

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 20 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.20. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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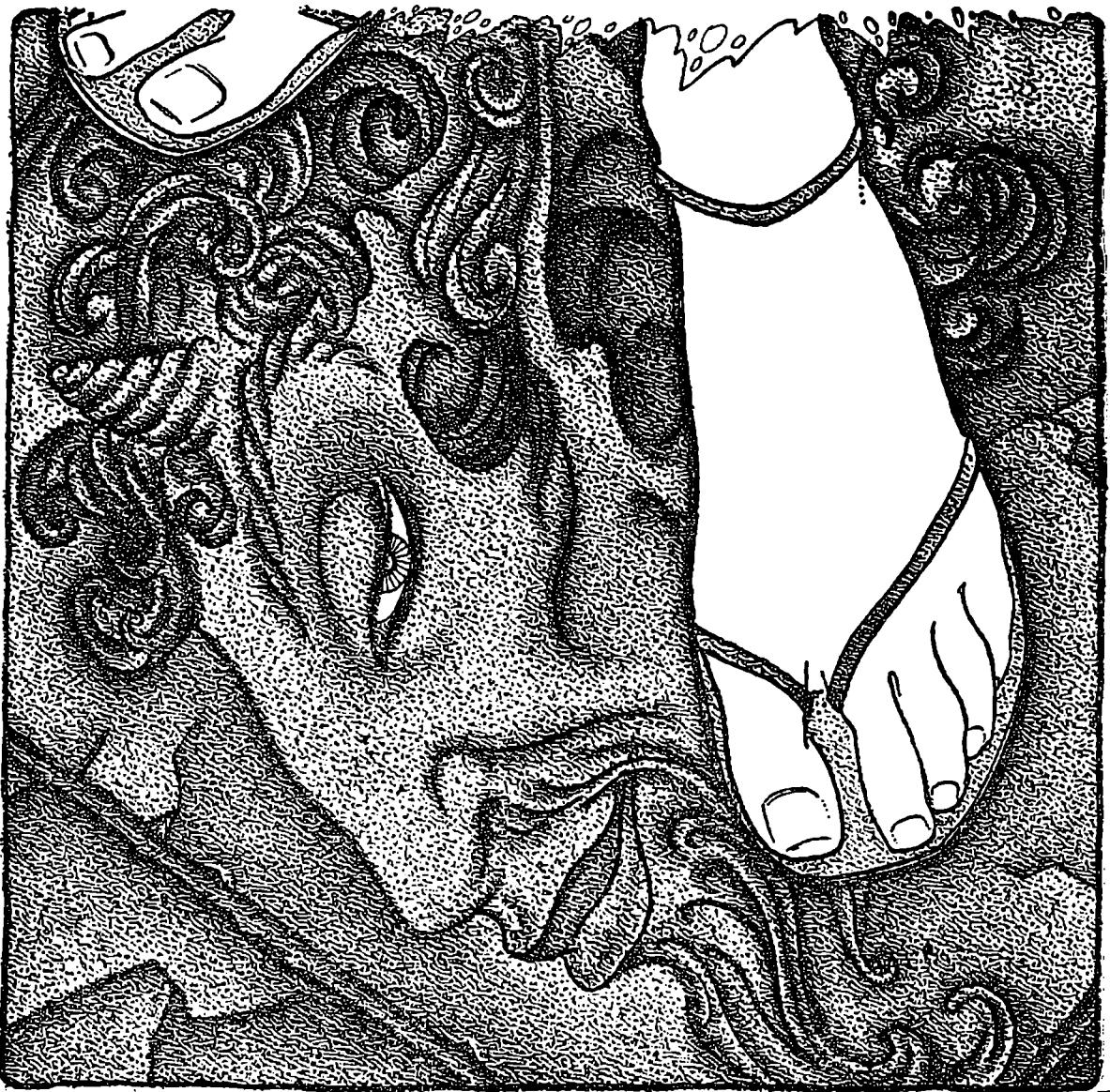
PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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The Cracks of Time

BY DOROTHY QUICK



Time is all around us; this minute and the next, simultaneously

IT WAS when the cocktail party I was giving for Myra was at its height that I first saw the face.

