
Weird Tales

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



... post-pig—and ante-pig. ...

The **D**isc Recorder

BY AUGUST DERLETH

“I CAN hardly let you have the house for more than a year,” said the agent. “Mr. Nason expects his wife back from

the Orient soon after, and he himself will be back by then. He’s letting the place furnished, with the exception of the single

closed room in which they've stored their more personal belongings."

At least a year, mused Lorin Harcourt. Solitude and relative isolation in a modern house on the edge of Brancaster.

"But can I be assured of that year?" he asked. "What about Mrs. Nason? Suppose she decides to return earlier?"

"She won't. She's a writer of travel books, you know. She's gone to Asia after material. I think he said she had an assignment, and couldn't very well finish it before then. In any case, he has the renting of the house, and she's not likely to interfere."

"And the closed room is that one on the ground floor?"

The agent nodded. "It's not as if you'd be shut out of it, or anything like that. It's locked, but you'll have the key to it with the others. Though there's nothing in it you'd like, I'm sure." In the face of Harcourt's indecision, he added, "I don't see why you're hesitating, Mr. Harcourt. The fact is, the place seems ideal for your purpose. You need to get away after a bit of trouble like yours, and the Nason house looks like the ideal place."

Nor did Harcourt himself quite understand why he hesitated. He had looked over the house, and it had indeed seemed the right place. He wanted to get away somewhere in order to

cut himself off from all familiar places. He was a retired teacher, who had recently suffered the sudden, accidental death of a son and his wife, and, being a sentimentalist, he preferred to remove himself for a while from the milieu associated with them. Moreover, he hoped to write a book himself, on the theory of education, and it seemed appropriate that he should do so in a house which had sheltered a published writer.

Just the same, however much the house suited him, there had been an air of tension about it, as if it were not restful, belying its appearance. Now, pressed by the agent, he shrugged and resigned himself to the inevitable; there was no other house which came close to satisfying him.

"Very well, I'll sign," he said.

He moved in within a week.

THE house was built on the side of a hill. Gardens and lawn sloped down toward a little pond at its foot, and the second story of the house opened out on to the ground farther up the slope. The room which Harcourt chose as his own was a gracious one on the second floor. He had no doubt it had been used by Bertha Nason, as well. It was a room which stretched all the way along the house, with a wide picture window facing the pond and the rolling country beyond,

and, on the other end, french doors opening out to the slope near the top of the hill.

In but a few days he was settled and in comfort. In a few more he had thoroughly explored the pleasant country and familiarized himself with Brancaster. In a fortnight he had begun to set down an outline for his projected book, the subject of which, though insufferably dull to the average reader, was nevertheless of singular interest to him, as he imagined it would certainly be to every other educator in the country.

Harcourt was a man of methodical habits. He set himself to work just three hours every day. He spent an additional hour hiking, two more hours puttering in the garden and grounds, and, apart from time for his frugal meals, he spent the balance of his day and evening reading. He slept just eight hours, neither more nor less, and very few sounds disturbed his sleep.

One night, however, during his fourth week at the Nason house, Harcourt's rest was troubled. He had partaken too heavily of oysters, and his stomach, unaccustomed to such rich food, protested. He went to bed with misgivings, which were adequately justified. He found it possible to close his eyes, to will himself to sleep, but not to go to sleep. After two hours of try-

ing, he got up and put on his dressing-gown, with the intention of walking out into the moonlit summer night until the edge of his distress should have worn off and he might return with more assurance of being able to sleep.

It was just as he was stepping from his bedroom that he heard sounds from below. He stopped in amazement and listened.

HE HEARD a peculiarly flat, nasal voice speaking. Unquestionably a human voice, he told himself. But try as he might, he could distinguish no word.

Harcourt was a woefully imaginative man. He conceived instantly that burglars had broken into the house and were systematically looting it. He perceived in the following instant that he might be held responsible for anything which was taken. Like many men, danger to life and limb held little terror for Harcourt; but an assault on his purse was another matter entirely.

Heedlessly, he plunged down the stairs, pausing only long enough to take up his stout walking stick. He turned on lights as he went and called out maledictions on the malefactors he expected to encounter.

He went from room to room and met no one.

He tried all the doors and

windows. There was no sign of illegal entry.

Harcourt was thus left with but one possibility. Somehow someone must have jimmied a window of the closed room and got in.

