looked at her and recognition was swift. She stood out from the crowd of shuffling, hurrying travellers. She crouched, rather than sat, in the waiting room seat, and her white-knuckled hand was clenched tightly on the stub of a railroad ticket. A small bag rested on the floor at her feet. He dropped into the seat beside her with the familiarity of an old acquaintance.

"We meet again," he said, with an attempt at lightness.

Dark, liquid eyes searched his face, glimmered, and the light went out.

"I don't know you," she said stolidly.

"Come now," he said shrugging. "We're both running from the same thing. Why shouldn't we run together?" He noticed shrewdly her sudden start of fright. "Does it follow you, too?" he asked.

"I don't—don't know what you mean," her tone was dry, thick. She darted quick glances about, as if seeking an exit, then her eyes came back to his face. There was resignation in her expression.

"You know all about it," she said tonelessly.

He kicked his suitcase. "I don't think we can run away from it, either," he confessed. "Wherever we go, that damned building will hound us out. It does follow you, doesn't it?"

"I—oh, yes! You couldn't know, unless. . . ."

"Unless it follows me, too," he finished for her. "It does. And unless we're both crazy, it's more than I can understand. Meeting you here has given me a better idea than running away."

Her eyes grew large with hope.

"Suppose you cash in your ticket and let me take you home," he suggested. "We'll stick it out together."

SHE stiffened momentarily, then relaxed and nodded pitifully. He said no more, even after she got a refund on her ticket and came back, and he took her to a cab, and the cab took them to the address she gave.

"Will you come up?" she asked shyly.

Clem looked down at his suitcase.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"You haven't told me your name," she reminded him.

He told her, and learned what she was called. "You need a good sleep," he said. "Don't look out the window tonight, y'hear?"

She shuddered. He forced a grin.

"Chin up. I'll be around tomorrow evening . . . early. We'll do the town. Promise you won't try to run out on me?"

"If I do," she smiled sadly, "I'm afraid it—it will bring me back!"

He waved to her as the cab drove away. She looked little and alone standing beside her bag on the pavement.

So he knew her name and he knew her fear. The fear was real. It was his own fear. Not madness. Malignance. The evil life of the building was something beyond his understanding. One is so helpless in the face of a thing one does not and can not understand. To whom could he go for an explanation? Nobody. They would call him mad. Where could he run? No place. The monster would seek him out. What could he do? Stay and fight! How? That was his problem.

THEY had seen a show and had a drink at El Kasbah. He took her home in a cab. He was only going to stay a minute. He was confident everything would be all right. He could not know that the building was . . . jealous.

Ann's compartment was small and neat, like herself. You could see that at one time or another she had relegated most of the landlord's furniture to the basement or to other, less fortunate apartments. The tastefully arranged furnishings reflected her own temperament and character. Clem settled

comfortably in a lounge chair. Ann mixed cocktails in the diminutive kitchen, chatted brightly with him through the open door. She brought him the mixed drink.

"I've been thinking," he said, lending an ear to the clink of ice in the glass.

Her expression became drawn. All evening she had been trying to be gay, trying to forget the incredible onus of their lives. There was a genuine attraction between these two. The evening's association had deepened the hold each had upon the other's feelings. They both knew it.

"Somehow," Clem went on, "we've run across something that wasn't meant to be discovered. I don't know what's behind it. Maybe it's a kind of illusion. For all we know, half the town may be affected the same way we are. And everybody hiding it . . . mob hysteria."

"Do you really believe that?" Ann asked him.

"No. That was just a slap-dab attempt at scientific explanation. Psychology. That sort of thing. When I first saw you, you were running out of that building . . . running away from something. I've seen guys running and looking like you looked. But they knew what they were running from. I've wondered. What were you doing there?"

Ann furrowed her forehead. "I—I was passing by. All of a sudden, I had an urge to go in . . . see what the place looked like inside. There was only that little light on in the lobby. It was terribly dark on the stairs. Even darker up above. I listened, but the place was so quiet I could hear the blood rushing in my ears. I don't know why, but I started to go up to the second floor. I hadn't even a flashlight with me. I think I almost got there, then . . . then I got frightened."

Her face had gone white. "I don't know why I was frightened. . . . I didn't know then. I was so grateful to . . . to you for being there when I ran out."

