

Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1952

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Published bi-monthly by WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 28, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McLWRAITE, Editor

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Vol. 44, No. 7

I bought the door—even though the auctioneer warned of evil.



The Artist and the Door

BY DOROTHY QUICK

THE advent of the artist and the door was almost simultaneous. I have always wondered if the one would have been as sinister without the other. Of course, the evil was in the door, but if the artist hadn't come along just then perhaps it might never have been released. I say that to comfort myself, but I know it isn't true. Evil is evil. It is a power and its strength is beyond mortal knowledge. Even without the artist there would have been horror. He only served to give it speedier expression.

But I am ahead of myself. The story goes back to my desire to have a carved door for my Elizabethan farm house.

I had rescued the cottage from demolition. It was just a frame when I first saw it, but the Tudor structure was there and

two of the old tiny-paned glass windows had miraculously survived. The old beams were still in place and one linen fold panelled room which I visioned for my study. There was a gap, like a missing tooth, where the front door had been.

I bought the house and restored it tenderly into the lovely place it now is. I did it with care and devotion, but my entrance door was modern and an anachronism. I hated it, but I told myself someday I would find an old one in keeping with the rest of Little Tudor—the name I had bestowed on my home.

I moved in, made friends with my neighbors, particularly the ten-year-old daughter of the people who owned the Manor house of which the farm had originally been a part. Anne was old for

her years and bookishly inclined. When she heard I was an author, she read my historical novels and accorded me a kind of hero worship that was good for my lonely spinster's heart. She was always under foot and my brother, Weston, who lives with me and looks after my affairs, said, "She's good for you, Tansy. She keeps you from too much work and loneliness."

Weston was right. He had to be in London a good deal attending to my contracts, for my novels are done in the cinema and on the wireless, and there are quite a lot of details to look after for which I have no head. I wouldn't be half the money-maker I am without Weston's pushing. As it is, we do very well.

When he was away I welcomed Anne's society. We grew very close and her parents were delighted. They were busy enough, Sir Richard with his bird raising and Lady Salter with her young. She had five children younger than Anne. So all in all, Anne was with me a good deal of the time.

I was alone, however, the day I found the door. It had been a day I intended to devote entirely to work, so I'd told Anne not to come over. The morning's writing had gone very well, but after lunch I struck a snag. Katherine Howard, my current heroine, proved difficult, the facts about her too obscure to fit into my plot. "You need air" I told myself sternly, and went out to the barn for my car.

AS I drove the Bentley past the road leading to the Manor I slowed up, but Anne wasn't in sight, so I rode on, thoroughly enjoying the Kentish countryside. It was in springtime blossom and the apple trees in full flower provided such breath-taking beauty I could hardly keep my eyes from them long enough to do justice to my driving.

As a matter of fact, it was fortunate there was no traffic on the back roads I had chosen or anything might have happened. I gave myself up to the season and wove in and out and around every orchard I could find. All at once I noticed a group of cars and carriages, even a riding horse

or two, standing by an old stone fence. I stretched my neck and saw at the end of a long lane a dark, forbidding stone house with a sign hanging from one of the windows announcing "Sale Today." There were people going in and I realized it was an auction.

I added my Bentley to the cluster of cars and walked up the lane. Auctions have always fascinated me, and a country one is usually something special. When I saw the door I knew why I was here. I had been led. There it was, just what I needed for Little Tudor, The Farm, Aldringham, Kent. It was of oak polished by centuries of wind and rain, carved by the hand of man in Tudor times—just what I wanted.

I went inside, sharp-eyed for London buyers who might prevent my getting it. Antiques and period pieces are hard to come by now-a-days. But so far as I could see, the people were local. There was no one well dressed enough for London. It was a country crowd.

I looked around. The large room, drawing room I supposed, was quite crowded—with people and the strangest assortment of furniture I'd ever seen—of all kinds and periods from a Gothic bench through a wonderful Queen Anne chest to some pieces that must have come from Grand Rapids, U. S. A.

There was a table, complete with a pitcher of water, a glass and gavel for the auctioneer. Presently a red-faced, jolly-looking man took his place behind it, picked up the hammer and was just about to begin when a voice rang out, "Tell the truth before you sell, man. Don't let them buy the Devil's wares unknowing."

