

Strange STORIES

VOL. I, NO. 2

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APRIL, 1939

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Application for entry as second class matter pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1918. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$1.15; foreign and Canadian, postage extra. Back-copies will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are sold only at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If a name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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*Eerie and Flesh-Crawling Revelations Form this Shocking
Kaleidoscope of a Mind Crying "Not Guilty"*



"That night the flies were worse than usual"

The Dead Woman

By DR. DAVID H. KELLER

Author of "The Thing In The Cellar," "The Human Termites," etc.

HE WAS found in the room with his wife, slightly confused, a trifle bewildered, but otherwise apparently normal. He made no effort to conceal his conduct any more than he did to the knife in his hand or the pieces in the trunk.

Fortunately the inspector was an officer of more than usual intelligence, and there was no effort made to give the third degree or even se-

cure a written confession. Perhaps the Police Department felt it was too plain a case. At least it was handled intelligently and in a most scientific manner. The man was well fed, carefully bedded, and the next morning, after being bathed and shaved was taken to see a psychiatrist.

The specialist in mental diseases had the man comfortably seated. Knowing he smoked, he offered a

cigar, which was accepted. Then, in a quiet, pleasant atmosphere, he made one statement and one request.

"I am sure, Mr. Thompson, that you had an excellent reason for acting as you did the other day. I wish you would tell me all about it."

THE man gazed at the psychiatrist. "Will you believe me if I tell you?"

"I will accept every part of your story with the idea that you are convinced that you are telling me the truth."

"That is all I want," whispered Thompson. "If everyone I talked to in the past had done that, if they had even tried to check up on my story, perhaps this would not have happened. But they always thought that I was the sick one, and there was not one who was willing to accept my statement about the worms."

"I suppose that I was happily married. At least as much so as most men are. You know that there is a good deal of conflict between the sexes, and there were a few differences of opinion between Mrs. Thompson and myself. But not enough to cause serious difficulty. Will you remember that? That we did not quarrel very much?"

"About a year ago my wife's health began to give me considerable cause for worry. She started to fail. If you are a married man, Doctor, you know there is always that anxiety about the wife's health. You become accustomed to living with a woman, having her do things for you, go to places with you and you think about how life would be if she should sicken and die. Perhaps the fact that you are uneasy about the future makes you exaggerate the importance of her symptoms."

"At any rate she became sick, developed a nasty cough and lost weight. I spoke to her about it and even bought a bottle of beef, wine and iron at the drug store and made her take it. She did so to please me, but she never would admit that she was sick. Said it was fashionable to be thin and that the cough was just nervousness.

"She would not go to see a doctor. When I spoke to her mother about it, the old lady just laughed at me; said that if I tried to make Lizzie a little happier she would soon get fat. In fact, none of our family or our friends seemed to feel that there was anything wrong with Mrs. Thompson, so I stopped talking about it."

"Of course it was not easy on me, the way she coughed at night, and her staying awake so much. I work hard in the daytime and it is hard to lose a lot of sleep. At last I was forced to ask her to let me sleep in the spare bedroom."

"Even that did not help much. I could hear her cough, and when she did fall asleep I would have to tip-toe into her room and see if she was all right. Her coughing bothered me so much that when she did not cough it worried me more because I thought something had happened to her."

"One night the thing I was afraid of happened. She had a hard spell of coughing and then she stopped. It was quiet in the house. I could hear the clock on the landing tick, and a mouse gnawing wood in the attic. I thought I could even hear my own heart beat, but there was not a sound of any kind from the other bedroom."

"When I went in there and turned on the light I just knew it was all over. Of course I was not sure. A bookkeeper is not supposed to be an expert in such matters, so I went and telephoned for our doctor. On the way to the phone I wondered just what I should say, for he had always insisted that my wife was in grand health. So I simply told him that Mrs. Thompson was not looking well and would he come over. Just like that I told him, and tried to keep my voice steady."

"It was about an hour before he came. He went into the bedroom but I stopped at the doorway. He spent sometime listening to her heart and feeling her pulse and then he straightened up and said to me:

"She is fine. Just fast asleep. I wish I could sleep as soundly as that. What did you think was wrong?"

"That surprised me so much that all I could do was to stammer some-

thing about not hearing her cough any more. He laughed.

"You worry too much about her, Mr. Thompson."

