

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1949

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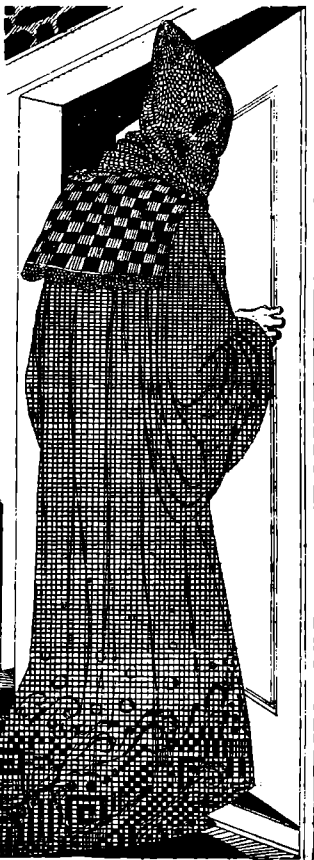
Stranger at Dusk

BY MALCOLM KENNETH MURCHIE

YOU are a little child again. The sun is a warm part of you, the air that touches you and fills you inside, the sounds that you will remember forever. That rumbling from the elevated that seems always to be there, or going, or coming but silent only in the silences of the night when your ability to hear is also stilled. The call of the flower vendor, shrill with the want for telling about those new fragile tiers of growing color on his rickety wagon pulled by the old horse who knows just when to stop and likes to.

The noise of other children, each noise so different to a parent, so same to a stranger; the high squeal of clothes lines being pulled at dusk, and the shrill talk of the women pulling in those stiff-with-cleaness cloth people. The ten-piece band that came out to walk and play their sad music in slow cadence from the gray and red faced church

*Many men are called by the name
"Stranger," but only one is wholly true to it!*



at the corner while mourners walked beside the shiny limousine with its so-precious, so-dead burden, and behind the dressed-up relatives riding this time in the best cars they would ever know.

The yards at the back of the brownstones, neat rectangles fenced each off from the others with grubby gardens trying to make their living out of the poor soil of the city.

A child can play in these yards, for all the poorness of the earth and bulging of the fences. A child can play and raise his voice to the blue top of the sky and hear it come bouncing back from the windows that look down like sightless eyes on the yards, row on row, house by house.

Children play in these yards to go out someday through the brownstone houses into life beyond, down the many paths of experiences and accomplishments, good and bad, happy and unhappy. They are all right here, wrapped in dreams, safe with bright, eager hope in them, tomorrow ahead of them. But once they leave, like in Victor Herbert's *Toyland* "Once you pass its borders, you can ne'er return again. . . ."

HAROLD WILSON lived in one of these old brownstones, played ball in its backyard; by the hour with a rubber ball and a yellow fielder's mitt. He went to the school several blocks away and had to be very careful what he did between times.

"No son of mine is going to run break-neck around the streets," his mother used to say. Long ago the neighbors guessed it wasn't fondness for Harold, but a cruel purposefulness that made her talk and act so. But she was a good mate for *him*.

He, Mr. Wilson, was a huge, bent-over man filled with gruffness and anger, unsmiling, unfriendly.

Miss Fretchett, who occupied a room in the next-door boarding house and who had, quite happily for a curious old maid, made the choice discovery that at one spot in her closet she could hear very well through the paper-thin dividing walls what was going on in the Wilson living room, used to wonder to herself how such ugly and disagreeable parents could beget themselves such a sunny little boy.

For the birth of this boy-child to this

glowering, forbidding couple was surely some sort of mistake. It was more than improbable, it was wrong in every way. For it was apparent that they neither wanted the golden-haired youngster nor loved him. Yet he grew up, even if painfully at times, for a child grows best on affection and security—these make the soil in which a child thrives best; the way nature grows things. He went to school and home. But always, nearly always, he was alone. His friends were never welcomed at the brownstone, and Harold was not allowed to stay out with them.

But he could be seen day after day out in the backyard, playing by himself with ball and glove—Miss Fretchett could see the yard from her back window and remembered well the one time there'd been another youngster there with Hal for a game of catch and the way Mrs. Wilson had come storming into the yard, chasing the other boy yipping with fear out of the yard into the street, cuffing Harold brutally. Miss Fretchett followed the scene by moving from front to back. Later Mrs. Wilson used her strong whiskey breath to deplore, at the neighborhood market, "that no good son of ours" to Miss Fretchett who had all she could do to keep from rearing up her slender old maid's frame to the ogress and telling her a thing or two about being a mother. But of course she didn't.

