

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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The Beasts That Tread the World

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

MY WIFE'S spoon fell into the saucer with a small clatter. "But, John, dear!" she protested. "You don't actually mean—a hoof-mark!"

"A hoof-mark."

"On Sheila Sayre's leg?" "On Sheila Sayre's leg," I repeated firmly, looking far more imperturbable than I really felt.

"But—but—" Marie stammered. "What did she say?"

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

Those great black beasts, they are behind you, even now . . . waiting . . .

I buttered toast with deliberation. "She said she'd been dreaming."

"Dreaming?" Marie stifled an exclamation of impatience. "And did the dream cause the hoof-mark on her thigh, for heaven's sake?"

I shrugged. "I don't know anything about it."

"Oh, you!" Marie said, exasperated at last, her plump cheeks shaking with annoyance. "You're the most maddening creature! I don't know how I've put up with you for thirty years! A fine doctor you are! A wonder you haven't driven me into a nervous breakdown long ago! You come home hinting of these fascinating stories, tell me just enough to drive me crazy, and then"—Marie spread her hands—"you know nothing. *Nothing!*"

She glared at me indignantly.

"Don't be so nosy, my dear," I reproved. It's very reprehensible of me, no doubt, but I'm afraid I enjoy baiting Marie's inquisitiveness. As a result we are always squabbling amiably with the mild and comfortable animosity engendered by thirty years of marriage. "I'm not keeping any secrets from you. I've told you the literal truth when I said I didn't know what caused the hoof-mark on Sheila Sayre's leg."

No more did I. But it's odd that I'd known something was wrong with Sheila Sayre, as early as the evening before, when she had walked into Petroff's Restaurant while Marie and I were dining there.

Though her Hollywood heyday was twenty-five years in the past, Sheila Sayre still entered a room as to a burst of applause. She favored restaurants, like Petroff's, that boasted short flights of steps leading down from the foyer to the dining floor, for on these she could pose dramatically, could descend slowly as if bathed in a spotlight's glare.

Time was when she had been the cynosure of all eyes at such moments, but now few heads turned. The public is notoriously fickle, and many of the younger generation had never even heard of Sheila Sayre. But of this she seemed fatuously unaware. You, watching her artfully artless entrancé, were amused or bored or irritated, depending on your own temperament.

She was slight and blonde, delicately

formed and tinted, and resembled nothing so much as an animated ornament from a wedding cake. She must have been fifty-five or sixty years old if she was a day, but she affected the vivacity and the ingenuousness of a girl in her very early teens.

SHE was a little ridiculous, if you like, yet one couldn't help but admire the single-minded purpose with which she tried to withstand the onslaught of old age. You knew she worked at it indefatigably. You were hazily cognizant of strict diet, rigid massage, careful beauty-parlor ministrations going on ceaselessly behind the tinsel backdrop that Sheila Sayre so determinedly held up before the public gaze.

As she entered Petroff's on this evening, she was flanked on either side by two young men who must have been many years her junior, surely.

Marie leaned forward to me across the table, and hissed, "Oh, look, there's Sheila Sayre!"

"Did you know she's just moved into our building? M-h'm. She has an apartment on one of the upper floors. Doesn't she look lovely? And good heavens, she must be a thousand years old. I wonder how she does it?"

"M-r-rmph," I said thickly, through my lobster.

I work long hours as a doctor, and as we have no children and Marie has much time on her hands, she's an addict of the movie magazines. She knows, as a result, most of the technical terms associated with the movie industry, and she can tell you the life history, if you're interested (and in my case, even when I'm not!), of every Hollywood star for forty years back.

"I saw her last picture, *Flames of Desire*—let me see," Marie pondered. "Why it must have been all of twenty-five years ago! And she was no spring chicken, even then. I remember how fuzzy the film always was in her close-ups. That was because they used to 'shoot' her through a gauze filter, so the wrinkles wouldn't show. She must be my age, at the very least."

