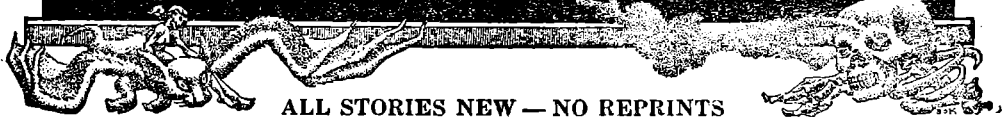


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1950

Cover by Matt Fox

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It was a present . . . but it seemed to have horns.



Heading by Vincent Napoli

The Cactus

BY MILDRED JOHNSON

THE package came by first-class mail. It was from Edith's old friend in Los Angeles, Abby Burden. She opened it with interest, picked out some cotton wadding, a bulky letter, more cotton wadding. That was apparently all, but since nobody, not even Abby, would package a letter so tenderly, she reinspected the cotton and found a small prickly object. The explanation was undoubtedly in the letter.

It was written, as usual, on thin paper, typewritten with hand interlineations and annotations crawling about the pages and into the margins, and Edith had to turn it upside down and endways and trail sentences for sheets before capturing the sense. It dealt with the Burdens' trip to Mexico, but not until the end did it divulge the mystery of the enclosure.

"And now about the cutting," Abby wrote. "I may as well tell you Robert is against my sending it to you. He thinks I'm very silly. Let me tell you about it, though:

"I picked it up in an out-of-the-way, God-

forsaken spot about a hundred miles from Chihuahua, where we had a flat tire. It was desert country, ninety in the shade—although there was no shade—and there was poor Robert faced with the prospect of changing a tire. I offered to help but he said the best way for me to help him would be to keep quiet for a while. You know how cranky a man can get under those conditions. The car was like an oven so I took a little walk around to look at the vegetation, such as it was, but there seemed to be nothing for hundreds of miles but sage and scrub and sand, and heat rising and shimmering all about. And then, a short distance away, I seemed to see a kind of fog, an overhanging mist. I thought it was an optical illusion—because whoever heard of a fog in the desert?—but, since it wasn't far away, I walked over to it. And as I approached it I smelled the sweetest, sourest, muskiest odor I've ever known. Suddenly the ground dipped and I was looking at a strange and lovely thing. Do you remember the meteor crater in Arizona? What I saw there was the same thing, much smaller, of course. It was a scoop in the earth, like a great dimple, and it was filled with cactus growths, marvelous, unearthly, beautiful—eight, nine, ten feet tall—gray-green giants stretching their twisted arms to the sky. There were hundreds of them, some of them already blooming with dark red flowers. It was the latter that gave off the strange, sweet smell.

"Edith—actually I felt as if I were on another planet, and what with the heavy perfume and the heat, my head swam. But finally I pulled myself together and rushed back to Robert to beg him to come and see what I had found, and ask him to cut me a slip of one of those weird plants. But his reaction was most peculiar. You know how sensible Robert usually is, but for some private reason he took a dislike to the whole area and became very difficult about getting a cutting for me. He said he wouldn't want a thing like that. He said they looked like goats and smelled like them too. He was positively silly. He said there was something about the little valley and the phalanxes of tortured shapes that gave him the creeps. But finally he gave in and cut me a tiny piece from the nearest plant. He scratched

himself doing so and that didn't make him any happier. The spikes on the stem are rather tricky, you'll notice.

"As soon as I got it home I planted it. Edith, it's the finest specimen I've ever seen and grows like—I was going to say like a weed but it's faster than that. In a week I had to transplant it to a larger plant pot.

"Robert is still angry about it, though, and that's why he thinks I'm crazy to send you a cutting of it. But knowing your fondness for cacti, I had to share my discovery with you."

EDITH folded up the letter and inspected the little cutting, holding it in her palm. It was no more than an inch in length, brown and shriveled, and so lifeless she doubted that it would grow at all. However, she would give it a chance. She found a small pot, pressed it in, watered it and set it on the shelf with her other cactus plants. "If you're going to be a giant cactus," she said, "you've a long way to go, little friend."

On examination the next morning, she was pleased to see that apparently its grip on life was secure. Watering it on the following Monday with the rest of her cactus collection she decided the infant was going to be a prodigy, for not only had it changed its wizened brown covering for one of healthy green but had straightened up and grown fully two inches. Its shape was somewhat comical: with the fat, spinous stem and the two little horns sprouting from the top, it resembled a rampant tomato caterpillar. Edith wrote to Abby that afternoon thanking her for the little plant.

Six weeks afterward, by the end of May, it was no longer little. In fact it had outstripped all the other cacti on the shelf. Now fifteen inches tall, it had been transplanted to a large urn and, in Edith's mind, was being groomed for a star appearance at the horticultural show in the autumn. Her friends admired it and, at club meetings, inquired about its health as they would about a child's.