"Right there my difficulty started. Here was a doctor who was supposed to know his business and he said there was nothing wrong with my wife, and there I was, just a book-keeper, and I just knew what was the matter. What was I to do? Tell him that he was wrong? Send for another physician?"

"It was growing light by that time, so I went down to the kitchen and started the coffee. I often did that. Then I shaved, and made ready to go to the office. But before I went I sat down a while by the wife's bed. It bothered me but I had to keep telling myself that the doctor knew better than I did.

BEFORE leaving the house I phoned to my mother-in-law. Just told her that Lizzie was not feeling well and would she come over and spend the day, and she could get me at the office any time she called. Then I left the house. It felt better out in the sunshine and after working a few hours over the books I almost laughed at myself for being so foolish.

"No telephone calls from the old lady. I arrived home at six and found the house lighted as usual. My wife and mother-in-law were waiting for me in the parlor and told me supper was ready. Naturally, I was surprised to see my wife out of bed.

"At the supper table I watched her just as carefully as I could without making the two of them suspicious of me. Mrs. Thompson ate about as she usually did, just pieced and minced at her food, but I thought when she swallowed that the food went down with a jerk, and there was a stiffness when she moved.

"But her mother did not seem to think there was anything wrong, at least she did not make any comment. Even when I went with her to the front door to say good night to her and we were alone there, she never said a word to show that she thought her daughter was peculiar.

"I started to wash the dishes after that. I often washed the dishes at night while the wife sat in the front parlor watching the people go up and down past the house. After the kitchen was tidy I lit a cigar and went into the parlor and started a little conversation, but Mrs. Thompson never talked back. In fact I do not believe she ever talked to me after that, though I am positive that she talked to the others.

"When the cigar was smoked, I just said good night and went to bed. Later I could hear her moving around in her room, and then all was quiet so she must have gone to bed. She did not cough any more. I congratulated myself on that one thing because the coughing had kept me awake a good deal.

"During the night I lit a candle and, shading it with my hand, tiptoed in to see her. She had her eyes open, but they were rolled back so all you could see was the whites, and she was not breathing. At least I could not tell that she was breathing; and when I held a mirror in front of her mouth there was no vapor on it. My mother had told me the purpose of that when I was a boy.

"The next day was just the same. My mother-in-law came and spent the day. I came home at night and ate supper with them and washed the dishes. The water was hot and it was a pleasure to make them clean. Perhaps I took longer than usual at it because I did not fancy the idea of going into the front parlor where the wife was sitting looking out of the window.

"But I went in, tonight without the usual cigar. I wanted to use my nose. It seemed there was a peculiar odor in the house, like flowers that had been put in a vase of water and then forgotten, for many days. Perhaps you know the odor, Doctor, a heavy one, like lilies of the valley in a small closed room. It was specially strong in the parlor, where Mrs. Thompson was sitting, and it seemed to come from her. I had to light the cigar after a while, and by and by I said good night, and went to bed. She

never spoke to me, in fact she did not seem to pay any attention to me.

"About two that morning I took the candle and went in to look at her. Her eyelids were open and her eyeballs were rolled back just like they had been the night before but now her jaw was dropped and her cheeks sunk in. I just could not do anything but telephone for a doctor and this time I picked out a total stranger, just picked his name out of the telephone book haphazard.

"What good did it do? None at all. He came, he examined Mrs. Thompson very carefully and he simply said that he did not see anything wrong with her; and then down in the front hall he turned on me and asked me just why I had sent for him and what I thought was the matter with her? Of course I just could not tell him the truth, with his being a doctor and I being just a bookkeeper.

MY mother-in-law went to the mountains next day for the summer and that left us alone. Breakfast as usual and to the office and not a word all day from the house. When I came back at night the house was lit and supper was on the table and the wife at her end as usual and the food served and on the plates. She ate, but her movements were slower, and when she swallowed you could see the food go down by jerks, and her eyes were sunken into the sockets and seemed shiny and—well, like the eyes of a fish on the stalls.

"There were flowers on the table, but the smell was something different, it was sweeter and when I took a deep breath it was just hard for me to go on eating the pork chops and potatoes. You see it was summer time and warm, and in spite of the screens there was a fly or two in the house, and when I saw one walking around on her lip and she not making any effort to brush it off, I just couldn't keep on eating. Had to go and start washing the dishes. Perhaps you can understand how I felt, Doctor. Things looked rather odd.

