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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Hedge

By ALFRED I. TOOKE

*A quaint little story, about a gardener who spent his
whole life clipping a hedge*

PEOPLE came from miles around to see the wonderful hedge that encircled the great estate of Count Martell. In bloom, the hedge was a sight of almost unbelievable beauty — mile upon mile of gorgeous, flaming blossoms — and somewhere along those miles you would come upon a solitary man, industriously snip-snip-snipping, trimming the hedge with a precision and dexterity that bespoke years of practise.

The Count himself noticed the man one day as he drove along engrossed in a business problem. He could not be sure of the date, nor could his magnificently liveried chauffeur; so the car was stopped.

"Hi, there! What date is it?" the Count called.

The steady snip-snip ceased. The man glanced deliberately about him, at a rock, a tree, a mound across the road, as though seeking the answer in them. Then

he nodded. "The twenty-fifth of June, sir."

"Are you positive?"

"Quite sure, sir. I am always at this point on the twenty-fifth of June, sir."

"Always?"

"Always, sir."

"How long have you been doing this task?"

"Ever since I was able to do anything, sir."

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-five, sir."

"And how long does it take you to trim the entire hedge?"

"Exactly one year to go twice around, sir."

The Count's brows knitted ponderously. "You mean to say you spend your life going round and round this hedge, snipping and trimming, never catching up, never falling behind, never finishing your task?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is your name?"

"Manuel Torro, sir."

"And you can even tell what day of the year it is by the hedge?" The Count frowned. "Well, I must not delay you, Manuel, or I may be delaying the passage of Time itself."

THE Count seemed strangely preoccupied during the rest of the day. Those with whom he transacted business remarked that he was getting absent-minded. He did not appear to hear some of the questions they asked, and his replies to others were vague or irrelevant, as though some profound problem monopolized his attention.

That night he awoke and rang for sedatives. "I had a horrible nightmare, Marquo," he said. "I dreamed I was clipping a hedge, and could not clip fast enough. It grew and grew about me, smothering me."

"It was the lobster salad, perhaps, sir."

"Perhaps."

But the following night it could not have been lobster salad, for none was served. The Count tossed restlessly all night, and rising early, called for the wage-roll. Having consulted it, he was driven along the road encircling his estate until he observed the lone figure snipping at the hedge.

"Manuel Torro!" he called. "Come here. I am Count Martell. I own this hedge. Who hired you to clip it?"

"Well, sir, it is Count Martell who always pays my wages."

"There must be some mistake. I have consulted the records for many years back, and it is sixty years since my grandfather hired a Manuel Torro to clip this hedge. You are only thirty-five."

"That was my grandfather he hired, sir," Manuel replied unabashed.

"Then who hired you?"

"Well, sir, when my grandfather grew old and slow, my father helped him, doing more each day as my grandfather did less, until, when my grandfather died, my father was doing it all, and since his name was Manuel Torro, the wages were paid to him."

"And when your father grew old and slow?"

"I helped, sir, doing more as he did less, until when he died——"

"Yes, yes! And when you grow old and slow?"

"I have a son named Manuel, sir, who will help me."

The Count motioned the car on, then stared into vacancy as though visioning vistas of years down which innumerable Manuel Torros snip-snipped their way along that hedge, never catching up, never falling behind, but maintaining a pace inevitable as the passage of Time itself.

MUCH of the grief and unhappiness in this world is caused by our failure to appreciate the viewpoint of others. Manuel Torro loved his work. To tend and care for the hedge, so that it would blazon forth each year into exquisite beauty that people would come from far and near to see, was not a task so much as an honor, and he was filled with pride when people said: "See! There goes Manuel Torro, the hedge-clipper."

But to Count Martell, the thought of that interminable snip-snipping was intolerable. It irritated his mind as a sharp flint in his shoe would have irritated his foot. He saw in it only unending monotony.

That night he groaned and called out in his sleep until Marquo awakened him not once, but a dozen times, and always it was the same dream: a hedge that grew and grew, encompassing the Count and his battalions of Manuel Torros in spite of their frantic snipping, until it smothered them.

Long before dawn the Count was up and busy. "It must be put a stop to, Alexor!" he commanded his head gardener. "Have the hedge cut down completely. Have a stone wall built in its place."

Alexor stared with horrified eyes and raised protesting hands. Cut down the hedge? The glorious hedge that all the world made pilgrimage to see? That were sacrilege second only to the sacking of churches and the ravishing of holy things.

"Bring me an ax, Alexor."

With his own hands Count Martell razed the first yard of hedge. With his own hands he laid the first stone in the

wall that was to take its place. Daily he urged the work forward until, after many months, not a branch or leaf of the hedge remained. In its place was a grim stone wall that would stand without care, without attention, throughout the ages.

For the first time in months, the Count slept well. In the morning he ordered a car and was driven in triumphant satisfaction around the wall that now encompassed his estate. But suddenly a startled command brought the car to a stop as he found himself staring at a familiar figure stooped beside the wall, snip-snipping away as though life depended upon it.

"What does this mean, Pietel?" he asked his chauffeur. "I told them to give this man other work. Why does he snip at a stone wall as though it were a hedge?"

"Didn't they tell you, sir?"

"Tell me? Tell me what?"

"Why, this hedge, sir! When he found them cutting it down, he went stark, staring crazy. They shut him up until he was quiet, and now he is loose, he——"

"Drive me home, Pietel! Don't sit there raving like a lunatic! Drive me home!"

IF YOU ever pass the estate of Count Martell, you may see Manuel Torro, now grown old and stooped, but still snip-snipping, working his endless way around the great wall. And if you ask concerning Count Martell, they may point to a window in the east tower and tell you that in that room a man goes round and round, year in and year out, snip-snipping away with stiff fingers at the flowers and leaves upon the wallpaper.

It is Count Martell.