The speaker was a wizened old woman who looked like a witch. Her eyes were beady bright and she spoke with authority.

The auctioneer held up his hand. He was obviously annoyed. "If you'd given me time I was going to tell my audience," he began with a lie, for I'm sure he'd had no intention of anything but the usual patter, "that this house has had the reputation of being haunted. That's why it's to be torn down,

but everyone in these parts knows that. The last owner—an artist—was supposed to have sold his soul to the devil so's he could live here. He was the last of the line and the pictures he painted were passing strange."

His audience was breathless now, and a little shivery, so he warmed up to his work by adding melodramatically, "These pictures have all been burnt, and the house has been exorcised with bell, book and candle by a priest. That includes the furnishings, ladies and gents, so you can buy with a free hand. Now, take this chest, genuine Queen Anne—" he began extolling the beauties of the chest I had singled out.

FROM then on everything went quickly to "ohs" and "ahs" from the "Ladies and Gents." Bidding was brisk and the auctioneer worked even faster than most of his kind. It was as though everyone was anxious to get away before sundown.

I didn't blame them. The place had an uncanny atmosphere despite the exorcising, or maybe that had only been in the auctioneer's mind. A good many things had been sold that morning, so there wasn't so much to fall under the gavel. I edged nearer the witch-like old woman. Towards the end she grinned at me. "You're wise, dearie, not to buy. The Masserys never had no luck—not since William the Conqueror's time they didn't, and their things shared their evil with them. Hain't you noticed things do? Reflect their owners, I mean."

I told her I hadn't, but now that she spoke of it I thought she was right. I admitted I wanted to buy the door.

She looked at me and shook her head. "It's been there a long time. It had best go with the house, miss. The door now. It's evil too. Maybe it was open and the priest's words were lost on it. Let be, girl, let be."

But I bought it just the same, for three pounds. No one else wanted it, and the auctioneer was anxious to be off. As his men tied it on the roof of my car I saw the old woman shaking her head in the background, but I had no premonitions. I was

overjoyed to have found just what I had always craved for Little Tudor. I had been careful to get the old hinges along with the door, and once it was in place my home would be complete. I was so happy I hummed a little tune all the way home. Even the apple trees had lost their charm.

When I drove up in front of my barn I found Anne, Weston and Old Tim, the gardener, wondering where I'd gone. They were glad to welcome me back and delighted to see my find. "It's perfect," Weston announced.

"Just like you to get the very thing, miss," contributed the gardener.

Only Anne was silent. "Don't you like it?" I asked, not wanting there to be one fly in the ointment, or one word of dissent. I had already forgotten the old woman.

Anne looked at the door which Weston and old Tim were holding. "It's beautiful" she said reluctantly, "beautiful, but there seems something evil about it." She shuddered involuntarily.

I remembered the old woman then. I thought it strange that Anne, child as she was and miles away, should echo her words. But I spoke sharply. "It's old, all old things have seen evil, much of evil. Sometimes they can reflect what they've seen to sensitive minds."

She accepted my explanation with gravity, but she had the last word. "Yes, only—only it's as though this evil were alive."

Long before the twilight which is so lasting in England had ended, Weston and old Tim had the door in place.

"Evil or not, it looks magnificent," Weston said.

"Does it seem evil to you?" I asked.

"No." Weston was matter of fact. "What you said to Anne is true, though. It doesn't seem just like any door."

"It isn't. It's Tudor." We laughed at the pun. Then I told Weston about the old woman. He was quiet for a little, then he shrugged. "Maybe—but it's a fine old piece and just what we wanted. Let's forget the rest." That was how we left it.

The next morning Weston went up to

London in his own car—an ancient Daimler which, true to tradition, still ran like a song. I decided I'd walk to market. Aldringham wasn't far, the exercise would do me good. Anne, who had come over for breakfast, went with me. When we reached the gate we found the artist. He was lying spread-eagled on the road with a nasty bruise on his forehead. We knew he was an artist as his easel lay beside him and a box of paints with half its contents spilled was there, too. He was quite unconscious, evidently the victim of a hit and run driver.

