

We have with us:—

AUGUST DERLETH We can tell you the title and issue of August Derleth's first story in WEIRD TALES, but we can't tell you how many tales of his we have printed between that date and the story in this issue. A goodly lot and a lot of good ones.

Derleth writes us on Arkham House paper—Arkham House being his own publishing concern among many, many other activities.

"On April 1, 1926 my first story appeared in WEIRD TALES. It was a shocker entitled 'Bat's Belfry,' clearly deriving from Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'; it had been written at 14, while I was recuperating at my grandmother's house from a case of mumps—a purely fortuitous circumstance which does not seem to have affected the story in any way; but was not sold until sometime later. It was actually the 18th story I had written, and 22 more were written before 'Bat's Belfry' was sold to WEIRD TALES in Sept., 1925. That was the beginning; the end does not seem to be in sight."

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

. . . he even had to look the other way to kill a fly.



THE EBONY STICK

BY AUGUST DERLETH

MY UNCLE JACK was always a devil-may-care sort of fellow, debonair, handsome, with a marked aversion to work. All his nieces and nephews loved him. All his own generation, naturally, disapproved of him. On two counts—because he did not work but managed to live by his wits, and because they envied

him his success at this, even though he lived from hand to mouth, so to speak, I always suspected that the only reason he kept his trim figure was that he

Heading by Virgil Finlay

never had enough money to gorge himself with the food and drink he loved. And the generation before his frowned on him heartily, with the exception of his mother, my grandmother, who was always slightly foolish about her children.

So it came as a distinct surprise to all of us when Aunt Maud died and left everything to Uncle Jack in a will discovered in a book in her library, which, by an earlier will, she had left to Uncle Jack, "to improve his mind and teach him that there is a great virtue and a lasting balm in labor."

We all guessed that Great-Aunt Maud, who had previously impressed us as formidably serious, had intended things to work out this way—if Uncle Jack had not begun to read the books he had inherited, he would never have found the last will and testament of Great-Aunt Maud. Still and all, it was a little strange that things should have happened this way; one would have thought she, more than most of us, would have wanted Uncle Jack to work a little harder for his windfall. And it was markedly unkind of Great-Aunt Maud to forget all the rest of us, especially Myra, who had been her favorite, and who was sure to grow up as helpless as she was beautiful, for having been petted

so, and because her widowed mother, my Aunt Hester, never seemed to be able to hang on to any money whatsoever.

But that was the way things worked out, and that was the way we expected they would stay. But someone in the family had other ideas, as we found out soon enough. As soon, that is, as we found ourselves benefitted by Uncle Jack's good fortune, for one weekend he invited us all to what had formerly been Great-Aunt Maud's large and imposing old house, which sat in the middle of a city block, protected from the curious by a wall of trees, and a stone wall all the way around it, so that going there was just like going out of the city into the woods. The only sounds you heard there were the clanging of the street-cars outside, and an occasional car whizzing past the gate.

I WAS twelve at that time. I remember that my mother and my father did not care very much to go, they had been so upset by Uncle Jack's good luck, but our disappointment was so pronounced in the face of their hesitation, that they decided to accept his invitation.

"I suppose we may as well make the best of it," said mother.

"He's got some reason for inviting us," said father.

"What about Hester and Myra?"

"Their turn will come."

But their turn had already come. They were at Uncle Jack's house when we got there, and Aunt Hester flew into my mother's arms, embraced her, kissed her, and, when no one was looking, leaned to my mother's ear and said theatrically, "Something's wrong with Jack!"

And something was. He who had always been so debonair, was now distinctly preoccupied. He smiled for all of us, he made jokes—but it was not quite the same; the twinkle was not right in his eyes, his smile was insincere, and we all noticed it. When we children had a conference after dinner in the large play-room which was part of the house, we examined the subject critically.

"Do you know what I think?" said Cousin Myra. "Uncle Jack's afraid of something."

"Hoh! Of what?" demanded my sister. "He's got all Aunt Maud's money. What's he got to be afraid of?"

"Perhaps he thinks we'll get some of it," said my younger brother, Harry.

"You know what I think," pursued Myra with dream abstraction. "I think he's planning to poison us all. Then his money will be safe."

"Not Uncle Jack," said my sister. "He wouldn't hurt a soul." She scoffed. "Why, he even has to look the other way when he kills a fly."

We laughed at this suggestion to scorn.

