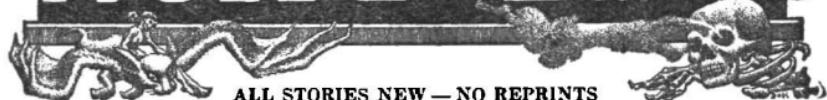


# Weird Tales



NOVEMBER, 1949

Cover by Matt Fox

## NOVELETTES

THE UNDERBODY . . . . . Allison V. Harding 6

*The country fields of summer hid, within their rich earth,  
a terror-rid doom to transcend men's ability to fear.*

THESE DEBTS ARE YOURS . . . . . Arthur J. Burks 34

*What in the world—or outside of it—would ever  
set such a chain of events in motion?*

## SHORT STORIES

CONSCIENCE MAKETH COWARDS . . . . . Seabury Quinn 18

*Jules de Grandin copes again with a peculiar case, the  
likes of which test even his particular talents.*

OUT OF THE WRACK I RISE . . . . . H. Russell Wakefield 30

*There are occupational hazards in all businesses. The  
conjuror has his own, and most unusual ones.*

MURDER MAN . . . . . Ewen Whyte 48

*The murder of a human being is a peculiarly final  
thing—particularly to the victim.*

TWILIGHT PLAY . . . . . August Derleth 53

*Strange things can happen to a child in  
those precious playtime hours.*

THE GREEN WINDOW . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 58

*It was a strange old structure, and the strangest part of it was that  
green opaque window to the left of the fan-lighted door.*

STRANGER AT DUSK . . . . . Malcolm Kenneth Murchie 64

*When the sun plays on the other side of the world,  
He comes toward you from the shadows.*

THE BARREN FIELD . . . . . Yves Theriault 74

*It was a poor piece of land where nothing would grow  
but the hopes of one who would do anything,  
yes anything, to fulfill a strange dream.*

SKYDRIFT . . . . . Emil Petaja 81

*The powers that be may send any things from the skies, and  
not the least of these is a destiny to change men's lives.*

TERROR UNDER ERIDU . . . . . Malcolm M. Ferguson 88

*In the subterranean canyons beneath the uppercrust  
of the earth, laws unlike our own are required  
for creatures unlike ourselves.*

## VERSE

DEMON LURE . . . . . Harriet Bradfield 57

FOREST GOD . . . . . Dorothy Quick 87

WEIRDISMS . . . . . Lee Brown Cope 17

WEIRD TALES CLUB . . . . . 4

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114  
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D. MCILWRAITH, Editor



# The Barren Field

BY YVES THERIAULT

*"Cette année-ci, le blé sera beau car la terre a bu le sang de l'homme."*  
*(This year, the wheat will be beautiful because the earth has drunk the blood of man.)*

*(Calloch)*

*A woman strong  
as nature and  
the elements—  
stronger  
perhaps.*

FOR thirty days, Christina Sorenson spread her arms out and stood above the barren field that was all the land she owned, and she let the setting sun throw her shadow on the parched yellow soil. She was a tall bony woman, built like a man. Her shadow was enormous on the field, and because of the outstretched arms it was in the shape of a cross.

She moved this way and that, throwing the shadow over the whole field, the bare half-acre she had fenced with iron posts and good strong wire. And as she moved she muttered the only prayer of faith she knew.

"God will make the wheat grow," she repeated endlessly, "since the soil will not." After two weeks she knew the work had been useless and the nightly prayer became a gesture. A concession to the people in the valley, watching her toiling up here; watching her because they feared the enormous woman who threw rocks at them if they came up the path to her cabin.

There remained no alternative for Christina. The words of the old songs and the sayings of the storytellers, that she had learned as a child in the land across the sea were now all that was left to her. Did they not tell the secret of the growing wheat? But no one could say Christina had not tried the way of God first.

It had taken a year after Big Bill Sorenson's death to make up her mind about the barren field and the wheat she wanted to grow in it.

