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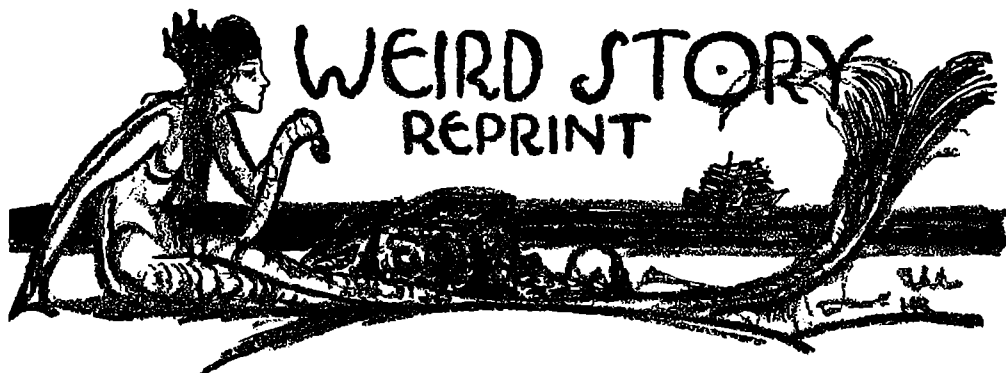
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The Floor Above*

By M. HUMPHREYS

SEPTEMBER 17, 1922.—I sat down to breakfast this morning with a good appetite. The heat seemed over, and a cool wind blew in from my garden, where chrysanthemums were already budding. The sunshine streamed into the room and fell pleasantly on Mrs. O'Brien's broad face as she brought in the eggs and coffee. For a supposedly lonely old bachelor the world seemed to me a pretty good place. I was buttering my third set of waffles when the housekeeper again appeared, this time with the mail.

I glanced carelessly at the three or four letters beside my plate. One of them bore a strangely familiar handwriting. I gazed at it a minute, then seized it with a beating heart. Tears almost came into my eyes. There was no doubt about it—it was Arthur Barker's handwriting! Shaky and changed, to be sure, but ten years have passed since I have seen Arthur, or, rather, since his mysterious disappearance.

For ten years I have not had a word from him. His people know no more than I what has become of him, and long ago we gave him up for dead. He van-

ished without leaving a trace behind him. It seemed to me, too, that with him vanished the last shreds of my youth. For Arthur was my dearest friend in that happy time. We were boon companions, and many a mad prank we played together.

And now, after ten years of silence, Arthur was writing to me!

The envelope was postmarked Baltimore. Almost reluctantly—for I feared what it might contain—I passed my finger under the flap and opened it. It held a single sheet of paper torn from a pad. But it was Arthur's writing:

"Dear Tom:

"Old man, can you run down to see me for a few days? I'm afraid I'm in a bad way.

"Arthur."

Scrawled across the bottom was the address, 536 N. Marathon Street.

I have often visited Baltimore, but I can not recall a street of that name.

Of course I shall go. . . . But what a strange letter after ten years! There is something almost uncanny about it.

* From WEIRD TALES for May, 1923.

I shall go tomorrow evening. I can not possibly get off before then.

SEPTEMBER 18—I am leaving tonight. Mrs. O'Brien has packed my two suitcases, and everything is in readiness for my departure. Ten minutes ago I handed her the keys and she went off tearfully. She had been sniffing all day and I have been perplexed, for a curious thing occurred this morning.

It was about Arthur's letter. Yesterday, when I had finished reading it, I took it to my desk and placed it in a small compartment together with other personal papers. I remember distinctly that it was on top, with a lavender card from my sister directly underneath. This morning I went to get it. It was gone.

There was the lavender card exactly where I had seen it, but Arthur's letter had completely disappeared. I turned everything upside down, then called Mrs. O'Brien and we both searched, but in vain. Mrs. O'Brien, in spite of all I could say, took it upon herself to feel that I suspected her. . . . But what could have become of it? Fortunately I remember the address.

