

# Weird Tales

NOVEMBER, 1951

Cover by Frank Kelly Freas

## NOVELETTES

**HIDEAWAY** . . . . . Everil Worrell 6  
*A weird little country widely associated with stormy politics and legends of vampire and werewolf.*

**PIGEONS FROM HELL** . . . . . Robert E. Howard 62  
*Who is that roams the house at night, that fumbles at one's door knob, who whistles weirdly and sweetly? Must one be mad to know?*

## SHORT STORIES

**THE BRIDES OF BAXTER CREEK** . . . . . C. J. Barr 24  
*How about if one's dream house is haunted?*

**DAGON** . . . . . H. P. Lovecraft 32  
*There comes to me a hideously vivid vision in reply to my own question—could it all have been a pure phantasm?*

**THE BIRD** . . . . . Margaret St. Clair 36  
*The fire burned emerald and turquoise and seemed to be all that Dwight Thompson wanted out of life.*

**HECTOR** . . . . . Michael West 42  
*Yet on the whole, Hector's ghost didn't look any the worse for wear.*

**THE NIGHT THEY CRASHED THE PARTY** . . . . . Robert Bloch 45  
*I saw everything—including my own puzzled, frightened face in the mirror.*

**FLING THE DUST ASIDE** . . . . . Seabury Quinn 51  
*...a slow easy descent of his body, soft as the downward wafting of a feather shed by a soaring bird.*

**WAS IT MURDER?** . . . . . H. C. McNeile 79  
*"Even though I knew the awful deed was to be committed, I was powerless to intervene."*

**WHEN THE NIGHT WIND HOWLS** . . L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt 86  
*...a somewhat unnerving experience to be a focus of attraction in a growing group of people who look as though they had just come from a graveyard*

**VERSE** { **HALLOWE'EN CANDLE** . . . . . Yetza Gillespie 41  
**UNEXPIATED** . . . . . Harriet A. Bradfield 85

**WEIRD TALES CLUB** . . . . . 91

**THE EYRIE** . . . . . 93

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178  
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

*Ghostly music sounded from the very walls of the old house. . . .*

# The Brides Of Baxter Creek



J. R.  
Eberle

By C. J. Barr

Heading by Joseph Eberle

# SANG GEORGE:

"Oh, I am painting the lean-to  
Which I certainly didn't mean to!"

and he splashed the white paint, merrily up and down the trim of the old house. George was a cheerful, forthright young man with no inhibitions whatsoever and with no claim to being artistic. That department was his wife's. Nell, it was, who had determined they should take over the little tumbledown house instead of living in one of the assembly line "homes" of the new nearby suburban developments. George, always good natured, had agreed and now spent such week-ends as he was home—he traveled for a much advertised line of soapflakes—in tinkering and plastering, shoring up or painting—in fact in any sort of project for which Nell enlisted his help. He was very much in love.

Nell was, too. In love with her husband, and now in love, desperately and deeply, with her house. It was in one of those old New York villages which had escaped being entirely engulfed by the waves of glass-sided, picture-windowed, characterless abodes which spread out from every town. They had bought it in spite of her family's objections that she'd be lonely there, George being away so much and the neighbors being mostly local people, resentful or suspicious of city folks—especially those with ideas about doing over old houses. But Nell had persisted and they were happily established in the place with its weathered shingles, sagging window frames, overgrown garden and undeniable charm. They hadn't much furniture, but what they had was good and suitable or else good and with possibilities of refurberation. At which Nell was a good hand; she loved to scrape paint, solder joints, wax wood and paper walls. She found life so good, so complete, so satisfying—or had up till the last two weeks.

George had been away the entire time and except for the once-a-week cleaning woman—a dear but erratic—and an occasional call from a neighbor—they were very friendly after all—Nell had been alone in the house. Or had she . . . ? Young Mrs.

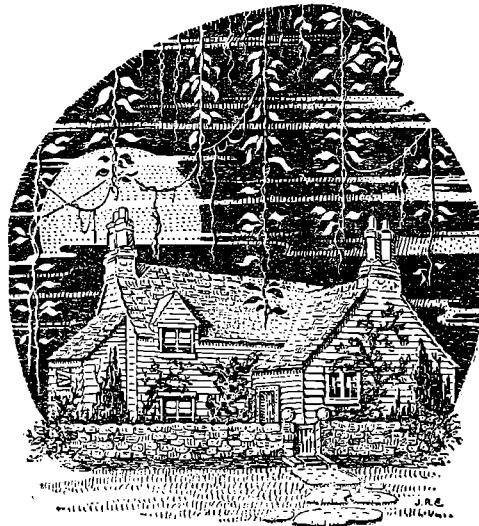
Howard was almost beginning to wonder.