On occasions, Miss Fretchett, who was almost as fond of cookies from the corner bakery as a small boy might be, tried to offer young Hal some. The first time was in front of the two adjoining houses, and as the golden-haired youngster stepped forward eagerly, there was an imperative rat-a-tat on the window pane of the Wilson house. It was Mrs. Wilson looming there, holding back the curtains with her brawny arms, scowling and shaking her head angrily.

Harold put his hand behind his back and said politely, "Thank you, Ma'am, but I can't."

Miss Fretchett was exasperated and stood, mouth agape, watching the boy scurry back into the old brownstone. It wasn't fair, the way they treated that young 'un, she thought. Next time and next she offered the cookies further afield where the disapproving eyes

of parents could not see—land's sakes, what was the harm of giving wholesome cookies from Geitzer's Bakery to a child! But Hal always shook his head. It vexed Miss Fretchett, that and other things she saw go on, but what could she do?

FOR instance, the old maid thought they neglected him. In the worst weather they let him run around without proper clothing when anybody knows—even someone like herself who'd never had children—that of course the child would get coughs and sneezes and illnesses.

A mother says, "Now Johnny" or "Bill" or "Eddie, put on your rubbers and wear your muffler . . ." like that, said Miss Fretchett to herself. Not the Wilsons. And, surely because of it, wasn't the boy sick a lot? And did they care for him properly—all the frustrated maternal instinct of the woman welled up—she never saw a doctor, well, hardly ever. There were a few times, she recalled. . . . And ask Mr. or Mrs. Wilson about the boy! They'd like to snap your head off. Act like it was none of your business! Which maybe it wasn't but *somebody* had to think a kind thought about the little fellow. His family certainly didn't and most of the world is too busy to notice or care about those things.

He was a strange boy . . . well, naturally. No friends his own age except during school hours, having to play that way so much of the time alone in the yard. She'd gotten to talk to him a few times, at the corner store, away from prying eyes. He had, with all his sunny hair and bright eyes, a sad, shy little manner that pulled at her heartstrings.

When he spoke to her—always polite in reply to something she'd said first—he seemed hesitant and she guessed the meanings of his sideway glances out the store door. But—and it was an arch triumph—she won him over to a degree. So that his thin face would light up when he saw her come into a shop, if he were there first.

They didn't talk much or of many things but enough so she caught the bleak unhappiness of the child's soul underneath his politeness.

"Don't you have any real good friends?

Real good, the kind you tell your secrets to?"

Hal started to shake his head, but then he smiled a half smile. And finally he told her of a man, a stranger who he'd seen a few times, who knew, well, just *everything* about him.

"That's nice," said Miss Fretchett, both pleased for the boy and crestfallen that he had a better confidant than she.

"An uncle perhaps, a friend of the family?"

The boy wrinkled his forehead. "I don't know," he replied. "I don't know, Miz Fretchett."

HAROLD *didn't* know. For in the beginning, at least, it happened in the night or dusk or shadows, when the sun is playing far away on the other side of the world.

The first time he could remember well . . . as he could all the meetings and what went on and what was said. The first time was in his very own street, it was evening's gloom made darker by soft spring rain that tiptoed in neat lines across the pavement. Harold was going home from some ordered errand, along the street that ran between the rows of houses, their blank stone and glass faces weeping from the rain. He was hurrying, for the chill and wetness was on his skin and in his bones. It was just then that Harold saw him. Just then like that, for one moment he had not been there, it seemed, and the next he was.

Tall, very tall to a child, dressed in dark clothing that suited the night with a big long angular face that grew in size as the boy looked up into it and listened to the words it spoke.

They were very simple. They said, "Why not come with me?"

And though the child had been told about strangers and warned, this one was different . . . this stranger.

They fell into step, the tall stranger and the small boy, the great shoes of the one, the little shoes of the other, keeping sloshing pace along the sidewalk.

"You don't want to go home," the stranger said. It did not sound like a question. It was a positive statement.

Hal did not answer. But in his heart he knew that was very true.

As though reading his thoughts, the stranger then said, "Then come with me. It will be easy, Harold."

