

# Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

The big boss saw a way to  
gather in his due. . . .



Heading by Jon Arfstrom

LAST month, the New York building inspectors appeared at a restaurant in the lower fifties and condemned it. Why did they resort to such drastic action? Was it because of some ill-fated happenings at this establishment, or merely on account of its miserable roof and cellar? It may have been either.

There is no doubt that the WHISPERING SHRIMP Restaurant was exceedingly popular. For a decade, the editors of "Ame-dee's Guide to Good Eating" praised its cuisine and atmosphere. The dining-room itself—let alone the connecting bar—was worth seeing.

For one thing, the ceiling was extremely low, and cluttered with menus and recipes of Shrimp *mongole*, *thermidor* and *creole*; for another, there were two dozen painted shrimp on each wall. They stood and reclined together, in a vague pretense of whispering. Fishing nets had been strung over the corners, Neptunes floated through the carpets.

The chairs were an agglomeration of antiquities, representing rowboats and gondolas, and even several rickshas. The tables could be recognized as submarines; several aircraft-carriers had been added, to keep up with the times. Seaweed contributed a touch of realism.

These *objets d'art* were due to the globe-trotter, who owned the establishment, a man named Elmer Melrose. Melrose was rarely in New York. He undertook voyages to far-flung places, while his two accountants and a headwaiter traveled diligently

## TABLE NUMBER 16

BY CURTIS W. CAREWIT

into his cash-registers. While this trio saw to the right (or wrong) things at the WHISPERING SHRIMP, the restaurateur was really quite content; he kept sending the quaint furniture from Hong-Kong, Bengasi, or Capetown, and took whatever cash there was left. Usually it was enough. He trusted the accountants to look after the headwaiter, the headwaiter after the waiters, and from there down to the humblest kitchenmaid.

ACCORDINGLY, one particular evening, a waiter named Joe Pistoizzi leaned against a fishing net, and watched the busboys. It was five-forty five, and they

were setting the tables. Because Joe was a musical and dreamy little fellow, he derived pleasure from the muffled clatter of silver, the ringing of glass, and the boys' white uniforms against the green decor of the room.

**S**UDDENLY, the door burst open, and two men staggered in. They carried a crate. Behind the crate entered Emil Hasslinger, headwaiter, with as much majesty as the obstacle ahead of him permitted. Joe noticed that the crate was black, and adorned with gold. Gleefully, Joe thought that it looked like a casket, and if it were just a little longer, a fine casket for Emil. And it was true the headwaiter looked cadaverous. In fact, his face was so white that you could have associated it with a mortician's embalming wax.

He carried a bulky portfolio in one hand, and a pair of white gloves in the other. Joe saw him dispose of both, then pass the two men.

"This way—" he pointed. "This way, please!" The men followed with difficulty, for the whole flotilla of furniture had to be moved out of their way.

After much shuffling and pushing, the group reached Joe's corner. It was still early, and the waiter wore his white shirt, a shabby bow-tie, and a pair of liquid-spotted tuxedo pants, held up by faded suspenders.

"Give us a hand," said Emil. His voice had the crunching sound of chipped ice.

Joe knew at once that his superior was in a bad mood; for a few seconds he mused about the cause, then ascribed it to Emil's lady friend. Her cost was indeed hard to bear.

"Come on," Emil repeated.

Joe's round and polished face broke out into a grin, and he helped the two men set the box on the floor.

**T**HE headwaiter stood rigidly, his face expressionless. The men wiped their faces with the back of their hands. Joe studied the crate. After a moment, he said, "Look, Signor Emil! Dere isa sign!"

The other stooped down, like an automaton. Joe pointed to a damaged label, which read:

From: The Singapore Furniture Co.

To: The Whispering Shrimp Restaurant,  
N. Y. C.

**EXPERIMENTAL! CAUTION!**

Remarks: Emil, here is something new. Don't open the crate till I get back to New York. On my way shortly.

*Melrose.*

Joe rubbed his broad honest face. "No open, eh? Isa sometin' speciale—!"

"Never mind instructions," Emil said. "We've got to replace number sixteen."

He waved to the workmen who presently attacked the boards of the packing case until a rectangular table appeared—a table for two.

"*Eh! Come e bella!*" marveled Joe who always expressed his delight, in a style all his own.

Then he looked at the crate again, and at the label. He saw the word "caution" and once more he thought of Emil's girl friend. As he and every dishwasher knew, she had a passion for glitterstones and other trifles, worn around neck, arms or fingers.