And this very day it was George who added one more doubt in her mind. "Hey, Nell," he called backing down the ladder for more paint, "you been doing any of this?"

"No," said Nell who was ready to try most anything, "the ladder was too heavy to lift." And she sauntered over to see him looking down at undeniable marks in the flower bed along the front of the house lean-to—marks such as would be left by a ladder placed against the side. Moreover, there were footprints there, too, a woman's footprints. Only made by very high heels, which Nell never indulged in.

"Must ha' been a ghost," said George lightly—but a chill came over his young wife at the words.

Since they had moved to Baxter Creek she had learned quite a bit about the history of their old house. It had been the former manse; the church site was now only indicated by a half-filled cellar hole in the overgrown lot on the side road beside the house. The last minister of the district had had his study in the lean-to room, the roof of which came well up to the eaves of the larger part of the house. Some tragedy seemed to have



overtaken the Reverend Mr. Baxter—his family was the one for which originally the place had been named—for his wife had met an accident in the house itself, an accident that had caused her death while still a young woman.

Nell's informant was rather vague as to the actual tragedy—she herself was a child at the time—but she thought the minister's wife had fallen against the iron balustrade of the stair, cut herself and bled to death in her husband's absence. Nell found her grave in the desolate neglected graveyard back of the old church site. It was overgrown with brambles and tangled vines, but, her hands encased in stout gloves, Nell scraped these aside and managed to make out the legend on the tombstone:

HORTENSE BAXTER  
Wife of the Reverend Hosea Baxter  
Departed this life May 18, 18—

*A false step caused her death*

After her passing the clergyman over the years had become more and more of a recluse, the nature of the community changed, people moved to the cities and finally the church was closed. What eventually became of the Reverend Mr. Baxter himself Nell couldn't learn, but he had certainly disappeared from the scene. The house became more and more unfortunate in its tenants, and had been empty for several years when Nell and George Howard took it over with such enthusiasm. It was a lovely little structure of weathered wood without and white woodwork within, and consisted of a hallway and staircase, a parlor off the hall from which opened the lean-to room—the Howards, too, called it the study, although so far they had hardly sat down there since moving into the house—or anywhere else, for that matter, there was so much to be done.

Back of the parlor was a sort of alcove dining space and behind that across the whole back of the house was a kitchen big enough to use for everything if there hadn't been another room in the house. Upstairs were two bedrooms, several wooden cupboards and a minute bathroom—added not so long ago by the looks of things. The wall which abutted the attic space above the lean-to was wholly blank—Nell had designs on it for eventual decoration.

At the time no more was said about the footprints in the flower bed, but Nell was

vaguely uneasy about their presence. Frequently of late she had had a feeling that someone else was with her in the Baxter Creek house. George and she spent a lovely busy, happy week-end there then he departed on the sudsly trail leaving Nell with the returning birds—and a newly acquired puppy of uncertain parentage, but enchanting manners, named Breezy.

The first night George was away Nell was awakened by the whimpering of the puppy, and the whole house seemed alive and filled with the swelling sound of organ music. Suddenly she was conscious of the theme. ". . . *Here comes the bride*," sounded the notes, "*here comes the bride . . .*" The threnody died away, there came a sort of black stillness over the place, even the wind outside died down. Nell lay listening, puzzled, amazed and strangely awed, while a trembling puppy crawled up the stairs and begged to be taken into bed. It was against the principles she and George had laid down, but the little animal was so bewildered that Nell lifted him onto the covers. She found his presence quite comforting, and they finally both went to sleep.

The next day Nell's brother, his wife and children spent at Baxter Creek. They admired the old house, the pleasant street, sympathized with the fact that Breezy seemed to be so cowed and abject, prophesying that he would overcome his tremors, however. In their company Nell felt so relaxed and happy that she went to bed quite at ease.

Sometime after midnight she was awakened once more by the sound of organ music which seemed to emanate from the very walls of the house. ". . . *Here comes the bride*," pulsed the notes, and Nell could have sworn she heard footsteps on the creaking old stairs.

Amazed, yet not wholly terrified—after all, she was a modern young woman—Nell lay still and listened. *Were* there footsteps on the stairs? Well, perhaps, but most assuredly the whole house was ringing with the ghostly sound of the wedding march. Then came that deathly silence Nell had experienced before, preceded by a sound of sobbing. And once more a whimpering small dog appeared at her bedside.

"Well!" said Nell aloud to herself.  
"Here I am living in a haunted house. What  
do I do next?"

