

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1949

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
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The Big Shot



*Oh, Thou who burn'st in Heart for those
who burn
In Hell, whose fires Thyself shall feed in
turn;
How long be crying, 'Mercy on them,
God!'
Why, ~~who~~ art Thou to teach, and He to-
learn?*

THE horrible nausea passed away and Bull Rafferty's spinning senses gradually slowed down to the point where he could regain command of them. Once more he could see and hear and feel and thus make contact with existence. It was comforting, though he would have been the last to admit it. No man likes to drown in a

By Eric Frank Russell

mental void. There is a loneliness in chaos, a terrible loneliness—not even the touch of a phantom hand,

With a mite of amazement he discovered that his feet still were walking forward, doggedly, with a dumb, animal stubbornness almost as if they had remained totally unaware of the momentary blankness above them, or as if they were entities apart from the squat, powerful body they carried.

There was something mighty peculiar about that. When a guy has a spasm he ought to flop. He shouldn't continue to amble along in a dreamy maze, like a zombie. Bemused by this, Rafferty pondered unseeingly while his legs bore him onward.

Snap out of it, Bull, and think back a bit. You've got to know the score. The boys expect you invariably to know the score—and when you don't they'll say you're getting old and feeble, and your mind's slipping, and somebody ought to do something about it. Think back, Bull, and think hard.

Let me see now: there had been Frankel, white and sweaty, his eyes burning life traffic lights under the brim of his heavy hat. There had been a pomade stain on the front of the hat-band; he could visualize it clearly. And Frankel's thin, hungry face sort of all screwed up with a regular twitch in the lower lid of his right eye. The signs had been easy to read: Frankel was hopped to the gills.

The sight hadn't bothered Bull Rafferty. Getting up from behind his desk he'd walked straight at Frankel, confidently, aggressively, in manner that did justice to his reputation. He had a tigerish self-assertiveness which many a time had paralyzed hopheads tougher than Frankel.

It always worked.

It hadn't worked.

What had gone wrong?

So deep was Rafferty's preoccupation that he lumbered onward like a sleepwalker, his eyes open and seeing but not telling what they saw. It was the little squirt with the white hair who shocked him into wakefulness.

"Pardon me," chipped in the little squirt, coming at him out of nowhere. "I think I've lost myself somehow . . . I don't know how." He was aged, wizened, confused and uneasy. His expression was that of one hoping for the best while half-suspecting the worst. "Can you tell me where I am?"

Rafferty looked him over with open contempt. "You don't know where you are?"

"I'm afraid I don't." The other was apologetic while his air of dreadful suspicion grew deeper. "Do you?"

"Sure," said Rafferty, displaying all his usual confidence. "I'd be in a heck of a fix if I didn't. What d'you take me for—a drunk?" His grin was patronizing as he waved an all-embracing hand, his small, deep-set eyes casually following the wave. "This, you poor stupe, is—" His words cut off abruptly.

"Well?" prompted the other.

"Hell in a bath-tub!" exclaimed Rafferty, his eyes wide and stupified.

HE SAW the marble road for the first time. He was plumb in the middle of it and had walked a goodly part of it, but had not really seen it until this moment. It resembled no highway within one hundred miles of his lifelong stamping-grounds, nor any of which he'd ever heard.

A broad, imposing artery, smooth, glossy, richly veined, it stretched far backward to a ghostly mist behind which loomed the firmament, black and awful. Along it, be-

Doesn't matter how big you are, Brother, there's things bigger!

tween him and its distant vanishing-point, toiled a scattered, uneven string of pedestrians in ones, twos, threes and random groups of dozens.

Ahead and similarly dotted with walkers, the road continued toward a vague horizon on which a gigantic cluster of buildings glittered in light from no visible sun. Direct and true went the highway without slightest hint of bend or curve. The street called straight.

There was a shimmering, strangely elusive suggestion of mighty, rainbow-hued mountains behind that faraway cluster of spires and pinnacles from which steadily radiated a fan-shaped glow of deepest rose.

Rafferty developed the queerest feelings as he took in this view; it was fantastic, alien, yet frighteningly familiar in some unidentifiable way. He knew every molecule, every atom of it as surely as if he had assembled them with his own hands, yet he had never seen it before in any way he could recall. Desperately he flogged his memory for some forgotten mind-picture.

"Well?" the other repeated. He put it with the nervous urgency of one who cannot bear to wait.

"Look," growled Rafferty evasively, "where's the last place you remember?"

"Alice Springs."

"Never heard of the dump." His small, calculating eyes held a worried glint as they continued to study the unearthly panorama. For the time being he wished this shrivelled old geezer would leave him alone and let him think. This road . . . Frankel . . . *what happened?*

"My name's George Morton," his companion went on. "I jumped from my buggy and I fell flat on my face. I couldn't get up for a while and felt pretty bad. Nobody took any notice, nobody lent me a hand, and that isn't like the folk in Alice Springs." He shook his head in solemn puzzlement, his white hairs drifting around. "When I came to my feet I found myself here. What part of Australia is it? I don't know of any—"

"Australia!" Rafferty echoed. He guffawed with less than his usual heartiness. "You're crazy! Australia is the other side of the earth."

