

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XVII

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Laveil, 13, Sergeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

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THE GAME

By DOROTHY NORWICH

Mallory knew that he was being murdered by degrees, knew that it was useless to fight—yet he made sure that his killers would be robbed of the fruits of their crime

MALLORY rose from his bed and stumbled weakly across the bedroom floor to the bathroom adjoining. From the hall came the saccharinely sweet voice of his wife.

"What are you doing, dear?"

Something in the cloying tone irritated Mallory. "Getting a drink," he answered, pettishly.

"But I'd have gotten it for you."

"Get it myself," Mallory retorted, shortly. "I'm not dead—yet." He allowed himself to pause suggestively before uttering the word, "yet," so that it took on a grim significance utterly foreign to it.

With a nice precision, he dropped two white pellets into a glass. His lips lifted themselves in a snarling grin as he watched the water slowly cloud, and then become milky.

His unnaturally bright eyes fixed on the door, Mallory drained the glass, rinsed it thoroughly, and returned it to its holder. A giddiness came over him. At his cry, his wife, accompanied by the doctor, entered the room. Together they helped him into bed.

"I've warned you about undue exertion." The doctor's voice. Hypocrite! Mallory wanted to shout at him. Denounce him. Call him murderer. Instead, he lay still, veiling his eyes with half-closed lids, lest they betray his secret triumph.

Presently, he looked up at them, the little man and the large woman. The woman's white forehead; her peculiar-

colored eyes that, actually small, somehow managed to give an impression of bigness; her lips, full, curved, and greedy.

There was a similarity, Mallory noted, between the woman and her lover, despite the man's inferior height and weak chin. The same furtiveness of eye was there, and the lips, full, curved, greedy.

The woman's voice interrupted his mental comparisons.

"A weak sleeping-potion, perhaps?" she was suggesting.

"Sleeping-potion!" Mallory could have shrieked his dreadful mirth. Fools! did they think he didn't know? Did they suppose him so utterly simple that he had not been aware this long time of the desperate game they were playing? But he was playing, too. They didn't know that. But he was.

The thought tickled Mallory, and for the moment, he actually smiled. Yes, he was playing. A sudden bitterness welled up in him. Alone, three miles from the nearest neighbor—five from the town, helpless, sick, old before his time, he sat in this strange game. He, against the other two, with the conspirators, until this very morning, holding the high cards.

The woman put her arm under his head and raised it slightly. His eyes met those of the doctor as he held the glass against his lips. There was fear in the furtive eyes, and strain. It pleased Mallory greatly. The man was breaking. A year and a half is a long time. They hadn't expected him to survive so many—sleeping-potions!

The glass emptied, Mallory lay back on his pillows. The room seemed darker than it had a few minutes ago. Ah, well, that last card of his would soon be played now.

And it had been luck, sheer luck—or had it been the machination of a tardy justice?—that had enabled him to see to its playing.

Hendricks, from the next farm, had been in to see him. Just passing by, he had said, and had dropped in to see how Mallory was getting along. It had taken but a minute to slip Hendricks the letter he had kept by him for months, and secure his promise to deliver it that same afternoon.

It might even have reached its destination now! The thought made Mallory's head swim. Fright seized him. He must keep his mind clear. He wasn't going to be cheated of living it all over again before he died. With difficulty, he marshaled his senses into some semblance of order.

He had been thinking of Hendricks. He *could* have said: "They are murdering me for my insurance money." But what would Hendricks have said? What would *they* have said? "Delirium." That's what they would have said. "His mind is going." Besides, he was too far gone for help.

He could have written it in his letter. But to what purpose? The electric chair for the pair of them, probably, and he'd have the woman's soul on his hands. Wasn't it enough to have endured ten years of her, here on earth, without having to bear with her in hell, as well?

No, the way he had chosen was best.

His thin body began to shake with repressed mirth. It was so grotesquely funny! And that insurance policy they had persuaded him to take out two years

ago; the policy that an ordinary farmer had to sweat blood to keep up; that policy that meant ease for them, and spelled death for him. That *fat* insurance policy! If they only knew!

Unable to control himself longer, Mallory shouted his triumph, only it didn't sound like a shout. It was more like a rattle. His emaciated frame shook and trembled. His vision, slightly blurred now, beheld the faces of the lovers bending over him. A little shaken they looked, yet indecently eager.

Vultures! They wondered why he laughed. Or did they know he was laughing? Perhaps they thought it was the death paroxysm. No matter, they would know shortly.

It was hard, suddenly, to breathe. A crushing weight sat astride his chest. A stiff, snarling grin parted Mallory's lips, and froze upon them.

They would know very soon now.

THEY sat stiffly, uneasily, on the edges of their chairs, the little man, and the large woman. Beads of sweat dampened the man's forehead. He wiped them away, nervously, with the back of his hand. A pearly dew also sat upon the upper lip of the woman, and she dabbed at it with a handkerchief, limp with the perspiration from her large hands.

Their greedy, puzzled eyes were fastened upon the man behind the desk, their ears straining to catch every word. Oblivious of the tap of the typewriters, the murmur of voices that came to them, slightly muffled, from the outer offices of the great insurance company, they centered their attention upon the adjuster.

He was handing the woman a letter. She took it with hands that trembled a little. The doctor's anxious eyes followed the lines of the brief note over her shoulder.

I am committing suicide. You will find the box of poison tablets in the bathroom medicine chest. There will be two missing.

MALLORY.

Still uncomprehending, the lovers turned their gaze back to the insurance man. What was it he was saying? The policy contained an iron-bound suicide clause. Yes, they remembered that now. It hadn't seemed important then. They hadn't feared suicide.

The doctor's lips were suddenly dry, and he tried to moisten them with a tongue as hot and parched as a lizard's. The woman's mouth sagged.

"In event of the insured committing

suicide, this policy becomes null and void." Not the exact words, but the gist of them.

The eyes of the man and woman met, understanding slowly dawning. That last, choking rattle of Mallory's! The sardonic gleam in his glazing eyes!

Empty, they rose, and made their way out of the office, through the outer offices, with their efficient bustle, to the corridor.

Softly, as if fearing to disturb someone, they closed the door behind them, and upon the clicking of the latch came the laughter of the dead man, mocking, haunting.

They knew, now.
