

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1950

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

NOVELETTE

HOME TO MOTHER Manly Wade Wellman 4

Whatever was to live through man-made catastrophe on earth would be bound to be altered into the sort of monster that alone could survive—horror piled on horror.

SHORT STORIES

TWO FACE Frank Belknap Long 19

Until now we have been free to speculate on the planetary mysteries of the universe, but on some great tomorrow these mysteries shall be known—for better or worse.

THE SHADOW OF SATURN E. Hoffmann Price 30

Wish is a firecracker, will is an A-bomb. Wishing is an emotional muddle; willing is pure force.

THE TREE'S WIFE Mary Elizabeth Counselman 43

Her young husband shot, her Paw in a hospital, how could she do anything else but marry a tree?

THE CORN DANCE Margaret St. Clair 50

To see the Corn Dance—and talk about it afterwards—that was an experience few terrestrials could have.

TAKE THE Z TRAIN Allison V. Harding 60

At the end of a hot monotonous day at work do you dare long for something truly different?

STAY WITH ME Shelby Steger 66

It was a comforting assurance that one need not be afraid either of living or dying.

THE HUNGRY GHOST Emil Petaja 74

"He's come back, Doctor! He won't let me eat because I starved him to death!"

DEAD MAN'S SHOES Day Keene 81

He had never killed anyone, blasphemed, nor stolen and what had it got him? A sentence of death at forty.

VERSE

YOU FORGET, ENCHANTRESS? Clark Ashton Smith 29

EIRDISMS Lee Brown Coye 65

THE EYRIE 94

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173
Vol. 42, No. 8

....Sensing the lovely fright....



Stay With Me

BY SHELBY STEGER

GEORGE BULEN shivered and roused himself in the chair—cold! Behind drawn shutters, the big square high-ceilinged rooms of the ancient fieldstone house remained cool even in the hovering smothering heat of midwest summers. Now in winter, with the blizzard spent these three nights, cold crouched still and deadly outside, its breath seeking under doors, freezing on windows.

Bulen's mind came full awake. *Was Gram dead? Had she escaped while he dozed?*

In sharp panic he rose and stood staring down at the old lady who lay, frail and tiny, in the vast bed with its tall carved walnut head and foot. The room was lit dimly by a shaded lamp, but Bulen could see well enough the face he hated. Gram still lived.

The wrinkled lids were closed, the puckered mouth, void of teeth, hung slightly

Heading by Vincent Napoli

open, the withered cheeks were white and bloodless. It was a corpse's face. But the flat chest, a mere bony cage for the weary imprisoned heart, still rose and fell beneath the quilts.

Who'd have dreamt I could keep the old witch this long! Bulen mused. She should have died the other night, when Emery—died. She wanted to, but I wouldn't let her.

Well, for all the furtive gossip about him in the village, no one in Midwood had ever said George Bulen wasn't a good doctor.

Bulen stirred up the rosy fireplace embers and threw another chunk on, held his long hands to the leaping heat. Steady hands; the tremor was only noticeable in the mornings. It went away with the day's first half-tumbler of whiskey.

They talked about that, too, in Midwood. *Drinks some, sure—who wouldn't, living in that spooky old house—but the Doc knows his business. His brother Emery, now—there was your booze-fighter! Could put away a quart or two, could Emery, and look sober as you please. Until his eyes'd glaze, his tongue get thick, and—blam! over he'd go. Flat on his face, like a falled post-oak. Funniest thing you ever seen.—But Doc? Hell, Doc can handle it . . .*

George Bulen stepped to the window, pulled the wooden blind aside. The land sloped away from the house, down to the creek, on past to the gate which opened onto the county road. All Bulen land once, but now Gram owned only the acre or so on which the square graceless house squatted. Emery was dead; the property would be George's soon. As soon as he dared let the old lady die—

Monday's blizzard had swirled down from near midnight until late the following day. Now, on Thursday—no, nearly three of Friday morning, said Bulen's watch. Now the land was swathed, declivities and hummocks smoothed out into a gently undulating whiteness which glittered in the thin starlight. Trees hunched beneath the snow's weight, drifts obscured the fences. And where the footlog lay across the shallow creek, there was a barely perceptible snow mound.