She had walked into Mort's store one day, her face grimy with the labor of fence-

building, and she had said: "I want seed wheat, Mort."

The storekeeper looked at her strangely, but he went to get the wheat.

He set the bag against the wall next to the front door and walked slowly back to his stool behind the counter. Outside was the maddening glare and the visible heat-waves, but the long, low store was cool and restful. It was littered with the goods of desert living, the barrels of lard, the sacks of feed, the bunches of spurs-straps or rein leather hanging from the rafters. Galvanized pails and cheap stetsons piled on the counter, and a row of high boots standing on a shelf near the ceiling. Mort pushed the stool aside and leaned against the shelving. He slowly rolled himself a cigarette, not touching the money Christina Sorensen had laid on the counter.

"Did you buy land, Christina?" he asked. "Did you buy land in the valley?"

She shook her head. "No . . . I'm sowing wheat in my field up there."

Mort Stevenson shrugged his shoulders and looked at Christina a long time. But the big, brawny woman with the wide hands met Mort's eyes steadily, as he searched for a meaning to the seed wheat.

"It's your land, Christina."

"Yes," she said, and she walked to the bag of wheat, lightly picked up the hundred pounds in one flip of the wrist, and went out the door.

Mort stood by the window watching her ride away on the big gelding, her long powerful legs dangling grotesquely on each side of the horse.

Through the dusty panes, he stared at her thoughtfully as she nudged the horse up the winding path full in the blaze of the afternoon sun. She was climbing steadily toward the cabin perched precariously on the ledge, a thousand feet up. The cabin, and the half-acre field below it were all Big Bill had left her when he died.

FROM the ledge, the small field came down abruptly, yielding to the slope, a neatly defined square in the jagged face of the mountain. The valley was a long narrow crevice between the high peaks. When the first gold-hungry men came to the valley, they built the town at the dry end, where

the gold was. They dug deep-reaching wells for the elusive water, and named the town after Baldy Connor, who struck water on the twentieth day, and after the wells, because they saved them from death, since they did not know of the river that flowed thirty miles away. Farmers eventually found the river, and grew seeds and raised cattle, but that was later, and the men of Connor's Wells did not know about them either for quite a while. Here, around the town and under it, the soil was yellow, implacable, refusing to feed anything but sparse mesquite. As the flat valley bottom surged suddenly into a stiff slope, a hundred feet from the town's last house, reaching for the high peaks of the Mother Mountains, the dry yellow earth became granite, still more implacable, and the paths were hewn by wind and rain or the hoofs of weary horses across the face of the gigantic range.

The only soil there was on the mountain was the plot of land staked by Big Bill Sorensen as a living place, when he came from the east with the early settlers. A pocket of the useless earth hanging on the hill, clearly seen from the town below. Near in measured distance, but very far because of the tortuous path that climbed to it, retraced its steps to find better footing, then circled around boulders, to climb some more before retracing again. A slippery, treacherous road, nearly impassable to any but Christina Sorensen and the mule-footed gelding.

Often, Big Bill had spoken of the day when he would hoe the ground, and fertilize it, and bring water from some mountain spring he was going to find, so the seeds would grow. And as he talked of that, Christina would smile, and nestle closer to the lumbering giant, because she loved the seeds and the plowed fields, and the wheat that reminded her of the land where she was born. But Big Bill never got around to plowing the earth, or fertilizing it. He was looking for the gold he never found.

And often, as often as Big Bill had spoken of the wheat he was to grow, Christina had thought of the secret she knew that would bring up the seeds in the barren earth, that would save looking for improbable water, but had never told Bill what the secret was, because Bill was dreaming,

and he would not listen to her, only to his dream. So she would become silent after a while, and dream with him.