Clem drained his glass.

"I'm glad I was there," he said quietly. "Though it wasn't until after I met you that the building began showing up wherever I went."

"It—it was here that night when I got home," Ann confessed. "I didn't scream. I was too scared to scream. It just sat quietly

across the street, and it seemed to be watching my windows. I ran into the house. When I could bring myself to look out the window, it . . . it was gone. After that, I saw it often, even in the daytime, and all over town. I never dared tell anybody about it before."

"There is life in a city," Clem mused, "life that is beyond the life of the people who live there. The people build the city, then the city starts building the people. It twists them about and shapes their lives to fit into its own destiny. You would think that is allegory, but it is fact. We never consider the city itself as being sentient. It borrows the life of the people. Could the city, or part of it, borrow life . . . and not give it back?"

"Suppose it could. Why does that horrible building follow us wherever we go? How does it do it?"

"I could explain that in too many ways to make sense. Say it is alive. Say it has super intelligence. It might hop through the fourth dimension. It might work on our minds and make us think we see it. Probably, we'll never know. I don't know why it does it, either. Maybe because we've guessed its secret . . . found out what wasn't meant to be discovered."

Ann suddenly buried her face in her hands. "I'm afraid, Clem! I'm afraid to be alone. Don't ever let me be alone, will you?"

Clem shifted uneasily, reached out and took her hand.

"Ann, we have to stand together to fight it. I don't know how we will, but we will. We'll be married tomorrow, then. . . ."

She squeezed his hand, and the response was enough for Clem. A moment later, he was kissing her, murmuring comfortingly. After a while, he kissed her one last time and went away.

CLEM awoke to the shrilling alarm of the telephone. He stumbled from the bedroom into the living room, bumping his shins on a rocker on the way. It was Ann calling. There was hysteria in her voice.

"Clem! Is that you, Clem? Oh, thank God you're there! Clem, it's here . . . the building. Outside my window. It . . . it doesn't go away, Clem. I shouted and screamed at it to go away. It's still there.

It has a . . . a voice, Clem. Like a big bell. It's calling me. I . . . I . . . Clem!"

Her voice died away in a whimper of terror. Clem rattled the instrument but got no further response. Cursing savagely, he groped for the light switch, found it, and bounded into his clothes. He left the house running. Two blocks away, he halted, breathless, and signalled a cruising cab.

The cab waited while he bounded up the stairs to Ann's apartment. There was no answer to his thunderous knocking. The door was unlocked. He flung it open and went in. His own hoarse breathing whistled on the blanket of silence.

Ann was not there. She was not in the sitting room. Not in the ridiculous little kitchenette. Not in the bath. Ann was not anywhere. He looked for a note and found none. The phone had been returned carefully to its cradle.

He looked in the closet. Ann's coat was on its hanger, her pert little red hat on the shelf. Slips and dresses hung neatly. Several pairs of shoes toed an invisible line on the floor. What had Ann worn when she went out? Where had she gone?

He went slowly back to the cab, a haunting fear nagging at his mind. Since leaving Ann, he had not been stalked by the building. He felt all of a sudden as if a great load were gone from his mind. What did that mean? He was not even interested in speculating about the building. Somewhere this night, his fear had left him completely. But Ann!

A pain pierced his chest. What had she said? The building was calling to her. It had a voice, like a . . . a big bell. Had she answered that voice? The thought was nonsense, but had she gone to that building—downtown? He gave crisp orders to the driver.

Tires swished on the pavement as the cab drove off and left him standing before the dark maw of the Heathcliff building. A bitter chill was in the air, and a few snowflakes had begun to drift down. An earlier rain had frozen as it fell, and the pavement was icy. It was quiet, restlessly quiet as the heart of a city is at three o'clock in the morning. It began to snow harder. Clem hunched his shoulders against the bitter wind and dodged into the building entrance.

The door should have been locked. It was not. The yellow bulb in the deserted lobby had long since been extinguished. It was as black as the throat of Hell inside, and cold.

Clem contacted a pencil-flash in his pocket. It cast a pale yellow cone through the darkness. He stood at the foot of the stairs and shot the gleam upward. Somewhere up there, the caretaker should be sleeping.

