

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

So Very Strange!

By ARTHUR WILLIAM BERNAL

An odd little story—What happened on that slippery city street?

AT FIRST there was only confusion. Not light or lack of light, not sound or lack of sound—simply a dull confusion. Confusion in the abstract, one might say, without shape or tone or form.

Netter was aroused from this state of vague bewilderment to an awareness of the things about him by the shrill scream of a horrified woman. The vacuous blur gave birth to a scream of horror, and Netter, as though someone had snapped open invisible shutters within him, opened his eyes, his ears—opened all his senses to the present.

Aroused now, the first thing he did was to stop his legs. They had been mechanically plodding off to somewhere and now he made them stop. Then Netter raised his eyes from his feet (his habitual posture), and drew himself erect. He was the least bit surprized that he did not feel the little twinge of pain which usually crept into his shoulders at such an effort. For the first time in months the sensation of standing up straight filled Netter with its subtle pleasure. He smiled, and with the smile there came a soft glow to ease his veins with its congenial warmth.

Netter felt very happy, comfortable. A moment before he had been worrying over something—over . . . well, something that he had now quite forgotten. Whatever it was, he had probably exaggerated its importance. The point was, that up to a second ago he had been absorbed in gloomy thought, blind to the world about him. And now, suddenly,

he was strangely standing to his full height, looking at the world around him, and being highly pleased at what he saw.

Never had Netter's eyes been so sharp, never so sensitive to form and beauty in trivial things. And this, even though his spectacles were somehow missing from his nose! What had formerly been a drab, sodden street crossing, sloppy and dismal during the few minutes' interval between two ugly winter showers, was now a satisfying, refreshing picture. The January sun, pale but pleasant, was a disk of dainty orange overhead, its delicately warming rays casting rain-soaked rooftops into sharp relief. All the compact houses on that street smelt fresh and clean after their day's washing in the rain.

The broad black street beneath him glistened also, with the clear sheen of a sugar glaze. Car tracks, crisp, silver things that raced like straight eels down the asphalt away from him, were like a symbolic decoration to a still-life sort of painting—symbolism representing the iron miracles of busy mankind.

But life was not lacking from this picture, and Netter, filling his nostrils again with crisp, dust-free air, sharp and stimulating as the smell of pine needles in a wooded country, turned his attention to the people who were ebbing past him. And here was the flaw in the picture. The people—two or three men and women and half a dozen young students like himself—were all coming toward him from the same direction; and thus Netter was enabled to get a clear view of each one's face. Without exception, the

pale features that swam toward him were drawn, worried, fretful. Not one was smiling, though several, after snatching hasty glowering glances at the soft gray heavens, were frowning with irritation. Netter felt a large, placid drop kiss his forehead and knew it was going to rain once more. Disconsolate, anxious, the people all hurried to Netter, ignored him, passed him by where he stood on the car tracks. He wanted to stretch out a hand, to stay one of the peevish group, find out what was behind this universal discontent. In keeping with his intention, Netter drew a hand from his overcoat pocket and reached out. Suddenly he stopped short.

Heretofore, while he had been standing where he was in the middle of the street, his ears, hypersensitively attuned to sounds, had caught and appreciated several very distinct and equally charming sounds. As a background to them all, there had come to him with a surprising clarity the steady musical *drip-drip-drip* of rain drops, trickling leisurely from awnings and house corners onto the wet pavement. Then, too, he had made out the soft *churr* of conversing birds, issuing from the telegraph pole across the way. There was the lulling *pad-pad* of leather on rainy cement, also, which told him of human feet shuffling by; not to forget the singing of rubber tires that followed an automobile's passing along the glassy street.

All other noises, if there were any, must have merged into a single monotone of muted sound which purled dimly through the rest of the natural symphony. Now, though, as Netter was about to detain a student who was scurrying toward the intersection, there came a new sound—a shrill note, that in being thus repeated, seemed to be a pre-ordained signal which was to signify both the opening and the closing of Netter's

pleasant little nature-concert of the past few seconds.

The sound was the scream of a horrified woman. . . .

NETTER faced himself about to see what had occasioned the outcry, and even as he did so there somehow blossomed inside his mind the peculiar realization that a second scream—an echo of the former one—had followed almost instantly upon the first, separated only by a breath. Netter's rapturous enjoyment of sight and sound, then, had taken place in the merest flash of time—had not lasted many minutes, but actually less than two seconds!

But now Netter was faced about, and new wonders met his gaze. He found himself in the midst of a small crowd of shifting heads and backs, the owners of which were all straining to catch a glimpse of something that lay huddled on the wet street. A chorus of anxious whispers muddled about him as Netter raised himself on tiptoe, the better to see. A vast bewilderment—the confusing familiarity of dreamed things—was suddenly exerting its influence upon him.

All at once a pale-faced woman thrust herself violently from the center of the throng. As she shoved past him, gasping for air, Netter was momentarily allowed a clear view of that at which the crowd was staring.

He saw first the giant wheels of a heavy truck. They were red-splashed as well as muddied from contact with the street. Netter's eyes then swept downward to the huddle beneath the grim tires, and his vision blurred with the shock of sudden recognition. The weaving heads blocked his view once more for a few seconds; then again he found himself staring down at the thin, crushed body of a poor student which lay in front of the impassive monster of rubber and

steel. The dead youth lay face upward, tawny hair wisping over pallid features, broken spectacles askew across the still, bloodless lips. It was evident from a single glance at that pale, calm face that the boy had died instantly, without even realizing that he had been struck down. The placid, gray eyes of the dead one, staring so earnestly into his own, vanished again behind a bobbing derby as a newcomer shouldered by the dazed Netter.

Slowly, Netter turned and left the crowd. He stood for a few seconds alone, in the center of the damp street, taking deep breaths of the cold, invigorating air to steady himself. He was trembling from head to foot. That familiar white,

pinched face gazing so calmly up at him. . . .

Abruptly, Netter shrugged and straightened up. He was no longer trembling, though his mind still tumbled with oddly mixed emotions. Obeying an inward urge, Netter set out down the street, away from the accident. A voice within his brain was gently telling him it was time to depart.

But as he strolled off, Netter caught a half-whispered sentence which came floating from the scene behind him—just one sentence from a familiar throat, and Netter knew he must quicken his gait.

"Poor Netter!" the dimly wafted voice murmured. "Poor Netter! . . . dead."