

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 30

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Case of Herbert Thorp

By HENRY KUTTNER

*A brief tale about an editor who was altogether too skeptical*

**M**R. HERBERT THORP, editor of *Fantastic Stories*, leaned over his desk and rapped sharply upon the manuscript before him. "I'd like to take it," he said, "I'm damn sorry I can't take it. But, good Lord, Beckett, see for yourself! It's unconvincing!"

Neil Beckett was a fat, dark little man with piercing black eyes and a somewhat cryptic smile. He met the editor's gaze squarely.

"Why should it seem unconvincing? Granted the premise that the supernatural exists, anything which transcends ordinary life is plausible."

Thorp shook his head, grinning. He took off his spectacles and polished them. "No," he said, "I've bought some of your yarns, but I won't buy this one. Talk as much as you want, you'll never convince me of the story's plausibility."

"Just what do you object to in it?"

Thorp ruffled the pages of the script. "The whole thing. It's just too far-fetched. You've got an ordinary business man incurring the enmity of some occultist, or magician—you're not even clear on that point—and getting cursed. Then what happens? A magic door opens in the guy's office, some ghouls drag him through, and initiate him into their club, since apparently the magician's curse turned him into one of 'em."

Beckett looked like a fat little Buddha as he nodded. Before he could speak Thorp went on.

"Then what? The ghouls want something to eat, so they send their new re-

cruit back into his office to get a victim. He finds his brother there, stuns him with a paperweight, and drags him through the magic door to the ghouls. That door sticks in my craw, Beckett. You can have 'em in Zothique and Joiry, but not in Chicago. It just doesn't ring true."

Neil Beckett's face was changing. Curiously, it was assuming lines of grim resolution, incongruous in the plump, round countenance of the man. Fleeting-ly Thorp wondered what Beckett's nationality was. He had wondered before, but knew next to nothing about the writer. One day Beckett had submitted a story, which Thorp had bought—and then, after a few months, they had met. But Beckett never talked about himself.

Now he said, "So it doesn't ring true, eh? You've rejected my stories before because they were—unconvincing."

"Yeah," Thorp assented. Absently his hand went out to the little stack of printed rejection slips on his desk, and, taking up one of the paper squares, he folded it and slid it under the paper clip on Beckett's manuscript. "What does your protagonist do after he gets his brother in this ghoulish-chamber? He watches while his playmates tear the poor fellow apart, and then joins them in their meal. Do you suppose for a moment——"

"That's implausible, too, eh?" Beckett's face still wore that odd, unpleasant smile.

"Surely. And what follows is almost bathos. Your hero is served with an arm and hand, and what does he do but slip

a ring from his brother's finger and put it on his own. Why? *Why?* Obviously so when he woke up in his office he'd find the ring in his finger, and die of heart-failure. Bah!" said Thorp genially. "Implausible as the very devil."

"It couldn't happen, eh?" Beckett inquired, opening his eyes very wide.

Thorp, about to reply, suddenly realized that he had said nothing. He was looking at Beckett's black, shining eyes, like little bits of jet . . . shallow, and yet hypnotically brilliant . . . and they seemed to be growing larger and larger. . . .

**W**ITH a start Mr. Thorp came to himself. He leaped to his feet, staring across the desk. Beckett was no longer there.

"Odd," said Thorp to himself. "I must have dozed. Rude of me. I'll apologize to Beckett next time I see him. I wonder if—oh, yes. He took his yarn with him."

Thorp sat down again, chuckling to himself at the implausibility of Beckett's tale. He reached for a manuscript from the pile before him, skimmed through it briefly, and fumbled for a rejection slip. Then:

He realized abruptly that he was very tired, strangely sleepy. It was almost impossible for him to keep awake. After twice catching himself nodding, he pressed the buzzer for his secretary. Presently a blond, bespectacled girl entered.

"Miss Doyle," Thorp said, "I don't want to be interrupted for an hour. I'll be very busy."

Miss Doyle nodded and retreated. Thorp put his feet on the desk, clasped his hands on his stomach, and dozed. His slumber merged into a deeper sleep. . . .

He dreamed.

Very slowly the chair on which he sat was revolving. His feet, instead of fall-

ing to the floor, drifted downward gently, hitting the carpet with a slight thump. He faced the wall which had previously been behind him.

But the wall was no longer there. What an odd dream, Thorp thought. Gray fog surged within a rectangular space where the wall had once existed . . . and through the grayness a figure came striding.

Thorp's analytical mind was busy, even in a dream. "If I weren't asleep," he told himself, "I'd probably run like hell at sight of that horror. As it is, I'm not even frightened."