## II

ONE thing she did was to visit the nearby county town with its local Historical Society, and read up on the life which had centered about the vanished Baxter Creek church and its eccentric minister. She was in luck in that when the church had been abandoned the records had been transferred to the Society archives and Nell found copious day to day notes of her neighborhood. There was a pretty complete history of the Baxter family, which had figured in witchcraft trials in the old days, she discovered, but later on seemed decent enough folk—whose line apparently ended with the disappearance of the Reverend Hosea Baxter.

His wife had been from another State and little record remained of her save some mention of her accomplished organ playing and her signature as witness at many, many weddings. Her husband seemed to have been a marrying parson, indeed, and have married countless couples at his house rather than in the church—which she found described as "so poorly lighted and heated as to be frequently unusable, seemingly by preference of the pastor." So the weddings most likely had been performed in his study in, the lean-to of the house. "Here comes the bride—" thought Nell. "I wonder . . ."

The next week-end she and George made a discovery. He found that there had once been a window, since boarded up, in the little attic space over the lean-to. If there was a window there must have been a means of using the space, so they explored. In the ceiling of their downstairs coat cupboard they found a tightly nailed trap-door, which George managed to lift up with considerable damage to the woodwork and his fingers. Nell's excitement was intense and she rushed for a step-ladder, pushing it up through hanging coats and wraps in her eagerness. She followed George up the ladder and they emerged in a tiny room, its sloping ceiling so low they could hardly stand upright. They could see daylight

through the cracks about the boarded up window, and, thickly covered with dust, several intriguing looking old wooden trunks.

"Wow!" said George. "The antique dealer's dream come true. Now for the museum pieces!" He produced a flashlight and they examined several of the boxes, which contained a truly astonishing litter. There were worn hymnals and detached covers of Sunday School booklets, bundles of yellowed organ music, bits of old china, together with mouse and squirrel nests, and broken shelving.

JUST then came a hail from outside. The plumber had arrived to discuss the question of rusty water pipes, and George descended, knowing he would not get back very soon. Country workmen count talk and reminiscence as part of their job.

So that was why Nell was alone when she unearthed the diary—a dilapidated journal on ruled paper, now yellow and brittle with age. It had been caught behind the painted panel in the lid of one of the old trunks, and a quick glance told Nell that it was a day to day account, frank and complete, kept by Hortense Baxter, wife of the last minister of the Baxter Creek church.

The heat of the little attic room was intense, so Nell, after another glance around, backed down the ladder, taking with her the journal and some bits of pressed glass—once mass produced, now diligently sought after by collectors. She decided to study the diary before sharing it with her husband, but washed up the glass and placed it on the old kitchen dresser. It seemed to fit perfectly there.

That evening George went to a local meeting—volunteer fire department business—and Nell began the perusal of her find.

At first Mrs. Baxter's journal was very prosaic, its entries dealing with costs of groceries, choice of green brocade for curtains, her delight in her handsome young husband, their planting of a flower garden, her meeting with various members of the congregation, and so forth. But gradually the tone changed.

"I do not know what has come over Hosea," Nell read. "It seems to me odd how he seems to *delight* in cruelty. I will not keep Duke (Nell judged Duke to be a dog) if he mistreats him so. . . . Hosea will not let me visit the neighbors. . . . Hosea has a strange library in the little attic over his study. I was wishful to dust the volumes and he struck me. They were horrible books, treating much of witchcraft. . . . I must confess curiosity *anent* Hosea's interest in his library of horrors took me again to his attic. He returned and when he found I was there his anger made me think of demons. He took away the ladder steps, by which one reaches the room under the eaves leaving me there for hours. I climbed out of the window to a painter's ladder, and now he has even boarded up the window. I am frightened. This is not at all the man I married."

Nell put away the journal, joined George in their usual week-end pursuits and only resumed its persual when her husband had left for his rounds. She had become aware of the fact that when George was in the house no ghostly manifestations developed. Were they a warning meant for her alone, she wondered? So vaguely she kept the diary to herself, too.

It became more and more fantastic. Gradually Hortense Baxter had begun to believe that some evil familiar from the witchcraft of his forebears had taken possession of her husband. His whole personality changed; he grew moody, subject to fits of the blackest rage and with one outstanding obsession—the performance of the ~~marriage~~ ceremony. A romantic aura had grown up about his old village church and young people came from near and far to have him tie their matrimonial bonds. These couples he welcomed with unctuous pleasantries, reading the marriage lines with genial ease, calling with actual joyfulness in his voice for his young wife to play the Wedding March on their small organ, and later to witness the signatures in the register. Then he would dismiss each newly made man and wife with a bland blessing.