SEPTEMBER 19—I have arrived. I have seen Arthur. Even now he is in the next room and I am supposed to be preparing for bed. But something tells me I shall not sleep a wink this night. I am strangely wrought up, though there is not the shadow of an excuse for my excitement. I should be rejoicing to have found my friend again. And yet—

I reached Baltimore this morning at eleven o'clock. The day was warm and beautiful, and I loitered outside the station a few minutes before calling a taxi. The driver seemed well acquainted with

the street I gave him, and we rolled off across the bridge.

As I drew near my destination, I began to feel anxious and afraid. But the ride lasted longer than I expected—Marathon Street seemed to be located in the suburbs of the city. At last we turned into a dusty street, paved only in patches and lined with linden and aspen trees. The fallen leaves crunched beneath the tires. The September sun beat down with a white intensity. The taxi drew up before a house in the middle of a block that boasted not more than six dwellings. On each side of the house was a vacant lot, and it was set far back at the end of a long narrow yard crowded with trees.

I paid the driver, opened the gate and went in. The trees were so thick that not until I was half-way up the path did I get a good view of the house. It was three stories high, built of brick, in fairly good repair, but lonely and deserted-looking. The blinds were closed in all of the windows with the exception of two, one on the first, one on the second floor. Not a sign of life anywhere, not a cat nor a milk-bottle to break the monotony of the leaves that carpeted the porch.

But, overcoming my feeling of uneasiness, I resolutely set my suitcases on the porch, caught at the old-fashioned bell, and gave an energetic jerk. A startling peal jangled through the silence. I waited, but there was no answer.

After a minute I rang again. Then from the interior I heard a queer dragging sound, as if some one was coming slowly down the hall. The knob was turned and the door opened. I saw before me an old woman, wrinkled, withered, and filmy-eyed, who leaned on a crutch.

"Does Mr. Barker live here?" I asked.

She nodded, staring at me in a curious way, but made no move to invite me in.

"Well, I've come to see him," I said.

"I'm a friend of his. He sent for me."

At that she drew slightly aside.

"He's upstairs," she said in a cracked voice that was little more than a whisper. "I can't show you up. Hain't been up a stair now in ten years."

"That's all right," I replied, and, seizing my suitcases, I strode down the long hall.

"At the head of the steps," came the whispering voice behind me. "The door at the end of the hall."

I climbed the cold dark stairway, passed along the short hall at the top, and stood before a closed door. I knocked.

"Come in." It was Arthur's voice, and yet—not his.

I OPENED the door and saw Arthur sitting on a couch, his shoulders hunched over, his eyes raised to mine.

After all, ten years had not changed him so much. As I remembered him, he was of medium height, inclined to be stout, and ruddy-faced, with keen gray eyes. He was still stout, but had lost his color and his eyes had dulled.

"And where have you been all this time?" I demanded, when the first greetings were over.

"Here," he answered.

"In this house?"

"Yes."

"But why didn't you let us hear from you?"

He seemed to be making an effort to speak.

"What did it matter? I didn't suppose any one cared."

Perhaps it was my imagination, but I could not get rid of the thought that Arthur's pale eyes, fixed tenaciously upon my face, were trying to tell me something, something quite different from what his lips said.

I felt chilled. Although the blinds were

open, the room was almost darkened by the branches of the trees that pressed against the window. Arthur had not given me his hand, had seemed troubled to know how to make me welcome. Yet of one thing I was certain: He needed me and he wanted me to know he needed me.

As I took a chair I glanced about the room. It was a typical lodging-house room, medium-sized, with flowered wallpaper, worn matting, nondescript rugs, a wash-stand in one corner, a chiffonier in another, a table in the center, two or three chairs, and the couch which evidently served Arthur as a bed. But it was cold, strangely cold for such a warm day.

Arthur's eyes had wandered uneasily to my suitcases. He made an effort to drag himself to his feet.

"Your room is back here," he said, with a motion of his thumb.

"No, wait," I protested. "Let's talk about yourself first. What's wrong?"

"I've been sick."

"Haven't you a doctor? If not, I'll get one."

At this he started up with the first sign of animation he had shown.

"No, Tom, don't do it. Doctors can't help me now. Besides, I hate them. I'm afraid of them."

