

# WEIRD STORY MAGAZINE

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# SO THIS IS DEATH

by J. LEOPOLD WOLLETT

I DIED quite easily. I hadn't thought that, or I would have taken what I it would be so easy to die as all expect the newspapers described as "the fatal plunge" a lot sooner.

And what they tell you about all your past life passing before you while you're drowning is all poppycock. At first it was pretty awful, and then all I was thinking about was if I could get another mouthful of air to help me out before my lungs burst with the water that was being sucked into them and how my eardrums were cracking with the roaring in them, and so on. In other words, I was funking it at the last.

Then all that passed, and I stopped struggling and got quite peaceful. It seemed as though I was a long way from myself, and was just going to sleep in a nice, soft bed. It wasn't warm, of course, but I was so cold and numb that it felt almost the same as being warm.

And the queer part of it is that I actually *did* sleep, and I dreamed. I dreamed about death—but not mine. Other people's. I dreamed about the death of Peggy, and the death of Tim, the dog. Went through it all over again, but this time, funnily enough, I felt no pain or grief, like I had done before. And when they were both gone, I felt very lonely—but only like you do when you've seen someone you're fond of off by train somewhere and you know you'll meet again soon.

I didn't feel that awful, hopeless

loneliness; that terrible, rending uneasable pain; or that sense that there was nothing now left at all to live for, which was why I had deliberately swum out beyond my distance and then let myself sink. . . .

I woke up slowly. It was a bad sort of waking. I was quite dry, but very cold, with a curious sort of coldness like I had never felt before. It was a sort of *empty* coldness. That's the nearest I can describe it. Rather like the sort of coldness you feel on quite a warm day, when you haven't had anything to eat for a long time. And yet not quite like that, either.

I wondered where I was. I couldn't see anything—not because it was dark but because there was a thick, grey mist everywhere. A queer sort of mist that seemed to shut one in very closely.

Then I remembered. I felt myself—my clothes. It was rather like feeling something when your hand is numb. But I could make out that I had all my clothes on, and that they were not wet, which struck me as curious. I was lying on ground, like baked earth, very hard and quite dry.

I got slowly onto my feet. My limbs were very stiff at first, but got easier with every movement. I still couldn't see a thing for the mist—not even my own hand when I held it up before my face. It felt queer. Not exactly frightened, but very *strange*—so strange that it felt almost like being frightened, except that, somehow, I knew

quite certainly that there was nothing to be *frightened* of—or about.

It came to me that I had better walk. I tried, and found I could do so, though my limbs felt heavy. Almost as though there were lead weights tied to them.

So I set off to walk through the mist. I could still not see a thing, but I walked at my best pace, without caution lest I should fall into a hole, or trip over something. I had no fear of that, and, anyway, my top speed was little better than a crawl.

I continued to walk—I don't know for how long. I still felt terribly cold, but that was not so bad as the loneliness. I felt lonelier than I ever had before—more lonely than I should have thought anyone could ever have felt. I seemed to be the only living thing in the Universe—a Universe without colour, or shape, or sound. It was dreadful—but still I was not frightened, or even anxious.

Presently, as I walked, the mist seemed to get lighter, and thinner. It was white now, instead of grey, and I could make out the ground at my feet. It was flat and smooth and hard, like beaten earth or rock, with no colour or variation in it.

I kept on. The mist got thinner and lighter, very vaguely I sensed that there were other people, or things, in the vicinity, somewhere. I got a nebulous sort of impression of figures that moved, and of shapes that did not. Buildings, maybe.

As I went along the visibility increased, and soon I found that I was in a curious situation. I was walking along a narrow path, or causeway, and on each side of me there was a stretch of water, black, oily, and very still. There was no ruffle on the surface, and I could see no land beyond, on either side.

But as I went I became conscious of changes. The mist lightened still more, and changed to a faint yellowish colour. There was a suggestion of sunlight somewhere behind it. I noted, also, that the path I was walking along grew slowly wider, and the waters on either side proportionately narrowed. I could faintly see land now on either side, and as I went along the banks—they were smooth and straight, as though cut by hand—grew nearer and nearer, but very gradually. There were no trees, no shrubs, no flowers and no buildings, it was all very flat and utterly desolate. Except for those vague impressions of movement in the background, almost beyond my ken.

In much the same vague way I became conscious of sound. a broken murmuring, as of voices, but very nebulous, and quite unintelligible.

I went on. I became gradually warmer, and still the path I trod widened, and the waters on either side of me narrowed.

And then, on a sudden, I stopped dead. For, very faint and distant, but still unmistakable, there came to my ears a sound that was as familiar as my own voice—and more welcome to me than all the songs of all the angels. The distant barking of a dog! Or, rather, not of *a* dog, but of one dog in particular. A high-pitched, yelping note that brought the sort of thrill to my heart I never expected to know again. The shrill, ecstatic bark of my old dog, Tim, used to give vent to when he saw me in the distance. And it was coming nearer . . . !

