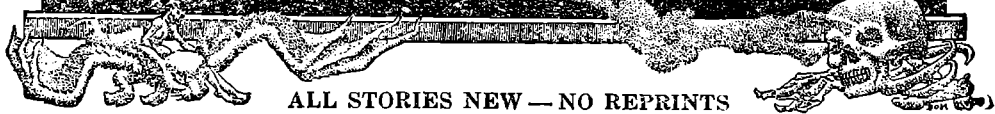


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1948

Cover by Matt Fox

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

The Grotto of Cheer

BY STANTON A. COBLENTZ

*A woman will wait for a long time—
on either side of the grave!*

“THERE are ordinary ghosts— and ghosts with a personality,” ruminated Hal Plainfield, as he sat back with a promising twinkle in his deep-set eyes. “If anybody knows, I guess I do!”

The rest of us, sprawled on a ridge above camp on that windless warm August evening, saw the full moon rising in witch-veils of mist above a long, low eastern range. A hoot-owl wailed far off; the air, heavy and oppressive, had provoked an eerie mood even in the least susceptible of us.

“Yes, and you run into ‘em when you’re least looking for it,” Hal went on. “I never dreamed, that day when I got stalled over at Spruce Gap—but maybe you’re not interested?”

“Go on! Out with it! What happened at Spruce Gap?” the half dozen of us prompted, in chorus.

Hal arose, and stretched himself in the dim moonlight. He was a tall, rail-thin man with a weathered face; and you would never have suspected him of being anything but down-to-earth. But when he had re-seated himself, and slowly and solemnly fell back into his deep, drawling bass, his tone was one of awe and mystery.

“To ‘this day, I’ve never wholly figured it out, but it was just about the most vivid thing I’ve ever experienced. It happened all

of ten years ago. Any of you know the timber regions of western Oregon?"

Several of us nodded.

"I was on a motor tour from Portland, to visit my sister and her three kids in some God-forsaken town not far from the California border. She expected me for dinner Sunday, but everything went against me: two tires blew out, one right after the other; and then a truck sideswiped me and sent me into a ditch, not much hurt, but cursing like the devil and delayed another couple of hours. But the real trouble didn't set in till I came to Spruce Gap."

"Where's Spruce Gap?" piped up the youthful voice of Sam Watson from the shadows half a dozen yards away.

"None of you would know, if you didn't have the hard luck to get stuck there," rumbled Hal. "It's a little town in a hollow in a logged off region. There's something weird about the very setting. On the west you see a high ragged ridge, with the charred ghastly trunks of ruined trees standing up like burnt toothpicks. On the east, equally high, a queer ragged formation of rock startles you, with the forest growth cut away. It's called the Grinning Devil, and the name just fits it, because in a certain light it looks exactly like a devil leering with the most ghastly malevolence."

"Maybe you were letting yourself imagine things," I commented, skeptically.

HAL DID not seem to notice my remark, but went on, "I was just about in the center of that doggone town, stepping on the gas for all I was worth, because I still had a hundred miles to do, when I heard a sudden clattering in the engine and the pesky thing stopped dead. Yes, plumb dead! I couldn't budge it! It being Sunday, I had a job finding help, but did manage to drag out old Jim Cahey, the one automobile mechanic in the burg, and for a consideration of about everything in my pocketbook, he promised to get busy. It was then about six o'clock—a sort of sultry August evening, like tonight; and I was just about crazy to get started again. But that pokey cuss took his time; lit a cigarette; fished around inside the car and under it, told me what he thought was wrong though I couldn't make head or tail of it all, and said he expected

he'd have it ready in a few hours. The earliest he would promise was, vaguely, about nine or ten o'clock.

"Well, after cursing him plenty, I managed to put in a long-distance call to my sister; and then, being hungry as a starved hound, I set about looking for a place to eat. But again luck seemed against me. There was one hashhouse called 'The Purple Frog' but a sign on it, 'Closed Sundays.' There was another named after 'The Grinning Devil', but the sign was still more exasperating, 'Gone fishing—back Monday.' Aside from that, there wasn't even the pretense of an eating joint in the whole metropolis. Where in hell's name am I going to get a bite?" I flung out at Jim Cahey, as he lay with his head half poked out from under my car. And he turned his flashlight full in my face, and muttered, 'Damned if I know. Why don't you see the Milligans? End of this street, then third shack to the right.'

"Feeling like a beggar about to ask for a hand-out, I started away. I hated like hell to ask dinner of the Milligans, whoever they were; and it was this accursed pride that got the better of me. I had just come to the end of the street when I saw—it was over the last house—the sign, 'Grotto of Cheer. Board and lodging.' I did think it queer that Cahey hadn't mentioned this place. I also thought there was something peculiar in the looks of the house, which certainly didn't seem at all what the name implied.