Wheréupon Marie whipped out her compact, and surveyed her plump, kindly features under the gray hair with considerable dissatisfaction. "It's just a shame the way

I've let myself go! They'd have to 'shoot' me through a brick wall."

The lobster must have made me mellow. "You suit me just as you are," I said gallantly.

"Don't knock yourself out, darling," Marie dimpled. "And anyway, why wouldn't I? You're no Tyrone Power your ownself! But pay some attention, dear. Look at Sheila Sayre. Don't you honestly think she could pass for thirty-five?"

I glanced covertly askance, and for the first time gave Sheila Sayre my close attention.

And then I really *was* interested.

Sheila Sayre was glancing idly about, and there was just the faintest hint of a frown on her forehead.

And it was just then that I saw a dull shadow pass before Sheila Sayre's pale blue eyes. The shadow was faint, ephemeral. Like a veil held before a candle-flame.

For I knew it for what it was.

Fear.

And I wondered, curiously, of what Sheila Sayre might be afraid, that it should show in her eyes here in the safe surroundings of Petroff's Restaurant.

UNFORTUNATELY I said nothing to Marie of the shadowed fear I had noticed in Sheila Sayre's eyes, and thereby lost a fine opportunity for posing later on as a prophet.

We were just sitting down to breakfast the next morning, Marie and I, when someone knocked on the door. When I opened it, Mr. Hazeltine, the building superintendent, was standing in the hall.

"I'm sorry to disturb you so early, Dr. Derry," he apologized, "but I wonder if you'd mind going up to 809? Miss Sayre has just phoned down to the desk, saying that she was injured during the night."

"During the night? What happened?"

Hazeltine lifted his shoulders. "I don't know. She wasn't talking very coherently over the telephone."

My bag is always packed and ready for just such emergencies, so I picked it up and called to Marie that I'd be back shortly. The cage of the automatic elevator was still standing at our floor where Hazeltine had left it.

When we were in it, and he'd pushed the button marked '8', I asked, "Didn't Miss Sayre tell you the extent of her injury, or what had caused it?"

"No. She just babbled something about being hurt, and that she wanted a doctor. I—I received the impression she was pretty badly frightened, so I sent one of the maids up to stay with her until you could get there."

There it was again. Fright. In connection with Sheila Sayre. And it recalled to my mind my fleeting impression of the night before.

We left the elevator at the eighth floor, and Hazeltine led me down the carpeted corridor toward the back of the building. As the choicer apartments were in the front, I couldn't help but think that this was quite a come-down for Sheila Sayre, who had had her Beverly Hills mansion, and Malibu Beach 'cottage,' and her *pied-a-terre* in New York. Had them twenty years ago, that is (according to Marie's relayed gossip). Before the market crash, and before Miss Sayre's personal Hollywood star had flickered and gone out in a blaze of frustration.

Heigh-ho, I sighed. And I thought, not very brilliantly, that was Life for you. Up and down.

The maid answered the bell, and Hazeltine told her who I was, but he didn't come in himself.

The maid said, "Miss Sayre is in the bedroom; Dr. Derry."

"Is that the doctor?" came a lilt from the bedroom. "If it is, send him right in!"

I entered alone at this invitation, and thought, as I took in the scene before me, that vanity certainly died hard in some women. Despite her injury, Sheila Sayre didn't appear to be suffering. Certainly, she had felt well enough to prepare herself for the doctor's coming. She was wearing a bed-jacket of pink marabout, and her face was delicately tinted, even at that early hour, her blonde hair becomingly arranged, the soft rose lights artfully disposed to cast no ageing shadows.

The whole effect had the unreality of a stage-setting. At any moment I expected to hear a director call, "Lights! Action! Camera!"

I believe those are the terms I've heard Marie use.

But Sheila's careful artifices didn't fool me. She was fifty-odd, despite them. In all justice, though, it must be said that it was difficult to discern Time's traces behind the skilful make-up she'd applied. If not a teen-age girl, she might successfully have passed for a woman of thirty-five with any man not a doctor.

