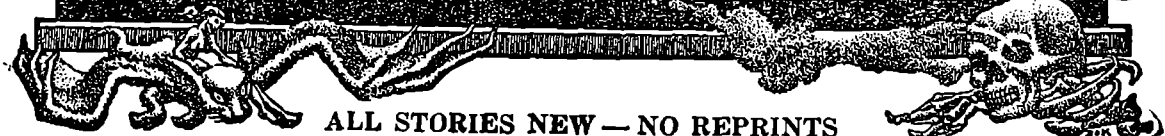


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1948

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

LONG NOVELETTE

- THE WHIPPOORWILLS IN THE HILLS** August Derleth 4
The ghastly sound swelled from the black hills into the valley, surrounding the house with waves of cacophonous horror.

NOVELETTE

- THE FOLLOWER** Allison V. Harding 34
A trail that begins in life and ends only with death.

SHORT STORIES

- FEVER DREAM** Ray Bradbury 23
We know the way germs multiply—suppose they go on and grow big and bigger!
- THE CRACKS OF TIME** Dorothy Quick 27
She was fascinated by the image of the tiles—heedless of the danger.
- THE BEASTS THAT TREAD THE WORLD** Harold Lawlor 48
A woman pursued by monsters, but only in a nightmare, should not have scars to show for it in the morning.
- THE DAUGHTER OF URZUN** Stanton A. Coblentz 56
Decisions made on other days, in other lives can affect us now and today.
- THE HIDDEN TALENT OF ARTIST BATES** Snowden T. Herrick 64
The most unusual, unheard of and deadly kind of strange talent.
- THE WATCHER OF THE AGES** Edmond Hamilton 68
Many had sought the dead metropolis but all had been defeated by the dark jungle and darker forces within it.
- DISPLACED PERSON** Eric Frank Russell 77
Our troubled world is full of displaced persons but the man in the black cloak was surely the strangest.
- DEATH'S BOUQUET** Peter Phillips 80
Lebrun's cider possessed a curious quality. Delightful until you knew the ingredients.
- THE DEVIL'S LOTTERY** Mary Elizabeth Counselman 87
Everyone agreed that the strange man was there, but no two people agreed on what he looked like.

VERSE

- THE EYRIE AND WEIRD TALES CLUB** 3
- WEIRDISMS** 47
- THE RIVER** Dorothy Quick 67
- TO THE CHIMERA** Clark Ashton Smith 79

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.

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 173
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The Devil's Lottery



BY MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

PERHAPS the weirdest aspect of the case was that no two people in the entire city of "Blankville" gave the same description of the man.

He was seen—never anywhere else—on the corner of 1st and Main, with that small shabby portable table in front of him;

really a folding suitcase with legs, such as pitchmen carry and set up to huckster their dubious wares. That much, at least, everyone agreed upon but no man could change his appearance and costume as often as all accounts insist that he did. "No man . . .", as Jeff Haverty, city editor of the

Heading by JOHN GIUNTA

It was a strange little game, pointless perhaps to all but one

local newspaper, expressed it in his last editorial about the strange affair.

IT SEEMS to have been a young traffic cop stationed at the corner of 1st and Main who saw the man first—standing there motionless behind his pitch-table on the morning of Monday, November 3rd. According to O'Reilly, he was a fat oily red-faced individual with bowler hat and cigar, who looked like a city hall politician, the kind who can get an ambitious young officer promoted for fixing a certain ticket for speeding.

O'Reilly strolled over to him, twirling his whistle, and surveyed the contents of the table. There was little on it to indicate that the stranger was an ordinary pitchman—no bottles of spot-remover, no trick fountain pens, no overpriced toys for children. In fact, there was nothing on the portable stand except three neat piles of papers, small oblong sheets, stiff and rough like parchment. There was writing on the papers, flame-colored printing of a curious wavery nature that O'Reilly found hard to read. The print was archaic, resembling Old English—"not like nothing you see in the magazines or papers," as the young cop described it. He read the pamphlets, or tracts, if that was what they were, scratched his head, and fixed the street-hawker with his best professional scowl.

"What ye sellin', buddy? You gotta have a license in this town to . . ."

The man smiled slowly and met his look with the most striking pair of eyes O'Reilly says he has ever seen. Oddly enough, all describers of the man agree about those eyes—large, dark, deeply weary but with a glint of sardonic mockery that made one uncomfortable under their gaze. They seemed to penetrate to one's hidden thoughts and laugh knowingly at what they saw, as one woman put it.

