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The Dream Chair

By LEROY ERNEST FESS

FREE! By 11:15 o'clock tonight I shall be free.

Free! God, I wonder how many persons in the world can appreciate and sense the full significance of that one wonderful word. Not many, I assure you. In order to have the feeling of really being free, one has to be liberated from something. It follows that the more terrible and enslaving that something is, the greater will be the feeling of freedom when one has at last shaken it off completely.

Tonight, when the clock on the town hall chimes the quarter-hour after 11, I doubt if I shall be able to contain myself. I shall feel like a little boy on the last day of school in June. Only with the greatest difficulty shall I be able to restrain myself from dashing out into the city streets sans coat and hat and shouting to the multitudes as they pass: "Look at me! I am even as one of you now! Thank God, I am free! free! free!"

I said by 11:15 p. m. Easily it should be all over by that time. In fact, it should be earlier than that; yet, there comes a gnawing fear. What if something should slip up at the last moment? What if the governor should grant an eleventh-hour reprieve? God, it's unthinkable!

That I could not stand. My poor brain has been too near the breaking-point within the last few months to endure a single night more of that unnamable hell. I tell you I couldn't stand it. It would drive me to the madhouse!

It is now eleven minutes after 10. Just one hour more! In this brief time that remains, let me collect my scattered thoughts and put down on this paper in as orderly fashion as possible the events of the last few months. I have one reason only for doing this.

If anything should happen that Robert Nailer does not die in the electric chair at Hardaway prison a few minutes after 11 o'clock tonight, and I, in consequence of the state's failure to execute its sentence, am rendered a madman, I want the world to know the strange and unbelievable story of Hubert Simmons.

Ha! You will say that it is strange at least that my freedom and happiness should depend upon the death in the electric chair of another man. And you will say my story is unbelievable, too, when I admit to you that I have never seen or met the condemned man—never knew of his existence until I read the account of his brutal and hideous crime in the newspaper. Surely, tonight in his death cell at Hardaway prison he can not dream of my unhappy existence—unless—

But to begin at the beginning:

Now please understand that I am not given to either day or night dreaming. Until the night of September 26th last, I was an ordinary man, content to earn a modest living for my dear wife and our darling little ones, and with no criminal thoughts in the secret depths of my heart. Just to clinch the point that my weird experience was not

the result of an overwrought mind and a nervous temperament, let me say that I was not given to following the developments of the latest crime scandals that appear daily in our newspapers. No; what happened to me came out of an entirely clear sky.

I had retired early that fatal night of September 26th. When I closed my eyes in the first sweet sleep of night, I was a happy, normal man—so normal, in fact, that I did not realize my happiness or my freedom.

When I awoke in the middle of the night, it was to sleep no more. Large beads of cold sweat stood on my feverish brow; my hands were shaking; my lips were parched and dry. I had experienced a hideous nightmare. In my dream I had murdered an innocent little child!

The scene had dawned upon my dreaming consciousness with a sudden fury. I found myself in a forest clearing, with the wind whistling plaintively through giant trees and causing their gnarled limbs to sway like battling demons. A pale, cold moon shone down. Suddenly I became aware that I was not alone. I was leading by the hand a little boy of eight or nine years who sobbed continually: "Mister, mister, please take me back home!"

His words maddened me. I seized him by the throat with my two bare hands. I felt my fingers sink into the soft, yielding flesh. With fiendish glee I pressed harder and harder until I saw the little fellow's eyes bulge from their sockets, his tongue protrude from his mouth and become swollen and his complexion change from a pale white to a livid purple.

Then the stark horror of my brutal deed overcame me. I hurled the dead body from me. As I did so, one of my thumbs that had been encircling the boy's neck caught in a chain he was wearing and tore off a small signet locket. It fell with a dull clang on the hard, frozen

ground. In the moonlight I could see the initials plainly. They were "S. J."

I was repeating those letters when I awoke in my own bed, my wife lying beside me and breathing evenly and our little ones asleep in their cradles in an adjoining room. All that day at the office the horror of that awful nightmare haunted me. It had been too vivid, too real, too horrible for an ordinary lobster or Welsh rabbit nightmare that one shakes off with the coming of dawn.