His voice trailed away, and I took pity on his agitation. I decided to let the question of doctors drop for the moment.

"As you say," I assented carelessly.

Without more ado, I followed him into my room, which adjoined his and was furnished in much the same fashion. But there were two windows, one on each side, looking out on the vacant lots. Consequently there was more light, for which I was thankful. In a far corner I noticed a door, heavily bolted.

"There's one more room," said Arthur,

as I deposited my belongings, "one that you'll like. But we'll have to go through the bathroom."

Groping our way through the musty bathroom, in which a tiny jet of gas was flickering, we stepped into a large, almost luxurious chamber. It was a library, well-furnished, carpeted, and surrounded by shelves fairly bulging with books. But for the chillness and bad light, it was perfect. As I moved about, Arthur followed me with his eyes.

"There are some rare works on botany——"

I had already discovered them, a set of books that I would have given much to own. I could not contain my joy.

"You won't be so bored browsing around in here——"

In spite of my preoccupation, I pricked up my ears. In that monotonous voice there was no sympathy with my joy. It was cold and tired.

When I had satisfied my curiosity we returned to the front room, and Arthur flung himself, or rather fell, upon the couch. It was nearly five o'clock and quite dark. As I lighted the gas, I heard a sound below as of somebody thumping on the wall.

"That's the old woman," Arthur explained. "She cooks my meals, but she's too lame to bring them up."

He made a feeble attempt at rising, but I saw he was worn out.

"Don't stir," I warned him. "I'll bring up your food tonight."

To my surprize, I found the dinner appetizing and well-cooked, and, in spite of the fact that I did not like the looks of the old woman, I ate with relish. Arthur barely touched a few spoonfuls of soup to his lips and absently crumbled some bread in his plate.

Directly I had carried off the dishes, he wrapped his reddish-brown dressing-gown about him, stretched out at full

length on the couch, and asked me to turn out the gas. When I had complied with his request, I again heard his weak voice asking if I had everything I needed.

"Everything," I assured him, and then there was unbroken silence.

I went to my room, finally, closed the door, and here I am sitting restlessly between the two back windows that look out on the vacant lots.

I have unpacked my clothes and turned down the bed, but I can not make up my mind to retire. If the truth be told, I hate to put out the light. . . . There is something disturbing in the way the dry leaves tap on the panes. And my heart is sad when I think of Arthur.

I have found my old friend, but he is no longer my old friend. Why does he fix his pale eyes so strangely on my face? What does he wish to tell me?

But these are morbid thoughts. I will put them out of my head. I will go to bed and get a good night's rest. And tomorrow I will wake up finding everything right and as it should be.

SEPTEMBER 26—I have been here a week today, and have settled down to this queer existence as if I had never known another. The day after my arrival I discovered that the third volume of the botanical series was done in Latin, which I have set myself the task of translating. It is absorbing work, and when I have buried myself in one of the deep chairs by the library table, the hours fly fast.

For health's sake I force myself to walk a few miles every day. I have tried to prevail on Arthur to do likewise, but he, who used to be so active, now refuses to budge from the house. No wonder he is literally blue! For it is a fact that his complexion, and the shadows about his eyes and temples, are decidedly blue.

What does he do with himself all day? Whenever I enter his room, he is lying

on the couch, a book beside him, which he never reads. He does not seem to suffer pain, for he never complains. After several ineffectual attempts to get medical aid for him, I have given up mentioning the subject of a doctor. I feel that his trouble is more mental than physical.

SEPTEMBER 28—A rainy day. It has been coming down in floods since dawn. And I got a queer turn this afternoon.

As I could not get out for my walk, I spent the morning staging a general house-cleaning. It was time! Dust and dirt everywhere. The bathroom, which has no window and is lighted by gas, was fairly overrun with water-bugs and roaches. Of course I did not penetrate to Arthur's room, but I heard no sound from him as I swept and dusted.

I made a good dinner and settled down in the library, feeling quite cozy. The rain came down steadily and it had grown so cold that I decided to make a fire later on. But once I had gathered my tablets and notebooks about me I forgot the cold.