"The next day I phoned to the

office that I would not be there and I sent for a taxi and took Mrs. Thompson to a first class specialist. He must have been good because he charged me twenty-five dollars just for the office call. I went in first and told him just exactly what I was afraid of, and I did not mince my words, and then we had the wife in.

"He examined her, even her blood, and all the satisfaction I got was that she seemed a trifle anaemic, but that I had better take a nerve tonic and a vacation or I would be sick.

"Things looked rather twisted after that. Either I was right and everybody else wrong, or they were right and I was just about as wrong mentally as a man could be. But I had to believe my senses. A man just has to believe what he sees and hears and feels, and when I thought over that office visit, and the wife smiling and the doctor sticking her finger for the blood to examine, it just seemed impossible. Anaemic! Why—that was a simple word to describe her condition.

"That night the flies were worse than usual. I went to the corner store and bought a fly spray and used it in her bedroom but they kept coming in, the big blue ones, you know. Seemed as though they just had to come in and I could not keep them off her face so at last, in desperation, I covered her head up with a towel and went to sleep. I had to work, the interest on the mortgage was due and the man wanted something on the principal, and it was a good house and all I had in the world to show for twenty years of hard work keeping books.

"The next day was just like all the days had been, except that I made more mistakes with the books and my boss spoke to me about it. And when I arrived home supper was not ready though Mrs. Thompson was in the parlor and the lights on. The heavy odor was worse than usual and there were a lot of flies. You could hear them buzz and strike against the electric lights. I got my own supper but I couldn't eat much, thinking of her in the parlor and the flies settling on her open mouth.

"She just sat there that night in the parlor till I went to her and took her arm to lead her up the stairs. She was cold and on each cheek there was a heavy purple blotch forming. Once she was in her room she seemed to move around so I left her alone and when I went into her room later on she was in bed.

"It had been a hard week for me, so I sat down by her bed and tried to think, but the more I thought the worse things seemed. The night was hot and the flies kept buzzing; just thinking of the past and how we used to go to the movies together and laugh and sometimes come near crying, and how we used to bluff about the fact that perhaps it was just as well we didn't have a child so long as we had each other, knowing all the time that she was eating her heart out for longing to be a mother and blaming me for her loneliness.

"The thinking was too much for me so I thought I might as well smoke another cigar and go to bed and try to keep better books the next day and hold my job—and then I saw the little worm crawl out.

"Right then and there, I knew that something had to be done. It didn't make any difference what the doctors or her mother said, something had to be done and I was the one who had to do it.

"I telephoned for an undertaker.

"Met him downstairs.

"'It will be a private funeral,' I told him, 'and no publicity, and I think after you are through you will have no trouble obtaining a physician's certificate.'

"He went up stairs. In about five minutes he came down stairs.

"'I must have gone to the wrong room,' he said.

"'The second story front bedroom,' I replied.

"'But the woman there is not dead,' he said.

"I paid him for his trouble and shut the door in his face. Was I helpless? Doctor, you have to believe me. I was at the end of my rope. I had tried every way I knew and there was not anything left to do. No one believed me. No one

agreed with me. It seemed more and more as though they thought I was insane.

"IT WAS impossible to keep her in the house longer. My health was giving way. Working all day at figures that were going wrong all the time and coming back night after night cooking my supper and sleeping in a room next to the thing that had been my wife. What with the smell of lilies of the valley and the buzz of flies and the constant dread in my mind of how things would be the next day and the next week, and the mortgage due. I had to do something.

"And it seemed to me that she wanted me to. It seemed that she recognized that things were not right, that she was entitled to a different kind of an ending. I tried to put myself in her place and I knew what I would want done with me if things were reversed.

"So I brought the trunk up from the cellar. We had used that trunk on our wedding trip and every summer since on our vacations and I thought that she would be more at peace in that trunk than in a new one. But when I had the trunk by her bed, I saw at once that it was too small unless I used a knife.

"That seemed to be the proper thing to do, and I was sure that it would not hurt her. For days she had been past hurting. I told her I was sorry but it just had to be done and if people had just believed me things could have been arranged in a nicer way. Then I started.

"Things were confused after that.

"I seem to remember a scream and blood spurting, and the next thing there were a lot of people in the house and they arrested me.

"And that is the peculiar part of it all, Doctor. Perhaps you do not know it but I am accused of murdering my wife. Now I have told you all about it, Doctor, and I just want to ask you one question. If you had been in my place, day after day, and night after night, what would you have done, Doctor? What would any man have done who loved his wife?"