

*A Fantastic Little Story of a Man
Who Met the "Green Goddess of Dreams"*

THE BROWN MOUSE

By EDWARD PARRISH WARE

AS I climbed the stairway I was conscious only that I was bent upon overtaking the vague form of a man, slim and youthful, whose face attracted me strangely. The question beat in my brain:

Who is he?

If I could get my hands upon him, compel him to look straight into my eyes, his identity would immediately become fixed; of that I was sure. But he seemed to float, rather than walk, always just out of my reach.

The chase, begun in a cafe on lower Broadway, had led me through many weary miles of streets, slippery with rain, and almost deserted. Miles away the pursuit ended in a grim old studio building much favored by writers, artists, and others who follow loose trades. I knew the place; in fact, someone whose name I could not quite recall lived there.

On the stairway of the building I overtook my quarry, but he would not suffer himself to be taken; he mounted upward; so did I. Presently, on the second landing, he relented—stood still. I approached with hands outstretched, poised on the balls of my feet, lunged—

With mocking laughter trailing behind him, he rose, seemingly without effort, and floated to the head of the stairs. There he paused on the topmost tread, turned—

God in heaven! It was *myself* I looked at! *Myself*, only younger—ages younger!

Then the figure faded, lost its importance. There was something in my mouth; something smooth and round, like an apple, but I could not bite it. For an instant, just an instant, I became almost normal; sufficiently so to recognize my surroundings.

I was on my knees before the door of my own apartment in the studio building, and the door knob was in my mouth. With a key, or it may have been my pocket knife, I was striving to unlock the hall radiator, which was near at hand.

Back of me, someone laughed. I got up and looked toward the sound. Some-

thing danced in my vision; something brown, formless. It had eyes, though; brown ones. I could see them, nothing more. No hands, no head, no mouth—Then I saw that it did have a mouth, and the mouth was smiling.

I became indignant. I threatened, but to no purpose; the figure remained—approached. The smiling mouth shaped words:

"He who shaketh the cocktail, by the cocktail shall he also be shaken!" were the words the mouth shaped.

I took the matter under advisement. Someone wanted me to shake a cocktail. Well—if I could only find out who wanted it! Was it person, or thing, there near me?

Then I recognized it.

"Mouse!"

By its eyes I knew it!

"Mouse!" I repeated, laughing immoderately. "Little brown mouse! Little brown mouse! Little br—"

NOW it requires at least an hour for the average man to make up his mind to get out of bed on the morning after such a night as I had spent—had been spending for many, many months. I am different. My powers of recuperation are, as yet, scarcely impaired.

That morning I did not awake of my own accord. A mouse, a brown one, gnawed at my hand and brought me bolt upright; I shook it off, and it became a woman—a brown-eyed woman; a woman who laughed. I buried my head in the covers, and when I looked out again the vision had gone.

Sitting there upon a couch, fully dressed except for my shoes, which stood on a chair nearby, and my coat, which hung over the back of it, I pieced together the events of the previous night—all that I could recall.

I had lunched with an editor, that day; an editor who used to think well of my work, and who once held the opinion that it would, in time, even excel that done by my father, in his time considered a master of the short story. His opinion had undergone a change, how-

ever; he no longer even considered my work—the little that I did—but, for old times' sake, he desired to reason with me concerning my future, which, he said, I was throwing away.

"You are allowing the fortune your father built up with his pen, to become a stumbling-block in the way of yours," was the way he summed it up.

As a result of that luncheon, I promised to get down to work, and to send the results to my former friend as soon as any materialized. I meant to do so, of course, but habit proved too strong. I left the cafe where we had lunched, and sought one farther down Broadway—where one could get, in a secluded room in the building, tiny glasses of that precious fluid that is at once a curse and an exaltation—a bitterness, and a sweet of all sweets!

Absinthe!

Dear God above! What vicious stuff it is that they give us now, in the name of absinthe! Once, in its clear, green, sparkling thrall, one might find the sweet exaltation of noble dreams—the spiritual elevation wrought by a vision of the streets of heaven, with soft-eyed angels hovering near! Now, in its yellow, muddled depths one sinks as if in a false woman's arms—to deception, confusion, death!

Yet we cling!

But why complain? The power to soothe is there, and to deaden the brain; the brain throbbing with the fading pulses of things that might have lived!

It was in that cafe that the chase of the night before began—that pursuit of an absinthe-created vision of my former self. The self I might have been!

I GOT up from the couch, and stood looking at my shoes, side by side upon the chair. The laces had been untied, instead of merely slipped, in hard knots, off the catches as they were wont to be, when I was indisposed. That seemed odd to me. My coat, too, should have been lying upon the floor, instead of being carefully draped over the back of a chair. None of those things was my handiwork; that I knew.