The boy did not wonder how this tall man knew his name; it seemed so natural at the time. But Harold did quicken his steps. He must get home, he must hurry. Even now, through the rain he could see the lower floor windows of his house and Mother or Father might be watching and would punish him for being with somebody, anybody.

Just as though he knew the decision had been made, the stranger stopped. Harold slowed his steps, looked back. The man was standing there watching, no sign of farewell, no final words, silent as the night. Then he turned and walked back down the street, his steps whispering with the rain, a tall, tall shadow fading into the gloom, into other shadows and was gone. Hal hurried on and made the great front door.

But how could it be true, he had thought about that first time again and again. For he had been in bed so sick and Dr. Finn, whose breath smelled whiskey the way his parents' so often did, came in and thumped him and mumbled about "scarlet fever."

That was so, so how could he have been out in the street? But it was not *like* a dream. It was *not* a dream; he knew that somehow.

There was another time; he was in the country walking in a small verdant valley that cozier between two hills. The hills were crowned with waving grass that tickled the blue skyline beyond. The sun was hot. They had come to this place, his father and mother bringing him to see an aunt. A woman too old for this life and the two Wilsons sensed it. Hal heard words about "wills" and "the legacy" which he did not entirely understand. He was left to himself, shushed irritably out of the house, the very old lady in the high poster bed calling in a cracked voice and his parents, behind her back, making unpleasant faces he could not understand.

SO HE found the valley. It had a brook. Harold liked to dip his feet in it . . . for once he was far enough away to be beyond his parental displeasure.

And into the valley one day came the

stranger. Hal saw him coming first as a dark silhouette against the far-away horizon, knew instinctively who he was and waited, waited quietly while the man climbed down through the grass-sided hill and came to his side, so tall and, and . . .

"You remember me, Harold," the stranger said gravely.

The boy nodded.

The man stood waiting, the peak of his somber hat centered in the sky where Hal sat at his feet.

The stranger offered a hand, a huge, gnarled thing that must be a Bunyan-like strength. Harold sucked his breath in.

"I don't want to go. Thank you, I don't."

The stranger's great head seemed to bow, and it was as though he gave great thought to the little boy's words.

He talked then, as though not in the least upset that his invitation had been rejected. He talked and Harold talked more than he had to anyone before, even nice old Miss Fretchett. It seemed that the stranger knew much about Harold; the things he had done, the places he'd gone, even the thoughts he'd thought—really everything.

And, for some reason his small boy's mind did not bother to grapple with it, it was all perfectly natural . . .

But he had been very sick again, and when he came to know of the things around him, the cottage, his parents and their looks—not of thankfulness as he opened his eyes, but of something else unfathomable—like the looks before, behind his old aunt's back—there was still a clear memory of the valley, and the stranger. He brought these memories back to the city with him.

Miss Fretchett worried and thought—poor old thing—there was nothing else in her life to worry and fret about but the little boy next door.

By dint of much putting of two and two together, by long observation and by the lucky break of a mailman's mistake—leaving a letter intended for the Wilsons at her door instead—she came to a conclusion that was as inescapable as it was dreadful.

She chided herself about the letter. Yet it was Providence. Was she not the child's only friend—Oh, that stranger Hal talked about—but where was he? *She'd* never seen

him. Anyway, the letter flap was a little loose at one edge; it wasn't hard to p-r-y-y-y it up very carefully . . . there! It was a letter that talked about money . . . from a lawyer . . . a good deal of money. Goodness! And about little Harold . . . who should receive this amount on his eighteenth birthday . . . of course in the event of (she couldn't bear to read *that*) those two, the Wilsons would get it all.

MISS FRETCHETT carefully refolded the letter. She would put it at their box in the morning. There . . . and she started to seal it up with old fingers that shook from what she'd been reading. Oh, Allen & Courtney, Counselors, Estate Management (the print letterhead had read), would you believe me, would you believe an old woman, an old maid, if I came flying to you and *told* you what was going on? No. She knew not.

So it was just *her* secret . . . and the Wilsons. And what could she do; she could not go up to either of those evil, evil parents and say:

"I know the truth. You don't mean to let Harold grow up!"

No, she would have to do what she could peering through the lace curtains of her window, watching him go to school and come home, or play alone, so alone in the back yard, listening so hard in the square tomb of her closet to their voices next door and wringing her hands impotently while the tears coursed down her old, wrinkled cheeks, almost in time to the sound of the beatings, the harsh words.