For days after she had come to buy the seed wheat, Mort watched her toiling up there in the field, carrying stones by hand, stacking them in a neat pile in the middle of the enclosure. She pulled out the mesquite and hoed the ground. Foot by sweating foot, using a hand hoe, she broke up the hard-packed earth that had been baked by the relentless sun for centuries.

As she bent and pushed the hoe into the ground; as she straightened to survey the work done and that which was left to do, Mort knew her great body was covered with sweat under the long skirt and the rough cloth bodice.

She turned the ground, shook out every stone that was in it; when the earth was ready, she sowed the wheat.

THAT first night, she stood over the field as the moon came up, and in a great raucous voice that tumbled down into the valley, and that was heard inside the houses where the frightened people listened, she sang a strange chant of her youth, of the far-away country, whence she had come, only a girl, to marry Big Bill Sorensen who searched for gold in the Barren Hills of the great Southwest.

The sound reaching Connor's Wells in the quiet night was like the howl of a wounded animal. Only the wheat seed and the God of the Mountains knew that the strange music and the foreign words asked for the kindness of the long-abandoned soil to the seed it now held.

But the second night, and every night for thirty days after that, Christina did not chant her pagan song. Instead, she stood on the jutting rock, and threw the shadow of the cross upon the sown wheat.

When the seed did not germinate after the month was over, when she saw it was hopeless to wait for a miracle, Christina came down to the valley, and went to see Mort at the store.

She stayed a long time near the counter, not speaking. Once she started to say something, but someone came in, and she was silent again, long after the customer had gone.

It was Mort who broke the silence finally. He had gone to the rear of the store, in the deep shadows where stood the crates and the cartons of goods, and as he came back to the counter in front, he said:

"Christina, did the wheat come up?"

There was no irony in his voice. Only a pity that the big woman did not understand. Her face and hands were dirty, and her long yellow hair was matted by sweat. It fell stiffly against her shoulder, framing the square, ugly face. Her lips were pale. She shook her head. "No," she said, "it didn't come up."

"This is not wheat country," the store-keeper said gently, "you can grow some at the other end of the valley, where the river is. But not here, and much less up into the hills. I keep seed for people that grow wheat at the other end, but I never sold a bag to anyone around here."

She stood looking at him, her face stupid and tired. There were lines around her eyes. Her breathing had become audible in the silent store. She was like a great spent ox after the long pull home.

"That's the way it is, Christina," said Mort. "Me, I figure never to mind other people's business. But there you are. The wheat didn't come up. You couldn't ever grow wheat up there, Christina. You know that."

"Bill said . . ."

But Mort stopped her with his raised hand.

"Sure! Bill dreamed. He dreamed often. I've listened to every one of his dreams . . ."

"He was going to find some water, a spring in the mountains, channel it down to our place . . ."

Mort shook his head and repeated: "He knew how to dream, Bill did. Why, he couldn't find water in the Barren Hills if he dug a thousand feet down. We hardly found any here, in the valley, thirty years ago."

He slowly rubbed the bald spot on his head and looked sadly at Christina.

"That's the way it is, Christina. No use trying. You're liable to kill yourself tilling that field up there, and nothing will ever come out of it . . ."

She stood up again, facing him, a foot taller than he was.

The storekeeper blinked, pulled his glasses down on his nose and looked at her over them.

"I been a friend of Big Bill a long time, Christina, you know that. Helped him all I could. What's your idea, why do you want to grow wheat? Place hardly big enough to grow a cash crop, and you can't feed your horse wheat in this country . . ."

She leaned over the counter, her face close to Mort's.

"Don't you know why?" she asked, "can't you see it? It's on account of how Bill dreamed. All about the wheat he'd grow, and then we'd get a place in the valley. I grew near the green fields, and the golden fields of the ripe crops. I needed them. Bill knew that. He kept talking about the wheat we'd grow in our field. But he never got around to doing anything about it. He died, and now I've got to grow the wheat. . . ."

Mort nodded.

"You see," said Christina in her tense, hoarse voice, "you understand, don't you? Now I'll grow the wheat."