Forthwith he went back upstairs and got his keys.

Despite the dangers his imagination conjured up before his mind's eye, he did not hesitate to unlock the closed room. Since there had been nothing but a grave silence following his noisy descent of the stairs, he felt that he was justified in assuming that the miscreants, whoever they were, had made good their escape through the same window by which they had gained entry.

The room sprang to life under the glow of the lights.

Somehow, Harcourt had expected it to be packed full of things. Instead, he saw that it was only an ordinary sitting-room, with a lounge, now shrouded and covered against lint and dust, several chairs, a desk, and some other items of furniture. The door of a small closet stood open, revealing large hangers which evidently held many of Mrs. Nason's dresses, all carefully encased in stiff paper to prevent deterioration during her stay in the Orient. But what caught Harcourt's eye almost immediately was a disc recorder standing near the desk, together

with stacks of discs, some manifestly used, others clearly not yet touched, ready for anyone who might care to use the recorder.

In his excitement at this discovery, the further discovery that the windows of this room, too, bore no signs of tampering, was lost to Harcourt. He foresaw immediately how useful the disc recorder might be to him, as soon as he was ready to do the actual writing of his work on education. Moreover, the recorder was not the kind of property which could be harmed or worn down by his use of it; if Bertha Nason had known, furthermore, that another writer of even such modest pretensions as Harcourt were to occupy the house in her absence, he was firmly of the opinion that she would have expected and intended him to use the disc recorder.

All else immediately became secondary to this prize. Without further ado, Harcourt moved the recorder upstairs to his study. He came back down for the discs, taking some of each along.

Back in his room, he plugged the recorder in, selected a disc at random from the stack of used ones, and put it on. The clear, mellifluous tones of a woman's voice sprang to life in the room.

"The Mexican landscape and that of the American Southwest are in a great many respects similar. Heat dominates both—the

shimmering of heat waves, perhaps even small mirages, and that constant kind of heat haze which is so prevalent wherever there is more sunlight than rain, more heat than temperate weather. There is an aura of great age about both—sometimes caught in monolithic rocks, sometimes in ancient Indian structures . . .”

He shut off the machine, removed the disc, and dug deep down into the stack for another, which he put on in place of the first.

He settled back to listen to this, though presumably, since Mrs. Nason wrote travelogues, it, too, would concern some corner of the earth with which the lady hoped to make her readers familiar.

But no, he decided after a moment of listening, this was fiction.

“But what, I often wonder, am I to do with Baxter? He dogs my days, literally. I can hardly tell you, Elisa, what a bore he has become. I suppose divorce is the answer, but he would fight it tooth and nail, for which I am realist enough hardly to blame him, for he has never had it so decent and good as now. Yet, when all is said and done—and will it ever be, I wonder? He is sometimes morose and brooding, sometimes exhilarated and effervescent, one never knows from day to day; when all is said and

done, as I said, what must come of it all?”

He shut this off, too. He had not realized that Mrs. Nason wrote fiction, but evidently she did. As a matter of fact, until he had come to look at the house, Harcourt had never even dreamed of the existence of Bertha Nason. The names he knew were virtually all in properly academic fields.

This time he put on an unused disc, and prepared to speak.

His words rolled out ponderously. “The proper course for the educator of the future to follow lies midway between the so-called progressive thought and the traditional curriculum. Somewhere there is a middle course; it must be found, and if it must be found at the expense of the greatly augmented extra-curricular activities which prevail in our time, then away with such activities, for schools are not, after all, playgrounds . . .”

He played his words back, and listened with dreamy satisfaction.

What a happy discovery, indeed! Harcourt shut off the machine, and went back to bed filled with roseate dreams of all he would accomplish, beginning tomorrow. The finding of the disc recorder had absolutely cured his indigestion and left him with a dizzy, happy feeling of remarkable exhilaration.

He fell asleep at once, and

slept happily free of his previous apprehension about burglars.

But not for long. In scarcely no time at all, he was awakened again.

He heard a voice, and it sounded frighteningly nearby.

Harcourt lay motionless under his sheet, and beads of perspiration popped into existence on his brow. He did not dare to stir. The voice he heard seemed to come from within this room, for all that it had a peculiarly disembodied sound, as if it were actually rising far away and being projected into this room by an accomplished ventriloquist.

He listened.