That mound was Emery Bulen, who was dead.

The creek had still been flowing Monday night. Now it was frozen, holding Emery in its rigid embrace. Emery had been the one who roamed, while George had been forced to stay. With Emery out of the way, it would be different. George would be free to go—as soon as he learned from the old woman what he had to know, and could let her die.

EMERY had been very drunk when the village taxi had brought him out from town Monday night. Answering the bell, George Bulen had not been too surprised to see him leaning in the doorway, holding the threadbare collar of a thin topcoat about his throat. That Emery would get here before she died, had been part of Gram's prediction; she had written it down to show George, before she was bedridden.

"The prodigal bum." His dark eyes had been haggard in his unshaven face, but Emery's grin had had a ragged jauntiness. "Had a hunch that Gram was bad, George. Rode a freight from Omaha to St. Louis and thumbed it down to Midwood. Had to see Gram, George, before she goes."

Emery and his hunches, Gram and her predictions! So Gram had been right and Emery wasn't dead, for all the years he'd been away. George had wanted to have Emery declared legally dead long ago, but "I'd know if Emery was gone," Gram had protested stubbornly.

The rest of Gram's prediction was wrong, though. George Bulen had not been going to murder Emery. George had juggled life and death before, professionally, but he was smart enough to know he couldn't murder his brother and get away with it. Yes, the old witch was 'way off on that one.

"Come in, boy, come in." Bulen had led Emery to the kitchen, poured him a stiff drink. "Get this into you; you're half frozen."

You fool, why did you come back? As soon as she's gone, I'd have you declared legally dead. Now I'll have to share the estate, watch you piddle away what should be mine, as you did before.

Talking, they had drunk together, George sparingly, Emery gulping the big drinks George poured for him.

"Gram and I—always something between us, so we knew when things were wrong with the other. Had to come, George."

"Gram's all right, but she's sleeping." She was dying, but Bulen could not bring himself to confirm the call, the cry which must have gone keening along the wind to wherever Emery had been. "You can see her tomorrow. Drink up, Emery."

Watching Emery's drunkenness mount almost visibly, like the mercury in a thermometer, the idea had come to George whole. It had certain imperfections, but it was well worth trying.

When the bottle was empty, "We'll drive to town for more whiskey, before the blizzard's any worse," George Bulen had told his brother. "You walk on ahead and open the gate while I put my coat on and get the car out."

Never leaving the front doorway, Bulen had watched Emery weave through the swirl of snow. He knew alcohol's way with Emery—he was gambling that, precariously just this side of stupor, the drunken man would fall. Fallen, that he would slide into slumber, from slumber to death.

Through the dazzle of falling snow, George Bulen had watched his brother slip on the icy footlog and sprawl in the shallow little creek. When after five minutes Emery had not risen, Bulen had gently shut the front door. Drowned? Head crushed against a rock? Or just passed out and dying from exposure?

It didn't matter. The important thing was that Emery was dead. Now he, George, was Gram's sole heir.

From the closet off his waiting room, Bulen had taken a full bottle from the wooden case. The amusing thing—Gram and Emery had always claimed that George had no sense of humor, but he had, he had!—the amusing thing was that, for all the hundreds of times he had futilely wished Emery dead, George had managed at last to kill him. And with no slightest chance of ever being suspected, much less accused.

A tragic accident—*My God, sheriff, I*

begged him to stay till morning, or at least let me call the taxi back for him. But he insisted the walk would clear his head. If I'd only known how drunk he really was—

It was extremely amusing, Bulen had thought, climbing the stairs. He'd like to tell Gram about it, but he hated to give her the satisfaction of knowing that her prediction that he'd murder Emery had come true.

He had found the old woman struggling to raise herself on the pillows.