"I see." Morton clasped his hands to-

gether, stared at them thoughtfully. They were aged and worn. When he spoke again his voice was resigned and low. "But you know where you're going?"

"You bet I do."

"Where, if I may asked?"

Rafferty glowered at him. "Mind your own darned business." He was about to add more but changed his mind as he became aware that a group of oncomers were overtaking him and hurrying by. He watched them in silence, as did Morton.

The first four were phlegmatic Orientals trotting one behind the other. They were followed by seven tiny, brown-skinned men. Then two pale-featured women, one young and blonde, one old and silver-haired. Next, a child hand in hand with a tall, dignified man. Three whites, one black, one pygmy like a musing gnome. Lastly, four athletic youths marching abreast and in step. All passed by and moved ahead with a fixed, uncanny intentness.

STILL nursing his hands, using the same low voice, Morton said, "I was seventy-two when I died."

"Then you've got a fat lot to belly—" Rafferty clipped short his retort. Something stirred his back hairs. He wanted to sweat but couldn't. His mind fell into a whirligig of mad sensations and got spun around. His voice shot up to a hoarse, outraged shout. "What d'you mean, when you died? Don't come that stuff with me! I won't stand for it, see? I'm nobody's—"

"Try to step backward," Morton invited.

Defiantly, Rafferty tried it.

He couldn't.

"We're dead," Morton went on, inexorably. He had full control of himself, and his listener hated him for it. He pointed to those just gone ahead. "They know it. We've been slow to catch on. But we know it now." He was mild and patient as he regarded the other. "We're dead. You and me. Both of us."

"No!" Rafferty's denial was violent. "Not me!" Something inside him was burning, burning. "Not me!"

"Why not?"

"I'm plenty big. Everyone knows Bull—"

"Nobody is too big for death," said Morton.

"I'm not ready," Rafferty shouted.

"Nobody ever is ready. I wasn't, either."

Overcome, overwrought, Rafferty made a snatch at Morton. He wanted to pull him apart, tear his head off, strew him around. He wanted to go berserk, do something, anything, so long as it would work off his fear-born fury.—He was growling like an angry bear as his huge, spadelike hands reached out. The hungry hands found no satisfying grip. They groped futilely, grasping nothing, seeking a hold that was not there.

"How can you strangle the dead?" asked Morton.

The fury thwarted, Rafferty let his hands hang at his sides where they opened and closed spasmodically. His growls died away to rumbles and then to angry quietness. He said nothing for a long, long time. The fires within him sank to fragmentary embers and he felt a fearful coldness closing around. And with the coldness came back his unavowed yearning for company.

In the end, he murmured reluctantly, "This punk Frankel came straight into my office like he owned it. How he got that far unscalped is something I don't know. I'll beat out somebody's brains for that!" Completely unconscious of the folly of his threat, he went on, "This Frankel owed me plenty. He was doped sky-high and had a roscoe in his mitt. He was so far gone he couldn't talk. He spoke with his eyes—and they said he hated my guts."

"So then?" Morton encouraged.

"I know how to handle a situation like that. It's not the first fix I've been in, and I know how to handle them, see?" He was quiet for a moment, then, "I got out of my chair and walked straight at him, looking right into his glowing eyes and burning them down with mine." His voice raced up to a sudden, sharp scream. "He didn't let me have it!"

"He did," said Morton.

AT THE end of the road the strangely shining group of buildings soared until they sundered the very heavens. Mocking mere dimensional height, somehow they continued to tower into other unseeable planes. They scintillated visibly and yet shaded away into angles beyond human

view, and in their base was a mighty entrance devoid of doors. The invisible guardian of the gate was named Silence.

If he could have drawn back, Rafferty would have done so. The long, long walk to the maw of inevitability had provided time for thought, deep and potent thought, and much of it had changed his mood. A voice within him had spoken all the way and he was now apprehensive and aggrieved by turns. He had found more or less plausible justifications for almost everything he could remember, every deed great or small, good or evil. All that remained was to put over his arguments if and when the necessity arose, but for once he wasn't too sure of his ability to be convincing. He needed a mouthpiece—badly.

Still animated by that peculiar, independent motivation of their own, Rafferty's legs refused to halt upon the threshold. He had a momentary struggle with them while Silence looked calmly on and saw him lose the battle. Involuntarily he went through, Morton still walking philosophically by his side. Together they strode into an immense hall in which not a soul was visible despite the fact that others had entered immediately ahead of them.

Rafferty felt the emptiness like a physical thing; it held the same awful quality of utter loneliness of which he had had a brief, unwanted taste in chaos. Fear cast itself over him like a terrible cloak. Seeking to distract himself from it, he glowered at Morton with a belligerence which had become unreal.