He could see nothing beyond the feeble range of his torch except greater more all-enshrouding blackness. He started up stealthily.

"Clem!"

THE voice sounded close—very close, almost as if it originated inside his own skull. It had been Ann's voice. He halted and listened.

"Go away, Clem!"

Undoubtedly, it was Ann speaking to him. But the words still sounded as if they came from inside his skull. Or perhaps from just ahead, up the stairs. He advanced cautiously, whispering, and damp, mouldy walls flung the whisper back at him.

"Take it easy, Ann, dear, I'm coming."

"No Clem. Go away. You can't help me. It won't harm you, if you go away."

He was sure, now, that the voice came from just a little way ahead of him, up the stairs. He advanced softly.

They were crazy, he thought, both of them. At least, he had been. Imagining things about a ratty old building. Ann must have gone under, wandering around in this macabre old shell. He'd have to find her and take her away. He could reason with her when he got her out of the place.

"You were right, Clem," Ann said. Her voice was clear, unfrightened, pitched low. It sounded very sweet and very sad. "The building lives. It loves life, all the things you and I love . . . loved. It wanted . . . me, Clem. You were in the way."

"Hold on, honey I'll be with you in a minute," Clem whispered fiercely.

Ann's voice receded as he advanced. She pleaded with him to turn back. He reached the landing, found the next flight and continued up. Another flight, and another. His torch grew weaker. He could barely see the treaders under his feet. A penetrating chill

came out of the unseen walls smote through his topcoat, made his flesh cold.

"There is nothing you can do now, Clem," Ann said, reasoning with him. "Go while you can. And remember I loved you, Clem; but this is bigger than either of us. I understand only a little you never would understand."

Clem set his teeth and continued doggedly to trail the voice. Ann's words grew faint, and he came to a door. The door was at the head of the stairs. He groped for the knob as the batteries of his flash failed, aware that he had climbed six flights and the door before him gave upon the roof. When his light went out, complete and utter blackness leaped upon him. He tugged at the door.

He met the bitter kiss of the wind, the stinging deluge of snow and flying ice particles. The storm smothered him, filled his eyes and mouth and nostrils. Upon the open roof, the wind whipped with gale-like fury. He staggered upon the treacherous footing. Faintly he heard Ann's thin entreaty.

"Go back, go back, Clem!"

He plunged in the direction of Ann's voice, advanced twenty yards and came to an obstruction, a wall. The voice came from above now.

Clem was beyond power to reason. His mind was possessed by an *idée fixe*. He must find Ann and take her away from here. Out of breath from the six-story climb, he panted harshly. The wind whipped and beat at him, hurled blinding snow into his face. He stumbled over something that lay flat on the roof. He stooped, discovered a ladder. Grunting his triumph, he heaved it against the obstruction that blocked his advance. He started up the icy rungs:

Ann was crying now. He could detect the teats in her voice.

"Go back, Clem. Please go back!"

He stopped, flung his head back, and yelled into the storm.

"I'm taking you back with me, Ann!"

"Clem!"

HIS groping hands went past the top rung of the ladder, found a slanting surface, rounded, slated, slippery with a coating of ice. It was the roof of the angle-tower at the corner of the Heathcliff building. He paused while this knowledge percolated into his numbed brain.

But Ann was up there. She was up there somewhere, on the tower. He could hear her crying. It wasn't right for Ann to cry. Ann was too lovely ever to cry or be unhappy. He would have to reason with her. Make her understand it was just a silly notion she had that the building was haunting her. . .

"Clem." Ann's voice was very close, plain in spite of the howling wind. "Clem, I told you the . . . the building wanted me. It . . . it heard us, Clem, planning to get married. It was jealous and took me away. Go back now, while you can. You can't have me, not ever. I'm already married, Clem. . . I'm married to the building!"

Clem flung himself toward Ann's voice, reaching out and clawing with both hands, as if he might thus seize her. He did not seize Ann. He did not seize anything. There was no purchase, not anywhere. There was only steeply slanting tile, covered thickly with ice, and the snow swirled around.

The shriek of the wind grew louder in his ears, and the thought occurred to him that he was falling. But it was too dark to see the grimed, opaque windows hurtling upward past him. With his last thought, he wondered if Ann would be unhappy without him. . . .