I had been listening to the one hundred and fourth "But my, dear, your engagement was such a surprise—You know you have

all my best wishes—Now I want to congratulate the lucky man," and wondering how Myra ever found the right words to reply. Marveling, too, at the ease with which she did so, and passed the people on to Henley, who managed them equally well.

They were a good pair, my younger sister Myra and Henley Bradford. They'd have a happy marriage.

It was to hide the rush of tears to my eyes that I looked down, and saw the face. The sun room's floor was done with tiles Jason and I had brought from Spain while on our honeymoon—when we had been happy. They were a sea green-blue, some with geometric designs, some perfectly plain, their only ornamentation the patina of the glazing and the dark lines, or cracks, which time had given them. In this particular tile that caught my eyes the cracks had patterned a face. It was only a vague outline, the profile of a man with full, thick lips—sensuous lips, slanted eyes, and a forehead from which the hair rose up into a point that looked like a horn. There was nothing more that was definite. The rest was blurred and vague, like some modern, impressionistic picture, of the shadowy school which suggests its subject, rather than portrays it.

I was about to call out and tell the crowd what I'd discovered. I thought I'd make a game of it, because, in a way, it was like "statues," or finding shapes in clouds. The words "See what I've found!" were actually on my lips when the eye of the face looked a warning from under its slanting lid, and then the lid came down, covering the eye.

IT was a trick of lighting, of course. The fact was in profile and the eye was open. The shadow of someone's foot in passing must have made the effect of the lid closing. The eye looking at me in warning was imagination plus several cocktails. But what I had been going to say was still-born. I didn't mention the profile but kept looking at it as the afternoon progressed, and it seemed to me that the face became clearer and more sharply etched. I began thinking it resembled the ancient sculptures of Pan.

By the time the guests had drunk themselves into a state of hilarity I had forgotten the face. I didn't notice it again until Jason came over to me and, in a rare mood of affection, put his arm around my shoulder. "Sheila," he whispered in a voice liquor had thickened, "you're the best-looking girl here. Why don't we kiss and make up?"

I knew he wouldn't have said that, sober. I also knew that our quarreling

had gone beyond the point where we could follow his suggestion. Jason's charms were legion but so was his drinking and the other women that went with it. I had out-forgiven myself—there just wasn't any more of that virtue left in me. Still, perhaps I should try once more. Maybe it wouldn't be right to reject this offer.

It was then I looked down and the face was moving from side to side, obviously saying "no" to my charitable inclinations. "No, no, no!" I caught myself up sharp. This was ridiculous; I was letting my imagination run away with me. The afternoon shadows were tricky things and I certainly couldn't let shifting light betray by better impulses.

So, when Jason repeated his question, kissing the place behind my ear that he called his, I said "Yes, Jason."

It seemed to me then that the one eye of the face completely closed and that I saw a tear trickle down the high-boned cheek. It was ridiculous but that's the impression I received.

"Hi, folks," Jason was calling, as he swirled me around in a wild dance. "Let's have another round. I'm celebrating the fact I've got the loveliest wife in the world, the kindest, the sweetest—"

I didn't hear the rest of the adjectives. My handkerchief had dropped during the turns we'd made. As Jason talked I bent down for it. The tiny square of white had fallen over the face. When I picked it up, it was wet. Liquor? Something spilled from a cocktail? That's what I thought, but when I lifted it to my nose there was no alcoholic odor. I touched it to my lips, the tip end of my tongue, and there was the bitter salt taste of tears.

And I had seen a tear roll down the face! Incredible, but in my mouth was the tang of a man's tears. I looked down. The face was much clearer; the back of the head was completely filled in, with the hair clustered on it dark and curly. The eye was open now and it had acquired depth and perspective. It looked down at me with admiration and a kind of pathetic appeal. The full lips trembled. It was as though they were calling out for me to lean over and touch them.