I remember I was on the subject of the *Aster trifolium*, a rare variety seldom found in this country. Turning a page, I came upon a specimen of this very variety, dried, pressed flat, and pasted to the margin. Above it, in Arthur's handwriting, I read: *September 27, 1912.*

I was bending close to examine it, when I felt a vague fear. It seemed to me that some one was in the room and was watching me. Yet I had not heard the door open, nor seen any one enter. I turned sharply and saw Arthur, wrapped in his reddish-brown dressing-gown, standing at my very elbow.

He was smiling—smiling for the first time since my arrival, and his dull eyes were bright. But I did not like that smile.

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In spite of myself I jerked away from him. He pointed at the aster.

"It grew in the front yard under a linden tree. I found it yesterday."

"Yesterday!" I shouted, my nerves on edge. "Good Lord, man! Look! It was ten years ago!"

The smile faded from his face.

"Ten years ago," he repeated thickly. "*Ten years ago?*"

And with his hand pressed against his forehead, he went out of the room still muttering, "*Ten years ago!*"

As for me, this foolish incident has preyed upon my mind and kept me from doing any satisfactory work. . . . *September 27*. . . . It is true, that was also yesterday—ten years ago.

OCTOBER 1—One o'clock. A cheerful morning this has been, the sun shining brightly, and a touch of frost in the air. I put in an excellent day's work in the library yesterday, and on the first mail this morning came a letter from Mrs. O'Brien. She says the scarab chrysanthemums are in full bloom. I must positively run up for a day before they are gone.

As I lighted a cigar after breakfast, I happened to glance over at Arthur and was struck by a change in him. For he *has* changed. I ask myself if my presence has not done him good. On my arrival he seemed without energy, almost torpid, but now he is becoming restless. He wanders about the room continually and sometimes shows a disposition to talk.

Yes, I am sure he is better. I am going for my walk now, and I feel convinced that in a week's time I shall have him accompanying me.

FIVE o'clock. Dusk is falling. O God! What has come over me? Am I the same man that went out of this house

three hours ago? And what has happened? . . .

I had a splendid walk, and was striding homeward in a fine glow. But as I turned the corner and came in sight of the house, it was as if I looked at death itself. I could hardly drag myself up the stairs, and when I peered into the shadowy chamber, and saw the man hunched up on the couch, with his eyes fixed intently on my face, I could have screamed like a woman. I wanted to fly, to rush out into the clear cold air and run—to run and never come back! But I controlled myself, forced my feet to carry me to my room.

There is a weight of hopelessness at my heart. The darkness is advancing, swallowing up everything, but I have not the will to light the gas. . . .

Now there is a flicker in the front room. I am a fool; I must pull myself together. Arthur is lighting up, and downstairs I can hear the thumping that announces dinner. . . .

It is a queer thought that comes to me now, but it is odd I have not noticed it before. We are about to sit down to our evening meal. Arthur will eat practically nothing, for he has no appetite. Yet he remains stout. It can not be healthy fat, but even at that it seems to me that a man who eats as little as he does would become a living skeleton.

OCTOBER 5—Positively, I must see a doctor about myself, or soon I shall be a nervous wreck. I am acting like a child. Last night I lost all control and played the coward.

I had gone to bed early, tired out from a hard day's work. It was raining again, and as I lay in bed I watched the little rivulets trickling down the panes. Lulled by the sighing of the wind among the leaves, I fell asleep.

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I awoke (how long afterward I can not say) to feel a cold hand laid on my arm. For a moment I lay paralyzed with terror. I would have cried aloud, but I had no voice. At last I managed to sit up, to shake the hand off. I reached for the matches and lighted the gas.

It was Arthur who stood by my bed—Arthur wrapped in his eternal reddish-brown dressing-gown. He was excited. His blue face had a yellow tinge, and his eyes gleamed in the light.

"Listen!" he whispered.

I listened but I heard nothing.

"Don't you hear it?" he gasped, and he pointed upward.

"Upstairs?" I stammered. "Is there somebody upstairs?"

I strained my ears, and at last I fancied I could hear a fugitive sound like the light tapping of footsteps.

"It must be somebody walking about up there," I suggested.

But at these words Arthur seemed to stiffen. The excitement died out of his face.