"Baxter! Baxter!" So much was clear, perfectly clear. And in a woman's voice, too. The next sounds were utterly confounding. Gurgling, gasping sounds, strangled cries. And then, amazingly, a fragment of a song.

"Water, water everywhere, all I need to drink; what I want is clean, pure air, and not this murky drink! One live man on my dead breast—oh, ho ho! and a bank account, too!"

As if this were not enough, the voice immediately thereafter became professional and smooth. "The area of my present sojourn is remarkable for its moisture. London fogs have nothing on this muddy site—small wonder that the inhabitants wear fins. The temperature, however, seems

never to vary; it is always pleasantly cool, since, of course, the water circulates . . ."

With a strangled cry, Harcourt sprang up and snapped on the bed-lamp.

Complete and utter silence fell on him like a sandbag.

There was no one in the room. Harcourt knew intuitively there was no one in the house.

He tried to take hold of himself, though he was shaking badly. "What I have done," he said in a firm, clear voice, "is left that recorder going. Somehow I must have put back one of her records . . ."

So saying, he got up somewhat unsteadily, and made his way to the overhead light switch, turned on the brighter lights, and went to examine the disc recorder. It was just exactly as he had left it. The record in the machine was the one he himself had dictated, for it was only partially used.

HARCOURT did not know what to do next. Undeniably, the house was now as still as the night. He looked at his watch. Four o'clock in the morning. Already there was a faint glow in the east announcing the coming day. There was nothing for it but to make another tour of the house, just to be sure no one was concealed in it.

Armed this time with a stout poker, Harcourt examined the

house from ceiling to cellar. Nothing had been disturbed, with a single exception. There was a kind of dampness leading from the french doors across the floor of his own room, the study which he used both for work and sleep, as if someone with wet feet had walked there. Yet there was no water—only an almost indefinable moisture, and a not unpleasant smell of damp places.

There was only one conclusion left for Harcourt to assume; so he assumed it. "Someone is playing a trick on me," he told himself.

He went to bed once more and this time slept without interruption until eight.

HOWEVER, by an hour past his breakfast, he began to think again uneasily of possible burglars, and, weighing his own responsibilities in the matter, he walked into the village and found the sole minion of the law in Brancaster. To him he duly reported that there had been an attempt to break into the Nason house in the night. The constable listened gravely to all he had to say, but, as he spoke, Harcourt realized he could not say everything that had happened to him. Even to his own ears, what he was saying sounded like a nightmare or a fantasy of his own creation. He ended up lamely saying that he did not know

what his legal responsibilities were in case of burglary.

"Don't think you'd be responsible," said the constable laconically. "Needn't to worry about that." As an afterthought, he added, "Anything else happen, you let me know. Always anxious to serve. My duty, you know. Getting paid for it."

Thus reassured, Harcourt returned to his temporary domicile, and made preparations to dictate a disc or two.

He was in the midst of his first disc when he caught sight of a large pig rooting around in his garden. With a cry of dismay, he left off dictating and ran outside, shouting angrily at the pig, which had evidently strayed from a neighboring farm. The pig regarded him with insolent boredom, and waited until Harcourt had almost reached it, before it turned and ran squealing for a cornfield which adjoined the property on the south. Harcourt followed and found the break in the pasture fence through which the animal had come, and by means of which it had returned to its fellows. Harcourt blocked it, somewhat indignant that the fences were not kept up.

He returned to his dictation. The machine had kept on running in his absence; he had forgotten to turn it off. No matter, Harcourt decided, and went right

on dictating. He was in fine fettle. Before he stopped, he had dictated on less than four discs, and he had begun to feel that he had his book well in hand.

He struggled against his vanity and refrained from playing his discs back to himself.

When he went to bed that night, he did so with some proper apprehension, lest he be awakened again.

His sleep, however, was untroubled for several hours.

It was well past midnight when a voice startled him from sleep.

This time, he recognized the voice without the least trouble. It was his own. It was coming from the disc recorder.

"Several recent studies have made, in effect, violent attacks on the theories of progressive education, some of them going so far as to disparage the late John Dewey as the author of all aspects of progressive education. This gross libel has gone unchallenged in many places, and the late great leader in the field of education has thus been unjustly blamed for the so-called 'improvements' which have been forced upon educators by lesser minds unable to believe that the primary function of education is to educate, not to entertain."