Her manner was gracious, and a trifle condescending. It was plain to be seen that she still conceived herself to be the glamorous star of twenty-five years before. Clearly she expected me to be bowled over.

Her speech was a curious mixture of Boston and Southern accents, which I shall not attempt to reproduce, delivered with the prattling coo of an artless child.

The effect to my mind, it would have pained her to learn, was decidedly phony.

"Oh, doctor, I'm so glad you're here!" Miss Sayre gracefully waved me to a bedside chair. "I've been through the most distressing experience. You must assure me my wound isn't serious! I've promised to dance tonight at the Polio Benefit, and I mustn't—I simply must *not!*—disappoint my public."

She eyed me archly, judging the effect of this. I murmured something suitably flattering. She seemed a child—a rather tiresome child—who must be protected from disillusionment at all costs. I don't know just why, but I found her self-delusion, her affected air, of extreme youth, a little sadening.

SHE sank back among her lacy pillows with a little sigh. "First," she said, "let me give you the background. For some time now I've been haunted by the same recurrent dream. I'm running, running as fast as ever I can, desperately trying to elude something pursuing me, something close behind me: Oh, Doctor, it is dreadful!" Sheila's hand sought her heart. "There seem to be so many of them behind me! There is the most awful thundering noise, and I can feel their hot, fetid breath on my back!"

"But it is dark, and I cannot see what they are. On they come, and on! Always, in the past, just as they seemed about to overtake me, I awakened. Frightened. Terribly, terribly frightened! But safe, thank God!"

Safe, here in my own bed, my own room!"

She had acted it all out for me, with considerable verve, but my pulses remained normal. I wondered just how much of this was self-dramatization, how much truth. With ego-maniacs like Sheila Sayre, one can never be sure.

I attempted to look sympathetic, and I must have been a better actor than she was, for she appeared consoled and went on with her story, sure now, apparently, of my rapt attention.

"But last night," she said, "something happened that never happened before. The things—whatever they are—came closer than they ever had before. I ran and ran till my lungs were bursting, but still they followed. And then—then—I fell!"

Her eyes, wide with horror, were on mine, waiting for my reaction.

"Ah!" I said non-committedly. But it sufficed.

"Fell!" Sheila cried. "With the things so close their hot breaths scorched me. I could hear their snorting and panting, and the terrible thunder of their hooves. And then I felt this sharp, crushing pain here"—she touched her left thigh—"as if one of the things had trampled on me. I woke then in agony, my forehead wet with perspiration, my leg paining me excruciatingly. Somehow I managed to phone down to the desk for a doctor."

She sank back, apparently exhausted.

"Let me see the wound," I suggested in my best bedside manner.

The down puff was thrown back, and the sheets of palest pink crepe de chine. The sheerest of chiffon nightgowns was lifted until I could see the wound on Sheila Sayre's left thigh, just above the knee.

I stifled an exclamation. Despite her dramatic story, I'd hardly been prepared, indeed had discounted the greater part of it. But now I stared, shocked, at the bruise.

It was black-and-blue, and unmistakable, standing out against the white flesh like a brand.

It was, beyond a doubt, the imprint of a hoof!

At fresh sight of the injury she had suffered, Sheila Sayre changed. Gone now were the labored histrionics. There was no touch of phony melodrama as she clutched

my hand, and whispered, "Dr. Derry, I'm—frightened!"

She wasn't acting. I know real fear when I see it. And it was licking now, like a hot tongue of flame, back of her pale blue eyes.

I couldn't do much for her fear, except murmur soothingly. And God knows, I could give her no explanation for her wound. I'm no psychiatrist, and to tell you the candid truth, I've always been, rightly or wrongly, somewhat of a mind to think that a good bit of psychiatry is nonsense, anyway. This thing of probing the subconscious, of interpreting dreams—well, my sense of humor is too great to take much of it very seriously, and if this be heresy, make the most of it. I daresay I'm just an old fogey.