"No!" he cried in a sharp rasping voice.

"No! It is nobody walking about up there!"

And he fled into his room.

For a long time I lay trembling, afraid to move. But at last, fearing for Arthur, I got up and crept to his door. He was lying on the couch, with his face in the moonlight, apparently asleep.

OCTOBER 6—I had a talk with Arthur today. Yesterday I could not bring myself to speak of the previous night's happening, but all of this nonsense must be cleared away.

We were in the library. A fire was burning in the grate, and Arthur had his feet on the fender. The slippers he wears are as objectionable to me as his dressing-gown. They are felt slippers, old and

worn, and frayed around the edges as if they had been gnawed by rats. I can not imagine why he does not get a new pair.

"Say, old man," I began abruptly, "do you own this house?"

He nodded.

"Don't you rent any of it?"

"Downstairs—to Mrs. Harlan."

"But upstairs?"

He hesitated, then shook his head.

"No, it's inconvenient. There's only a peculiar way to get upstairs."

I was struck by this.

"By Jove! you're right. Where's the staircase?"

He looked me full in the eyes.

"Don't you remember seeing a bolted door in a corner of your room? The staircase runs from that door."

I did remember it, and somehow the memory made me uncomfortable. I said no more and decided not to refer to what had happened that night. It occurred to me that Arthur might have been walking in his sleep.

OCTOBER 8—When I went for my walk on Tuesday I dropped in and saw Doctor Lorraine, who is an old friend. He expressed some surprize at my run-down condition and wrote me a prescription.

I am planning to go home next week. How pleasant it will be to walk in my garden and listen to Mrs. O'Brien singing in the kitchen!

OCTOBER 9—Perhaps I had better postpone my trip. I casually mentioned it to Arthur this morning.

He was lying relaxed on the sofa, but when I spoke of leaving he sat up as straight as a bolt. His eyes fairly blazed.

"No, Tom, don't go!" There was terror in his voice, and such pleading that it wrung my heart.

"You've stood it alone here ten years," I protested. "And now——"

"It's not that," he said. "But if you go, you will never come back."

"Is that all the faith you have in me?"

"I've got faith, Tom. But if you go, you'll never come back."

I decided that I must humor the vagaries of a sick man.

"All right," I agreed. "I'll not go. Anyway, not for some time."

OCTOBER 12—What is it that hangs over this house like a cloud? For I can no longer deny that there *is* something—something indescribably oppressive. It seems to pervade the whole neighborhood.

Are all the houses on this block vacant? If not, why do I never see children playing in the street? Why are passers-by so rare? And why, when from the front window I do catch a glimpse of one, is he hastening away as fast as possible?

I am feeling blue again. I know that I need a change, and this morning I told Arthur definitely that I was going.

To my surprize, he made no objection. In fact, he murmured a word of assent and smiled. He smiled as he smiled in the library that morning when he pointed at the *Aster trifolium*. And I don't like that smile. Anyway, it is settled. I shall go next week, Thursday, the 19th.

OCTOBER 13—I had a strange dream last night. Or was it a dream? It was so vivid. . . . All day long I have been seeing it over and over again.

In my dream I thought that I was lying there in my bed. The moon was shining brightly into the room, so that each piece of furniture stood out distinctly. The bureau is so placed that when I am lying

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on my back, with my head high on the pillow, I can see full into the mirror.

I thought I was lying in this manner and staring into the mirror. In this way I saw the bolted door in the far corner of the room. I tried to keep my mind off it, to think of something else, but it drew my eyes like a magnet.

It seemed to me that some one was in the room, a vague figure that I could not recognize. It approached the door and caught at the bolts. It dragged at them and struggled, but in vain—they would not give way.

Then it turned and showed me its agonized face. It was Arthur! I recognized his reddish-brown dressing-gown.

I sat up in bed and cried to him, but he was gone. I ran to his room, and there he was, stretched out in the moonlight asleep. It must have been a dream.

OCTOBER 15—We are having Indian Summer weather now—almost oppressively warm. I have been wandering about all day, unable to settle down to anything. This morning I felt so lonesome that when I took the breakfast dishes down, I tried to strike up a conversation with Mrs. Harlan.