"*I have nothing to sell but wisdom,*" was the stranger's reply. His voice, too, is a point on which everyone seems to concur; hollow, reverberating, and without inflection, like the voice of someone shouting down a well.

"Hmm! What ye advertisin', then?" O'Reilly demanded, unable to make heads or tails out of the three queer sentences printed on those papers.

"*Advertising? Perhaps . . . the power of evil and the futility of good,*" the deep voice answered, with a mocking chuckle that made O'Reilly want to smash a fist into his face. "Or . . . perhaps I am only amusing myself . . ."

"I don't get your angle," the young cop said gruffly, annoyed that his skin was prickling as though from an icy wind. "You ain't spreadin' no propaganda, are you, buddy? I got orders to pick up any foreign-lookin' character who . . . What is all this junk you've shovin' on the public?"

"*Call it a game. A contest. A lottery, if you will,*" the stranger intoned softly. "*Anyone may take a chance—man, woman, or child. The price is whatever you care to pay. Write your answer beneath each question; and return them to me with your name and address. Those who offer answers which are most pleasing to me shall receive a great gift!*"

O'Reilly frowned. "I still don't get your angle. What do the folks lose who don't win no prize?"

"*Only . . . their sense of values, perhaps,*" the stranger began to chuckle again. "*And you may be assured that all cash profits will be placed where the money will do the most good for this peaceful little city of 60,000 souls!*"

Accenting the last word oddly, the stranger began to laugh in a way that made young Tim O'Reilly want to cross himself and stop up his ears, as he later told it. He had half a mind, he said, to run this obvious crackpot in for vagrancy or a trumped-up charge of disturbing the peace. But at that moment a coal truck rammed into a school bus, and he hurried away to unravel the resultant snarl in his morning traffic.

ABOUT noon, various accounts of the strange pitchman and his "lottery" began to trickle into the city room of the "Blankville" *News*. Jeff Haverty, always on the lookout for human interest items, sent a reporter to interview the man for his Sunday edition. He also sent his ace photographer, there being nothing for him to do that afternoon.

It was Bill Morgan, the reporter, who brought Haverty one of the little pamphlets, or lottery tickets, with the wavery red print-

ing. Haverly read, and laughed at, the three cryptic sentences inscribed thereon:

I. WHAT IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN SEEK TO HOLD BUT NONE MAY KEEP; WHICH SOME ARE BORN WITH, SOME KNOW NOT THAT THEY POSSESS, AND SOME NEVER TASTE; WHICH WEALTH CAN NOT BUY NOR TOIL EARN NOR WISDOM ATTAIN.

II. WHAT IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN HAVE IN PART BUT NONE IN FULL; WHICH ALL MEN FLEE BUT NONE MAY ESCAPE; WHICH EVERY MAN IS HAPPIEST WITHOUT YET SEEKS DILIGENTLY TO ACQUIRE.

III. WHAT IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN STRIVE TO DESTROY YET THEREBY OFTEN CAUSE MORE; WHICH ALL MEN THINK GREAT WHEN THEIR OWN BUT SMALL WHEN ANOTHER'S; WHICH OVERPOWERS EVERY OTHER FORCE IN LIFE, EVEN FOR THOSE WHO KNOW IT BEST.

"Three philosophical questions, eh?" Haverly commented, smiling. "They sound like something the Sphinx might have whipped up. Say, what *is* this? Some kind of religious tract?"

Morgan shrugged. The editor, he said, knew as much about it as he did. He had interviewed the queer pitchman—if one could call it that, since the answers he received left him, like the young traffic cop, only more puzzled than ever. The street-hawker represented "all firms and manufacturers of world goods," though he was "not a peddler." He was "a part of all religions" though he "advocated none of them," he had told the reporter. Anyone answering each of his three mysterious questions by the following Friday would receive "a great gift"—exactly what, the man would not say.

That was all Bill Morgan had been able to pump out of the fellow; and he was a clever young reporter, coming to "Blankville" from a New York daily. Fatso Roberts, the photographer, was also an expert at his job—yet on that Monday when he had snapped two shots of the strange pitchman standing behind his folding table, he must have been a little drunker than usual, considering how the pictures turned out in the *News* dark room on Friday.

But, even before that, Haverly eyed his

two employees with a scowl of disfavor. Bill Morgan, on one hand, declared that the street-hawker wore a checked suit and resembled a race track tout—like the one who had recently parted him from a year's savings. Roberts, on the other hand, flatly insisted that the pitchman was middle-aged, half-bald, with a forehead curl plastered down and a handlebar moustache—like the bartender at the "White Cat" who was always urging him to have "just one more."