When Mrs. Ferguson, her next door neighbor, viewed it, however, she asked the question: "When's it supposed to stop growing?"

"Well," laughed Edith, "my friend who sent it to me said they were eight, nine and ten feet tall—the ones she saw growing in Mexico, but I don't imagine it will grow so much. I haven't a container large enough for it, for one thing."

"And your porch roof isn't high enough." Leaning over and tentatively feeling the two parallel spikes at the head of the plant, she added, "Not that it couldn't bore a hole right through if it wanted to with these things. They're like daggers."

Her remark prompted Edith to ask Abby how the parent was getting along, and she heard, with slight dismay, that it too was hyperexpansive, already two feet high and showing no signs of stopping. When it outgrew the house, wrote Abby, she had plans for it in the yard, but Edith thought grimly: when it outgrows my house it outgrows me. Goodbye, cactus, in that case.

It blossomed early in June with flowers of a peculiar liverish color. Though she never would have admitted it publicly, Edith thought them unattractive, almost repellent. They were almost like sores, she thought. And their odor was pungent enough to cause comment, the baker's delivery man asking if gas was escaping, the meter reader wanting to know if she had something burning in the oven. But her handy man, Mr. Krakaur, who came on Mondays to put out trash cans, mow the lawn, etc., and who was the local philosopher on the side, stated frankly that it "stank." "Stinks like a goat," he said.

"Mr. Krakaur, how can you say that?" Laughing, she recalled what Robert Burden had said about it.

"And it looks like one too," Mr. Krakaur went on, shifting his cud reflectively. "Got horns and everything. Looks like a sick goat with boils."

But in two weeks the blooms were gone. Most of the smell went with them, although it lingered unaccountably in various portions of the house far away from the porch, in closets, in her bedroom, and seemed to be contained in air pockets for often, usually at night, she would smell it strong and musky, but in the next second lose it. It was as if the cactus itself had passed her open door. She smiled at her fancy, but was surprised to hear from Abby that Robert

Burden had the same idea, although he was carrying it to ridiculous extremes, averring, for instance, that he had caught a glimpse of the cactus floating along in its own emanations like a jellyfish in an ocean current. Abby wrote that if he thought that frightening her would make her dispose of the cactus he was mistaken. He was being very stupid and unreasonable, she said. He was even threatening to warn Edith about the danger—"So if you hear a lot of nonsense from him you'll know what it's about."

SHE was not going to allow herself to be influenced by such palpable friction in the Burden household, Edith thought, but just the same, after reading Abby's letter, she went to the porch and took a good look at her cactus. It *was* a grotesque thing, she admitted, a frame on which mental aberrations could easily be hung. Cruciform in shape, its upraised "arms" were terminated in spiked nodules, like taloned fingers; the forward-sweeping horns were truly formidable; and the withered flowers at the "head" were arranged to suggest an evil face, a demonic, leering, loathsome face.

In sudden revulsion she decided she must destroy it but then, remembering her promise to exhibit it at the flower show and the admiration and interest of her friends, canceled the impulse by laughing herself out of it. "You're not going to pay any attention to Robert Burden's crazy notions, are you?" she asked herself, reminding herself in addition that she had always thought him neurotic. He sounded positively psychotic now.

But that night she dreamed about the cactus. It seemed that she was in bed and, awakened by a slipping, slithering sound from the hall, got up to investigate. In a shaft of moonlight there sat a tiny animal, like a chipmunk, all agleam with silver light, dainty and pretty, and she was about to approach it when suddenly Ted appeared. He looked young and slim, the way he had been when they were married, but his face was grave. Laying a hand on her shoulder, he shook his head as if to restrain her, but she paid no attention and walked towards the little animal clucking softly. But, as she reached it and was crouching to it, it began to swell and grow and in a second had be-

come the cactus, writhing with vile delight, its malevolent face close to hers, its long arms pinioning hers to her sides in sickening embrace. She screamed for Ted but he had gone. He had left her.

Choking, heart beating wildly, she awoke and lay shaking in terror. Oriented at last, she looked towards the door, and it was as if a hand clutched her heart for the area in the hall was bathed, it seemed, in a deep, oily fog, like a swamp miasma, behind which something gray and green was stirring. She sat up, stared hard, cautiously reached for the bedlamp and quickly turned it on. There was nothing.

There was nothing but moonshine and sinister groupings of shadows and her own heavy breathing.

IN THE sensible light of day she marvelled and was ashamed of the mantle of fear she was weaving for herself out of odds and ends of suggestions, fancied resemblances and nightmares — she, Edith Porter, middle-aged, matter-of-fact, a professed scoffer at all superstition. Was she going to allow an odor, a shape and a bad dream to push her into unreason? And as for Robert Burden's vaporings, for all she knew he might be joking.