"Mighty sure of yourself, aren't you? Been a good little boy all your life, eh?"

"I wish I could say that." Morton sighed regretfully. "I've done my best according to my lights. No mere man can do more than that."

Seizing the point eagerly, Rafferty said, "So have I. A guy has to do certain things when he's dumped in certain places, caught up in certain circumstances. You can't help yourself when it's you or the other chump, can you? I've done many a thing I wouldn't have had to do if I'd been someone else, somewhere else. A guy has to cope with things as they come, hasn't he?"

"To a certain extent."

"Nuts on that!" snapped Rafferty.

"You've got no choice at all most times. If I'd been you and you'd been me, each of us would have acted like the other." His small, sunken eyes held an angry meditateness. "So on that score I'm no worse than anyone else. Maybe in some ways I'm better."

Morton said nothing.

"I'm going to talk back fast and plenty if any smartie tries to railroad me," Rafferty went on. "No guy knows all the things I know, all the little items that add up to what I've got. Nobody can possibly know all that, can they?"

Morton still said nothing.

"They can't know, they can't!" Rafferty shouted. "And I'm entitled to say my piece. I've got rights. Nobody's going to frame me without a fight on his hands. Yeah, I've kicked some punks around, and I've seen off a few others, and they'd have done the same to me if I hadn't got in first. What else could I do? What else could I do?"

"At this stage it is hardly for me to say," Morton observed, evenly.

"And it isn't for anyone else to say! Not even Moses himself can know what was in my mind at any particular time, or what has played upon me ever since I was a squalling kid." Automatically he went through the defiant motion of hitching his pants and failed to notice that he was devoid of clothing although, in some way, not naked. "You stick to your halo and much good may it do you. I'm going to say things that'll mean plenty!"

Morton remained quiet.

"Moreover, I'm going to ask who made Bull Rafferty in the first place—and made me what I am!"

"Then I guess this is where you get your chance," said Morton in a whisper. He ceased walking forward as if held back by an unseen hand. His eyes were full of nervous strain.

RAFFERTY'S legs marched resolutely on while his brain bawled at them to halt. He turned his head in frightened appeal to the other to stay with him. Not alone. Not here not now.

There was no sign of Morton; he was hidden in an intervening haze. Now there was only chaos different in some subtle way from that which Rafferty already had ex-

perienced; an all-encompassing blaze of shifting, sliding colors and hues in the midst of which he was alone, terribly alone. There was no way of telling whether he was walking or floating. His eyes hurt. His fear welled up afresh within him, a cold, compelling fear such as he'd never known before.

Then within the depths of his whirling mind there sounded a loud, sonorous note resembling the clamor of a mighty gong. A supernal force tore him in twain, depriving his fundamental self of some essential part he could not identify. The loss made him feel better; he was free, confident, assured. More than ever he was now, the old Bull Rafferty, brutal, bellicose, sans handicapping misgivings. This was good. At the right time and in the right place he was mentally prepared to take on all comers, and that went for the judge, jury and the entire calendar of saints.

TOUGH, plenty tough he was—and more so than ever he had been. He felt peculiarly in character and out of character at one and the same time. There was no small, inward voice to bother him, to be suppressed lest it ball up the works, to be ignored, stifled or subjected to whatever treatment he deemed expedient in the circumstances. It was good to be able to face issues unhampered.

He wore a set, forbidding scowl as he waited for the battle. A multitude of elusive angular and concentric shapes swirled within the strange, vari-colored mist as if striving to pattern themselves in infinitely lower terms of a mere three dimensions. They were solidifying slowly, gaining shape and form as they molded themselves out of unimaginable planes. Rafferty saw the feet first.

This was it!

A voice that was not a voice spoke to him with what was not speech, but rather came to him as a compelling thought within his mind.

"Look upon me and know my name—for I am the beginning and the end."

Rafferty raised small eyes aflame with challenge. His heavy, pugnacious jaw was outthrust as his thick lips parted in readiness to tell the judge where he got off. But no

sound came forth, no sound, no sound at all. His gaze remained fixed, fascinated.

For what seemed to be endless eons he stared rigidly at the transformed but easily recognizable figure before his eyes; the broad, powerful torso now gentler in its lines; the heavy underlip now generous rather than cruel; the eyes, still small and deepset yet somehow wide and wise. Long familiar lineaments these; so much so that he was tremendously aware that already the last word had been spoken.

The defense rests!

A violent shiver ran through him. He

broke the spell by covering his face with his hands. Turning, he tried to flee where there was no sanctuary, blindly seeking a funkhole like a scared mouse.

He was sobbing soundlessly as the dark remnant of his being craved shelter from the other.

"He is me. . . me . . . ME!"

Then his frantic dross dissolved to nothingness before the vision of that from which it had been filtered.

The gonglike note sounded as Morton's released feet carried him into the waiting haze.