On Tuesday, therefore, Haverly decided to stroll past the corner of 1st and Main and have a look for himself.

When he reached the spot, a small crowd was gathered around the strange huckster, or whatever he was, peering at the little pamphlets and arguing heatedly one with another.

"Aw, it's easy!" one man was saying. "That first question—*Love* is the answer. Everybody wants to hold love but nobody can. Some are born with it, some never know they got it, and some never have any. And it's a cinch you can't buy or earn it, or get it because you're smart. . . . Why, my girl told me the other night . . ."

"No, no," another disagreed cynically. "That's the answer to the second question, *Love* is. 'Which all men have in part but none in full!' And you can't escape from it. And it's a cinch a guy's happier when he keeps away from love. . . . That old battleax of mine! Never lets me out of her sight . . .!"

"You're both wrong," a young girl laughed. "*Wealth* is the answer to that first question. And the second—*Health*. Or maybe . . . Wait. Maybe it's the other way around. No; that wouldn't fit. . . ." She pored over the parchment sheet in her hand, frowning in deep thought.

"That third 'ne," an elderly man quavered. "That'll be *Old Age*, sure as shootin'. The more a feller works to stay young, the quicker he gets old. And a body sure feels like he's older and wiser than another 'ne his same age. And old age sure overpowers all else in life, like it says here. . . ."

"No, I think *Hate* is the answer to that one. Or . . . *War*? That might fit. . . . But I don't think I'll mark mine yet. I'd like to think about it some more. Whatever that

prize is, I'll take it. Take anything that's free! Why, I didn't pay a cent for my chance on this quiz game, so what have I got to lose even if I don't win?"

Haverty moved closer, his eyes traveling over the disturbed, oddly discontented faces of the crowd. Like an echo, above or beneath the murmur of their voice, he thought he heard someone laughing—a deep sinister mocking laughter that made him feel at once angry and subtly afraid.

THEN he saw the pitchman standing behind his portable table: a tall suave gentleman in a pin-stripe suit and gold-rimmed pince nez. He reminded Haverty somewhat of a certain crooked tycoon who had once tried to bribe him to print a smear-campaign against the late Governor Morgan and Roberts had been, obviously, a little tight when they interviewed the fellow. He was nothing like either of their descriptions, the editor noted with a snort. Haverty walked away presently, the arguments of the crowd over the meanings of those three queerly-phrased riddles still ringing in his ears.

For the next few days, it was all one heard throughout the little city of "Blankville"—in beauty shops and chain stores, in dentists' waiting rooms and at the post-office, around the fire station, at choir practice, or along the street where any two people met. Glib answers to all of the questions were on everyone's tongue, and no one seemed to agree with anyone else. A nebulous ill-feeling had crept over the citizens of the town, and neighbors who had trusted one another for years began to eye each other with suspicion.

"*Honesty* is the answer to that first question," one would say.

"Which all men seek to hold but none may keep?" a friend would break in. "Hmp! So that's the way you look at things, is it? And I suppose you think *Fear* is the answer to that third one. ? I never knew you had such a nasty slant on life!"

"And I never knew you were such a Pollyanna! . . . By the way, I'll be busy on Saturday, so we won't have our usual round of golf . . ."

"Suits me fine! You've probably padded

your scores all along, only I didn't dream you were the kind who . . ."

So it went, all over town. Races, creeds, and even individuals in the same family clashed over the meaning of the three questions which, Haverly remarked, perhaps delved too deeply into people who hitherto lived happily on the surface. It was as though a perverted adult had crept into a children's birthday party, whispering ideas and thoughts into ears too young to hear such sophistry.

Every man, woman, and child in "Blankville" wondered, too, what "great gift" would be awarded to those who best answered the three riddles.

"Mark my words, it's just an advertising trick for some kind of new product," one barber sagely told a customer he was shaving. "Just wait and see; the winners will get a crate of some kind of crazy breakfast food!"

"I don't know that I agree," the customer said, wiping lather from his eyes. "This contest, or lottery, has the earmarks of religious ballyhoo, in my opinion. Some tent-revivalist will show up to hold meetings here—he's just building up interest. He'll answer those fool questions from his pulpit, and all anybody'll get will be a chance to join his church!"

"Could be," another customer called from the shoeshine chair. "But if you ask me, it's propaganda! Somebody trying to start another war. . .!"