Hitherto I have found her as solemn and uncommunicative as the Sphinx, but as she took the tray from my hands, her wrinkles broke into the semblance of a smile. Positively at that moment it seemed to me that she resembled Arthur. Was it her smile, or the expression of her eyes? Has she, also, something to tell me?

"Don't you get lonesome here?" I asked her sympathetically.

She shook her head. "No, sir, I'm used to it now. I couldn't stand it anywhere else."

"And do you expect to go on living here the rest of your life?"

"That may not be very long, sir," she said, and smiled again.

Her words were simple enough, but the way she looked at me when she uttered them seemed to give them a double meaning. She hobbled away, and I went upstairs and wrote Mrs. O'Brien to expect me early on the morning of the 19th.

OCTOBER 18—Ten a. m.—Am catching the twelve o'clock train tonight. Thank God, I had the resolution to get away! I believe another week of this life would drive me mad. And perhaps Arthur is right—perhaps I shall never come back.

I ask myself if I have become such a weakling as that, to desert him when he needs me most. I don't know. I don't recognize myself any longer. . . .

But of course I will be back. There is the translation, for one thing, which is coming along famously. I could never forgive myself for dropping it at the most vital point.

As for Arthur, when I return I intend to give in to him no longer. I will make myself master here and cure him against his will. Fresh air, change of scene, a good doctor, these are the things he needs.

But what is his malady? Is it the influence of this house that has fallen on him like a blight? One might imagine so, since it is having the same effect on me.

Yes, I have reached that point where I no longer sleep. At night I lie awake and try to keep my eyes off the mirror across the room. But in the end I always find myself staring into it—watching the door with the heavy bolts. I long to rise from the bed and draw back the bolts, but I'm afraid.

How slowly the day goes by! The night will never come!

NINE P. M.—Have packed my suitcases and put the room in order. Arthur must be asleep. . . . I'm afraid the parting from him will be painful. I shall leave here at eleven o'clock in order to give myself plenty of time. . . . It is beginning to rain. . . .

OCTOBER 19—At last! It has come! I am mad! I knew it! I felt it creeping on me all the time! Have I not lived in this house a month? Have I not seen? . . . To have seen what I have seen, to have lived for a month as I have lived, one *must* be mad. . . .

It was ten o'clock. I was waiting impatiently for the last hour to pass. I had seated myself in a rocking-chair by the bed, my suitcases beside me, my back to the mirror. The rain no longer fell. I must have dozed off.

But all at once I was wide awake, my heart beating furiously. Something had touched me. I leapt to my feet, and, as I turned sharply, my eyes fell upon the mirror. In it I saw the door just as I had seen it the other night, and the figure fumbling with the bolt. I wheeled around, but there was nothing there.

I told myself that I was dreaming again, that Arthur was asleep in his bed. But I trembled as I opened the door of his room and peered in. The room was empty, the bed not even crumpled. Lighting a match, I groped my way through the bathroom into the library.

The moon had come from under a cloud and was pouring in a silvery flood through the windows, but Arthur was not there. I stumbled back into my room.

The moon was there, too. . . . And the door, the door in the corner was half open. The bolt had been drawn. In the darkness I could just make out a flight of steps that wound upward.

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I could no longer hesitate. Striking another match, I climbed the back stairway.

When I reached the top I found myself in total darkness, for the blinds were tightly closed. Realizing that the room was probably a duplicate of the one below, I felt along the wall until I came to the gas jet. For a moment the flame flickered, then burned bright and clear.

O God! what was it I saw? A table, thick with dust, and something wrapped in a reddish-brown dressing-gown, that sat with its elbows propped upon it.

How long had it been sitting there, that it had grown more dry than the dust upon the table! For how many thousands of days and nights had the flesh rotted from that grinning skull!

In its bony fingers it still clutched a pencil. In front of it lay a sheet of scratched paper, yellow with age. With trembling fingers I brushed away the dust. It was dated October 19, 1912. It read:

"Dear Tom:

"Old man, can you run down to see me for a few days? I'm afraid I'm in a bad way——"