Somehow I dreaded the coming out of the afternoon newspapers. My worst fears were confirmed when I saw the newsboys rushing out with the latest editions and shouting as they ran: "Wuxtra! Wuxtra! All about the latest murder!" With feverish haste I ran to the nearest corner and bought a copy.

There it was under the scare headlines—the story of my nightmare! Every detail as to the finding of the poor little body where I had hurled it—even the telltale locket with the initials "S. J." which was discovered near the scene of the crime. The time given by the medical examiner as the approximate hour of the child's death also checked up with the time of my dream.

UPON arriving home that night I decided to make no mention to my wife of the strange coincidence. For that was all it was, nothing more, I argued. The scene of the murder was more than two thousand miles from the city in which I lived. I could not possibly have committed it between the time when I went to sleep and when I awoke, even if I had employed the fastest airplane known to science.

That night I had another dream. Again I was the murderer. I was fleeing and I sensed the fear of a hunted animal. The minions of the law were at my very heels. Every night for weeks following I played

the role of murderer-at-large, and every night I tramped through streets of unknown cities.

Finally my nocturnal travels took me to familiar places. One big city, particularly, I was able to recognize and name from landmarks I had noticed when there in person on a visit months before. From that time on I began to look forward with—shall I say pleasure?—to my nightly nightmares. One super-thought dominated my waking life: I wanted this murderer apprehended and put to death, for then I knew I should be free.

If only I could assist the police in locating the criminal! This was by no means easy, though. For in my dreams I became the hunted criminal only for split seconds during that one's night-life. Sometimes I caught him sleeping and was forced to dream his troubled and haunting dreams—dreams within a dream!

Then one night early in October my opportunity came. I became the murderer as he was walking out the side door of a squalid lodging-house of Buffalo's tenement section. Perhaps, in eluding the police dragnet laid for him in all the cities of the country, he had just changed his former place of abode and taken new quarters. At least he—or should I say I?—turned full around upon reaching the street and scrutinized the number on the building as if wishing to remember it. I remembered my lips repeating, "3215 Swan Street."

That was the clue I had been waiting for. Early the next morning I disguised myself, took a street car to a remote section of the city, and then summoned by telephone a telegraph messenger boy. I hastily scribbled a telegram and handed it to the lad with a liberal tip.

The message was addressed to the chief of detectives at Buffalo. It informed him that the brutal murderer of eight-year-old Sammy Jos-

lyn was in hiding at 3215 Swan Street in his city. My message was not signed.

In the following day's papers I read the details of Nailer's capture in Buffalo. The Swan Street rooming-house had been surrounded by police, acting on the anonymous tip that came by wire from a distant city. Nailer had been surprised while shaving in the bathroom, and taken into custody without a struggle.

That night, for a few agonized moments of a nightmare, I paced the narrow confines of a prison cell!

It would be repetition here to narrate what followed. That, I trust, is familiar to everyone: Nailer's sensational confession and his subsequent trial and conviction. I might add, though, that nightly for the past month my soul, for brief fractions of a moment, has been confined in the death-house at Hardaway and destined in Nailer's body to pace up and down the caged room—in the very shadow of the electric chair.

God, but don't I know the feelings of a condemned man! That awful monotony of waiting for the day! The mock courtesy of the guards who watch you, awake and sleeping, as a cat watches a canary—lest you take your own life and rob the state of its just dues! The dismal efforts at bravado and cheeriness of other condemned prisoners who keep kidding each other with: "It won't be long now." That deathlike stillness that falls over the prison like a pall whenever one of the condemned takes that last walk out through the little green door at the side! The dull thump that the other prisoners in the death-house hear and the flickering of the electric light in the corridor they see when the lethal current is turned on!

Yes, I know! I have been there. Last night I was Nailer pacing his cell. Six steps up, then turn, and six

steps back. Then do it all over again. Six up, six back; six up, six back! Every once in a while I would pause to look down the corridor at the little green door at the end. "It won't be long now!" I said to a praying negro who occupied the cell next to mine on the right—and I tried to laugh. Laugh? It was a sorry attempt.