"You tried," said Mort, "and the wheat didn't come up. How you figure to do it now?"

HE HAD no sarcasm in his voice, but again the deep pity for the woman who had to grow the wheat her husband had not known how to grow.

She had never spoken so much to anyone, and Mort felt a strange feeling of fear creep up his spine as he looked at her eyes, the grim face, the hard jaw.

"Can you understand hunger, Mort?" she asked. "This is a kind of it. Or wanting to win in a fight. No matter what the fight is about. Bill didn't grow the wheat, but I will. I tried your way, and the way of the people at the river end of the valley. I tried it. No one can say I didn't try hard. There'll be wheat on my field."

She was smiling now, but Mort did not like to look at the smile. Her eyes were not smiling.

Her hand fumbled in the bodice, and she took out a soiled paper, damp with the sweat of her breasts, and she smoothed it out on the counter, so Mort could read it.

He bent and studied the writing, but it was in a language he did not understand.

"What is it, Christina?" he asked.

She snatched the paper from the counter and put it back where she had taken it against her skin. She kept her hand there against the warm breast, as if seeking reassurance.

"Bill is dead," she said flatly, "he kicked me in the face, and he beat me when he was drunk, but I never lifted a finger to fight back. That was because I loved him. Now he's dead, and I'll grow the wheat he didn't get around to growing."

She bent down over the counter and her voice whispered to Mort: "This is the secret. The paper is the secret. It tells how to grow the wheat. You wouldn't know how, but now I do. It's a terrible secret . . ."

Mort shrugged his shoulders.

"As you wish, Christina. I told you what I thought about growing anything up the mountain, or even down the valley. Maybe the secret doesn't work either. I figure that also is your business . . ."

"But I had to tell you, Mort," she said. "I had to tell you about the secret. Now you know I tried the right way. No one can blame me for trying the other way . . . Don't you see?"

She smiled again, the way Mort didn't like.

"Give me some seed wheat, Mort. I'll pay you later."

He stood undecided for a few seconds, then he shrugged his shoulders in the familiar gesture he had, and went to get the wheat.

When he came back from the hangar, dragging the bag along the floor, she lifted the heavy sack under her arm and silently walked out. He heard the horse riding away outside.

That night, Mort slept fitfully on the cot stretched behind the hardware counter. He kept thinking of the woman's smile, the paper in her bodice.

IN THE morning he saw that she was again at work in the small field, hoeing and sowing the new seed.

When darkness fell, the people of the town who had seen her come into Mort's store the day before, and ride away again listened for her chanting to come down from the hills. But they did not hear it. All they

heard was the gallop of the gelding—or was it some other horse?—through the village, long after they were in bed.

For Christina had sown the seed, and after she sat in the cabin waiting for the hour. When the hour came, she saddled the horse and rode it into town, along main street, as far as Luke's Barber shop, in front of Mort's store. She rode to the back of the building and crept inside through the unlocked back door.

She grabbed Luke before he could scream. The small, puny Irishman who had come from the East to open the barber shop years ago could not fight the big woman's tremendous strength, and she gagged him securely before she trussed his hands and feet.

Then she carried him outside to the gelding.

Only one person saw her. Mort had heard the gelding ride into the village, and he had seen Christina leading the horse behind the barbershop for he had stayed at his window, watching the mountain uneasily, and the strange woman who tilled its soil. Later he saw her emerge from the back with her burden, and ride away into the night. And Mort, after that, could not sleep at all.

Christina frenzied the gelding with her stirrups, and the horse almost flew up the path to the lone cabin.

When she got there, she threw Luke on the ground, took a length of rope from her waist and passed it under the shoulders of the man. He moaned under the gag, and writhed, but she paid no attention to him.

Then she tied the rope to the saddle of the gelding, and led the horse, dragging the man on the ground, to the field of new-sown wheat.

There she knelt beside Luke and un-gagged him.