AFTERWARD, we made a tour of the house, to see whether Uncle Jack had changed anything. If so, we could not find it. We thought certainly he would have taken down or turned to the wall that hideous portrait of Great-Aunt Maud which was in the living-room. It showed her clad in her usual color, which was black, wearing a black velvet dress with white collar and cuffs, with one claw-like hand resting on her ebony stick with the ivory knob for a handle, and her dark, beady eyes looking out into space, and her face just as if set to say, the way she always did, "Never be afraid to work, Children. Work sweetens living and earns its due reward on earth and in heaven." But he had not touched it; there it still was, dark, grave, forbidding, a constant reminder that, by her whim in favor of Uncle Jack, we would have no choice but to work and work and wait for that sweetening and that reward of which she had spoken so often, and with such affirmation that we never had a doubt they were to come.

Had they not, after all, come to Uncle Jack, even without work?

That evening at dinner we watched Uncle Jack closely. Every little while he was like his old self. He was a great tease.

He would kid Aunt Hester and poke jokes at my father. He seldom troubled my mother, who had as ready a tongue as he, and struck back fast. Aunt Hester was just helpless before his wit, and my father was too easily irritated. But when he was not his old self, he was a complete stranger; he seemed to forget all of us, and, if he had invited his sister and widowed sister-in-law and their families to that old house in order to impart some information to them, he gave not the slightest sign of it. He sat with a kind of strained expression on his face, as if he were listening for something none of us said.

After dinner, we children discussed him.

"You know what I think," said Cousin Myra again. "Uncle Jack's afraid of something."

"You said that before," accused my sister.

"I know, Jenny. I still think so."

"Why?"

"The way he sat at the table, listening."

"We didn't say anything."

I commanded my sister to pay attention to our cousin, since Myra was my personal favorite.

"He wasn't listening to us. He scarcely heard what mama or Uncle Herbert said," pursued Myra. "He was listening for something else."

We debated this proposition back and forth for a long time, and could not reach any agreement. In their own way, our parents were probably concerning themselves with a similar problem, because when we rejoined them, my mother was saying in a firm, if somewhat scornful voice, "It's perfectly plain that it's all your imagination, Jack. I've heard nothing at all since I set foot in this house."

"Wait," said Uncle Jack.

Aunt Hester, catching sight of us, said nervously, "Hush, the children."

"Are you telling fairy tales?" asked Harry naively.

"Ha! Fairy tales. That's a good one," said my father, laughing loudly. "Just what we were doing, too! That boy has the makings of a smart man."

AFTER midnight, my cousin Myra slipped into the room where Harry and I were sleeping. She shook me awake.

"Charles, listen," she whispered.

I sat up and listened.

"Do you hear it, Charles?" she asked.

I heard something, far away.

"What is it" I asked.

"Listen," she urged again.

It was a tapping sound. It came with marked regularity.

Tap, tap, tap. . . .

I woke Harry up, and when I had convinced him no goblins were about to devour him, told him to listen, too.

"Do you hear anything, Harry?" pressed Myra.

"Tap, tap, tap," said Harry earnestly, looking from one to the other of us.

We slipped out and into Myra's room, to awaken my sister.

She listened, too, for a moment. Then she said, "I know what that is. That's Aunt Maud's cane."

"Aunt Maud's dead," whispered Myra.

"Don't be silly," countered my sister in a superior voice. "Somebody's using her ebony stick, that's what."

"Who?" demanded Myra.

"We'll find out." My sister got out of bed, cautioned Harry not to let a peep out of him, and led the way into the hall.

Stealthily, we made our way along the hall in the direction of the sound. Uncle Jack's house was T-shaped. We were in the right wing of the T, and the

sound seemed to be coming from the forend of the back wing. So we crept along in the dark in our nightgowns until we came to the hall that yawned blackly away from our wing. The tapping sound was plain and unmistakable. It came from up ahead in that blackness.

Harry began to whimper uneasily.

"You hush up," said our sister fiercely.

Being far more frightened of the immediate danger presented by our sister, Harry was obediently silent. Just to be on the safe side, he held on to my nightgown, even though I pushed out in front. I could hardly let my sister lead the way with Myra there.

We went on down the hall. The *tap, tap, tap* was right ahead.

At the end of the hall, now showing more clearly, was a double-window through which the moonlight shone. And, as we came closer and closer to it, we could see Great-Aunt Maud's ebony stick. It was moving up and down against the floor, making the sound we all heard. We could not see who was using it, only a dark shadow in the darkness of the hall. I would have pressed even farther forward, but at that point my brother planted his feet against the floor

and pulled back on my nightgown. Both Myra and my sister had stopped, too, unwilling to go farther.

The stick danced up and down there in the moonlit darkness of the hall. It was somewhere near Uncle Jack's room, I figured out.

Myra put her mouth to my ear and whispered. "Who is it?"

"Don't know," I whispered back.

