

WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

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Contents for March, 1923

TWENTY-TWO REMARKABLE SHORT STORIES

- The Mystery of Black Jean.....JULIAN KILMAN 41
A story of blood-curling realism, with a smashing surprise at the end.
- The Grave.....ORVILLE R. EMERSON 47
A soul-gripping story of terror.
- Hark! The Rattle!.....JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS 53
An uncommon tale that will cling to your memory for many a day.
- The Ghost Guard.....BRYAN IRVINE 59
A "spooky" tale with a grim background.
- The Ghoul and the Corpse.....G. A. WELLS 65
An amazing yarn of weird adventure in the frozen North.
- Fear.....DAVID R. SOLOMON 73
Showing how fear can drive a strong man to the verge of insanity.
- The Place of Madness.....MERLIN MOORE TAYLOR 89
What two hours in a prison "solitary" did to a man.
- The Closing Hand.....FARNSWORTH WRIGHT 98
A brief story powerfully written.
- The Unknown Beast.....HOWARD ELLIS DAVIS 100
An unusual tale of a terrifying monster.
- The Basket.....HERBERT J. MANGHAM 106
A queer little story about San Francisco.
- The Accusing Voice.....MEREDITH DAVIS 110
The singular experience of Allen Defoe.
- The Sequel.....WALTER SCOTT STORY 119
A new conclusion to Edgar Allen Poe's "Cask of Amontillado."

The Basket

An Odd Little Tale

By HERBERT J. MANGHAM

MRS. BUHLER told him at first that she had no vacancies, but as he started away she thought of the little room in the basement.

He turned back at her call.

"I have got a room, too," she said, "but it's a very small one and in the basement. I can make you a reasonable price, though, if you'd care to look at it."

The room was a problem. She always hesitated to show it to people, because so often they seemed insulted at her suggestion that they would be satisfied with such humble surroundings. If she gave it to the first applicant, he would likely be a disreputable character who might detract from the respectability of her house, and she would have to face the embarrassment of getting rid of him. So she was content for weeks at a time to do without the pittance the room brought her.

"How much is it?" asked the man.

"Seven dollars a month."

"Let me see it."

She called her husband to take her place at the desk, picked up a bunch of keys and led the way to the rear of the basement. The room was a narrow cell, whose one window was slightly below the level of a tiny, bare back yard, closed in by a board fence.

A tottering oak dresser was pushed up close to the window, and a small square table, holding a pitcher and

washbowl, was standing beside it. An iron single-bed against the opposite wall left barely enough space for one straight-backed chair and a narrow path from the door to the window. A curtain, hanging across one corner, and a couple of hooks in the wall provided a substitute for a closet.

"You can have the use of the bathroom on the first floor," said Mrs. Buhler. "There is no steam heat in the basement, but I will give you an oil stove to use if you want it. The oil won't cost you very much. Of course, it never gets real cold in San Francisco, but when the fogs come in off the bay you ought to have something to take the chill off the room."

"I'll take it."

The man pulled out a small roll of money and counted off seven one-dollar bills.

"You must be from the East," remarked Mrs. Buhler, smiling at the paper money.

"Yes."

Mrs. Buhler, looking at his pale hair and eyes and wan mustache, never thought of asking for references. He seemed as incapable of mischief as a retired fire horse, munching his grass and dreaming of past adventures.

He told her that his name was Dave Scannon.

And that was all the information he ever volunteered to anybody in the rooming-house

AN HOUR later he moved in. By carrying in one suitcase and transferring its contents to the dresser drawers he was installed.

The other roomers scarcely noticed his advent. He always walked straight across the little lobby without looking directly at anyone, never stopping except to pay his rent, which he did promptly on the fifth of every month.

He did not leave his key at the desk when he went out, as was the custom of the house, but carried it in his pocket. The chambermaid never touched his room. At his request she gave him a broom, and every Sunday morning she left towels, sheets and a pillowcase hanging on his doorknob. When she returned, she would find his soiled towels and linen lying in a neat pile beside his door.

Impelled by curiosity, Mrs. Buhler once entered the room with her master key. There was not so much as a hair to mar the bare tidiness. A comb and brush on the dresser and a pile of newspapers were the only visible evidences of occupancy. The oil stove was gathering dust in the corner: it had never been used. She carried it out with her; it would be just the thing for that old lady in the north room who always complained of the cold in the afternoons, when the rest of the hotel was not uncomfortable enough to justify turning on the steam.

The old lady was sitting in the lobby one afternoon when he came home from work.

"Is that your basement roomer?" she asked.

She watched him until he disappeared at the end of the hall.

"Oh, I couldn't think where I'd seen him. But I remember now—he's a sort of porter and general helper at that large bakery on lower Market Street."

"I really didn't know where he worked," admitted Mrs. Buhler. "I had thought of asking him several times, but he's an awfully hard man to carry on a conversation with."

He had been at the rooming-house four months when he received his first

letter. Its envelope proclaimed it a hay-fever cure advertisement.

As he was not in the habit of leaving his key at the desk, the letter remained in his box for three days. Finally Mr. Buhler handed it to him as he was passing the desk on the way to his room.

He paused to read the inscription.

"You never receive any mail," remarked Mr. Buhler. "Haven't you any family?"