"You want to know why you're here?" she said. "It's you or someone else. You're here because of the wheat. There's got to be wheat. I spent twenty years with Bill, waiting for him to grow wheat, but he didn't. Now he's dead. I can't go. I must stay with him here. So I'll grow the wheat. I may not grow a lot of wheat. Maybe only this crop. But it doesn't matter. It's a fight I got to win. A fight with the soil, and maybe with God. I have a paper here . . ."

Luke saw the contorted face of the woman as she bent over him, and her eyes. He was shaking violently. When he tried to speak, it was only a ghoulish croak that came from his throat.

She didn't hear him. She was unfolding the paper she had taken from her bosom.

The moon pushed some clouds aside and came back to light the scene. The jagged rocks of the mountains stood out in the eerie light, and long shadows striped the flat valley.

"I don't need a light to read that paper," said Christina. "I know every word by heart. Long ago, in my country, I learned the secret that makes wheat grow. I listened to the songs of harvest time, and in winter I listened to the storytellers night after night, sitting near the fireplace. And they all said the same thing, they told the tale of the Wheat God who knew how to make the grain grow anywhere, even on the rocky slopes, even where seed could never live. It's written on this paper, Luke. Listen, then you'll know why you're here."

She bent close to the small man on the ground.

*"This year,"* she read, *"this year the wheat will grow and be beautiful because the earth has drunk the blood of man."*

And then she threw back her head and laughed a horrible laugh that hit the high rocks and echoed and moaned against the hills. Luke started screaming, a thin sound that rose in the night air when Christina's laugh had stopped traveling along the face of the mountain and into the valley below.

"My wheat will grow, Luke!" cried Christina.

She took a knife hanging from the horse's saddle, and bending down she cut the ropes binding the feet of the doomed man, carefully slitting the trouser leg. He tried to wriggle out of the shoulder ropes, every motion desperate, but the gelding moved, the rope went taut again, and he was powerless with his hands still bound.

Then Christina searched with her finger for the arteries on the legs, and in a sure stroke slashed them open.

Blood gushed out into the hoed earth. She ran to the horse, swung on it, and led the animal around the field, yelling her chant of triumph, reining the horse that the

smell of blood made nervous. Dragged behind, Luke yelled with her, but it was in pure terror while his blood drained out, drenched the earth and the sown seed. Soon, his screams were fainter, and then they became a moan. Finally they stopped completely, as Christina turned the horse for the last time over the field.

Luke was quite still, horribly pale under the cold moonlight.

MORT heard the chant and the screams as he stood with the others in front of his store. They could not see the cabin in the darkness. They could only see the new fence reflecting the moonlight, up near the sky. But they couldn't see the cabin nor the field, only blurred shadows.

All evening Mort had watched. He was reluctant to clash with Christina, so when he saw her riding away with Luke, from his window, he didn't go out, didn't try to stop her. Instead he waited until she had gone up the path, then he went out to round up a few neighbors.

They were organizing the posse, debating on why Christina should kidnap Luke when they heard the hoarse singing and the screams they recognized as those of the barber. They went up to the cabin, pushing the horses as fast as they could go on the dark, dangerous path. As they rode, Mort kept thinking of the paper with the strange markings Christina had shown him. He had not thought of Death, not in the plain unescapable words before, but now he did. He did as he recalled her words and her smile.

Halfway up, the screams became gradually fainter until they stopped.

They found Christina Sorensen sitting inside her cabin, near the stove. She had lighted a small fire against the chill of the night, and she was rocking there, a wild look in her eyes, her mouth set in the grim smile.

"Where is he?" asked Mort as he walked into the cabin. "Where is Luke?"

Christina rocked contentedly and smiled at Mort.

"That was the way," she said. "The paper said how to do it. And I had been told of the strange way when I was a child. Now I'll get the wheat. That's all that matters."