Sheila Sayre's whole story had been incredible to me, but the wound was real enough. I treated the bruise, and told her I could see no reason why she shouldn't be able to dance that night. The initial stiffness should wear off in a few hours. She forgot her fear then, apparently, and grew arch and vivacious once more.

I made my escape as soon as I decently could.

Yet the fact remained that I was a sorely puzzled man as I went downstairs. And when Marie questioned me avidly about the hoof-mark, as I told you in the beginning, I could offer no rational explanation. How satisfy her curiosity when I couldn't satisfy my own?

The whole thing set me to wondering deeply.

What species of beast could have trod so brutally on the frantically fleeing Sheila Sayre?

AS IT happened, Marie and I had tickets for the Polio Benefit that same evening. I hadn't really wanted to go, but Marie was insistent. I think she had a certain ghoulish desire to see Sheila Sayre dance now that she'd heard the bizarre story of Sheila's wound—much as people will linger on a curbstone to gape at a house in which murder has been committed! At any rate, she ding-donged about it, until in self-defense I relented and consented to go.

In a way, now, it's fortunate that I did,

else I should have missed the most important link in the story of those last fantastic hours of Sheila Sayre.

Once I'd agreed to go, I went the whole hog, for such is my nature. "We might as well make a night of it then, Marie," I said largely. "I'll blow you to dinner at Petroff's again first, before going on to the Benefit."

So it was that we were lingering over dessert and second cups of coffee when Sheila Sayre came in, again with the two young men who'd been with her the night before. I think she considered their youth proved that her own hadn't faded quite, that she was still capable of attracting young men. Poor Sheila! Everyone knew she footed the bills for these evenings.

She was heavily made up, wearing a bewildering creation of black net and sequins, with bird-of-paradise feathers in her high-piled hair. She made the usual grand entrance, and there was the customary dramatic delay on the staircase to attract all eyes.

But few diners looked up. The clatter of silver and of china, the low-toned murmur of engrossed conversation, continued while Sheila and her escorts proceeded to their reserved table.

She passed quite close to us without seeing us, but I noticed that she was aware her entrance had created no great comment. And I saw, too, that the baffling expression I'd noticed on her face the evening before was on it again.

Perplexity, perhaps. But, most of all—Fear.

When she reached her table, Sheila hesitated a moment before sitting down. I saw her eyes scan the nearby diners, all of them intent on their meals or their dinner companions, and then, without warning, Sheila's eyes turned up under their lids, and she collapsed.

One of her slender, dark, young escorts caught her before she fell. He eased her gently into a chair, and stood there chafing her wrists helplessly. Both he and the other boy seemed completely at a loss to know what to do.

Marie had uttered an unintelligible exclamation when she saw it happen. I lost no time in getting over to Miss Sayre's table, elbowing her young men out of the way.

They were inclined to resent my brusqueness at first, but were pathetically relieved when they learned I was Sheila's doctor.

Well, she was all right. She had only fainted. After a few minutes, I succeeded in bringing her around. Her pale blue eyes opened, and she recognized me at once.

"Oh, Dr. Derry!" she said, shuddering. "The Beasts! They were after me again!" Terror sprang into her eyes then, and she tried to get up.

I put my hand on her shoulder, to keep her in the chair, to try to quiet her.

But she threw it off, and her terror deepened. "But—don't you see!" she cried. "It happened here! Here in the evening! In a brightly lighted room! Dr. Derry! *It isn't a dream!*"

My hand tightened on her shoulder. I tried to indicate by a warning shake of my head that this was hardly the place to discuss the subject.

The two young men were exchanging puzzled glances.

Sheila must have understood what I meant, for I saw her eyes go to the young men, close momentarily as if she sought to summon her resources, and by the time she'd opened them again, she had made a gallant recovery.

"How silly of me!" she murmured. "My mind must have wandered. I felt quite faint for a moment. It must have been the air in here."

"It is close," one of the young men said.

"But there!" Sheila smiled widely. "I feel quite all right now. Thank you so much, Dr. Derry."