So strong was the illusion that in another moment I might have done so, but Jason

came back just then with two cocktails. "Here you are, darling." He handed one to me.

I took it, and he encircled me with his arm. "Sweet, let's drink to us!" He was very tight, but his charm was in the ascendancy. I drank with him and forgot about the face.

THE reconciliation proved very absorbing. Not since our honeymoon and the first year of our married life had Jason been so completely devoted. It was as though the five miserable years through which we had quarreled had not existed. We were suddenly back, continuing the first twelve months of our felicity. I had fully intended to examine the tile with the face most carefully, the next day, when there would be no feet to cast shadows, no liquor to give ideas. But as it happened it was over a week before I went in the sun porch.

To begin with, there was the new devoted Jason, a round of parties for Myra, and several days of rainy weather, which always put the desirability of the sun porch at low ebb.

The cocktail party had been on a Saturday. It was exactly ten days later—Tuesday, to be definite—that the sun shone so brightly I said I'd have my lunch in the sun room. I had completely forgotten the face by then.

But once seated on the red bamboo chair with my lunch tray on a matching table before me, the face obtruded itself into my vision. It was slightly to my right and not as much *en profile* as I'd thought. It was more three-quarter; there was a glimpse of the other cheek, more than a suggestion of the other eye. The original one looked at me reproachfully.

I caught my breath. The effect was really amazing. Since I'd seen it the face had gained dimensions too. There was depth and thickness to it now, and it was larger—the hair had spread over to the next tile. I leaned over and examined the lines—the cracks of time. They were deep, almost fissure-like, quite outstanding against the blue-green glaze. It was almost as though some artist had made a sketch freehand of Pan, before the tiles went to the kiln, and it had lain under the glaze for years until time and wear had brought it back to the surface. I had no hesitancy about knowing

it was meant to be Pan; the little forehead horns were very clear now, and the full, sensuous lips could have belonged to none other. Pan in the deep wood, admiring a dryad, with all the connotations of a satyr.

I wasn't particularly interested in my lunch but I went on eating it automatically, watching the face as I did so, surprised to see the reproach melt away to admiration, then longing, and finally desire undisguised.

At that point I caught myself up sharply. "Sheila, you're being ridiculous," I said aloud.

Johnson, the maid, appeared in the doorway. "Did you call?" she asked.

"No." I was amused. She'd heard me talking to myself. "But now you're here, you can take the tray. I'll just keep my tea."

When she came over I pointed down to the tile. "Look, Johnson. Don't you think it's funny the way those lines on that tile make a face?"

She peered down and then drew back. "It is, indeed, Madame, a strange face—not quite human, although it's not very clear, is it?"

The outlines weren't vague to me now but they had been when I had first seen them. Suddenly there was a voice in my ear. "You have tasted the salt of my tears; that is why you see more clearly."

The tea cup I had been holding crashed to the floor, the china ringing hard against the tiles as it shattered into bits. I found control of myself quickly. "Oh, Johnson, I am sorry. It just slipped out of my hands."

"And your good china, too," she sighed. "I'll clean up, Madame, and give that tile a bit of an extra rub, too. Maybe we'll be able to wipe that ugly face out."

But I knew she'd never be able to erase it from my mind.

Or the floor, either!

IN FACT, her efforts only made it more distinct to me, although she seemed to think she had obliterated some of it.

When she had finished and gone, I sat there trying to figure it out. There was an outline of a face on the tile. Johnson saw it, so it wasn't entirely imagination. She wasn't educated enough to know about Pan; if she had been, she too would have seen the resemblance. So I wasn't completely off track.

There was a face. It was inhuman, but there actuality stopped. The rest had to be imagination. The cracks of time could make a face but they couldn't make it weep or speak. That had been my own mind, and yet what it had said made sense in a way: "you have tasted the salt of my tears; that is why you see more clearly."