At that moment a door opened up ahead, and Uncle Jack stepped out into the hall. He was carrying a large flashlight, and by its reflected light we could see how wild Uncle Jack's face was. We could see something else, too—there was nobody holding on to that ebony stick.

Even before we could take that in, something wonderfully strange happened. Whoever was handling that ebony stick, and however it was being done, it suddenly jumped up and began to beat Uncle Jack about the head and shoulders while he tried in vain to catch hold of it, muttering and cursing under his breath. But he couldn't do it; he dropped his flashlight, covered his face with his hands, and fell back into his room, closing the door.

COUSIN MYRA and my sister backed away and ran. Harry let go of my nightgown,

and fled, whimpering, after them. The last thing I saw was that ebony stick, still making its *tap, tap* in the moonlit hall. Then I ran after them.

We all gathered in the room where my sister and Myra slept.

"I told you he was afraid of something," said Myra accusingly. "So now you see what it is. It's Aunt Maud's ebony stick."

"That's silly," said my sister scornfully. "It's not the stick, it's who's holding it, that's what."

"Who?" demanded Myra.

My sister did not answer.

"Who?" demanded Myra again.

"I couldn't see," said my sister.

"Ha!" exclaimed Myra scornfully. "I ask you who, and you say. . . ."

Harry interrupted. "Aunt Maud," he said in a small voice.

"Aunt Maud's dead," said my sister firmly.

"Aunt Maud," said Harry again. "I saw her."

"Aunt Maud's dead," repeated my sister.

"She's not."

"She is! You hush up, Harry Sanderson, or I'll paddle you."

Harry went around and stood behind me. "Aunt Maud," he said again in a whisper so low that my sister could safely pretend not to have heard it.

IN THE morning we were all going down for breakfast when we halted outside the large kitchen because we heard Uncle Jack's voice raised angrily.

"I tell you I chopped up that damned stick and burned it, do you hear? I did it myself. I didn't trust anybody else to do it. But you heard it last night, didn't you?"

"I heard a sound that might have been made by a cane," said my mother calmly. "But I don't know what it was, and I'm not guessing."

"Oh, Jack, what a story!" said Aunt Hester, and giggled.

"How did I get these, then?"

"Probably been drinking in your room and fell out of bed or ran into the door," said my father.

"Damn it, Herb. . . ."

"All right," said my father in a grave voice, "Let's assume it's so. Then tell me why. What's on your conscience, Jack?"

Uncle Jack didn't say another word.

So we marched into the kitchen, after agreeing not to say anything to anybody. Uncle Jack's head and face showed angry blue bruises. That ebony stick had hit him hard. We knew, because we had seen it. We looked from one to another with that sly assurance children have when they know something their parents do not.

But not one of us said anything because we were determined to corner Uncle Jack.

And corner him we did.

We caught up with him in the old coach house out in back. Even there he appeared to be listening, and of course, we knew he was listening for the *tap, tap, tap* of Great-Aunt Maud's ebony stick.

"Do you hear it all the way out here?" Myra asked.

He just looked at her, as if he could not believe what she had said.

"We know," I said. "It's Great-Aunt Maud's ebony stick. What have you done, Uncle Jack?"

Uncle Jack's bruised face got as white as a piece of paper. His bruises and his mustache stood out dark against that whiteness.

"You kids don't know what you're talking about," he said gruffly.

"Oh, yes, we do," said Harry. "We saw you get it last night."

"You saw the stick?" demanded Uncle Jack, turning on him.

Harry nodded. "And Aunt Maud," he added.

Uncle Jack swallowed hard. He hardly heard my sister's indignant denial of Harry's words.

"It was so dark we couldn't see anything except the cane in the moonlight."

Uncle Jack got up and walked away.

"I told you, I told you," chanted Myra. "Uncle Jack's afraid."

We children held a pow-wow and promised one another that the first one who heard the ebony stick again would immediately hunt up all the others and tell them. After that we separated and each of us went his own way.

In that manner we found out that the ebony stick seemed to follow Uncle Jack around. It was strange, but though we could hear it, none of us could catch a glimpse of it. And it could not always be heard, either. Sometimes it was plain, then again there wasn't any sound at all. Sometimes we couldn't hear it for an hour or more; then, of a sudden, it was there, and Uncle Jack would jump and turn around and not be able to see anything any more than we could.

TWO things happened that day, apart from the *tap, tap* of the ebony stick.

The first was Harry's find. Harry had gone to rummage about outside. He was a great one to get himself lost in the woods. That afternoon he found a place where a lot of rubbish had been burned. When he came back he had with him a charred white thing that couldn't have

been anything but an ivory handle just like that on Great-Aunt Maud's ebony stick. It puzzled us all a lot.