*Caution. Caution.*

"Don't just stand there, Joe. Get the old table out of the way. And hurry with my dinner!"

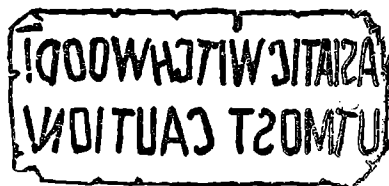
The little fellow said, "Yeah, right now."

But instead of leaving, he examined the wooden newcomer. Busboys, waiters and barmen were also looking on. The table proved to be a rather common red mahogany affair, thick, shiny and visibly heavy. There were no adornments, except the gold rings around the legs.

Joe continued to scrutinize it, and soon exclaimed, "*Perbacco!* Another sign!"

"That's enough now!" said Emil.

But Joe had seen the slip which was pasted inside one side of the table. Its lopsided smudged letters looked like:



Joe tried to decipher the strange idiom, he only spoke *napoletano*, and English of sorts. He wondered, whether Emil who

knew three languages, and had gotten around, could understand this one. But Emil had already shoved the table against the wall, with the help of two boys and his own precise, little motions.

**A**NOTHER boy brought salt, pepper and utensils and Joe finally trudged into the kitchen, to return shortly, with Emil's Spare Ribs and *krant*, and a glass of Burgundy from the bar.

His master was seated, and Joe stood behind him, his foot scraping the carpet.

"Scuse me," he at last began.

Emil, with circular movements, spread butter on a roll. He used the knife like a designer would handle a compass. "What was it?" he asked.

"Datsa good news," said Joe shyly. "My wife hasa new——baby!"

"Good," replied Emil, sipping at the wine.

"No, natsa good."

"Why?"

The waiter stepped around, and faced the eating man who was just draining a fruit-cup, by lifting it and pouring the last drop of syrup into his spoon. Joe waited. When Emil looked up, Joe said, "Money. Babies costa money." He thought of nipples and bottles and—"Please senda lotsa guests, tonight?"

"Well," said Emil, wiping his thin lips. "I——"

There was a pause, after which the little man, as he had often done before, reached into his pocket. When he was sure that no one was looking, he drew out two dollar bills. His superior, as accustomed to bribery, as a member of the *Corps Diplomatique* is to a signature on a document, seized the two bills slowly. When his bony hand above the new table touched them, something strange happened. Joe saw the green paper pulling downward, almost out of the receiver's hands. Emil grasped the money, however, folded it quickly, and, one eyebrow raised, pushed it into his tuxedo pocket.

The waiter did not muse about the phenomenon; instead, his imagination began to play with the great possibilities two dollars could offer, respectively to his wife and Emil's lady friend.

**U**PON arrival of the first patron, Emil folded his napkin into six neat parts, arose and went toward him. Above his head hung the chandeliers, shaped like reversed shrimp cocktails. As he maneuvered the guest to a table, the light spread over Emil's hair, which was parted in the middle, and looked precisely as though a bucketful of wax had melted on it.

This thought cheered Joe, immeasurably and, after removing the plates, he slid into his tuxedo.

Other guests arrived, and the headwaiter shuttled between doors and chairs. His fingers executed impromptu movements with the oyster-shaped ashtrays, or the unique sugar bowls, while his head gestured to the staff. Smoke and whiffs of *sauces piquantes* spread in the air. What Amedee's Eating Guide termed as atmosphere, now settled over the place; from the greenness of the walls, it sank down to the nautical furniture, so that it all looked like a party at the bottom of the ocean.

By eight fifteen, Joe stood in the kitchen. Nickels, quarters and dimes were on a window sill in front of him, like a small regiment, the metal soldiers of which he counted. When Emil suddenly towered over him, Joe stopped moving his lips, and looked up anxiously.

"Isa funny sing," he remarked. "Dat first man I had tonight. He always leave' plenty tips."

"What of it?" Emil asked. His lips were so tight that they looked as if they had been sewn together.

"Well, he sat at de new table tonight—no? Datsa very baad."

Emil's hand crackled a lonely dollar in his own pocket. "Make it snappy," he said.

"The man left no tip dis time."

"It won't be the last time either," said Emil rather expansively for him. "Guests are unaccountable. Like—err—. Well, it even happens to me. And *I* need money too!" Joe reflected a moment about this superior's worthy purpose.

"Look at the door," went on Emil. "Another party. I bet that——"

**A**T THE entrance, a guest's hand moved forward and the headwaiter took it gingerly. This motion was immediately fol-

lowed by Emil's fingers slipping into his own pocket.