". . . but it is false, false!" wrote his wife in horror. "Each blessing contains a curse I hear him utter the words of his

benediction so slowly and deliberately that between them and under his breath he can mutter the black curse of the Western Witches—that each maid shall die alone in childbirth and that each man shall turn from his faith and die a blasphemer . . . about this I read in the gray book."

**N**ELL read on, and her days were filled with the haunting tragedy of Hortense's life in her house, and her nights with sounds of the fatal wedding march that over and over again had accompanied some unwitting bride to her doom. "Today I learned that Phyllis Bayles and her baby both died," wrote Hortense. "Hosea married them but a year ago, and she was so young and joyous and happy. Now, from grief, her husband has turned against God . . . the Curse again!"

The horror of it began to tell on Nell, too. She was a bride; was she being warned? She could not bring herself to tell George of her discovery. She felt his cheerful sanity could never be brought to believe such a gruesome and fantastic record. She would resolve to burn the journal but some power beyond her control would drive her on to peruse page after yellowed page of its frightened childish script.

Hortense realized that her husband had sensed her growing knowledge of his secret; indeed she had been discovered inquiring the later history of various young couples her husband had united in wedlock. Word of her search reached her husband, the search which forced her to even clearer realization of the terrible fact that one after another of the gay young brides of Baxter Creek had lost her life, bringing life into the world.

But there was one thing Hortense had noted—not all the brides had died: at times the curse seemed ineffectual. Why, the minister's wife wondered? Her wonder, her horror, had driven her yet again to the secret reading of her husband's books—and there she had found the answer.

"The black curse of the Witches of the West fails," wrote Hortense, "if the destined victim approaches from the East. . . . Hosea has changed the doorway of his study so that it faces West. . . . Dear God, I know

why, and I am fearful he will kill me lest I warn these innocent young people and try to usher them in by the front door . . . another marriage today, such a pretty guileless young thing. He forced me to play the Wedding March. I knew they had come straight to the study door. . . . I *must* find some way to stop all this. My husband's very soul belongs to the devil. Would that I could buy it back."

After this the entries grew more and more incoherent, seemingly with terror, and the last one was a resolve to hide this diary which might incite her husband to murder. "Hide it from him, I must," wrote the frantic young woman. "I do not know where to turn for help; who would believe such infamy?"

Nell shuddered. She could only guess that Hortense's accident had been a contrived one; she remembered the ironic line on her gravestone about a false step. Had her husband caused it to be put there, and after her death continued the practice of his evil rites?

That night the manifestations increased in intensity. Wakened by the sound of the organ and its recurrent March, Nell saw a queer light outside her bedroom door. Against the blank wall of the upstairs hall there materialized before her startled eyes a ghostly procession. Pacing slowly to the weird throbbing of the music, one after another the doomed brides of Baxter Creek, their veils drawn, their trains sweeping the floor, passed across the wall as on a screen. Following them was the huge and sinister figure of the clergyman, his gown flapping, his head bowed, and behind him scurried a little wistful, terrified figure. His wife seemed to look imploringly at Nell as if warning of peril and pleading for help. Though she was only a transparent shadow, Nell felt emanating from her—terror, horror and a sort of heroic despair.

The ghostly procession faded from view, the sound of the music died away and there descended the black, sinister silence Nell had learned to know.

"How can I help you, Hortense? What can I do?" Nell pleaded to the breathless, empty house, but her only answer was in Breezy's plaintive whimpering.

## III

THAT she could not accomplish this by herself was Nell's heartfelt conclusion and when George came home that weekend she told him the whole incredible story.

He was much less skeptical than she had feared, kissed her fervently and said he'd been worried that she had been growing so thin and pale.

"I thought it was climate," he said. "If it's only ghosts, we'll lay 'em. No Reverend Baxter is going to haunt me out of my house."

Nell laughed in relief and together they studied Hortense's battered journal.

"Wish we could find some of the old boy's books—curses and all," said George. "Let's have another look at that Historical Society library."

They drove to town, Nell not being able to help a wry chuckle to herself at the idea of a man like George spending a Saturday afternoon pouring over local archives. But their visit proved very enlightening. First of all, they encountered an elderly clergyman, another researcher, who many years before had retired as minister of the church in the town. He remembered the Baxter Creek church and the story of its eccentric last incumbent. He, too, was interested in the documents concerning the church, and even mentioned casually that the Reverend Mr. Baxter's library had been burned by town authorities when it had been discovered during a house cleaning prior to one rental of the house.

"I suppose they were right from their standpoint," he sighed, "but some very rare volumes on demonology went up in smoke. Queer subject for a minister to be studying," he remarked.