She dismissed me as casually as that, and I noticed, for the rest of the while we remained in the restaurant, she was almost feverishly gay. It had been in my mind to suggest that she go home and to bed, instead of on to the Polio Benefit. Things would have ended much differently, perhaps, if I'd offered the advice and she had taken it.

But I didn't. And she didn't.

Back at my own table, Marie said, "What was wrong?"

I kept my voice low. "The beasts, again. I felt a little shiver of foreboding, remembering what Sheila had said. *It wasn't a dream!* I thought a moment. "You know,

it's the strangest thing, but I have a funny feeling that I have some clue to the beasts right at the back of my own mind. Something has been nagging me, ever since last night. A memory, perhaps."

Marie was intrigued. "I wonder what it could be. Certainly the 'beasts' mean nothing to me."

"Perhaps I'll think of it," I said. "Anyway, I have half a mind to call on Sheila Sayre tomorrow, to see if both of us, together, can get to the bottom of this thing that is haunting her."

And so I should have done, no doubt, if it weren't for one fact that it never occurred to me to consider.

How was I to know that for Sheila Sayre, there was to be no tomorrow?

WE FINISHED our dinner, and went on to the theater where the Benefit was to be held.

Marie often says now that she wishes we had never attended. For she learned then just how cruel the public can be to an entertainer who has outlasted her fame, outlived her youth.

Sheila Sayre didn't appear until well along in the program. When the master of ceremonies at last announced her, there was much rattling of programs while many of the audience sought to find out just who Sheila Sayre really was.

And when she finally made her entrance, the applause could only be described as modest.

Poor Sheila! She might have passed for thirty-five, but not while dancing. Gone were the grace and the elasticity of youth. The two young men she'd dined with were her dancing partners, and Sheila moved creakingly between them. They were really young, and the contrast was too cruel.

There were a number of bobby-soxers in the audience who had never even heard of Sheila Sayre. How could they have?—born, as they were, long after her day. They watched at first politely, but seemingly in some bewilderment as this elderly woman sought to hypnotize her audience into believing she was a creature of fire and spirit, no older than they were.

Sheila made a spectacle of herself. I hated to watch, but seemed unable to tear my eyes

away. My toes were curling in my shoes with vicarious embarrassment.

And then, toward the end, it happened. Sheila essayed a difficult step, stumbled awkwardly, and only saved herself from a ridiculous fall by a miracle.

Perhaps they thought it comedy. One of the bobby-soxers giggled tentatively. And then they all started. It was contagious. Peal after peal of laughter rolled through the hall, until even the older people were laughing helplessly, too. It was one of the finest examples of mob psychology that I've ever seen.

Marie's fingers tightened on my arm. "Oh, I wish they wouldn't," she said, and there were tears in her voice.

For Sheila had stopped dancing, and she stood there, obviously in amazement, while she looked out at these guffawing fools. Her thoughts were plain to be read in her face. They *couldn't* be laughing at her? But then even she understood. And I saw the slow, unhealthy flush of red that crept up over her whitewashed skin.

Something more. I saw her eyes, and that obscure shadow of fear was in them again. I knew now what it was, beyond a doubt. And I knew Sheila knew.

It was fear of old age. She saw the specter of the years, grinning hideously at her now behind those laughing faces. The years she had defied so long. A death's-head, grinning.

She stood there shivering, and I think in the agony of her embarrassment she had become paralyzed, was powerless to walk off the stage. Her eyes roved wildly from side to side, striving desperately to find some cranny in which she might find refuge from that sadistic laughter.

At last, belatedly but mercifully, someone backstage had the wit to ring down the curtain.

I WILL never forget the deep sense of depression that accompanied Marie and me as we went home. We couldn't even bring ourselves to speak of the hideous humiliation Sheila Sayre had undergone.

Marie only said once, low, "I wish we hadn't gone."

Silently I heartily seconded the wish.

It was the following morning that Hazel-

tine again knocked on our door. When I opened it, he was standing outside, his face the dirty gray of a scrub-cloth. His eyes held the blank, unbelieving stare of a man who had just seen a ghost.