"Emery's dead. I heard his voice downstairs, and now he's dead in the snow. You killed him, George."

"Yes, he's dead. It was time. Sometimes a doctor has to know when to let a person die," he said bluntly. "You can die now, too. Everything's mine. I'll buy that city practice I should have had years ago."

"Die? Of course I'll die now. I was only waiting for Emery. You might have let me see him." She had lain and stared at him. "You killed him for nothing. There's nothing but the house, no money." Weak, almost dead of the incredibly worn-out heart, she had laughed aloud, a witch's cackle. "No money at all, George. And who'll buy a haunted house? Besides, you can't leave; I've fixed it so you can't."

THE blue lips had turned bluer, and Bulen had thought she was going to die. He had crushed an ampoule in his handkerchief, held it to her face, and she had come back. When she was stronger, he had questioned her, scornful, yet fearful of the hold she'd always had on him.

"Why can't I leave?" He had wanted to shake her, but was afraid of killing her.

"My prediction of Emery's murder—I hid it," she had breathed. "You'll never find it. Once I'm gone, you'll leave—you were always terrified of being alone, George. You'll be afraid to stay to look for it. But boys, maybe—boys love to plunder a deserted house. They'll find it and take it to the sheriff. He'll go after you."

George Bulen had shuddered with an instant's icy fear—she could always scare him with her spooky talk.

"The hell with the sheriff!" he had flared.

"Who can make murder out of an accident to a drunken fool?"

"I wrote it down, how to make you tell. Remember how I could always make you tell the bad things you did, George? Just lock you up in the dark, alone. You never could be alone with your wicked self in the dark, George. You'd scream and hammer at the door until I let you out. 'Gram, Gram, stay with me and I'll tell,' you'd scream. Much as you hated me, you'd cling to me and tell me what I wanted to know. I wrote it down, George, how to make you tell you killed Emery."

"You lie!"

She had not written all that, he told himself as he had gone through the entire house, a room at a time, frantically looking everywhere, everywhere for the paper the old woman said she'd hidden. She had lied—he could not find it.

If it *were* true, if it were found after he had left, they could not make him confess. He was a man, not a scared boy; he could not be made to confess.

Still, if it *were* true—?

George Bulen had remembered when, several years ago, the highway police had picked him up, mistakenly, on a hit-and-run charge. He was not guilty, but after the night in the cell, inescapably behind bars, alone in the stinking dark, he had huddled on the grimy cot in a frenzy of hysteria. *Let me out!* the words had hammered crazily in his brain, while sweat drenched his cramped, huddled body; *I'll tell, I'll tell if you'll let me out!*

Soon he would have been screaming the words which had fluttered and beat behind his fear-slackened lips. But the police had picked up the real hit-and-run driver and unlocked Bulen's cell. The false confession had subsided, had sunk back down into the churning hysteria deep within him, as the cell was unlocked and he was freed.

GEORGE BULEN now turned back from the window into the dimly lit room. Emery was gone, into empty darkness, and Gram was not being allowed to follow. He was keeping her here, with medicines and skill; he had to make her tell him where

she had hidden the paper she claimed she had written. It was good, too, to let misery wrench and rend her until she should escape from him.

His eye caught the fluttering movement of one of the old lady's hands. He crossed to the bedside.

"Water, Gram?" Gravely he inclined his narrow, graying head, reached for her skinny hand; dry and cold, the almost fleshless fingers lay in his palm like the ivory slats of a broken fan. His own fingers slid to the bony wrist, briefly noted the erratic pulse. "Better yet, there's hot milk in the thermos. We've got—" he chuckled drily—"we've got to keep your strength up, you know."

Weakly she moved her head against the pillow; the meager light glinted on the waxy-pale part in her thin hair, her scalp the color of the scanty yellow-white braids which hung beside her cadaver's cheeks.

"Nothing." The black eyes, scoured dull of the waspish humor which used to light them, looked up into his. "Emery? He's still—out there?"

Bulen poured himself a drink from the bottle on the marble-topped dresser.