"It wasn't only its run-down condition—the fact that the steps sagged, the roof above the vine-covered porch drooped at a sickly angle, and the whole two-story barn looked famished for a good coat of paint. Since it was still full daylight, I couldn't help seeing the cobwebs about the stoop, and the dust and fallen leaves that lay everywhere, layers deep. 'Damaed slovenly housekeeping,' I remember thinking. But there was something I felt rather than thought—a hard-to-describe shuddery sensation, along with a chilly wave down my spine. But by nature I've never been superstitious; if I wanted a good meal, the thing to do, I told myself, was to ask for it where meals were regularly served. So I turned in at the 'Grotto of Cheer.' But even as I did so, my steps

dragged, and a sort of numbness came over me.

Plainfield paused long enough to light his pipe. Though the evening was warm, two of us had kindled a campfire across from him. By its uncannily flickering beams, Hal continued, somberly.

"When I knocked, it seemed to me that the echo was unusually long, deep and solemn. But there was no other response. If hunger hadn't been raging within me, I would have let things go at that. However, it infuriated me to be ignored, so I rapped again, this time much louder. I must have hit the panels harder than I'd intended, because the door gave a creak, and swung inward on its hinges. And, as it burst open, I saw *her* standing there before me."

"Who?" we all demanded, in one voice.

Plainfield took several reflective puffs at his pipe before continuing.

"I didn't, of course, know who she was. But I was struck by her appearance. She was an exceptionally tall, slender woman—fully as tall as the average man. She looked about fifty-five to sixty, and her hair was silvery white.

"Her face was long, clear, pure and sorrowful—the most deeply sorrowful, I believe, that I'd ever looked upon; the furrows of grief that ran down from it were like those of some suffering saint. But what really struck me were her eyes. They were dark, but had a burning fierce intensity, like the concentrated expression of a vehement, feeling soul; and I also felt in them a compelling power, a magnetism that held me against my will in a way I find it hard to make plain. But the time, I think, my emotion was chiefly surprise—surprise that she should have been standing there so silent, so unresponsive.

"However, a faint smile spread across the tragic countenance; I saw her motioning; and thought I heard her murmur, 'Come in.' I know, at any rate, that my feet obeyed; though as I closed the door behind me, I was surprised by the odor of extreme mustiness—the smell of dampness and decay, as in a wood lodge long unused."

SOMEHOW, I shivered as Plainfield spoke; shivered in spite of the warm evening and the fire. I think we all felt an un-

natural chill running down our spines as he resumed.

"The house inside wasn't only stale-smelling; it was dark. I don't know how I had failed to notice it from outside, but the shutters were drawn. Through little chinks and crannies, the light came filtering in, making it possible to see reasonably well; but the whole effect was gloomy, almost sepulchral; and here and there the shadows were especially deep, making me start back in a queer, jumpy way. My impulse was to leave at once; however, I couldn't think of any good excuse; and, besides, my hostess was beckoning, and her eyes kept that intense, compelling look.

"Almost automatically, I followed her into the dining-room. The long table was spread with a dark cloth, and was set for seven persons—I distinctly remember the number. But there wasn't a soul about except my hostess. A grandfather's clock leering from the opposite wall—leering is the way it looked to me—couldn't have been in good working order, because it pointed to the hour of twelve. The painting of an aged dame in a hoop skirt hung in a stoop-shouldered way just beyond the clock, and the dusty-looking draperies across from the dinner table had slipped, and slanted at an odd angle from the wall. The shutters were drawn in this room too, and the musty smells were pretty nearly overpowering.

"For the first time now it came to me that I hadn't said a word since entering. Somehow, words didn't come easily as I turned to my hostess, and muttered something about wanting dinner. I thought that a faint smile softened the dismal features as I spoke, but I hadn't at all expected her answering tone. It was hollow, almost unreal, if you can imagine a tone of voice to be unreal; it reminded me a little of a person heard over a radio, speaking with great difficulty in a large hall, with undertones of annoying echoes. Yet the words were as commonplace as could be. 'Of course we'll be glad to have you with us.' And she motioned me to a seat.

"I moved a chair back, and some small thing scuttled from under it with a sudden frightened rustling. I think it was my own alarm quite as much as anything else that made me slip into a seat.

"The white-haired woman was now standing just above me. I did not like the concentration of her eyes, which seemed to be growing even more intense, with something almost devouring in the stare. 'We've been waiting for you, Henry,' she said, in the same hollow, unnatural voice as before.

"It was then that I began to wonder if something wasn't wrong with the old woman's head. My name, of course, isn't Henry; I could see she had confused me with someone else, and I didn't like the confusion.

"All these years, we've been waiting for you,' she went on. 'Just you stay here. The others will be here now any minute.'