The cabin was small, but of hewn logs. It was furnished with a table and two chairs, a dresser near a window, a wide cot in the corner.

There was a shelf next to the stove; the water pail stood there. The walls were bare. There was only a small picture of Bill tacked above the water shelf.

The men drew into a circle around the widow Sorensen. They had known what was in her eyes and now they were frightened.

She rocked in a steady rhythm, smiling at Mort.

He slapped her across the face, but she didn't move. She just wiped the blood that appeared on her lower lip.

One of the men walked out, and they could hear him going into the shed.

"He'll find him," said Christina suddenly. "You don't have to slap me anymore, Mort."

They heard the yell, and when the man came in, he was dragging Luke's body. He let it drop at Christina's feet, the small, slight body of the bled man.

"He's dead?" asked Mort.

"Yeah," said the man flatly.

"Quite dead," said Christina.

She had not stopped rocking. Now she was smiling again.

"He bled to death!" said Mort.

They looked at each other, then at Christina.

"Blood," said the woman, stopping her rocking suddenly. "Blood. It was said on my paper that the wheat will be nice if the earth has drunk the blood of man. Look for nothing else . . ."

THE man who had found Luke ran out of the cabin, into the night, and he ran to the field below the cabin, and they heard his cries of disgust, and he ran back shouting curses, screaming at the mad woman.

"Goddam it, she bled him to death, all over the field! It's all wet with blood. It's Luke's blood!"

Christina spread her hands on her wide lap. Now she was rocking again.

"I told you to look for nothing else," she said.

They brought her down to Conner's Wells, and she didn't resist. She came si-

lently, her head high, that strange smile still playing on her lips.

By morning, every one knew of the horrible death at the widow's cabin, but the sheriff had posted guards at the jail door, and no one tried to take Christina away, although the feelings ran high in Connor's Wells.

For a week, the trial of the woman dragged. For a week, the widow sat in the box every time they called her in. She sat there and repeated the story of the earth that must drink the blood of man to feed the golden wheat.

She offered no defense and did not accept the lawyer the court offered her. Not once did she flare up in the terrible bursts of violence they expected of her.

Once she bowed her head and they could see tears running down her cheeks. It was when they mentioned Big Bill Sorensen, whom she had loved enough to stay here and *make* the wheat grow where it would not, instead of going to the places where wheat grew year after year and where she would have been happy.

The judge called a recess when he saw her cry, but when they reconvened, she was as calm as she had been before breaking down.

At the end of the week, the jury called her guilty of murder, and she was sentenced to hang in the courtyard, two months later.

For two months, the people of Connor's Wells slept very badly. Every night, as dusk fell, they could see Christina, in her cell window, her arms stretched out in the form of a cross, looking at the field of sown wheat up against the mountain. And

there she would chant her savage incantation, the words foreign to their ears. But they recognized the sounds that had kept them awake before, the sounds she had made high on the hill when Luke was bleeding to death.

ONE dawn of a clear morning, she was led to the scaffold they had erected during the night. All the people of Connor's Wells were there, lining the prison yard, standing on the wall, and those that couldn't come in were on the roofs of nearby houses. And the woman walked firmly up the thirteen steps, and she stood on the platform, facing the mountain beyond, the cabin that the rising sun showed clear and brown against the granite slopes, the small field. . . .

When the hangman held the hood over her head, and the sheriff asked her if she had anything to say before she paid for her crime, she pointed to the field and her great animal laughter shook the courtyard.

"Look!" she yelled, "Look up there, in my field! The wheat is growing!"

The hangman let the hood fall, and quickly secured the knot.

Then he kicked the trap open and the huge body fell, but they could hear the horrible laugh until the rope snapped her neck seven feet later.

And while she swung between the scaffold posts, the people turned and looked at the field up there above them, and they could see the wheat, the green stalks already strong in the morning breeze, a bright patch in the dreary yellow mountain as the sun played upon it, making it clearer than it had ever been, nearer. . . .