There was a fairy tale I remembered from my youth and Andrew Lang's colored fairy books. It was called "Elves' Ointment" as I recollect, and it was the story of a midwife brought to attend the birth of an elf. Given ointment to put on the new baby's eyes she had inadvertently gotten some on her own, and had seen everything differently thereafter—that is, until the elves caught on and took her new sight away from her, with quite tragic results, as I remembered.

But the analogy held. I looked at the face again. The full lips were parted. I could almost feel the hot quickened breath on my nearby ankle.

This was getting beyond sense. I was making myself see things that couldn't be,

hear a voice, feel emotions that should be kept under cover. It was incredible; yet it was so real! It was uncanny. It made me a little afraid.

I decided I would go up to the attic and see if there were any left over tiles and if there were, I'd have this one, with its cracks of time, removed as quickly as possible.

"Of course," I told myself sternly, "it's only because you've been emotionally stirred up these past days. What with Myra's engagement and Jason, no wonder you're full of imaginings."

Then I heard the voice again, an ageless voice, thin and reedy, yet with a curious appeal. "Don't fight me. Just listen to my music."

The music was soft at first, fleeting into my brain with gently-vibrating notes. From its first sound I didn't think any more. I couldn't. I could only listen to something indefinably lovely—music that soothed and made me know that nothing apart from it really mattered. It held the essence of life.

Suddenly it changed and became little

tongues of flame licking around me, touching me here and there like caressing winds. Then there were waves of sound that vibrated through my entire being. And it seemed as though all the magic there had ever been was in them, weaving itself around me until I was a part of it, and I knew that nothing so lovely had ever happened to me before. I was suddenly a part of nature. Soon all its secrets would be known to me, and—

JASON's voice: "Hi, Shelley, where are you?" came from the living room, driving the music away. I didn't answer. I didn't want Jason to find me. I wanted the music back again. I wanted to lose myself in it.

"Shelley." Jason was calling. "Shelley." His pet name for me, part nickname for Sheila and partly made up from my admiration for the poet.

I looked down at the face. There was a finger touching the lips, as though to enjoin silence. Another crack of time, but it looked like a finger and its meaning was plain: the music was to be our secret, there was no mistaking that. And I wasn't imagining it. There *was* a finger on the thick lips.

For a minute I thought of them touching mine, and I knew that was what I wanted most in the world—that, and the music.

"Soon. It will be soon." The thin, ready voice was like the notes of a pipe, coming from far-off enchanted places. A pipe, Pan's pipe.

Then Jason was in the room, exclaiming: "What the—! Why didn't you answer me? Didn't you hear me call?"

"No. I—I guess I was half asleep."

He leaned over and kissed me. There was warmth in his kiss but it left me cold. The wonderful music had deadened my senses to everything but its own magnificence, and Pan's, the god who had called it to being.

I looked down at the tile. The finger was no longer against the full lips. Instead, they were forming a word, "Wait." It was as plain to see as though I had studied lip-reading.

Jason's eyes followed mine. "Hello! Look at that cracked tile. We'll have to change that. You know, those cracks make a face,

a horrible, repulsive face that gives me the shivers. I'll go to the attic tomorrow and fish out another tile and get rid of that face on the bar room floor."

Against my will I laughed. Against the hurt look in Pan's eyes. But suddenly the expression changed to one of cunning, combined with determination.

Words came to my lips. Without any volition of my own I found myself saying, "There's a piece of broken china still there. I broke a cup."

Jason bent down, picked up the piece of the tea cup the maid had overlooked, which I hadn't even know was there. He swore softly and shook a few drops of blood from his finger. Aghast, I watched the full lips catch them, suck them in.

"Jason," I cried. "You're hurt!"

He laughed. "Don't look so horrified; it's only a small cut." Again he shook off a few drops of blood, which the mouth on the floor caught.

I shivered. There was something so horrible about the mouth and the blood that I forgot the music.