"Maybe he learned how to make himself disappear," suggested Nell. "He certainly seems to have vanished."

The old gentleman gave her a queer, startled look. "Well," he said, "other folks than you suggested that, I remember. The local blacksmith—his shop stood below your house; it's gone now—maintained he saw him out in an epic thunderstorm, his arms raised as if invoking the lightning. And, as a matter of fact, no one remem-

bered seeing him after that. Lots of stories were circulated about it at the time; but, of course, it's long ago now."

"Rum deal," commented George, still examining cases of documents labelled "Baxter Creek Church." Suddenly he whistled. "Nell, my girl, a clue, a clue!" he exclaimed and held up a battered book. The cover, to be sure, proclaimed it to be "Hymns Ancient and Modern," but it had been used to conceal another gray-covered work, very old indeed, its title being, "Handbook of the Witches of the West." A sub title announced it to include, "Their Cult, Their Curses, and the *Laying of the Ghosts They Raise*." On its flyleaf ancient script proclaimed it to be the property of Amos and Emily Baxter, A.D. 1682.

To arrange to borrow the book might have aroused comment, so George blatantly concealed it under his coat and he and Nell took their departure, the elderly clergyman looking after them with curious eyes.

"This one must have been removed with the church records, the way the old boy had it covered up," said George. "Otherwise it might have been found by the book burners."

"Now what?" asked Nell, and the answer seemed to be a careful study of the old volume they had purloined—to use a polite word. Surely it must be the very one from which Hortense had gleaned her gruesome information; Hortense whose spirit was doomed to unrest in that she had died before she could fulfill her mission to counteract the evil perpetrated by her demon-possessed husband.

Their very discovery of the book seemed to help her, for, although that night for the first time when George was at home Nell heard the ghostly music of the Wedding March, it seemed to strike an almost triumphant tone.

THE Handbook gave the Howards a very complete exposition of the Witches of the West. Apparently, with their adverse influence coming from the East, they were a development of the days when witchcraft itself had been struggling between benevolence and malevolence. They read of their

ancient cult for evil, their obscene rites, the spirit engendered by them which might enter into the body of a man of God and cause him to promote evil instead of good.

"That's what happened to Baxter all right," said George. "I feel we should only handle this book with fire tongs. Anyway, we'll burn it. The town fathers will have nothing on us."

"Of course," agreed Nell, "but not before we see if we can find some sort of charm to answer a curse like this. I think Hortense found it—oh, why didn't she write down her discovery!"

"You know what?" said George. "I bet the Reverend gentleman first found this book by accident among his family possessions, and from there on in he began to study the whole queer business. . . . Here we are!" he exclaimed.

"You're getting quite good at it yourself," said Nell, almost fearfully. But we must, we must. . . ."

"If ye spirit of one protesting a curse appears in ghostly form," read George, "it is most like to appear to a similar situated person as the one so cursed . . . that's you, my girl bride."

"Oh, George, don't even in fun," said Nell. "It was so real, so horrible . . ." and she shuddered.

"Well, we can fix it," said George, "for the black curse on brides and grooms is all gone into here. Guess that's where the Reverend got his dope. We—you and I—are the sort to do it, being uncursed and man and wife within a short time—proceed to a graveyard at dusk. We walk backwards (that'll be tough on rough ground) East to West across three graves, and always with our backs to the West, we take hands and we say. . . . Well, we don't need to say it now, but it's all here. Seems it will break any remnant of a curse hanging

around and quiet the protesting ghost—Hortense in this case, you say."

#### IV

SO AT dusk of the next day two modern, sophisticated young and happily married people walked from their haunted house the few steps that took them to the old burying ground of the former church of Baxter Creek. Among the briars and weeds they carefully stepped on three graves as marked by their leaning headstones, and their backs always to the West, George solemnly pronounced words, weird, portentous and but half understood, found in an ancient Witches' Handbook—George, whose line was soapflakes, and who'd never even given a thought to things supernatural.

As they returned home, the moon came up over the locust trees around the site of the old church, and from the house came Breezy, frisking to meet them as any pup should. Deliberately they burned the old Handbook—using a sassafras root as instructed in the book itself for consuming "any object of evil whatsoever." That night no music sounded in the little house, no stair treads creaked, no black stillness blotted out the usual country night noises, and Breezy slept quietly, sprawled in his comfortable box.

The next morning after George had gone Nell visited the old graveyard. All was peaceful. A wood thrush sang, crickets chirped and from a nearby field came the mechanical sound of a mower at work. Nell looked at Hortense's grave. Below the familiar inscription now apparent for the first time—or were they newly carved there?—were the words:

REST IN PEACE