She would take hold of herself firmly and, in the meantime, try to rid the house of the meandering gamey stench.

It was nine o'clock on the following Sunday evening. Having spent the day riding in the country with the Fergusons, Edith was finishing reading the newspaper and was beginning to yawn with delicious weariness and plan early retirement when the telephone rang.

It was a girl's voice, blurred with crying, sharpened by hysteria, and Edith could not recognize it.

"Mrs. Porter? This is Nancy, Nancy Winnick, the Burdens' daughter."

"Oh, yes, Nancy—how are you? Is anything the matter?" Edith's mind skipped about frantically for an explanation.

The girl was apparently trying to control herself. At last she said. "The most horrible thing happened this morning. Dad's dead!"

"Oh, no! How—how did it happen?" She felt herself turning cold with shock.

"I don't know the whole story because

Mother is half out of her mind and she's given it to us in bits and pieces. She's resting now under a sedative, but all afternoon she's kept begging me to call you and let you know. It's about that cactus she gave you. She wants you to destroy it, because she says—" Here Nancy burst into sobs and was a few seconds recovering herself. "She says it killed him. She knows it killed him deliberately, and it's all her fault. She's afraid something will happen to you too and she'll have two deaths on her conscience."

"But how? How did it kill him?"

"This morning Mother finally agreed that he could get rid of it. You know what controversy there's been about it. Mother said she wrote you about it, how Dad hated it so and Mother was set on keeping it. Well, this morning they had it out it seems and she told him to go ahead and destroy it if he felt so strongly about it. He didn't wait a minute. He took it out to the rubbish can—it grew to an enormous size, you know—and threw it on top of the rubbish, pot and all and then—" Nancy started whimpering again. "I don't know what made him do it, except that he wanted to get rid of it quickly and couldn't wait for the trash collection, but he set it afire and stood there watching it burn. Mother said she shouted to him from the window, but he seemed fascinated by the sight of the flames traveling up it, and then all of a sudden it broke in the middle and the top half flew at him, all ablaze, and landed on him—and it clung to him—he couldn't tear it off—it was all over his face and head—"

"Oh—how horrible—how terrible—" Edith broke down then and wept with Nancy, who at length completed the story:

"When my husband and I arrived we found Mother in a faint, and when she came to she just screamed and screamed; and then my husband went out into the yard, but he wouldn't let us see Dad. He himself was sick because his face and head were all—they took him away to be cremated. We thought that was best."

Lenitive words, condolences—what good were they now? And Edith could not say them; she was too shocked.

After hanging up she sat frozen, staring ahead; then she rose quickly, strode

to the porch, lifted down the cactus from the shelf, and, grasping the horns as one would the ears of a rabbit, tore it up by the roots. From the gaping hole there rose the fetid odor so concentrated and powerful that she choked and coughed, but her anger gave her courage and, without looking at the plant in her hand, holding it far off, she ran down cellar and threw it into the trash barrel. She returned for the pot and carried it down too, set it on top of the barrel, took a hammer and smashed it.

She was still panting when she sat at her desk in the living room to write to Abby all the sympathy she had been unable to express on the telephone and her hand shook so much she had to rest before beginning.

A hand touched her shoulder, gentle but firm—a warning hand; it rested there; she felt the pressure of the fingers. Slowly she unveiled her eyes. All about her was a mist pouring in ever thickening clouds from the area behind her and obscuring the light, and a foul stink wafted to her nostrils, but she could not move: in that growing fetor, that dankness, that accrescence of vileness, she sat still. The hand pressed hard, and, coming to her senses, she half-turned her head. On the wall, just behind her head, was the shadow of horns.

She lurched to her feet, tore open the casement and flung herself into the darkness, landing on her hands and knees in the soft earth of a flower bed, scrambling to her feet and hurling herself forward across the field separating her house from the Fergusons'. She stumbled, fell, clambered up, ran on and at last reached the back door and pounded on it. When it was opened to her she fell in and pressed against the wall.

Mrs. Ferguson was staring at her, plump, red-faced, round-eyed. "What's wrong?" Edith could not answer.

"Harry!" Mrs. Ferguson called. "Come here!"

Ferguson appeared and together they led Edith to a chair. "Somebody trying to break into your house?" he asked.

"I don't know," she gasped. "I don't know. I've just had a terrible fright."

She sipped the glass of water they gave her, her teeth chattering against the rim.

"Call the police, Harry!" urged Mrs.

Ferguson as Edith Porter sat frightened.

Edith raised a protesting hand. The police to rout something from another universe, another stratum of existence; the law to command the supernatural? "Don't call the police," she said, setting the glass on the table and sighing.

"But if there's a prowler around—"

"There's no prowler I'm sure. I imagined it." She looked at these solid sane people and wondered if it were true. Perhaps she had dreamed it all. Nevertheless she could not return to the house. It was difficult to confess her fear of staying alone, but she had to do it. They said they understood, offered their guest room, but were puzzled. Ferguson went over and locked up and brought her keys back as directed.