But no one could say with any real authority just why the weird lottery was being held. Certainly it was not to make money, for those who took the little red-lettered "tickets" paid for them or not as they wished. Most people tossed a nickel or a dime on the table, assuming that the fellow was some sort of beggar with a new angle instead of the usual shoestrings or pencils in a hat. One wealthy matron, who had heard that the contest was "for civic betterment," laid a fifty dollar bill ostentatiously on the stand. The pile of money grew slowly day by day, seemingly uncounted and almost unnoticed by the man who stood silently behind the pitch-table, dealing out his small slips of paper across which three questions ran in shimmery red

print like the distant line of a forest fire at night.

ON the morning of Friday, November 7, everyone in "Blankville" awoke with a tense irritated feeling of excitement. O'Reilly, yawning as he took up his early-morning stance on his accustomed corner, was the first to note that the strange pitchman with his table of pamphlets was gone.

He strolled over to the spot to lean against a lamppost, in readiness for the 7 o'clock rush hour, when he happened to see something protruding from the swinging trapdoor of a nearby trash-can. Idly—sure that his eyes had deceived him—he moved closer and pulled it out.

Then, eyes bulging, he swung open the trap and began clawing out handfuls of what lay-stuffed-carelessly-into-the-trash-can on top of its ordinary contents of waste paper and banana peels. What he had seen was a fifty dollar bill protruding from the slot. Inside was a wad of currency and silver, crammed through the opening as by a casual hand.

The young traffic cop dashed to the phone and called headquarters, to report that a startled burglar must have cached his loot there in flight. But no such robbery had been reported, or was since discovered.

Bill Morgan, the *News* reporter, rushed to the scene at once, with Fatso Roberts, the photographer, panting at his heels. But when Morgan phoned in his story of the currency in the trash-can—about \$732, by quick count—Haverty cut him short.

"Never mind that! Forget it. I want you to go to Beeman's Grocery on 14th. On the double! Their delivery boy had an accident about an hour ago. Front tire of his bicycle exploded. He was thrown off, but only scratched up a little."

"For Pete's sake!" Morgan cut in. "What's the big story in that?"

"Just this," Haverty's voice came, shakey and stifled, over the wire. "That kid ran over a piece of glass. . . he *thought*, until a customer at the store, the jeweler at Mace's, happened to see it and announced that what blew out that bicycle tire was . . . a 120-carat uncut diamond! Larger than the Koh-i-noor. It was worth millions—but the

kid was so mad about his tire, he threw it down a sewer before they could tell him what it was!"

"I'm on my way. . ." yelled Morgan, but did not hang up until Haverty had said, in the same queer voice:

"Er . . . look, Bill. Somebody said there was one of those crazy lottery slips stuck on the bicycle tire . . . but with just one word on it. Just . . . 'I. LUCK', and nothing else. They say that kid filled out one of those things and turned it in. He's feeble-minded; can't read or write. So he just copied some letters down on the slip from a cigarette ad across the street. L-U-C-K . . . that was his answer to the first question. . . ."

"Yeah. . . ?" Morgan swallowed a lump that had come into his throat, almost as though a hand had cut off his breathing. "Okay . . . Okay, Jeff, I'll . . . I'll check on it . . ."

MORGAN hailed a cab, and he and the puffing photographer climbed in. But halfway to Beeman's Grocery on 14th, the driver made a remark that caused the reporter to order him to drive rapidly in the other direction.

"Mean you ain't heard about it?" the cabby expanded. "Yeah—Mrs. Carter Pendergast. You know; the dame who's been plugging for free college education for slum kids here in town. Well, she went nuts last night at that big home of hers on Forrest Drive. Blew her top. The maid found her crouched in a corner of the basement, screaming to beat hell and tearing out her hair. There was one of them lottery tickets in her lap, with just the one word on it: No. II, and the word *KNOWLEDGE*. She kept screaming: 'Don't tell me the rest! I can't stand to hear any more!' The maid heard a mumbling voice and somebody laughing—real horrible, she said. But nobody was in the basement but the old lady. . . ."

"Where is she now? Mrs. Pendergast, I mean?" Morgan demanded.

"Dead," the cabby shrugged. "I just told you, pal; didn' you hear me? She killed herself while the maid went to phone for help. Cut her throat."

But that was not all. When Morgan and

Roberts returned to the *News* office, with their stories of the imbecile boy's accident and the Pendergast suicide, they found Haverty yelling into a phone and frantically motioning for a rewrite to take down the conversation on an extension. At last he hung up the receiver, and his hand was shaking.