I sent Anne to ring up the doctor and when she'd done that to return with old Tim. I felt the artist's pulse. In view of the tools of his trade there was no doubt of his profession. The beat under my fingers was faint but steady. I knew enough about fractures and concussions not to disturb him, so I began picking up the tubes of paint and putting them in his box. I was just aware of the doctor's car in the distance when I found him awake and regarding me.

"So you're better." I said.

He smiled ruefully. "I guess so. Is anything broken?"

"You should know." I told him and watched him flexing his arms and legs. Apparently there was nothing wrong with him. He grinned as the doctor came over. After a hasty examination the doctor said he was suffering from shock. He should be quiet for a day or so. The M.D. looked at me so I invited him to stay at Little Tudor. After all, he'd practically been injured on my ground. I really had no choice.

The doctor and old Tim helped him in. I put him in the guest room. He slept most of the day. The doctor had seen to that—but by night he was up and insisting on being no trouble. He finally came to dinner in a robe of Weston's.

HE LOOKED very young and handsome with blond, waving hair and deep blue eyes the color of turquoise. There was something open and ingenuous about him that made him most appealing. He was a charming talker too. Actually he was an artist only on the side. He had a regular

job on a newspaper. Painting was his hobby and he was on a two weeks' vacation walking tour indulging it. He had only a few days left before he had to be back at Fleet Street. He showed me his sketch book. The things in it were good. He certainly knew how to draw and paint. Maybe some day he could illustrate a book of mine, I suggested.

He'd like that, he told me. By now Mrs. Tim had cleared the table and I was sitting by the fire. The artist, his name was Sandy Gordon, was moving up and down the big room. But he'd like to do something now to pay his way. How about painting that door? It looked so plain in the room.

I explained it was Tudor and all the carving was on the outside. Inside there was only the outline of four squares, and the wood wasn't as well polished, but I told him it would be out of character to paint it.

"No, it wouldn't." He'd been to some castle on his trip, pure Tudor, which had painted doors. It was even rumored Holbein had painted them. He'd do a good job. Please let him. Otherwise he could hardly accept my hospitality.

What could I do but weaken? When I came down next morning he was at work, Mrs. Tim hovering near enthusiastically. Later in the day Anne joined Mrs. Tim. "It's a lovely color, isn't it?" she asked, but she looked worried. When I asked her why, she mumbled something about "still evil."

Sandy didn't finish the back of the door until just before it was time for me to take him to the train. Then he called me. "Do you like it?" He pointed to the door and stood back.

It was exquisite, a path outlined with a serpentine hedge of box leading off into a riot of roses. There were roses all along the side, across the top, bower-like. Mammoth roses, incredibly full blown. The colors were gorgeous. One could almost smell them.

"It's wonderful," I told him with enthusiasm, and it was. Then, because he was obviously waiting for more, I added, "It makes one want to find out where the path goes."

He turned away. "I shouldn't try to discover if I were you. It's a funny thing," he went on with a rush as though the words were forced out of him, "It isn't what I meant to do at all. I'd planned a Persian sort of thing, a princess in a flowery field with a prince on horseback. But when I started to paint it was as though another hand seized mine and this is the result. Those exotic colors aren't me at all. I usually deal in muted shades. These are stronger than I ordinarily use, and I never saw a rose like any of these. Oh, well, I suppose it's genius. Anyway, it's more vivid than anything I've ever done. Actually I'm quite proud of it."

"I shall be too." I told him. Then we rushed for the train. As it pulled out he leaned from the window and called, "Don't walk down that path." Then the train took him off to London.

WHEN I got back to Little Tudor, Anne was sitting, watching the door. I thought she was looking out for me, but

such it developed was not the case. She was looking at Sandy's mural.

"Isn't it funny how those lovely roses take all the evil away, Aunt Tansy!" She always called me that. "I've never seen such pretty flowers and that path—where do you suppose it goes? I'd like to find out."

"You mustn't," I broke in sharply, remembering what Sandy had said.

She raised her brown eyes to my slate gray ones and laughed childishly, "As though I could! But I'm sure it's somewhere lovely—like the flowers. Perhaps Sandy knows."

"When he comes back to visit we'll ask him." I looked at the door myself and once again it seemed as though I could smell the roses and that they moved as though swept by some slight breeze.

Anne slipped her hand in mine. "The roses dance. I'm sure at the end of the path there's a carnival—a carnival of roses."