When I awoke in my bed I was laughing like an insane man and my hands were covering my face, hiding the vision of the little green door at the end of the hall!

I HAVE just looked at my watch. It is now two minutes after 11 and I must hurry. Nailor is enjoying his last few minutes on earth. Did I say enjoying? Ha! ha! In a few more minutes they'll be cutting Nailor in pieces on the autopsy table, and I shall be a free man. Dead men tell no tales; neither do dead men do anything to dream about. Just a big blackness without dreams, that's what death is. With Nailor dead I shan't dream any more of his hideous nightmares.

It is now five minutes after 11. It surely won't be long now. They're probably dressing him in the black suit—the one, you know, with the slit in the right pants-leg below the knee! And I bet two cents and a cookie that funny little priest with his graveyard face and black prayer-book is in the cell too, jabbering off some ritual—words that Nailor doesn't hear.

Ah, seven minutes after 11. I am feeling drowsy. But there isn't much more to tell or much longer to wait. . . .

By now like as not the two prison guards, dressed in their blackest and best, are knocking on Nailor's door. "Come right in, gentlemen, and take a chair! Ha! Ha!"

They're leading Nailor through his cell door! The wedding procession is on! There they go—tramp, tramp,

tramp! Down the long corridor to the little green door at the end. Here comes the bride! Da, dum, da, da! Why doesn't someone play the wedding march from *Lohengrin*? I want to know.

The chair! The chair! That's what Nailor sees when that little green door opens. Kind of makes you shake a little bit in the knees, eh, Nailor? Now maybe you'll haunt my dreams again and make me a murderer by night, eh? (Gad, but I'm getting sleepy—I can hardly hold my eyes open. But it "won't be long now," as the boys in the death cells say.)

They're strapping him in the chair! That cold, steel electrode about the right leg calf doesn't feel so good, eh, boy? And that black cap that shuts off the light of this world. All done in a few seconds, eh, Nailor? These execution boys sure do know their ropes—not a moment wasted. Each one at his job and that job done neatly and with dispatch.

How'd you like to get up and give your seat to a lady, Nailor? Ha! ha! ha! You can't blame me for having my little joke, for in a minute or two now I shall be free! free! free! (I only hope I can stay awake for a minute or two more. Then it'll be all over.)

That funny—little—priest—he is standing—before—the—chair. (Gad, can I ever stay awake?) The executioner's hand is on the death switch and he is waiting—waiting. The—funny—little—priest—begins a prayer:

"Our—Father—who art—in . . ."

• • • • •
HERE the manuscript ended abruptly in the middle of a sentence.

All the newspapers the following day carried under front-page streamers the detailed story of how the

arch-fiend and murderer, Robert Nixon, met his death in the electric chair at Hardaway prison at 11:13 the night before. It is doubted if any of the morbidly curious who devoured the account of the execution in the *Evening Star* noticed the following little item down at the bottom of an inside page:

Hubert Simmons, 42 years old, of 47 Glendale Avenue, this city, was found dead in the library of his home shortly before midnight last night when his wife, Sarah Simmons, returned from a visit to some neighbors.

Medical Examiner Lancer, who investigated the case, declared that death apparently had been caused by heart failure, though he admitted being puzzled over the appearance of slight scorchings of the flesh on the crown of the dead man's head and on his right leg below the knee. He will perform an autopsy on the body before issuing a death certificate.

A watch in Simmons' pocket was broken when his body crumpled from the chair on which he had been sitting before his library table and fell to the floor. The hands showed the mechanism had stopped at 11:13 o'clock, which probably marks the time of Simmons' demise. Several pages of a manuscript Simmons had been writing apparently up to the moment of his death were taken by the medical examiner.

In case the autopsy on Simmons' body indicates he met his death by any other than natural causes, Dr. Lancer said he would attempt to decipher the notes to see if they would throw any light on the case.

Simmons had been in ill health for the last three months, according to his wife. He did not rest well at night, and often had fits of nervousness that kept him awake for hours, all of which would indicate he died of natural causes, according to Dr. Lancer. Besides his wife, Sarah, the deceased leaves two small children, Alice, eight, and John, seven. Funeral services will be held at the home Wednesday afternoon at 2 o'clock.