"He'll be there until—well, let's see." The doctor's eyes, the red-brown color of the drink he held, flickered at her mockingly. "When the road's cleared and the mail truck gets through, maybe Ed'll notice Emery there beneath the snow. Or maybe I'll have to try to get out on a call and I'll find him. More likely the mail man, though—I left word with the operator that you were very low and I'd take only urgent calls."

Devoted to his old Gram, people at Midwood would be saying. Could have been a big city doctor, but he stayed home with her. 'Twas that no 'count Emery that lit out and went to the city. Yep. Doc's got his faults, but he's been mighty good to old Gram Bulen.

Gram whimpered. "Emery!"

"He won't hear you. He's dead."

"Emery—"

"Call him, then." Bulen sat again in his chair, drank from the glass, set it aside. "Do you think he'll be back, like Grandpa?"

Those are Grandpa's footsteps you claim you hear sometimes in the hall, aren't they?"

"You've heard the footsteps, too."

"Never!" he lied. "I've heard rats in the walls. I've heard an old house creak as it cooled. I've heard—"

He fell silent. He had heard the footsteps often; hearing them, he had known the sound was not rats, not the creaking of timbers. But it could not be what Gram said it was. No one could come back from nowhere.

Death was an ending. He had conquered his fear of it. It was not from compassion for those who suffered that George Bulen had become a doctor; he had never been burdened with the softness of pity. He had studied medicine so as to probe the frightful mystery of death.

There was no mystery. Just the ceasing from being. People died and became cold flesh, just as had the birds he shot as a boy, the cats and dogs he had killed with his BB gun. Death was nothing; he certainly did not fear it.

Had Gram really hidden a note, to be found and destroy him? She had hidden his BB gun, told him the spirits took it to punish a cruel boy. Half believing in Gram's spirits then, he had yet searched for the gun. Not until months later did he find it, in the spring branch at the far end of the pasture, rusted and ruined where she had wired it to a stone and sunk it.

"Damn you," he said sullenly, "with your ghosts and fortune-telling, your haunted houses and your clairvoyance."

The dull old eyes turned to the ceiling, where fire-shadows flickered. "I see things, I know things. You can't deny it," she whispered. "How else did I know that Emery died in the snow, that you killed him?"

"The ravings of a dying old woman," Bulen said cruelly. "If there were anyone to listen, no one would believe."

Fakery—she guessed cleverly. Just as, when the stupid village girls used to come to have their fortunes told, Gram made little darting guesses. *A tall young man, dark . . . oh, blond? yes. I see him clearer now . . . he loves you very much, dearie . . .*

Fakery, yet it had brought a steady trickle

of foolish women, sometimes even men, to the old fieldstone house, eager to be told what they wanted to be told. No wonder, Bulen mused savagely, he had wanted to escape to the city. The doctor, the cool man of science, living with a granny-woman, a witch, a soothsayer!

BUT it had been Gram's money which put him through medical school. It would have been Gram's money which would have bought him the city practise he wanted. Only Gram had refused that.

"Midwood needs a doctor," she had told him nearly twenty years ago. "Besides, I haven't enough for you and Emery, too. It's Emery's turn now."

"For what? He couldn't farm the place profitably, nor hold a job in town. For a honeymoon with Lucille, maybe?" Bulen had laughed scornfully. "I'll marry Lucille, you finance the city practise for me, and you'll be money ahead, for I'll pay you back. Emery's weak, he'll fail. Let him stay here where he belongs."

Gram had still been fiery twenty years ago.

"You leave Lucille alone," she had blazed. "She loves Emery and he loves her; they'll be happy. Maybe that cold wickedness you've got in you fascinates the child, but that'll pass. She'd be miserable with you; any woman would. You leave Lucille alone."

Lucille had been attracted to him, Bulen mused; the soft, pretty, big-eyed little thing would tremble when he talked to her. She had been afraid of him—*ah, it was lovely when they were frightened! Like holding a bird in your hand, knowing you could crush the fragile pulsing to stillness, any time, whenever you were ready. And the waiting, and sensing the lovely fright*.