So she had been at her window, the lace curtains held aside by her gnarled old hands, the evening of the accident. Harold had been across the street when they called. The two of them were on this side, home from some errand, and Hal had been across the street. They called, shrieked at him purposefully, and he came with that blind, terrified obedience as always.

Of the four, only Miss Fretchett seemed to notice the truck lumbering down the center of the road. Afterwards, she realized *three* of them had noticed—all but Harold, too intent on obeying. She filled the room with her scream, beat at the window with her hands. Harold never saw, never knew

until the crushing impact was upon him, tossing his body aside.

In the evening street the boy lay, but only for the moment it took for the father to get there. The truck driver's face was one of astonishment and shock as he clambered down from the cab.

"Geeze, the kid ran right in front of me," mumbled the truck driver, wagging his gray-with-shock face from side to side.

Meantime, Mr. Wilson had picked up his son—almost roughly—*anybody* knows you don't move someone so badly hurt. Miss Fretchett went as fast as her old stiff legs would carry her, out the door of her house toward the scene.

"You murderer," she shrieked in her high voice, shaking her thin fists at Mr. Wilson. "You murderer!"

The man turned, the child still in his arms, his face wolfish, threatening. He flung a foul word at her. It was a scene beyond the wildest imaginings. Miss Fretchett floated through it, unreal herself as the whole tableau was unreal.

They were letting the truck driver go.

"*Those things will happen!*" He had said that; Mr. Wilson. Little Hal's father. Dismissing with those few words the sweaty, sweating, scared-to-death driver.

"Geez, Mister, t'anks. Like I say, never saw him." The truckster went back into the cockpit of his machine. "Sweet Geez!," Miss Fretchett was close enough to hear him mutter half to himself. Then he drove off in the lumbering monster, and it was just the little group of three left.

MISS FRETCHETT, the mother, the father with the bundle in his arms. The old maid screamed at them again; it was the only sound in the long, still twilight street, empty except for them. "*You murderers!*" *And the shrill echo was taken up* and sent back into her own ears by the window-mouths of the blank-faced houses watching, row on row.

They moved ominously at her as she stood between them and the front door of their house. Mrs. Wilson came first, her big flabby fish forearms raised to brush the little woman aside . . . their faces working, both of them.

She hardly felt the impact as both of their

huge, terrible, wicked overfed bodies knocked her frailness to one side. But she heard Mr. Wilson speak and she saw the look in his eyes when he said it.

"... besides, he's not dead, not dead..." his lips went back to say the words, and *there was regret in his eyes.*

Miss Fretchett didn't stop screaming at them, following them until she was finally shoved away and the big front door slammed in her face. Back in her own place she told her landlady, a phlegmatic woman who traditionally minded her own business and this time had been minding it "in the back of the house" beyond eye or earshot of the accident.

The landlady had long ago ticketed Miss Fretchett as "one of those nervous ones who likes to keep in a stew instead of forgetting herself at a movie."

"Don't take on so, dearie," had been her advice. "These kinda things happen alla time. Maybe the kid ain't hurt so bad," and she went on about her business.

No, of course, no one else had *seen*. That would be the way they *would* do it.

Miss Fretchett kept watch. At her window and, in the evening, at her closet. There was nothing. Nothing, that is, until late that night. She heard then, straining her ears; the words were clear.

She, Mrs. Wilson, said, her voice coming low but distinct through the partitioning wall, "He's bad, real bad. Don't think he'll pull through this... out of his head... talking funny things."

The man's voice rumbled, and they both laughed, peals of laughter from the house next door where a child lay dying.

He said, "Yes, this looks like it. Well, we can use that money."

THERE was a word of caution from the woman. Something Miss Fretchett couldn't make all out but about "that meddlesome old maid next door" and "hadn't they better have a doctor... to make things look good?"

Mr. Wilson agreed. Miss Fretchett kept listening as long as she could and then her old age and weakness caught up with her and drove her to bed.

The next day the doctor came. Dr. Finn. *That* one. He made such a commotion

next door, you knew; everybody knew. Al-ways drunk. Ask anyone in the neighborhood. It wasn't as though there weren't a nice young physician right around the block. But the Wilsons liked this one who couldn't even have been much of a man sober... but he was never sober.