The conclusion was inevitable: Someone had assisted me into my room, and removed a part of my clothing.

I became conscious of a penetrating odor—the odor of violets.

Was it the woman? I remembered her, now; laughing lips, merry brown eyes and all. "Brown Mouse," I had called her.

Who was she? Was she real, or just a fancy of my own? The coat and shoes argued that she was very real indeed. I wondered if she was someone I knew, but could not believe it so. I had to give it up; my mental condition did not sanction lucid thought.

That night, and the next, and the next, I returned home more like my old self—the self of the stairway—than I had been in months, but I saw nothing of the woman whom I could think of only as the "Brown Mouse."

Then, one night a week after our first encounter, I saw her again. She knelt on the rug before the grate in my room, tugging at my shoes; one of them came off, and a wad of bank notes fell out. She looked up at me with a face that was white and drawn—pinched; she started to speak, then, getting up, she placed the bills in a dresser drawer. I found them there the next morning.

The odor of violets was strong in the room.

How she came and when she went, I could not recall. Just one glimpse of her, there on the rug, was all my memory would yield.

During the week that followed, I fairly haunted the old building, actually making myself offensive peering into the faces of the women who came and went. Nothing came of it. I could not rid myself of the thought of her; at night she haunted my dreams. During the next month I was conscious that she had been with me upon at least four occasions; a new picture of her would flit across my mind, elusive, as always; or the odor of violets would saturate my senses. Needless to say, I was not myself upon any of those occasions.

On one of those scarcely remembered

visits she had wept—pleaded with me; but what it was she pleaded for, or who the object of it was, I could not remember. I could recall, though, that she no longer smiled—and I wondered.

On a night six weeks after I first saw the Brown Mouse, as I still thought of her, I came home—bad, very bad. Worse than I had ever been before. When I awoke, the following morning, I knew that she had been with me the night before; her presence, typified by the violet perfume, still lingered. I strove to bring her back to me, as she must have looked when there, but my brain was too dead—too sodden. Then I realized that my hand was gripping something tightly; it was a slip of paper, covered with writing in a fine hand. My eyes, attaining a normal focus, I read:

"The Brown Mouse will not come again. It is afraid, terribly afraid, and it is going—away. Perhaps, if it had been possible for you to have helped me, you would. I know you would. That night, when the money fell from your shoe—Oh, how I was tempted! I needed it so! Hunger makes us do such strange things. It cheapens virtue—destroys it. But it shall not cheapen or destroy mine! Oh, if a 'mouse' could indulge a human hope, it would be that you will draw back from the abyss before it is too late! May it hope that you will!"

No heading, no signature—gone!

I leaped out of bed.

What did the Brown Mouse fear? Was she afraid of me? Or was it something else that threatened her?

My brain reeled dizzily; I felt very ill. Try as I would, I could not fathom the meaning of the words she had written.

Curse the day the Green Goddess of Dreams first laid her cloying lips on mine!

Was the Brown Mouse afraid of me? Oh, no, no, no! I wouldn't harm her for the world! But—

I read the letter again, and understood!

Starving—going down in the unequal battle of feminine frailty pitted against the world—she had sought help from me. And I was in no condition to help anyone—not even myself!

Money! I could have given her that—would have begged myself for her!

Then a terrible thought shot through my brain!

Could it be that she was afraid of herself, as I had often been of myself? And did she contemplate the easy way out, as I, too, had contemplated it? Was that what she meant when she said she was going away?

Slipping into a dressing gown, I ran out into the corridor. I would find the janitor; he would know if she lived in the building. He had denied all knowledge of her when I questioned him before, but now he would tell, or I would choke the words out of him!

At the rear of the long hall I stopped suddenly. From a partly opened doorway came the odor of violets—strong, sickeningly strong!

With mad longing to find her, and to protect her from that thing she feared—no matter what it might be—I pushed the door ajar and entered.

The room was in darkness, save where the light from behind me trailed across the floor, and out of the gloom something leaped at me. It was the sickening odor of violets, so intense it seemed to my distraught mind a thing alive!

I stepped further into the room, and something swayed before me—something white and vague; then it took form in the semi-darkness.

A slender, white body, scarcely veiled by the shapeless gauze thing about it, swung gently to and fro beneath the chandelier—one rigid, white foot reaching downward as if seeking something to rest upon!

Someone shrieked. Long afterwards I knew that it was I. Blindly I fell beneath the swaying figure under the chandelier. I took the rigid foot into my hands and breathed upon it, trying to warm it—muttering, over and over, broken, senseless, useless words!



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