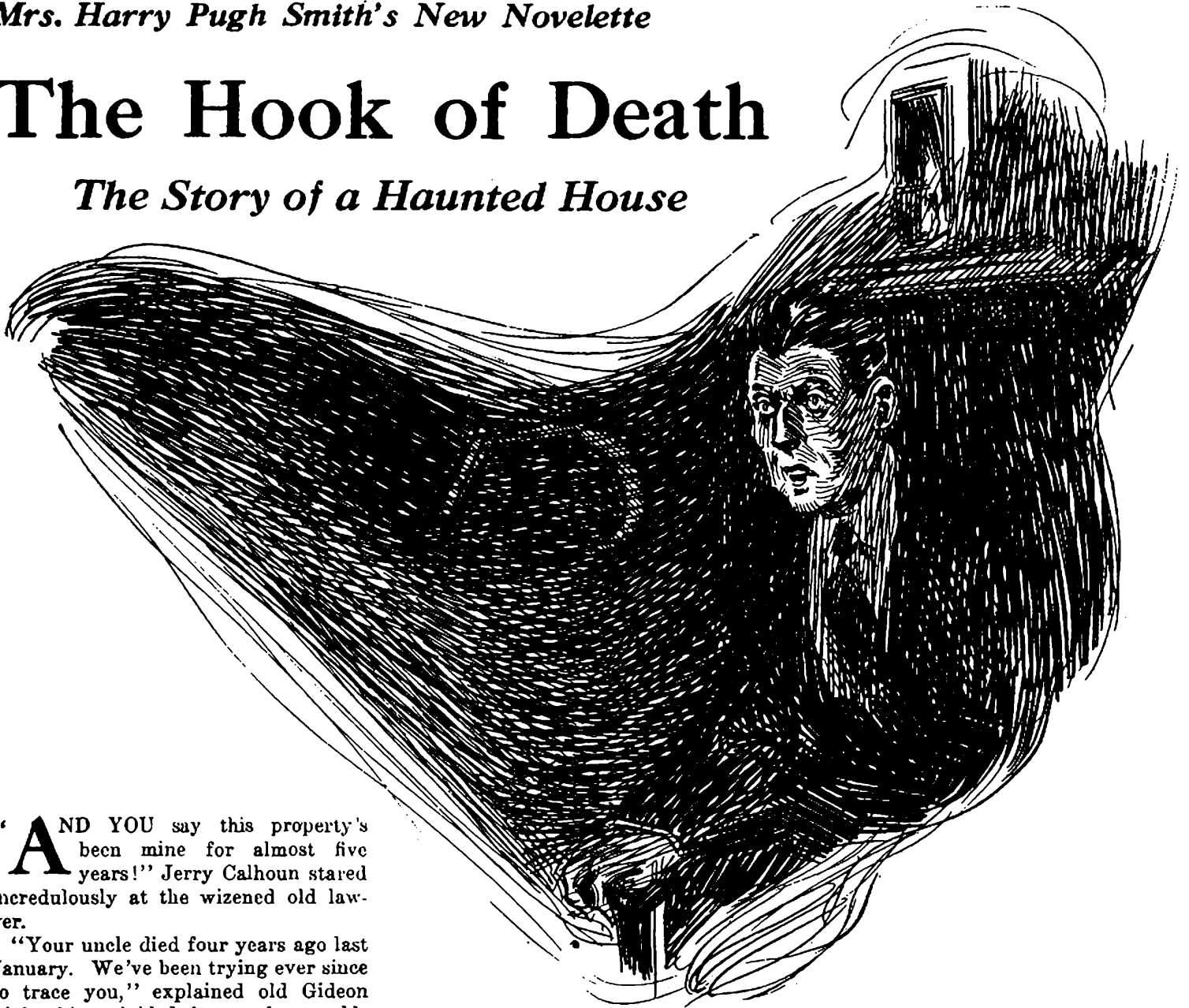


The Hook of Death

The Story of a Haunted House



“AND YOU say this property's been mine for almost five years!” Jerry Calhoun stared incredulously at the wizened old lawyer.

“Your uncle died four years ago last January. We've been trying ever since to trace you,” explained old Gideon Light, his wrinkled face as inscrutable as one of the yellowed law books in his dusty library.

Jerry Calhoun laughed. It was a refreshing boyish laugh, strangely out of keeping with the dry-as-dust formality of the old lawyer's office.

“To think I have been a property man all these years and didn't know it!” he chortled.

Old Gideon frowned slightly at his levity.