Miss Fretchett listened in her closet, not breathing, clasping her white, blue-veined hands together. She heard the doctor join the two Wilsons in the living room; they made a boisterous threesome; the medical man's prediction of death in no way dampened the proceedings.

"Yep," the slurred voice of the physician rasped through the paper-thin walls. "The little fellow is bad. 'Pears to me he won't last much longer."

"Another drink, Doc," Mr. Wilson urged. "So he's bad, is little Harold, eh? Too bad, too bad." It went on like that, the drinking and talking and laughing in that house next door and only here, across the mortar board and plaster and wallpaper, only here did anybody care.

But what could Miss Fretchett do? How could she go to the police? To anyone. She was not so old as to be foolish in the head about those things. She would get short shrift, and other people besides the Wilsons would think she was a meddlesome old maid with not enough to worry about of her own. And after all, to society's eyes, hadn't the Wilsons done *everything*? Yes, of course. *Everything*.

Salt wetness coursed down her old wrinkled cheeks that night; so many tears that there were none left for the next night. That momentous next night when, through the wall, she heard Mrs. Wilson come running into the living room.

"He's gone," the ogress said. It was an elated voice.

"Are you sure?" Mr. Wilson replied and continued matter of factly, "I don't want to get that damn fool doctor in here one more time than necessary if—" Then Miss Fretchett heard both sets of heavy, clumping steps leaving the living room. *He* was going to make sure himself.

Miss Fretchett stopped listening. And no new tears came. For she had known at the

time of the accident that twisted, broken little Hal would not live. There was no anguish left to be felt, no crying left to be done. She was numb as she went to bed, and the numbness went deep inside of her.

There was not much for her, now, she reviewed. What a large part of her life the little golden-haired boy from next door had been. She'd thought of him as an orphan, or more—even more ridiculously—as much more hers than belonging to the Wilsons. Now she was just a lonely old woman with not very many happy memories and the small insurance envelope each quarter keeping her frail body here in this place that would have to be home forever and forever—

IT WAS a strange beginning for Harold, this meeting with the stranger. For this time he was not as sure of his surroundings; it was not the country with its soft green valley; it was not the familiar street. There was a byway, of indeterminate makeup, stretching away to distances Harold must travel.

The boy walked, and although there was an indefiniteness about just where his steps were to take him, he must keep working his legs and going onward. It was, certainly, the gloom of twilight around him, deepening, so that when he found that his friend suddenly strode beside him, he was not surprised for the stranger must have stepped out from the shadows that surrounded them both.

Harold slowed his pace, slowed it more and more until finally they were standing there, facing each other, the little boy looking up at his companion. The shadows were there too, mist swirling about them now.

"Where are you going?" the man spoke. Even though he stood close by, his cloak-muffled body and his head were far away and up in the darkness.

The little boy looked and thought. "Why . . . why I really don't know," he replied. And he didn't.

"You want to go home," the stranger said and, as usual, it was not a question but a statement. The little boy's heart leaped at the words and the thoughts they conjured up . . . but he did not know where—

not for sure—where in all this world of gray gloom and twilight, where . . .

It was not back to the house there on the street, not to the country cottage, or the nearby country valley . . . no, not to these . . . to a something, a somewhere he'd never known yet.

The stranger bowed his great height over the boy.

"Come with me."

Harold hesitated. The stranger was holding out his huge hand, the little boy knew he had but to take it and they would be off . . .

Harold still hung back . . .

The stranger standing there with his head in the dark clouds made words of the little boy's thoughts.

"You want to come with me but you also want to be able to go back." The statement again.

It was so, Hal knew. It would be so easy to just take the mighty gnarled hand. But the stranger understood there was something else.

Then the pact was made; Harold reached for the outstretched arm in the growing gloom and the two went off down the byway, hand in hand now, close together, the towering one and his diminutive companion.

MISS FRETCHETT'S life closed around her. There was nothing else much to be interested in. More than old age was creeping on her now as illness sapped the poor strength left in her limbs. Her decline, as it so often happens with older people, dated from the time of little Harold's accident. To be sure, the exact end of that chapter was hazy in her mind.

She remembered that the doctor, Finn, had come, for she distinctly had seen his roly-poly form trundling down the street after she'd heard Mr. Wilson tell his wife it "was time for that now."

What had happened then, she didn't quite know. But the sounds of arguing rose louder and louder from the living room next door. Miss Fretchett was so physically and emotionally spent that she hardly registered or properly sorted out the angry words and curses that rose from next door.