But Gram had given Emery the money George wanted and he took Lucille to the city. He bought a gas station. Marriage seemed to settle him; he worked hard and did well for several years. Then Lucille died with her first baby. Emery went back to his drinking then, went on the bum, and disappeared.

So here George Bulen had been, stuck

with a country practise where, when they paid you at all, it might be in potatoes or chickens or, perhaps for an operation, a heifer with its calf. Some money, of course, but not enough. You couldn't buy a city practise with a basket of eggs and a farm-cured ham, so you waited.

He had hated every minute of those twenty years, every dreary, grubby minute. Oh, there had been small secret amusements, to be savored with the mind. There was, often, the heady awareness of life and death, nicely balanced in your hands. The old hillbilly, for instance, whose family could not possibly pay you, anyway. When you discovered you'd forgotten to restock your kit with sulfa, rather than make the long trip to town and back over the wretched roads, you gave him aspirin instead, let him wheeze and rattle an end to his shiftless days. There was the rabid child you'd been called to see too late for Pasteur shots—well, you finally put him to sleep. Not out of pity for the convulsions which were tearing him to screaming shreds, but because the snapping jaws might have done you injury.

There were the awkward questions the boys at the pool hall sometimes asked—*Say, uh, Doc, a friend of mine*—Very funny, some of those questions, especially when you knew the girl involved.

Girls. You had to be careful in a small community where everyone knew you, so there was little of that. But there were books; not that you could afford all you wanted. The few you had were cleverly written, the scenes whispering slyly through your brain like opium fumes. And the illustrations—you wondered who the artists might be, who had both skill and the necessary antic imagination for those illustrations.

And there was the whiskey. You drank much more than anyone suspected, but it was good whiskey, the body builds up a growing tolerance, and—well, you weren't weak, like Emery. You knew how to take care of yourself.

None of this made up for living with a crazy old woman who spent her time in the past, rocking before the fireplace in this fusty bedroom. The dusty cushion of the

rocker by the fireplace still held the imprint of her scrawny body; her knitting basket still leaned against it.

He'd looked in the knitting basket for the paper she'd hidden; it wasn't there.

Nothing made up for being forced to live with a crazy old woman who "saw things." She'd predicted Lucille's death, too, had written it down. "I don't know when nor how, but I've written it, it's coming." She had screamed and yammered with sobs when Lucille finally died in childbirth. Not when Emery's telegram came next day to tell her of the death. Before, at the actual moment when Lucille must have been dying.

Coincidence. These things had to be coincidence.

A crazy old woman. Quite unafraid, she saw things you couldn't see—"elementals," she called some of them. And even though you knew she was crazy, that there was nothing there, your flesh crisped to hear her say crossly, in the impatient tone one might use to a pesty child, "In Christ's name, be gone." Elementals, it seemed, could be banished by the name of Christ, Buddha, any of the mystic Masters—

Aaah!

BULEN rose, snatched the bottle from the dresser, brought it back to his chair. When he had drunk from it, he set it beside him on the table. Why think of these things! She was crazy, crazy.

Still, what of the unseen thing which had, for a while, broken dishes in the kitchen? A poltergeist, Gram said; poltergeists were mischievous spirits from a plane a bit higher than that of the beastlier elementals. Such nonsense—doubtless she broke the dishes herself, to prove some esoteric point. Finally she had muttered over an onion, set it above the kitchen door—or was that to ward off sickness?

He forgot—anyway, there had been no more broken dishes.

Emery had always believed. He and Gram used to laugh at the boy George who could not hide his fear.

"No need to be scared of Grandpa, Emery told George when the footsteps

wandered the hall upstairs. "There's just something he didn't finish in life, Gram says. He's just restless; he wouldn't hurt you."