The second was our parents talking.

Aunt Hester said, "I think it was a wonderfully generous gesture on Jack's part to offer to divide the estate with us in equal parts."

My father said, "There's something behind it."

My mother said, "We'll wait and see what happens."

That night it was Harry who heard the ebony stick first. He pinched me and whispered, frightened, "It's Aunt Maud. She's going up to whip Uncle Jack again."

I woke the others. We took a vote on following or not. Harry voted against it, but because he was too scared to stay alone, he went along anyway, hanging back as much as he could.

Once more we followed the sound of that cane along the hall.

That night it was different. Instead of moonlight, there was a storm outside, and every little while the lightning flashed and flared at the windows and into the hall. It was scary, but the four of us stuck together. I think each one of us, except Harry, was afraid to admit he was scared; so we all went on, follow-

ing that ebony stick to Uncle Jack's room, where it stood tapping and dancing.

I tried as hard as I could to see who was doing it. Every time the lightning flared I looked close, but I couldn't make out anyone definite. Maybe there was someone leaning there over the stick, just the way Harry said.

"It's Aunt Maud," he kept whispering.

"You hush up," my sister said inevitably.

Maybe there was no one there, only that couldn't have been, because otherwise the cane couldn't have moved like that. So there was someone or something, and we weren't smart enough to figure it out.

This time the door of Uncle Jack's room stayed closed.

But that didn't seem to make any difference, for suddenly the ebony stick wasn't there at all, and at the same time we could hear Uncle Jack shouting in his room, and then the door flew open, and he came stumbling out in his pajamas, trying to protect himself, and the stick came *after him*, though none of us had seen the door open to let it in.

Then, in a flash of lightning, he looked straight at us.

I don't know who he thought we were, but just then he fell down to his knees, with his hands over his face, and he shouted

out, "Let me alone! Go back where you belong! I'll do anything—I'll give it back, all of it."

We ran like everything.

"He saw us," said Myra, once we were safely together in our room.

Harry shook his head.

"I don't think he could make us out," I said.

Harry whispered hoarsely, "It was Aunt Maud. I saw her. Oh, but she was mad at Uncle Jack!"

My sister shook him. "Aunt Maud's dead, do you hear?"

"She isn't!"

"She is!" she said so fiercely that Harry was cowed.

"Let him alone," I said.

"Let's not quarrel, please," said Myra.

"What shall we do?" asked my sister.

"Nothing," I said.

"I said all along Uncle Jack was afraid of something."

"He said he'd give it back," said my sister thoughtfully. "He must have stolen something."

"Oh, no!" cried Myra. "Not Uncle Jack! He's got everything. He's got all the money he wants."

"That's true," admitted my sister.

Harry had noticed something the girls had not seen. After we were alone, he whispered it to me.

"Charles, you could see the window-sill right through that cane."

Coming to think of it, you could.

We had agreed to scout the kitchen next morning, the last day of our stay with Uncle Jack, so that we would not miss anything.

Nor did we.

As soon as Harry let us know that Uncle Jack had gone down, we slipped down and stood outside the kitchen to listen to what went on inside.

"And how are you getting on in your affair with Maud's stick?" my father greeted Uncle Jack.

"I asked you all down here for one purpose," answered Uncle Jack soberly. "I wanted to offer you a share of what Aunt Maud left."

"You did, and I think it was a wonderful thing of you, Jack," said Aunt Hester.

"Thank you. But apparently it was not enough for Aunt Maud."

"How you talk!" That was Aunt Hester again; I could see her giggling.

"I guess Aunt Maud means you to have it all," Uncle Jack continued.

"Except the library," said my mother. "I thought so."

"Oh, no, Jack!" cried Aunt Hester.

"All right, let's stop pretending," said Uncle Jack. "It's true. I forged that will. It was a masterpiece. No one ever suspected. But I haven't had a moment's rest since then. That damned cane even follows me to hotels and resorts. You might have guessed. I thought I could appease her by sharing all this with you—but no, she'll have her way."

"We must avoid scandal," said my mother immediately.

"We'll let the will stand," said my father. "But you'll just deed over the property, and we'll make the proper division. You might have known Maud would resent being foiled."

We all felt sorry for Uncle Jack, no matter what a rascal he had been.

But in the end, Great-Aunt Maud was foiled, after all. Uncle Jack took after Aunt Hester and they were married. They came at last to live in Great-Aunt Maud's house. Neither of them ever saw or heard that ebony stick again, though Cousin Myra said that Uncle Jack kept on listening for a long while after they had returned to the house. This time the ebony stick stayed burned.