"Naturally, I hadn't the dimmest notion who 'the others' might be. What was more, I didn't want to know. By this time I had forgotten that I was hungry; my only desire was to leave that accursed place. But somehow I seemed rooted in my chair. The woman's uncanny eyes held me fixed there. Strangely, as I gazed back at her, it came to me that I couldn't see the iris—this may have been due to the darkness of the room, but it seemed to me as if I was peering into two black pits.

"They will all be here. I know they will be here,' she repeated, with an unmodulated monotony that added a new weirdness to the occasion. 'Just you wait, Henry. They have to be here.'

"A faint creaking and rustling in an adjoining room seemed a fitting punctuation to these words. It was no use telling myself, either, that I was only listening to the scurrying of rats or mice. I felt the hair on my scalp prickling. I felt no desire on earth except to be gone. And yet I told myself I was the biggest fool and coward west of the Mississippi to be afraid of a white-haired old woman in an empty house."

A LONG silence followed while Plainfield, rekindling his pipe, stared at the pale-yellow apparition of the moon that was rising in phantom veils of mist. The cry of some far-off beast came with an unearthly throbbing to our ears. But none of us had anything to say before the speaker went on.

"By now, I suppose, my eyes were getting used to the dim illumination. I was surprised to notice the unlighted kerosene lamp across

from me; and it burst over me that there were no electric fixtures about the place. I also caught a glimpse, through an open door, of a sewing machine—the old-fashioned kind, worked by foot. I saw, too, that there was a bird cage across from the grandfather's clock—but no sign of a bird. And there was a large mouldy-looking dog collar on the floor, without any sign of a dog.

"They have been gone so long now. They will be back soon, they will have to be back,' the woman droned on, in the same monotonous hollow voice, which now, however, had a distinct wailing quality. 'It's so long since they have gone. They will have to be back. I have been waiting all this time. If you will just stay here, Henry, we'll all have dinner together again.'

"I couldn't fail to note that 'again.' But her tone, it seemed to me, was more of a command than a request; it had the determination of one who will brook no denial. Time after time I tried my best to rise from the chair; but my muscles were paralyzed.

"Nevertheless, the whole situation seemed clear enough. That poor lonely woman, living in this great lonely house, had been demented by her misfortunes; and now, returning to the past, mistook me for one of her relations. Too bad, I thought, that the poor afflicted soul couldn't be placed in an institution, where she would be cared for properly.

"But this was only the view of my reasoning mind. There was some part of me, beneath and beyond reason, which didn't accept any such explanation, but shuddered and went cold all the way through. And yet, fixed by the glare of those fierce penetrating eyes, I had ceased trying to escape, hardly dared even to think of escape.

"By imperceptible degrees—for twilight takes its time in those latitudes—it was getting darker. And, oddly, the woman's long, furrowed face seemed to be growing even clearer as the dusk descended, as though it burned with some inner light. But it hardly for a moment took its gaze off me.

"That is to say, at first it hardly took its gaze off me. After a long while—maybe half an hour, or an hour, for I was beyond judging time—the great transformation came. Her face seemed transfused—yes, transfused—with a blazing radiance. I have

never seen such joy illuminating any other countenance. 'Ah, there they are! Yes, there they all are!' she exclaimed. And she ran to the front door; and uncannily, seemingly without any movement of her hands, it opened.

"A puff of wind was all that entered. A swirl of dust greeted my nostrils. In that startling interval, I would at last have leapt up and fled, had I not still been held despite myself, pinned down as by some power outside myself, fascinated and horrified by the scene that followed.

"As the door closed—again apparently without action of human hands—a peal of joy rang forth. It may seem a paradox to say that, while the tones were weird and hollow as ever, the joy seemed pure and undiluted, like that on the woman's countenance. 'Ah, here you are at last! I knew you were coming! Mary! George! Arthur! Joe! Ellen! Katie! How are you? How are you? Step right in, all of you! Henry's here already, waiting for you!'

"With the enthusiastic motions of one escorting a crowd, the woman re-entered the dining-room. But by the fading light, I could see that she was still alone."

UNACCOUNTABLY, the night seemed to have grown cold. I huddled near the fire and shivered, as did several of the others. Only the crackling of the flames broke the silence before the speaker went on.

"There was still light enough for me to see the old woman's face, which was as jubilant as ever as she came drifting toward me. 'Here, Mary, you sit here! George next to you! That's it! Arthur over there, beside Katie! Why, it's just like old times! There, Joe, I knew you wouldn't wait to be asked! Why, you haven't changed one bit! Nor you either, Ellen! Not the least of it! But it's been so long, so long since you were here!'