"Come on." Jason caught me up: "I'll let you put a band-aid on it and then we're stepping out. The Crawleys are waiting for us at Agello's."

Agello's was our local "21." Going there was always an event. I was quite excited. There in the bright lights, with the gay music, I could forget the face and the silly things it provoked me into imagining.

I thought that, and I was happy, looking forward to fun at Agello's with Jason and the Crawleys, a couple we both liked tremendously. I was quite elated. Jason had his arm around me and it felt fine—warm and vibrant.

But as we left the porch I saw the face again. The lips had color, and they formed a word, "Soon." And as we left, an echo of the thin, fluting pipes sounded in my ear.

At Agello's I managed to forget. I had to forget, otherwise I would begin to think I was going mad. The face on the floor was genuine enough; Jason and the maid had both seen it. They had sensed evil. The maid had said it was inhuman, Jason that it was repulsive. So the face was all actuality. The rest had to be an overworked imagination, and I didn't like the implications of that.

I made up my mind there on the crowded floor dancing with Jason that I'd help him find another tile and get rid of the one with the cracks of time as quickly as possible. After that, I proceeded to enjoy the evening.

It was late when we left Agello's. Once we were home, Jason didn't give me time to think. It was like our honeymoon all over again, and I was glad of that.

THE next day was Sunday. Sunday was the day we usually had breakfast on the sun porch in our pajamas. In the light of day I wasn't worried about the face, but it was comfortable in our room. "Let's be sissies," I said, "and have breakfast in bed."

"Lazy." Jason laughed. "But it's too nice a day to be on the north side of the house. No, Shelley, we're going to bask in the sunlight. And just to pamper you, I'm going to carry you thither." He leaned over the bed and gathered me into his arms.

"This is fun," I grinned, "but in the interests of modesty you'd better let me have a negligee."

He held me down so I could retrieve my blue crepe housecoat from the foot of the bed. I clutched it to me, and we were ready.

On our way, Jason paused a minute before the mirror set into my closet door. "See what a pretty picture you make," he whispered in my ear. "You're like a slim dryad of the woods, and I—" he squared his massive shoulders and I felt the muscles of his chest hard against me—"am Pan."

There wasn't any music—no thin fluting or wondrous tones; only a resentment and a feeling of instinctive recoil—as though anyone could be Pan but the face. I made myself look in the mirror. Just as we were we might have posed for a calendar picture of a dryad being abducted by a satyr—not Pan. Jason's face was lascivious enough but there was no suggestion of the god in him. He was of the earth.

I, in my white satin nightie had a classic look, for the satin moulded my form and was a startling contrast to my red-gold hair.

Jason, in blue foulard pajamas, looked like an advertisement straight out of "Esquire." Direct physiological appeal. But I knew instinctively that within him there were no nuances, none of the subtle approach that is so dear to a woman's heart.

His was not the knowledge that Pan possessed.

It was at that moment I heard the music—the faint, thin piping that shivered against my nerves and made them vibrate to its tune, music that grew louder even as I listened.

Jason started towards the door.

The music was calling to me. Calling to me to come, to give myself up to it completely.

Suddenly I was afraid. Jason was very dear, human and near. I clung to him. "Don't go downstairs," I begged. "Let's stay here." I tried to put allure into my voice. Anything to keep him here where it was safe, where I could shut the door and drown out the music that attracted me, as something evil that is yet beautiful can always do.

Jason's mind was one track. "Breakfast first, darling." He walked on, and the music swelled in tone. It was making me forget everything but my desire for it—and Pan, for the two were inescapably one.

Still I tried to hold to reality. "Do you hear music?" I asked Jason, as he descended the stairway.

"Music? Lord, no! But I do hear a vibration like the jangling note of a wire that's off-key. After breakfast we'll look for it."

"There may not be time." The words said themselves.

"We've got all day, darling." He was at the bottom of the steps, advancing to the living room. The music was becoming more and more pronounced. Like Wagner's fire music, little tongues of flame licking about me, growing larger and stronger.