I wondered where she'd heard the word carnival. It was an odd word for a child to know. Perhaps she'd picked it up from

Sandy. "Such a lovely scent." She half whispered. "There were never such roses in this world." She wasn't really aware of what she was saying. It was curious that she seemed to have taken the words right out of my mind.

"Come on." I cried, sweeping her up. "Let's go for a walk." Instinctively we went out the side door leading onto the terrace. It was only then that I realized since I had brought home the new door no one, not even Weston, had used it.

THE next morning I was doing much better with Katherine Howard when suddenly Anne rushed into the room. "Surprise, surprise," she cried and dropped a yellow rose on my manuscript. It was the most perfect flower I have ever seen, much larger than most. It looked like a sequined star and the dew on it glistened like diamonds.

"Why, Anne, wherever did you get this? It looks like one of Sandy's roses."

She giggled, "It is! I found it lying in front of the door. Do you suppose it dropped off?"

"Don't be silly, Anne. You know that's impossible." I was sharp again, hating myself and the hurt look in her eyes. "Did you pick it in your mother's garden?"

"No rose is blooming yet." She told me gravely. "Not even in the conservatory. Besides, I've never seen a rose like this, not even at the Flower Show in London."

I knew she'd been taken for a treat last year, and I knew she was right. I had never seen such a rose either.

"Perhaps it comes from the end of the path," she suggested.

"Anne, you mustn't say such ridiculous things, or even think them. Probably Sandy sent the rose down from London. It's most likely a new kind he knew and that's why he drew them on the door. He told old Tim to put it there for me to find." I made my tones convincing, although I was remembering what Sandy had said about his painting. It wasn't like him and I never saw a rose like any of these. Maybe he had found one and sent it as I'd told Anne.

Anne didn't argue. She only looked hurt. "Don't you want it?" she asked, her lip quivering.

"Of course, dear. Let's put it in one of the best vases. I'll keep it here on my desk. It will inspire me." We made quite a thing of putting it in water and a ceremony of placing it on my desk.

It didn't inspire me. It worried me, for it lasted as no flower has any right to last. After a week it was as fresh as the day Anne brought it. Its yellow unfaded, dew still nestling at its heart. Anne worried me too. She was always sitting, looking at the door. When I asked her why she said she saw so much in the picture. "Some day I'll know what's at the end of the path. I have to." She was serious and I was frightened. I tried to discourage her visits, but it was no use. She was always there and now she was no longer interested in being with me. It was only the door that fascinated her. I was beginning to wish I'd never found it. I wished Weston would come home, but he was detained in London with a big cinema contract for my last book. "Even with the tax you're going to have some money to spend," he told me on the telephone.

I was too worried, and too afraid to care. Anne was changing before my vision, growing thin and pale. Her eyes, great pools of mystery, and her hands when they touched mine were like claws. I tried to talk to her mother, but she wouldn't take it seriously. "Just growing," was her comment on her child, "and working her imagination overtime. If it wasn't your door it would be something else. Don't worry."

But I couldn't help it. There came a rainy day and between the wind and storm I knew Anne wouldn't get over to Little Tudor. I made up my mind I'd watch the door myself, to see if I could discover what she saw. I suggested to Mrs. Tim that she take a nap, and when I knew she was settled I went into the long room. There, in front of the door, lay another rose. A red one this time, as beautiful and as unreal as the yellow one Anne had brought me. I knew now Sandy hadn't sent it. I'd written and asked him and he'd denied it

heartily. "Couldn't be a real rose like those products of my imagination—" he'd put on paper.

I took the red rose and put it in the vase with the yellow one, which was so strangely unwithered. I left it, glad to be free of the over-powering scent, but when I returned to the long room the perfume was still there, heavy as pure attar of roses, permeating the entire room. I sat in the deep chair facing the door where Anne always sat, with the sweet, cloying odor of the rose in my nostrils growing stronger every second. I watched the door. Once again the roses seemed to sway as though moved by some, to me, unfelt breeze. They seemed to be leaning towards me, beckoning me to come to the path, and the patch stretched endlessly and invitingly before me. What a picture it was. Genius, Sandy had said, it was more. It was a masterpiece, living as some pictures do.