When Mr. Krakaur put in an appearance on the street the next morning she joined him and walked with him.

"What you doing out so early, Mrs. Porter?" he asked.

"Last night I had a kind of brainstorm. I had a notion something—someone was breaking in, and so I ran over to the Fergusons and there I stayed. You know how we women get nervous at times."

"At times?" cackled Mr. Krakaur who fancied himself something of a misogynist. "I'd say all the time."

She was in no mood for badinage. Trying to be casual, she said, "I wonder if you'd be good enough to put out the trash barrel right away. I want to straighten up the cellar."

Standing fearfully in the kitchen, not daring to go down the cellar stairs but filled with curiosity, she heard him open the outer doors and come back for the barrel. She was not too surprised, though, when he called from the foot of the stairs: "Mrs. Porter, what happened to your cactus?"

"I broke it," she said from the door.

"Did it fall off the shelf?"

"Yes." If one waited others would always provide the answers.

Without realizing it she had moved to the head of the stairs and was peering over the rail just as he was picking up from the floor one of the pieces of the plant pot. Her heart leaped. It could not be coincidence this time, nor a dream. That every piece of the pot had remained in the barrel

and none had fallen out she was positive. The sickness of terror rolled over her.

"It don't look too bad," he was saying. "All you got to do is put it in another pot. I think it'll grow just as good."

"No," she said.

"O. K. You're the boss."

SHE must go away and rest, cleanse her brain of this viscid horror which kept her trembling, made her afraid to go to bed, had her staring hard at shadows, sniffing the air, starting and glancing over her shoulder. She was sure now that the hand on her shoulder had been Ted's and that only her enormous danger had enabled him to get through to her. But it was over; the peril was gone; and perhaps a summer in Maine, at the little hotel in Winter Harbor where she and Ted had spent their honeymoon, would eradicate its immediate effects.

When she took one of her keys over to Mrs. Ferguson the latter expressed approval of her decision. "To tell you the truth Harry and I have been worried about you. It's so easy to go into a nervous breakdown, you know." She gave some instances of friends who had slipped into them. She would step in once a week and water the plants and see that everything was all right, she promised. "That was too bad about your big cactus," she said then. "Krakaur told me it fell off the shelf. And after you set such store by it too. But that's the way it is: it's always the things we like the most that get smashed."

IT WAS September when Edith returned. Riding in the taxi from the station, listening to the church clock bong eleven in the clear air, she felt calm, able to pick up her life where she had abandoned it on that Sunday evening in June. It seemed far away now. The peaceful summer, the new friends, the fresh stimuli, they had helped her forget. And she was not afraid. Never again would she be completely sure of herself and of the order of existence, for something strange and unearthly had touched her she knew, but she was not afraid. There was good to surmount evil, a tender hand to warn her of its approach.

The driver set her trunk in the hall, took

his money, thanked her for the tip and left, closing the door behind him. And now she was alone; but everything was in its place, familiar and dear and homey: the grandmother's clock tick-tocking in the corner (Mrs. Ferguson hadn't forgotten to wind it, then), the Meissen figurines, a man and woman, in their perpetual saraband on the table, the Regency mirror reflecting a portion of the living room and beyond it the porch with its greenery of plants. She released the breath she had been holding, smiled, walked to the mirror and took off her hat. Then she felt it, the hand on her shoulder.

"This is ridiculous!" she said aloud. "Now I'm sure I dreamed the whole thing!" The pressure was renewed and she wheeled about and shouted, "It's gone, don't you know that?" In hysterical triumph she ran to the porch and turned on the light. "See?" she cried, standing in the middle and sweeping her arm around. "It's gone, I tell you. It's *gone!*"

But, on the wall, she saw the outline of its horns and, simultaneously, smelled its sickly odor. Her cry was guttural. With hands stretched out protectively, mouth squared in fear, she stepped backwards, crashed into a hard object, turned, and in the last second of consciousness saw the cactus teetering and falling. . . .

"But I feel responsible. I feel that it's my fault." Mrs. Ferguson had said it over and over. She would never be done saying it nor forget the sight which had met her eyes when, seeing the light, she had gone over to welcome Edith home. Again she explained. "I knew she was fond of that cactus and when I found it growing with the rubber plant I was so pleased. I didn't tell her. I wanted to surprise her. And so I planted it in a pot of its own and it grew even faster than the other one. I should have let her know, though—shouldn't I?"

"It was an accident," Harry Ferguson said patiently. "You're not to blame. Anybody would have done the same in the same circumstances. It was an accident, that's all."

"But it would never have happened if I hadn't done it. Oh, God, when I walked in and saw her lying there with those spikes in her throat—"