"No."

"Where is your home?"

"Catawissa, Pennsylvania."

"That's a funny name. How do you spell it?"

Scannon spelled it, and went on down the hall.

"C-a-t-a-w-i-double-s-a." repeated Mr. Buhler to his wife. "Ain't that a funny name?"

IN HIS room, Scannon removed the advertisement from its envelope and read it soberly from beginning to end.

Finished, he folded it and placed it on his pile of newspapers. Then he brushed his hair and went out again.

He ate supper at one of the little lunch counters near the Civic Center. The rest of the evening he spent in the newspaper room at the public library. He picked up eastern and western papers with impartial interest, reading the whole of each page, religiously and without a change of expression, until the closing bell sounded.

He never ascended to the reference, circulation or magazine rooms. Sometimes he would take the local papers home with him and read stretched out on his bed, not seeming to notice that his hands were blue with the penetrating chill that nightly drifts in from the ocean.

On Sundays he would put on a red-striped silk shirt and a blue serge suit and take a car to Golden Gate Park. There he would sit for hours in the sun, impassively watching the hundreds of picnic parties, the squirrels, or a piece of paper retreating before the breeze. Or perhaps he would walk west to the ocean, stopping for a few minutes at

each of the animal pens, and take a car home from the Cliff House.

For two years the days came and passed on in monotonous reduplication, the casual hay-fever cure circulars supplying the only touches of novelty.

Then one afternoon as he was brushing his hair, he gasped and put his hand to his throat. A sharp nausea pitched him to the floor.

Inch by inch, he dragged himself to the little table and upset it, crashing the bowl and pitcher into a dozen pieces.

His energy was spent in the effort, and he lay inert.

MRS. BUHLER consented to accompany her friend to the spiritualist's only after repeated urging, and she repented her decision as soon as she arrived there.

The fusty parlor was a north room to which the sun never penetrated, and in consequence was cold and damp. The medium, a fat, untidy woman whose movements were murmurous with the rustle of silk and the tinkle of tawdry ornaments, sat facing her with one hand pressed to forehead, and delivered mysteriously-acquired information about relatives and friends.

"Who is Dave?" she asked finally.

Mrs. Buhler hastily recalled all of her husband's and her own living relatives.

"I don't know any Dave," she said.

"Yes, yes, you know him," insisted the medium. "He's in the spirit land now. There's death right at your very door!"

She put her hand to her throat and coughed in gruesome simulation of internal strangulation.

"But I don't know any Dave," reiterated Mrs. Buhler.

She regained the street with a feeling of vast relief.

"I'll never go to one of those places again!" she asserted, as she said good-by to her friend. "It's too creepy!"

A great fog bank was rolling in majestically from the west, blotting out the sun and dripping a fine drizzle on the pavements. Drawing her coat collar closer about her neck, Mrs. Buhler

plunged into the enveloping dampness and started to climb the long hill that led to her rooming-house.

Her husband's distended eyes and pale face warned her of bad news.

"Dave Scannon's dead!" he whispered hoarsely.

Dave Scannon! So that was "Dave!"

"He's been dead two or three days," continued Mr. Buhler. "I was beating a rug in the back yard a while ago when I noticed a swarm of big blue flies buzzing about his window. It flashed over me right away that I hadn't seen him for several days. I couldn't unlock his door, because his key was on the inside, so I called the coroner and a policeman, and we broke it in. He was lying between the bed and the dresser, and the bowl and pitcher lay broken on the floor, where he had knocked it over when he fell. They're taking him out now."

Mrs. Buhler hurried to the back stairway and descended to the lower hall. Two men were carrying a long wicker basket up the little flight of steps between the back entrance and the yard. She remained straining over the banister until the basket had disappeared.

The coroner had found nothing in his room but clothing, about five dollars in change, and a faded picture in a tarnished silver frame of an anemic looking woman who might have been a mother, wife or sister.

Mrs. Buhler answered his questions nervously. Yes, the dead man had been with them about two years. They knew little of him, for he was very peculiar and never talked, and wouldn't even allow the maid to come in and clean up his room. He had said though that he had no family and that his home was in Catawissa, Pennsylvania. She remembered the town because it had such an odd name.

The coroner wrote to authorities in Catawissa, who replied that they could find no traces of anyone by the name of Scannon. No more mail ever came for the man except the occasional hay-fever cure circulars.

The manager of the bakery telephoned to ask if the death notice in

the paper referred to the same Dave Scannon who had been working for him. He knew nothing of the man except that he had been very punctual in his duties until that final day when he did not appear.

SEVERAL weeks later. Little Mrs. Varne, who occupied a room at the rear of the second floor, stopped at the desk to leave her key. She hovered there for a few minutes of indecision, then impulsively leaned forward.

"Mrs. Buhler, I just want to ask you something," she said, lowering her

voice. "One afternoon several weeks ago I saw some men carrying a long basket out of the back door, and I've been wondering what it was."

"Probably laundry," hazarded Mrs. Buhler.

"No. it was one of those long baskets such as the undertakers use to carry the dead in. I've often thought about it, but I couldn't figure out who could have died in this house, so I decided I would ask you. I told my husband about it, and he said I was dreaming."

"You must have been," said Mrs. Buhler.