"Miss Sayre—" he began, then stopped to swallow.

"Yes?" I could feel my heart sinking. After her dreadful experience at the Polio Benefit, had Sheila Sayre to bear the additional burden and fright of her old nightmare? I'd hoped she could find, for a while at least, release and peace in sleep.

"Miss—Miss Sayre is dead." Hazeltine's chin was trembling. "The police are up there now."

"Police?" I said stupidly.

"Yes. You see, there were—peculiar circumstances about the death. They—they don't know just what caused it. It couldn't be murder, couldn't be suicide. The Medical Examiner seems quite baffled, and said he'd like another doctor's opinion on the cause of death. When I told him you had attended Miss Sayre yesterday morning, he asked me if I'd bring you upstairs."

NATURALLY, I went right up to Sheila's apartment. There was a confusion of blue-coated figures in the living-room, and then I saw the Medical Examiner, Dr. Whitcomb, a balding, fussy little man whom I'd met once before at a medical convention.

"Ah, Derry." He held out a hand. "Come with me, please."

We went into the bedroom alone, and he stood back while I approached the bed. Miss Sayre's body was lying upon it, the down comforter drawn up to her breast. I moved it back a little, my eyes on her face, and put my stethoscope to her heart.

She was dead, all right, as Whitcomb himself had already determined.

He came forward now, and drew down the comforter and pastel sheets. "What do you make of this, Dr. Derry?"

I stared down in bewilderment at what had once been the white, unblemished body of Sheila Sayre. The chiffon nightgown that she'd worn was ripped to tatters, and her corpse was black and blue from head to toe, a welter of interlocking and overlapping hoof-marks!

Whitcomb's voice sounded awed. "What

in God's name could have caused such wounds?"

I wondered irritably how he thought I could possibly know. I felt a little sick. "It looks as if she'd been trampled by a stampeding herd."

"A herd, Dr. Derry? Here—on the eighth floor—in an apartment so small it would hardly accommodate a good-sized dog?"

I knew that as well as he did. No need for him to tell me.

I TOLD him then of my interview with Sheila Sayre yesterday morning. Of her previous wound, and of her dreams. And in the telling, I felt again that nagging something tugging at my memory. Something. If I could only remember what it was. I felt it would be a clue to the whole grisly business.

Hoof-marks. Beasts. A herd. Of what? Cattle? Oxen? Oxen!

A bell rang in my mind. As quickly as that. And then I did know what had happened to Sheila Sayre. These *were* the hoof-marks of oxen on Sheila Sayre's body! Of black oxen.

A few of the policemen had come into the bedroom while I had stood there lost in thought, seeking that elusive clue. Whitcomb was looking at me as if he thought the sight of Sheila Sayre's corpse had been too much for me.

"I know now what happened," I said softly. And I did know, here in my heart,

though they never believed me. True, the theory was fantastic. But surely it was no more fantastic than the manner of Sheila Sayre's death? And to this day, they have never explained that.

I quoted Yeats, the line that had been nagging at my memory for so long:

*"The years like Great Black Oxen tread the world
And God the herdsman goads them on behind!"*

Whitcomb and the police were exchanging puzzled glances. It was obvious they thought that I had gone mad.

But I knew I was sane, though the scoffers stared. I saw it all too clearly now.

The years. Those Great Black Oxen that Sheila had feared and eluded for so long. She'd danced before them—gaily at first, more and more frenziedly toward the end. But last night, at the Polio Benefit, she had known the dance was over. She'd known irrevocably then that she was old. And the oxen—they'd caught up with her. They'd trampled her. They'd conquered her at last.

But do you, too, think the explanation fantastic? Ridiculous, perhaps? And do you scoff—you in your strength and youth?

I wouldn't, if I were you.

For they're marching relentlessly onward still. For you. For all of us.

Look behind you! They're right at our heels!

Those Great Black Oxen.

Those *beasts* that tread the world!