At seeing this, Joe shook his head a little, mumbled *Eh signore!* and returned to the gentleman at Table Number Sixteen, who was ready for his dessert. The waiter unfolded the bill of fare and came back with a "Custa puddì." He also brought the check, presented this time on a cashtray.

While the man finished his meal, Joe's blue eyes peered from behind a pillar. It was a hectic evening. Diners were now sitting and waiting at all tables. Though hard-pressed, Joe did not move until he saw and heard the dropping of a coin into his plastic helper. No sooner was the patron out of sight, than Joe rushed forward. His stubby thumb grasped the tray.

There was a hole in it.

He stared at the tablecloth. There was another hole, sharp and black, just the size of a fifty-cent piece. His colleagues sailed by, and someone cried "Waitah, waitah!" but Joe was oblivious to the world around him.

Finally he covered the Table Number 16 with a couple of clean napkins, a practice at the WHISPERING SHRIMP, where, on occasion, the quality of food came before adequacy of service.

Just then Emil arrived. "You are slow tonight," he said sharply. "You can't handle all these tables."

Joe didn't answer immediately. He looked at a black gondola and at the headwaiter. Then, trembling, he set place silver out on the spread napkins.

*Caution. Caution.*

"Good heavens, PistoZZi, what *is* the matter with you?"

Joe's face now turned crimson, and he finally managed to get out a few words. "*Misericordia!*" he burst out. "Dere is soamting wrong wit de new table."

"What?"

"Is impossible to explain, Mr. Emil!"

"Anyway, better speed it up! I'll check later." With that, Emil left.

Joe went into the kitchen then, and stood lost amid a scrambling, yelling crowd. There was the scent of French Onion soup, garlic, croutons; it was hot, and the vapor crept through his tuxedo, penetrating the threadbare shirt. At last, with such a weird pre-

dicament as he had to cope with, it entered his head also.

It was still spinning when he returned to the dining-room. The tables were filled to capacity. A white-haired man now sat at Number Sixteen. He was a Senator, and a young creature, whose head was more dressed than her body seemed very occupied with him; alternately she looked into his eyes and at his carnation, cooing—for good measure—into his rosy ear.

Under these circumstances, Joe considered, the man would be worth two dollars, a sum that he immediately translated into two pairs of baby socks. So he served with as much *empressement* as he was capable of, after the evening's bewilderment. His mind's eye saw the *bambino's* fluffy head and its big, blue eyes, and he kept smiling, running and nodding.

When he brought the bill, Joe held the tray at the Senator's throat level. He dreaded the table now, and took no chances. With twenty dollars on his plastic device, he sped toward the cashier, a frowning and puzzled Senator following him with his eyes. Emil stood at the door, erect like a candle. In that position, as he studied the reservation books, Joe pulled at his sleeve. "Will you come wit' me?"

"More trouble?"

"I—I show you soamting!" said Joe.

They reached the Senator's table. He was scowling, and even his curvacious companion pursed her lips.

"Sir," the Senator asked, rising, "what's the hurry?"

"No hurry at all, sir," replied Emil, flashing a smile that disappeared like a razor blade in quicksand.

"Isa no urry," echoed Joe.

The gentleman's face smoothed out, and he pushed—*noblesse oblige*—a handful of large coins under the coffee cup.

The instant Emil had given his approving nod and the guests had left, there was a distinct scraping sound, audible in spite of the gabble of voices and rattling of cocktail shakers. Even as they watched, the coins slowly bored themselves through the table cloth. Then avidly through the second cloth. And finally with a grunting satisfaction into the mahogany—all this followed by a slight and excited vibration.

Both men stood riveted to the carpet for a long time. A quartet of mermaids at the bar began their act. They played and sang, "Soooo deep is the ooooshean—"

Joe bent over the table, and gave a curse which would have made the simplest citizen of Naples blush. Emil jerked the perforated cloth aside, and his long fingers moved over the surface. A busboy came, wanting to see what had happened, but Emil waved him away.

The money was there, perversely visible under a thin layer of wood. To extricate it without tools would have been impossible.

The little waiter's nerves were quite shattered. Fearfully he looked across the room. The shrimps on the wall, that had always whispered, now seemed to convulse themselves in merriment, leaping and blaring madly. The nets seemed to surround him viciously; and the Neptunes were griping and poking at his feet. And voices were everywhere, as if they came from under water.