One thing was clear; her memory served

up this on the spring evening of reference. The little doctor, probably more sober than usual, kept insisting over and over.

"He *couldn't* have moved, I tell you. He couldn't have got out of bed. He was unconscious, dying, I tell you." But the arguments went on. "You've hidden him somewhere," the doctor's voice rose wrathfully.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilson's voices joined then in placating the doctor who was "going to tell the authorities." There was talk then that there was enough "money to go around." An empty sealed casket could be buried, couldn't it? The physician would take care of the certificate, wouldn't he? Finally a quieter Dr. Finn left.

Miss Fretchett was no longer able to get around much. Her desire to get to the little boy's funeral was not fulfilled.

Afterward the old lady clutched with her thin fingers at the landlady.

But that unimaginative worthy had said: "What, me poke into them folks' affairs? Not on your life, dearie! Never liked them but we don't need to do business together. You're making up things. 'Sides, the talk is the funeral was a nice one, so maybe the Wilsons had a change of heart. Did anyone *see* the little fellow? Now dearie, you don' suppose people go around and pry open the coffin of those resting in peace, do you?"

THE days and months ran their course through the street, swept along by snow, rain and wind and cold and finally by the softness of spring again. It was hard to keep track sometimes, but Miss Fretchett, lying mostly abed now, knew in her old, dry bones and so-tired heart and head that it was a year ago, just.

The young physician from the neighborhood had come to see her, offering kindness and little else. After all, age is incurable. And privately, with her landlady, the young doctor doubted that Miss Fretchett would ever be very active again . . .

But this night she was active enough to pull herself out of bed. The voices from the Wilson living room were loud, angry as was so usually the case. Again the roly-poly doctor's rasp was plain. It was the

eternal subject of money, and the discussion was heated.

"It's coming to me," Dr. Finn shouted, sounding more drunk than usual. The Wilsons, first man, then wife, tried to quiet the physician, and in the effort their voices rose too.

This night Miss Fretchett was active enough—although the effort was a severe one—to pull herself to the closet where she leaned against the door jamb, holding herself upright with shaking arms even as she strained her ears.

The doctor, his tongue sharpened and loosened with an extra load of liquor, was insistent. "*I want my money!*" Over and over.

Lower, calmer voices—the Wilsons—explained, soothed. There always was considerable delay in these matters. Lawyers and estates can't be hurried.

"They *got* to be hurried, or else!"

"Or else what, Finn?" Mr. Wilson asked the doctor with an ominous edge to his voice.

There was a pause for a moment and all the world seemed to still for listening. Miss Fretchett strained her trembling body closer to the thin partition.

The doctor spoke low but clear, his anger cutting around the liquor-thickness of his voice. "Or else, my buckeroos, I'm going to tell the authorities there was a bit of dirty work on the death of your son! A bit of funny business, ya know what I mean!"

The silence stretched itself out as the listener tried to imagine what was happening in that room. Then she heard the doctor's abrupt curse and an accompanying sound of surprise from Wilson.

It was the words Mrs. Wilson spoke, though, that made Miss Fretchett's senses reel. For a moment she had been thinking that perhaps there was physical violence among these three terrible people and they were fighting among themselves.

But the Wilson woman said, choked up, like a cry, terror strong in every syllable: "*Harold! Harold!*"

They all talked at once, the three. Fear talk. *How was it possible?* Cloaking the thought each had, *Harold, we three know you are dead or should be, why we worked*

so hard to see to it . . . and there you stand. . . .

"Come here, boy," Mr. Wilson managed, his voice not yet his own. "You mean you're all right! Why, after all this time, your mother and I have been so worried . . . the doctor here said you were *dead* and then, then when we couldn't find you . . ."

Words of guilt . . . tumbling, useless words.

AND then *he* spoke. Little Harold. Unmistakably, clearly, and the sounds of the boy-voice struck a dagger of terrible pain at Miss Fretchett's laboring heart.

"Yes," simply that, then, "I shall tell you about it, Father and Mother."

There was silence and then—Mrs. Wilson it was—somebody said: "Harold, son. Who is your friend there in the doorway?" Cautious, their little minds still on witnesses and the law and who would think what and do what, and with this return from the dead, the boy who had not died, something would have to be done . . . what about Allen and Courtney, Counselors, Estate Management . . . the money, The Money, THE MONEY

All wrapped up in that prosaic, tiny, imprecise sentence . . .