Nearer and nearer . . . ! Louder and louder . . . ! And presently there was the old chap himself, on the left-hand bank, leaping about and almost screaming with delight at the sight of me. I called his name as loudly as I

could, but it seemed as though my voice was muffled by cotton-wool, or something like that. All the same, he seemed to hear it, for he paused for a moment as though to listen. Then he started barking and leaping again. He tried to get into the water, but at the last moment seemed to be frightened of it. Queer, that, because he had always been a good water-dog.

As I stood there, staring at him. Filling my eyes with the sight of his old, familiar shape. I couldn't see him quite clearly—it was almost as though I was looking through clouded glass. I put that down to the mist, or to some dimness of my eyes.

It came to me that I must walk on. The path was widening, and the water narrowing—in time I might be able to jump it, or Tim could. . . .

So I walked on, and Tim, barking and yelping on an increasingly loud note, followed along the further bank.

After awhile I heard a new sound. It was as though someone called my name in a very faint voice—and it was my name spoken in an old, familiar way, as I had never expected to hear it spoken again. And, turning my head, I saw on the right hand bank another figure—a human one, this time—that had lived for months only in my memory. In my stifled voice I called out, Peggy, Peggy! and faintly her dear voice came back to me; I am here, she said. I am here, dearest. . . !

As in the case of Tim—still yelping and barking, more frantically than ever, on the other bank—I could not see her quite clearly, but clearly enough to recognise her dear features, and the dress she had on. It was the last one she had worn—on earth. . . .

So I am dead? I asked her. And she answered, that is what you would call it, and she smiled. How wonderful it was to see her smile again. I said, I

took my own life, and she stopped smiling then, and nodded, gravely. Yes, she answered, that makes it more difficult, you see? And she pointed at the black water. That's nothing, I said, I can swim. But she cried out, No, No, you mustn't do that! She seemed frightened. You must just keep on walking, she cried, the water is narrowing, and soon, if all is well, we shall all be together. What do you mean, if all is well? I asked her. But she did not answer, only waved to me to walk on. Tim, on the other bank, was trying to tell me the same thing, too. I sensed that they were both frightened, and I became frightened, too, for the first time since I had been dead. But I didn't know what I was frightened of!

I hurried as fast as I could, but my limbs still felt heavy. Mingled with my fright was great joy that I was so close to my dear ones again—that I should soon be with them . . . *if all was well.* . . .

Suddenly I felt queer—ill. I stopped in my tracks. It seemed I could not go further. I was conscious of the other two, Peggy looking anxious, with her arms half outstretched, and Tim with his tail down and his head a little on one side. . . . Then it seemed that something—something invisible—took hold of me and dragged me slowly but irresistibly into the still, black water.

I caught one more glimpse of Peggy, heard a low cry of pain from her, and an agonized yelp from Tim. And then came blackness, and a terrible and increasing agony, that seemed to be first in my head, and afterwards in my body—a terrible, racking, torturing, rending agony, as though something was tearing my vitals out, and rending the very soul from my body. . . .

It seemed to go on for years—for aeons. The blackness was a roaring thunder, tearing at my ear-drums. Then the blackness turned blood-red, and the roar became a shrill shrieking . . . And then. . . .

I was staring up at the old, familiar blue comfortless sky, and there was cold, empty sunlight in my eyes. I was lying in my back, and some fellow with a fat, shiny face, like a full-moon, was working at my arms. He had large, round glasses on, and the sweat was running down his silly face. Someone behind him, out of sight, spoke :

" I reckon you'll get the Royal Humane Society's medal for this," he said.

The fat man answered, pantingly :

" Oh, I don't think so. Hardly worth it . . . !"

The other spoke again, his voice a silly squeak :

" By God, you've done it! He's coming round, and I'd have sworn he was dead as a doornail! Wonderful gag, this artificial respiration stunt!"

" By jove, you're right!" said the

fat man. He stopped working my arm, and bent his silly sheep's face close to mine : " Hullo," he murmured, sloppily. " Feeling better, now, eh?"

Suddenly realization came to my numbed brain. Realization of all that had happened, and of what this fat-faced fool had done for me. I wanted to scream aloud, but I couldn't. All the same, I managed to croak :

" Feeling better . . . ? Why you . . . !"

And then I cursed him to hell and out again—cursed and damned his eyes and his soul as I have never cursed a fellow-man before.

He looked startled at first, then that silly, unctuous smile spread all over his fat face, and he shook his head, and said over his shoulder to the other man :

" Poor devil, he's delirious! That's what it is."

" Never mind," said the other.

" He'll be better soon, and then he'll thank you enough. I'll bet!"

Shall I . . . ?

THE END

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