How good it sounded! thought Harcourt, listening in the darkness of the room. Despite his

now subsiding alarm, he was very much pleased with the sound of his voice and the weight of his theories. His voice rolled on and on; had it been any other voice but his own, it would have put him to sleep.

Then suddenly it stopped.

Harcourt recognized the break. "The pig in the garden," he murmured.

THERE should have been a long silence from the machine. There was not. Instead there came once more a strange voice, a woman's voice, saying, "Please notify Carl Malam. Repeat: please notify Carl Malam."

Harcourt had hardly time to feel the prickling in his scalp before his own voice rolled out of the darkness at him once more.

As in the previous night, he leaped from bed, and turned up the light. He bounded over to the disc recorder and turned it off. It was true, he had left a record on the machine. It was the fourth of his dictation; this one which he had heard was the first. So, however incredible it might seem, someone had been in the room.

Now he felt again along his bare feet a moisture as of the previous night. Whoever had come had walked through dewey grass. Whoever had entered the house, he discovered after an-

other examination, must have had a key with which to lock the door behind him again, for once more nothing was disturbed in the tiniest degree.

When Harcourt went back to bed, he did so regretfully, convinced that the Nason house was proving too much for him. His first impression of the house had, after all, been correct. It was not restful—anything but. Before he slipped under the covers this time, he made sure of the disc recorder and disconnected it.



In an hour's time he knew how vain this had been.

Once again that disembodied woman's voice came huskily out of the darkness.

"My opportunities for travel

in this region are severely limited. As in the countries behind the Iron Curtain, there are such restrictions here as to amount to virtual imprisonment. If Mr. Malam were here, I am sure that he might effect my release . . ."

With a howl of anguish, Harcourt sprang from bed for the second time. What devilish trickery made him its victim? Under the light he examined the disc recorder minutely. It offered him no clue.

There was nothing about it to distinguish it from any other machine of its kind.

Deliberately now, he connected the machine again, turned it on, and played back the first of the discs he had made the previous day. He listened with tense anxiety to his own words coming back to him. Yes, he had spoken them. Indeed, the record recreated the moments gone by—now he had turned, now he had caught sight of the pig—his voice duly stopped.

He waited.

Punctually came that other voice. "Please notify Carl Malam. Repeat: please notify Carl Malam."

And then, after a further pause, his own voice, post-pig.

Under the light, one fact registered with crystal clarity. It had escaped him before. Carl Malam was the name of the phlegmatic constable to whom

he had spoken in Brancaster only the past day.

He did not go to bed again.

AS SOON as the sun was up, he made his way into Brancaster and got Malam out of bed.

"Now what?" asked Malam, not yet dressed. "More burglars?"

"I want you to come along with me," said Harcourt.

"Are you laying a charge?"

"I'm obeying an order—but don't ask me who gave it. I don't know. You may. We'll see."

The constable looked at him shrewdly, decided in his favor, and dressed to go along with Harcourt.

At the house, Harcourt put his first disc on the recorder.

"Now listen, please."

Malam did so, without comment. He was manifestly not happy with Harcourt's academic and somewhat pompous dictation. He brightened visibly when, in the middle of the record, Harcourt's voice ceased to sound.

"At that point I got up, leaving the machine running, and chased a pig out of the garden," said Harcourt. "Now listen."

Out came the adjuration to notify Carl Malam.

The effect on the constable was extraordinary. He jumped to his feet and faced Harcourt.

"That's Mrs. Nason's voice. I'd know her voice anywhere. How'd you manage that, Harcourt? She's in Bombay. Elisa Cobbett had a letter from her last week."

"Mr. Malam, no matter how ridiculous it may sound, I want to tell you every single thing that's happened to me in this house since I moved here . . ."

Thereupon Harcourt narrated his experiences in the house with the same meticulous care with which he was writing his work on education, and Malam listened.

Fortunately, the constable's imagination worked along somewhat different lines from Harcourt's. He lost no time.

By nightfall, with the help of fellow-villagers, he had grappled up from the lake bottom, where it had been buried in shallow water and weighted with rocks, the trunk containing the body of Bertha Nason. She had been strangled into unconsciousness and drowned. Baxter Nason, certain that he had disposed of his troublesome wife beyond discovery, with the consummate egotism so much a part of many murderers, was taken with ease.

Harcourt was so bewildered and upset by the whole affair that he abandoned his projected book; fortunately, this was no loss to education.