"Harold, who's your friend there in the doorway?"

Who's your friend?

Miss Fretchett *knew* even before the little boy-voice said, "He's come to see you."

There, like that. Listened to by an old woman, very sick and old in body but not out of her mind. That was all.

He's come to see you . . .

There was the sudden, urgent, terrible clumping of heavy steps, and then the most . . . complete silence. . . .

Miss Fretchett made it back to bed but it was almost her last effort. Some moments later, her landlady came to the old woman's room. Her broad face was grinning; she'd seen something that amused her.

"Dearie, I thought you'd be interested. I just saw Doctor Finn tearing out of Wilson's and going down the street like all the devils in Hades were one step behind. Did a body good to see that drunk no good doctor run so—" and she put her hands on her huge hips and laughed.

Then she stepped closer. "Why Miss Fretchett, you all right?" Her expression and tone changed abruptly. And though the old woman had enough strength to nod slightly in what she meant for reassurance, the landlady bustled out.

"I'm going to call the nice young doctor, that's what I'm going to do. A body can see you're not feeling right," and her heavy, hurrying steps took her away into the other downstairs regions of the house where dwelled the telephone.

MISS FRETCHETT lay there, and her body began to float, slowly at first, beneath the blanket, despite her will to keep it down. There was wetness on her face as she cried for the last time—an involuntary memorial for her own tired, drab life. But more. She had *heard* little Harold. If she could only have *seen* him, only could have found strength to go to the front of the house, to beckon to him as he went, she would so dearly have loved to see him just once more . . .

The small sound brought her eyes away from the ceiling. Her eyes that were so blurred, and it was getting dark, but there was someone . . . she gulped her throbbing heart from her throat as she saw.

"Harold!" she breathed out, gratefully.

He had come, he hadn't forgotten her. He was coming towards her.

The little golden-haired boy was indistinct but he *was* there beside her bed. "Yes, Miz Fretchett," and he put his small boy's fingers on her pale hand.

Then she saw beyond him. The tall figure in the doorway, watching them. It seemed almost as though Harold felt her seeing and wondering through his fingers on hers.

"It's all right," he said kindly with a child's vast, grave kindness. "That's my friend. Don't be frightened, Miss Fretchett. We're with you now. Don't be frightened."

Don't be frightened. How could I with you, little Hal, here now. She saw the stranger advance slowly into the room, his height almost too much for this dimension, dark-muffled in the gloom-rid room. She felt a moment of strange, vague fear.

But Harold's voice was in her ear and head and soul, "*Don't be frightened, Miss Fretchett.*"

THERE was nothing the young doctor could do, but when the landlady, bug-eyed, peered over his shoulder as he was completing his examination, he agreed with her relieved sentiments, "My, young doc, she died peaceful."

He nodded. It was so. Old Miss Fretchett had passed quietly away, and the smile on her face had both the beauty of a youth so long ago gone and the peace of age so just now terminated. But the soft spring evening was just beginning for the young doctor. Strange how these things go in cycles. Later that night he was summoned by the authorities to the next house from whence Miss Fretchett had died. A policeman had noticed the front door banging unlocked. Investigation had followed.

The two in the living room were Mr. Wilson and his wife. They had died apparently of natural causes, but the young doctor was moved to recall the death he'd seen earlier. For these two had not died easily. Anguished, twisted terror was written on both faces.

Upstairs in the small bedroom was the strangest, though. A boy—yes, it was the little Wilson boy beyond a doubt, killed in an accident and buried a year ago, records said. But this night disproving the cold ledger, lying in his bed. Dead to be sure, but the same peace on his face, the same sweet smile . . . though his body was badly broken even as the records claimed. . . . And he had been dead not hours—but months. No one knew, no one could figure out beyond the shrug of shoulders, just what had happened . . .

And across town, one who did know and would be eternally, damnably worse for it, was trying to forget what he knew and had seen with drink after drink . . . to still the terrored heart, the shaking fingers . . .

To forget the memory of the live boy Dr. Finn had seen and heard again this night . . . the boy he himself had declared dead just a year ago . . . Harold.

But most of all, to forget Harold's *friend* . . . the tall stranger, standing there waiting, waiting for them, all of them.