No—the grinning skull-face, hideously veiled by rags and tatters of granulated skin, swimming into view from fog-shrouded emptiness—that did not arouse any emotion of fear in Thorp's bosom. The thing came forward with great strides, its skeleton-thin limbs grotesquely incongruous with the bloated, blue-veined, hanging belly, and its talon-like hand gripped Thorp's. It was very cold, very hard, bruising Thorp's flesh.

The creature tugged him to his feet. Thorp seemed to float rather than walk across the room. Odd, inconsequential thoughts flickered across his mind: "Strange how unimportant gravitation is in a dream . . . too many eggs for breakfast. Or could it have been the bacon?"

They were engulfed briefly in the grayness; Thorp felt cold stone beneath his feet, and they emerged into a low-vaulted, eery chamber. Its granite walls were covered with niter, and moss grew thickly on the floor. There was a long table of stone running the length of the room, and around it sat, on low stone benches, creatures which were in every way replicas of Thorp's guide. Bulbous, whitish eyes glared at Thorp; skeleton-thin hands were raised in grim salute. There must have been nearly a dozen of the monsters.

In a harsh, creaking voice, like the groaning tocsin of a Cyclopean bell, one of the things spoke. Although the words were so distorted as to be almost unrecognizable, Thorp managed to make out their portent. He was being welcomed. The creatures nodded and grinned at him with their bald, scabrous heads. He was one of them, the spokesman declared. One test only awaited. Food must be supplied—an entrance fee to the brotherhood. . . .

Things got a little hazy just then, for a familiar voice kept piercing through the harsh gutturals of the skull-faced monster, and dimly Thorp was conscious of being seized and pushed back through the foggy grayness . . . and he stood in his own office, looking dully at a man's back.

The man turned, and Thorp saw that it was his brother, Peter. Peter's boyish face looked startled for a moment, and then he smiled.

"Hello, Herb," he said. "Where were you hiding? I didn't see you come in."

Thorp walked to his desk. There was a sharp, throbbing pain in his skull. His thoughts kept getting confused. He grunted, "No. What d'you want?"

"I want to extend an invitation to lunch with me," Peter said grandiosely. "Your secretary said you were busy, and didn't want to let me in——"

Thorp wasn't listening. One word Peter had said brought the gray mists swirling up into his mind, smothering his consciousness. Lunch. Food. One test only awaited. *Food must be supplied.* . . .

It was quite easy—in fact, a *cliché*. Thorp said, "Look!" and pointed to the window. As Peter turned to stare, Thorp snatched up a heavy metal paperweight from the desk and struck. Without a sound Peter crumpled to the floor.

Thorp seized him under the armpits and began to drag him toward the wall,

He cast no glance behind him, but presently the gray mists shrouded his body and Peter's—and then other hands were helping him. Cackling, obscene laughter rang in his ears, and grinning skull-masks were thrust into his own.

Peter's limp body was lifted to the stone table. The monsters bent above him in a huddle, so that Thorp could not see what they were doing. An outburst of charnel laughter culminated in a ghastly shriek. Then silence, save for an indescribable soft sound.

Again things got hazy. Thorp was conscious of being seated at the stone table—of something warm and wet and frightful being thrust at him. He gripped it involuntarily. It was a human hand and arm. On the index finger he saw a ring that he recognized—a diamond set in a square of black jet. Peter's wife had given her husband that ring last Christmas.

On what impulse he acted Thorp did not understand, but suddenly he slipped the ring from the still-warm finger and tried to put it on his own. It stuck; it was too small. He finally had to slide it on the little finger, where it fitted perfectly.

Then came gray emptiness . . . and mad laughter . . . and horror unspeakable, from which Thorp fled screaming to awake sweating and shuddering in his chair.

His feet came down from the desk with a thump. He turned to stare at the wall behind him. Then, expelling a long breath of relief, he settled back, fumbling in his pocket for a cigarette. What a dream!

He did not light the cigarette. He did not even place it between his lips. The little white cylinder dropped unnoticed to the floor as he glared at the ring on his little finger—at the diamond set in a square of jet.

He screamed. His hand went out clawingly. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

**T**HORP'S body had fallen forward so that the head and shoulders lay upon the desk. The dead editor's face mirrored a look of horror so great that even the hardened detective turned away his eyes.

"He was just like that, eh?" the detective asked. "He ain't been moved?"

The pallid Miss Doyle shook her head. "He was like that—when I found him,"

she whispered through white lips. "I can't imagine what's happened to his brother, either."

"He'll turn up," the detective said optimistically. "You say that's his brother's ring on his finger? That's funny." The man's eyebrows lifted. "Wait a minute! He's got something in his other hand!"

Quickly Thorp's outflung, clenched hand was pried open, and the thing he had gripped so desperately was revealed.

It was a rejection slip.