Well, George Bulen was not afraid any more. He had seen death, had willed it to go or stay. It was an ending, not a continuance. No one ever came back. If they did, you'd know Gram was right about all her craziness. You'd know there was a doorway, through which you'd shudder to step. There was no doorway, just a wall. There'd be no punishment, later. No punishment for the things you'd done.

There was the comforting assurance—that you need not be afraid of either living or dying.

THE old lady surged up from a doze and groaned, her hand scrabbling at her breast. George Bulen jumped to his feet, snatched a tiny white pill and thrust it beneath her tongue.

In a moment she was better. He wiped the sweat from her face; the skin moved beneath the damp towel, loosely, like crumpled cloth.

"Let me go, George." It was the first time she had pleaded.

"You're anxious, aren't you? You think there's something further on, some bright happiness, don't you? There's nothing but empty blackness, nothing." He leaned toward her, rage curdling within him. "Tell me you lied, that there's no hidden note, and I'll let you go."

She shook her head, lips puckered tightly within themselves.

"Then I'll keep you here as long as I can. If you're finding the minutes long, think how the years have been for me. Wanting to go, having to stay." He gestured toward the dresser. "I've the big needle in readiness, the one that goes directly into the heart. I'll use it last of all. It may delay you quite some little time."

She closed her eyes. To prevent her dozing, he spoke rapidly, loudly.

"Once you're gone, I'll sell this miserable old place and go to the city. There's a shortage of doctors; I won't have to buy a practise now. Ghosts or no ghosts, I'll get

enough for the house to start me out."

He drank from the bottle again; bad habit, that—it made it look like he needed the stuff worse than he did.

"Ghosts!" He gave a snort of laughter. "If this place could be haunted, Emery'd be here by now."

"Emery had happiness, with Lucille. He'll not be back. It's the unhappy ones, the restless ones who left something unfinished. Unpunished, even—" The tired voice threaded off into silence.

"If Emery comes back, it'll be for my whiskey. And I'll fill him up and send him out again, to die again." George Bulen laughed a little shilly; he was drunk, he thought.

Well, why not! A celebration. Soon he'd be away—a decent practise, the stimulation of city life, for once in his life enough money to indulge his fancies. No more books; girls, lovely frightened girls.

Yes, he was drunk. But that was all right; he could handle it.

"You'll never leave." Gram's voice was amazingly strong and clear. "Never, George, never!"

She gasped and was still.

"Wait! You haven't told me—"

George Bulen hurried. He tore the old woman's gown aside, with careful accuracy drove the big shining needle into her withered chest, slowly pushed the glass plunger home so that the barrel's contents entered the heart.

It was no good. She was gone.

Bulen straightened, stared with baffled hatred down at her. She had escaped from him.

Still, the final joke was on her. With the last glimmer of consciousness she must have known, must have seen that there was nothing beyond but the murky void.

He felt a roaring lightness bubble through him, such a glowing happiness as he had never known before. He was free, at last he was free.

"I'm not afraid of you any more, old woman! You lied about writing the note, didn't you? There was no note, was there?" It was not the whiskey, but this beautiful joy which was making him babble. "You

lied, didn't you? Of course you lied!"

And then movement caught the corner of his eye. In the flickering firelight, the rocker seemed to move.

Senseless horror twanged at George Bulen's nerve-ends. The taste of fear foul in his mouth, he turned slowly from the quiet body on the bed.

Gram rocked before the fire. She was knitting.

His eyes wide and staring, Bulen backed toward the door, then stood, listening to the footsteps in the hall, restless, wandering.

His knees held him until he reached the chair by the table; he sank into it.

Tomorrow he'd start again to look for the note. And if he didn't find it—how many days until the road was cleared and the mail man could get through? How many days until he darted from the house, lonely, empty of everything but terror, to point with a shaking hand at the mound in the snow and scream "*Don't leave me alone . . . stay with me and I'll tell . . .*"

The familiar little figure still rocked before the fire.

George Bulen groped for the whiskey bottle. Gram glanced up from her knitting and, with the old malicious humor bright in her black eyes, she smiled.