**BY TEN**, Emil had the table covered again and more patrons served on it. As the evening progressed, only a few coins went into Joe's pockets, while Number Sixteen remained insatiable.

The waiter tried to be vigilant, but ultimately confusion always got the better of him, so that the money-devouring crevices grabbed a lion's share of his receipts. Joe blamed it all on the *diavolo*, or failing his presence, on at least an imp. On occasion, he compared the table's greediness to that of his co-workers, and admitted that in eighteen years of service he had never seen such a thing.

Meanwhile, the headwaiter made the trips to the door and his pocket. When the former was filled with waiting guests, the latter abounded with currency. From time to time he showed up at Number Sixteen. His detachment was such that Joe kept his eye on him apprehensively. Somehow, he felt, that more evil was yet to come.

Once, Joe even walked to the table and said, "Looka here, if this *mascalzone* steal my money, you do something—no?" The table didn't answer, but a guest sitting at it looked up puzzled. "Hey," he asked, "what's goin' on?"

"Noting," said Joe, very much embarrassed.

Around eleven, the aircooling system developed a short. The fans worked furiously, but clouds of smoke spread quickly in the room. From the corner of his eye, Joe saw his superior talk briskly to two busboys. Immediately afterwards they came to remove Number Sixteen. They dragged it downstairs.

Joe knew that the *coup* was on. When he returned to the vacant spot, he found the dirty slip that had been pasted inside the side of the table. He read it, with alarm. It was right side out this time: ASIATIC WITCHWOOD! UTMOST CAUTION! He threw it down.

It had been a big evening, Joe reflected. A lot of money must be in the table; it was clear that Emil wanted the whole take. Hadn't he kept banquet tips? Hadn't he been a steward on the *Bremen*, but, as another shipmate revealed, been thrown out because of repeated smuggling? And his blackmarket connections, later? And—

So thinking, Joe became quite excited. As he carried a glass of sherry from the bar, he saw Emil—all nonchalance—walk toward the door, whence, a few minutes before, the table had gone. He ran toward him, the sherry dancing and slithering on the tray. Despair made him bold. He barred Emil's way.

"Whasa matter," he asked, "where you g—?"

"Sh-sh, look at your drink: It's a fine mess!"

"Is oright," Joe murmured, "where you going?" *You are stealing*, he thought. *Stealing!*

"I'm investigating," said Emil, forcing a smile. "You'd better go to your other—"

"*Signor* Emil, I've five small ones." His free hand waved five vehement fingers. "I must—"

"You must go to your guests now. Thank you."

"Datsa going to mean drouble."

Malice came into Emil's eyes. "Now go back to work, or—"

Joe stumbled back to his tables, fear and rage and indignation searing through him.

He waited for the boys to come up, then followed Emil down the squalid

stairs and through the labyrinth of corridors. The air was thick below, and the smells of coal and wine penetrated his nostrils; and because fine restaurants are often short of elegance in their cellars, Joe's legs thudded against trashcans and empty cases. Overhead ran giant pipes, water pipes and steam pipes and electrical circuits. Months' dust covered them all.

While he walked, his wife's picture flashed through his mind; he thought of Mario, Pia, Jimmy and the *bambino*, and of his big son overseas. He thought of Emil's extravagant woman. He thought of Elmer Melrose, the absent boss, who had, knowingly or unknowingly, brought a curse on them all.

Joe's footsteps echoed from the walls. Otherwise it was quiet, until—until he heard a thumping sound, and a stifled rattle from a man's throat.

He had walked in circles, but he now found his way to the boiler-room. There he stopped, out of breath.

He saw Emil on the floor, sprawled on his back. The table was squashed down on his face.

Joe, who was a pious little man, crossed

himself and raised his eyes to the ceiling. But he was also a careful man, and, without touching anything, he bent down and looked under the table.

Emil lay quite still there. His neck and face were gently, but firmly gripped by fibrous tentacles. There were traces of foam on the wood, as if it had enjoyed the meal.

No heroism could be ascribed to Joe, for he drew away immediately. On the floor, he saw the knife which his superior had been using to extricate the coins, and near it a sizable supply of nickels, quarters and dimes. Joe took them, repeating several prayers several times.

LATER that night, Elmer Melrose arrived from Singapore. Joe and the accountant took him down to the cellar where the boilermen and the police were lifting Emil's body from its stronghold. They used gloves and force. Emil's coat was glued to the wood. His tuxedo pocket was found to be empty, but under the surface of table Number Sixteen they discovered a handful of green, green bills.