"Bill . . ." He mopped his forehead, and fixed the reporter with a peculiar look of fright in his usually unperturbed eyes. "Bill, I . . . I don't know what to make of this. That man, that pitchman with the folding table—who was he? *What* was he? Where's he gone? All the police in town have thrown out a dragnet for him, but there's no trace. He's obviously a madman, or an extremely sadistic practical joker! Or else," and now the editor's voice took on a completely different note, "or else he's . . . *No!* That's ridiculous. I won't say it!"

He stormed over to the rewrite and bent over his copy, reading swiftly the lead he had typed. Morgan and Roberts, puzzled, strolled over to his side.

Haverty straightend, and mopped his face again.

"It's insane, it's fantastic! . . . Bill, I just got a call from the Mercy Hospital. Dr. Kincaid, their top surgeon, was found a while ago, locked in a vacant room on the third floor. He . . . he was hanging up by his thumbs from a ceiling light. . ."

"*Wha-ai!*" the reporters jaw dropped. "He hung *himself*. . .?"

"No, no." Haverty muttered. "Somebody else . . . But the room was *locked!* There's a window, but it's a three-floor drop. Nobody was in there, but just before an interne broke in, he heard somebody laughing like a maniac.

"Not Kincaid—he was unconcious from the burns."

"*Burns?*" Morgan stammered. "I thought you said. . .?"

"I did," the editor lit a cigarette shakily and snubbed it out again. "But somebody—whoever hung him up there—had plugged in an electric sterilizer just under him, where he could stand on it and ease his thumbs . . . if he could bear to sear his bare feet. He couldn't of course. So now they'll have to amputate both his thumbs. And . . . he'll never operate again. Best surgeon in this part of the country. . . ."

"What kind of a fiend would think up a thing like. ?" Roberts burst out, shuddering. "Somebody with a grudge?"

"No," Haverly shook his head. "It . . . was our friend again, our lottery friend. One of the tickets was pinned to Dr. Kincaid's shirt, with a single word on it: III. PAIN. Kincaid marked one of the things the day before, just as a joke, one of the nurses says. '*Pain*' was his answer to the third question, she says . . . and it seems our sadistic friends set out to prove to Kincaid just how right he was! . . . I don't understand all this. There's something . . . diabolical about it all. As if we were being made sport of by . . . by . . . Here!" he growled "Look at these, and then tell me I'm crazy!"

THERE were two papers on the editor's desk. He picked them up and thrust them at the bewildered reporter. Morgan stared at them, with Roberts peering over his shoulder.

The first was one of the lottery tickets he had seen so often, though three additions had been made to the fiery-printed sentences on the little parchment sheet. They read now:

I. *LUCK* IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN SEEK TO HOLD BUT NONE MAY KEEP; WHICH SOME ARE BORN WITH, SOME KNOW NOT THAT THEY POSSESS, AND SOME NEVER TASTE; WHICH WEALTH CAN NOT BUY NOR TOIL EARN NOR WISDOM ATTAIN:

II. *KNOWLEDGE* IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN HAVE IN PART BUT NONE IN FULL; WHICH ALL MEN FLEE BUT NONE MAY ESCAPE; WHICH EVERY MAN IS HAPPIEST WITHOUT YET SEEKS DILIGENTLY TO ACQUIRE.

III. *PAIN* IS THAT WHICH ALL MEN STRIVE TO DESTROY YET THEREBY OFTEN CAUSE MORE; WHICH ALL MEN THINK GREAT WHEN THEIR OWN BUT SMALL WHEN ANOTHER'S; WHICH OVERPOWERS EVERY OTHER FORCE IN LIFE, EVEN FOR THOSE WHO KNOW IT BEST.

The other paper in Morgan's hand was a still-wet print of the photograph Roberts had taken of the pitchman that first day,

standing on the corner of 1st and Main behind his portable table on which the three neat stacks of papers lay.

Morgan gasped. Roberts cursed under his breath and rubbed his eyes. -

The little folding table showed clearly in the picture, with its piles of white papers. In the background was a store front, clear of detail even to the mortar and the bricks.

But in between, the camera had caught

no likeness, not even the faintest shadow, of the dark-eyed deep-voiced figure that everyone in "Blankville" seems to have seen as an entirely different personality—one elderly artist declaring that he wore a black robe and had the arrogant cruel face of the fallen Lucifer; and one little girl of six vowing that he had no face at all, but wore a masquerade costume, dark red, with scaly wings, spiked tail, and horns that jutted from the tight red hood.