I knew they were waiting to envelope me. I made a last effort. "Jason, we musn't go to the sun room. There's something there—something—" "Evil" was what I'd meant to say but the word was still-born on my lips. The music had taken possession of me. I was encased in it as surely as Brunehilde ever was on her fire-ringed mountain. Little flames of music were licking about me.

THEN we were in the sun room and Jason put me down.

My wrapping the negligee around me was mechanical, and wasted, for Pan's eyes looked through the material, yes, through the skin, into my very soul. He was complete.

now, a full-grown figure, and even as I watched he rose from the blue-green tiles, wholly dimensional. His boring eyes held mine and the music was like a flowing river of fire, touching me, everywhere.

"So, you have answered my pipings?" It was as though he were singing.

"Yes," I replied, "And now that I am here?"

"Shelley, what are you talking about?" Jason's voice was impatient.

The music diminished. "Didn't you hear?" I began.

"Wait." Pan's voice was thunder-clear.

Suddenly arrested, I stood still. But my gaze betrayed me.

"What is it?" Jason asked. Then, when I made no reply he became insistent. "What is it? What do you hear?"

That caught me up short with surprise. It didn't seem possible that he didn't hear that glorious, engrossing, enveloping music. I found words. "But you *must* hear the music. It's so wonderful. And you must see—"

I looked at Pan. He was regarding me strangely and shaking his head.

I stopped short. Jason followed my gaze. "It's that darn tile. You've been acting peculiarly ever since you saw those cracks. I'm going to dig it out."

"No," I cried. "No, Jason, let it alone. There's danger!" I don't know how I knew there was danger for Jason, perhaps it was the expression in Pan's eyes. But how, or why I knew Jason went in peril? And at that moment the urgency was upon me to save him.

"Don't be foolish, Shelley. How could there be danger in a tile—a cracked tile, at that?"

"But he's larger than you." I was struggling against Pan and the music now, trying to save Jason from something intangible, some danger I sensed but couldn't rightly name. I was afraid, and yet, what did Jason—anything—matter, against the vibrant music that was swelling around me?

"Sheila!" Jason exclaimed. "I think you must have a hangover—seeing things. A hangover, or be mad. That tile has bewitched you. I'm getting rid of it now—this second."

He went to an old sea chest where he kept tools and things. He opened it and took out a hunting knife.

I could see Pan's triumphant smile.

"No, Jason, no!" I shrieked, and then the music was so loud, so beautiful that I couldn't think of anything else. I was completely lost to the music, hypnotized as any snake by a master piper, enveloped by melody which was part of Pan.

As in a dream I saw Jason advance toward the tile, knife in hand. I saw Pan moving towards him.

The music accelerated. For one desperate moment I came to my senses. "Jason, come away!" I screamed, and rushed to him.

Pan was before me. With one hand he thrust me back; with the other he turned Jason's arm with the knife inward, so that the knife was toward Jason's body. I saw the blue tile gleaming, crackless and pure, just like the others. Pan had left it. He had materialized. Just as I realized this, Pan pushed Jason. My husband fell, and as he did so, impaled himself on his own knife as surely as any ancient Roman running himself through with his sword.

There was a funny gurgling noise. Then Jason rolled over on his back. I knew the danger had struck. Jason was dead.

But Pan was alive!

Alive and wholly man, and the music too was a living, throbbing thing, marvelous beyond human knowing, enveloping me until I was part of it.

The wonder of the music was completely mine now. It swept me forward, into Pan's arms.

I DON'T mind being in prison; or the fact that I am on trial for my life, charged with the murder of my husband. I don't even care that they are saying I am mad, perhaps because I know that if I told them the truth they would be certain of it.

I don't mind being confined in this horrible cell, or any of the rest of it. I don't mind, because the cracks of time opened for me, and now the wonderful music is always in my ears, and the remembrance of Pan's kisses on my lips.

And the certainty that at the end I shall feel them again!