"On and on in this vein she rambled, in that strangely unreal, monotonous voice that somehow continued to give the impression of extreme pleasure. I tell you, boys, I was petrified as I sat watching, gripped in a sort of ghastly spell, like the spectator of a scene in a nightmare. After a minute or two, she appeared satisfied that her visitors were well seated; then turned toward me with a smile

though her eyes still seemed hollow black sockets, and beckoned with a scarred white four-fingered hand, whose disfigurement I now noticed for the first time. 'See, Henry has come too! Here's Henry. He always was one to keep to himself, Henry was.' And almost without a break, as she swung about and gestured toward the darkness at my side, 'Down, Rover! Down! Be a good dog, and don't put your paws on the table!'

"Somehow that reference to an animal—an animal that wasn't there—seemed just about the culminating stroke. My lips opened—and I'm sure that a faint, cracked sound, which may have been a stillborn scream, came forth. With the fury of a desperate fear, I tried to rise; but it was just as when you're asleep and dreaming, and know you're asleep, but can't for the life of you wake up. I could no more have risen than I could have sunken through the floor.

" 'Now, Henry, why don't you say hello to the folks?' my hostess demanded, her look of exultation gone as she turned her long sorrow-trenched face upon me with the intensity of a burning passion. I really felt her now as a personality; felt her as a being of a powerful will and tremendous tortured emotions; felt her as one suffering from some prodigious unuttered want, which she would seek to satisfy, as a thirsting man seeks to satisfy his craving for drink. 'Come, come, Henry, get up and greet them. Talk to them,' she urged, the concentrated blaze of her attention full upon me. 'Let bygones be bygones. Come, come, they're your own flesh and blood.'

"Those words 'flesh and blood' chilled me like a touch of ice. And it may have been those words that—would you believe it?—gave me the sense of presences all about me; the feeling that the room was filled, crowded with invisible witnesses, their eyes fastened upon me, watching my every move, my every expression. By all that I have ever held sacred, boys, I could have sworn that this was so. At that command, 'Get up and greet them,' I did manage to wrench myself free of the vise that had gripped me; I did struggle to my feet. But as I left my chair, I made an observation that unfroze my lips in a blood-curdling shriek. Sure, it was all due to some trick of the light, some whim of my crazy imagination; but the face of the

old woman, in the growing dusk, suddenly seemed not the face of an old woman at all, suddenly had taken on the leering, fiendish expression of the Grinning Devil.

“EVEN as a fresh cry vibrated in my throat, my legs regained their mobility. The woman stood directly in my path, blocking my exit; and as I raised a panicky arm to brush her aside, I made the discovery that even to this day turns my spine cold at the very remembrance. She offered no resistance at all to my movements. My arm passed right through her.”

* * * * *

After a silence of several minutes, Sam Watson inquired, “And did you ever find any light on the mystery?”

“Well,” Plainfield drawled, “nothing but what Jim Cahey told me. He was still pottering away at the car when I wobbled back to him. ‘Have dinner?’ he asked. . . . ‘No such luck,’ I answered. ‘Saw a sign down the road, ‘Grotto of Cheer,’ and went in.”

“He dropped his wrench, and turned upon me with his jaws drawn wide apart in amazement. ‘Like hell you did!’ he answered. ‘Why, there ain’t been nobody living there these last twenty years.’

“‘No, sirree,’ he went on, after a minute, ‘nobody’ll rent the place, they say spooky things go on there. Used to belong to the Grimwalds. Seven boys an’ girls there was in that family, an’ Miss Amy she used to keep house for ‘em ail ‘an watch over ‘em

like a mother bird. That was before the tragedy.’

“‘What tragedy?’

“‘Over Emerald Lake way. It was after a heavy rain, an’ an embankment fell on a car five of ‘em were riding in, an’ snuffed ‘em out in one second. They say poor Miss Amy never did get over it. She put up the sign, ‘Gotto of Cheer,’ an’ took in boarders for a living, but just the same she grieved a terrible lot, and never was quite right again, I guess. She died only a year or two later.’

“‘What did she look like?’

“‘Oh, she was white-haired, with dark eyes, and was mighty tall for a woman. Folks sometimes called her Four Fingers, because she’d lost one finger in an accident.’

“‘I thanked Cahey, and was about to pass on, when he looked up at me in a sort of funny way.

“‘You know,’ he said, ‘there was one of the brothers that didn’t get along so well with the others, he was away most of the time an’ was the only one that didn’t end in the accident, though nobody seems to know what did happen to him. It’s funny, Mistef, but as I looked at you sideways just now, I could of taken you for his double.’

“‘What was his name?’ I asked. And my heart gave a strange sudden leap, and I could feel the hair once more prickling on my scalp as Cahey turned to me and slowly reported, ‘Well, the boys always called him Beanpole, he was that skinny, but guess he didn’t have any honest-to-goodness name but Henry.’”