I grew more and more enthralled. Now I could understand Anne's feelings. No wonder she liked to sit here with such sheer beauty before her, with endless, inviting vistas opening to her eyes. Carnival of roses—roses in riotous confusion, the epitome of beauty urging me to be a part of it.

The heady aroma of the roses' perfume must be affecting my brain. But I was like one compelled. I had to touch the flowers, to feel their velvety petals, to be a part of them. I was out of the chair without my knowledge, moving towards the door. The scent was stronger now, more alluring, and the path more inviting. I knew if I opened the door I could step onto the path and I knew, too, that I desired that more than anything in the world. I put my hand on the door handle. I turned it, opened the door. There was sunshine and roses outside, a riot of roses, red, pink, yellow and white rustling roses, moving towards me, touching my hands with velvet, my cheeks with dew, while the path sparkled like diamonds, and a bright, unnatural sunshine flooded everything like a spotlight.

I was dizzy with the redolence of the flowers. I took a step forward. I was on the threshold. Now, in another minute, I would

be on the path. I would know such beauty as was not in the world.

Crashing through the sunlight and the roses came Sandy's voice, "Don't walk that path," and then suddenly the cloying scent was gone and instead I smelt that foul odor of decay that is part of yellow roses just before they begin to wilt.

Shocked, I drew back, though there were hands, strong, masculine hands, trying to pull me forward through the door. I exerted all my will and stepped back again into my long room. The path, the sun and the roses were gone. There was only wind and rain outside as the door slammed shut. I fell back into the chair and covered my face with my hands.

The door *was* evil. I knew now Anne was right. The old woman had known. She had been right too. Tomorrow I would have it removed. I could run no risks with Anne.

I remembered now what Sandy had said about it was as though someone else had seized his hands, and it wasn't his kind of painting. It was that of the last owner of the house. He had been an artist, the auctioneer had said so, who had sold his soul to the devil so he could stay in the house, and that his pictures had been burned. The roses were his pictures, not Sandy's—his. They would have to be destroyed, know the cleansing of fire. They were utterly evil, like the door, which, as the old woman had said, probably had been open and escaped the exorcising by the priest, so the evil spirit of the artist could cling to it and come to Little Tudor, bringing his evil with him. This was all strange and shattering to me, but I did not question it. I somehow knew it was so, knew too that I must cleanse the evil with fire, tomorrow. I could do nothing while the storm raged. Now I was shaken and unnerved. Work would be my best medicine. I went back to my study. I ignored the roses on my desk. I couldn't bear to touch them. I started to write. My pencil took no note of time, but suddenly I was aware of movement on my desk. I looked up. The sun was shining in my windows. I had been too absorbed in Katherine Howard's love scene

with the king to notice the storm was over, but that wasn't what had disturbed me. It was the roses. They were swaying and moving as though dancing with joy.

"Anne!" I cried, clasping my throat. The rain was over. She could have come to Little Tudor. I rushed into the long room. She was there, her hand on the door knob, just as mine had been a short time ago. "Anne," I called, "Anne, come back." There was all the fright and horror I felt in my voice.

It didn't stop her. She only called out over her shoulder "I can't stop, Tansy, I've got to find out where the path goes."

I rushed forward toward Anne and the moving roses but I was too far away. She swung the door open. I saw again the carnival of roses, the path, the sunshine so different from that visaged from my study window.

"Anne, Anne, no, no." I was screaming, but it was no use. She was over the threshold; when I reached the door it was shut, the painted roses on it rustled mockingly.

I opened the door. There was no sign of Anne, no path, no roses, no unnatural sunshine.

Anne was never seen again. She had found the path and vanished completely. Her disappearance made a nine days wonder in the neighborhood. I said I had last seen her go through the door. There was no use telling the rest. No one but I ever knew the truth—or what I thought was the truth.

The next day we burned the door. Old Tim and I. We chopped it up first, in small pieces, and what a bonfire it made!

As it burned wildly I heard, or thought I heard, two voices. One was a man's screaming with frustration, the other was Anne's. "Thank you, Tansy," was what she said. I like to think the fire freed her soul from Evil.

When the door was completely ashes and I got back to my study I looked for the roses. They were gone. Only around the vase were little seared petals that resembled the ashes of the door.