“The estate has remained in our hands, of course, since your uncle's death pending your return,” he said a bit stiffly. “You'll find everything accounted for down to the last penny.”

“I am sure of that,” said Jerry quickly, giving the old lawyer an affectionate smile. “My uncle trusted you completely.”

The lawyer opened a great ledger and began to tell off in his dry, monotonous voice the tale of the inheritance, so many stocks and bonds, so many shares

in this and that. He paused irresolutely, with his pencil on the last item in the book, as if suddenly loathe to go on.

“The old place down in the country,” he said, his voice altering subtly, “I am sorry to say, has netted no returns.” He paused and frowned slightly.

“You mean my uncle's house down the river?” asked Jerry. “The old family home?”

The lawyer nodded.

“We have been unable to rent it,” he said slowly. “I am afraid it has fallen into decay. We haven't been able for some time to get carpenters to do any work there, and last fall we even attempted to import city laborers without success. They left after one night.” Again there was a peculiar note in the lawyer's voice.

“You don't mean I have inherited an ancestral ghost with the rest of it?” asked Jerry Calhoun excitedly.

Again the old lawyer frowned as if he resented the young man's levity.

“I don't know just what the trouble is,” he replied, almost caustically, “but no one seems to want to pass a second night in the place. Even your uncle's faithful old servants fled within a month after his death.”

“Don't tell me Uncle Davy has gone!” cried Jerry, with real disappointment. “He's the only person, strangely enough, I remember in connection with the place.”

“Davy lives in the lodge at the gate,” said Gideon Light. “He is a sort of caretaker. Not,” he smiled grimly, “that a caretaker is especially needed. No one would go near the place at night, and I doubt if even Davy could be persuaded to enter the house after dark.”

"Well, this is exciting," laughed Jerry Calhoun. "You have the keys to the old place, I suppose?"

Gideon Light started.

"You're going up to look it over?" he asked sharply.

"Not only to look it over," Jerry replied with a grin, "I think I'll settle there. I always had an affection for the old place."

Gideon Light's face altered curiously.

"I shouldn't advise that," he said earnestly. "I shouldn't advise that at all. Perhaps I haven't made it clear, but," his lips worked painfully, "there really is something in that old house, spirit or devil, I know not what. Anyway, I should strongly advise against your attempting to live there. Your uncle owned several residences in town, as well as a number of apartment buildings. You can be fixed up very comfortably in any one of them."

"Surely a man of your intelligence doesn't believe in ghosts, Mr. Light?" laughed Jerry Calhoun. The words did not ring quite true, however. There was something in the old lawyer's expression which froze the mirth on his lips. "Of course I'm going to live there. It is the home of my people. My mother was born there and her father before her. I am not afraid of ghosts. Give me the keys."

Gideon Light attempted another remonstrance, but the young man laughed it aside, and at last the old lawyer rose and, securing a bunch of keys from a safety box in his safe, handed them with much reluctance to his client.

"I'll have nothing to do with this, remember," he said, with a warning gesture. "You are acting directly against my advice. I wash my hands of all responsibility in the matter."

Jerry Calhoun laughed and tucked the keys into his pocket.

"My country home is only a mile from you by the highway," continued Gideon Light. "If you should change your mind and decide not to attempt the house after all, my daughter and I shall be glad to offer you the hospitality of our home."

Jerry was touched by the old lawyer's solicitude in his behalf.

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Light," he said, with a flash of his very white teeth. "If the ghosts prove too much for me, I may avail myself of your offer."

He shook the old lawyer's hand and turned toward the outer office. At that moment the door flew open, and a man and girl appeared on the threshold. The man was a large stocky-built fellow about thirty-five years of age with a

round bullet head on which the greasy black hair was rapidly thinning. He had cold black eyes and a mottled face. He was dressed with a foppishness which irritated Jerry Calhoun. While the man was not bad-looking (he might even have been called handsome in a florid sort of way) despite his fastidiously-groomed person, there was something curiously repulsive about him.

In welcome contrast, the girl was altogether lovely, a slim, graceful creature with thick dark hair, cut close to her small, well-shaped head, and beautiful dark eyes, made darker and more seductive by the long black lashes which swept her clear, rose-pink cheeks.

"Aimée!" A smile transformed the old lawyer's face.

The girl went to him and he slipped an arm about her.

"And Rivers, how are you?" He turned as he spoke to the mottled-face man, the smile suddenly wiped as by a giant sponge from his withered lips.

"Fine, Giddy, old chap!" Jerry blinked. He had never imagined any one's taking liberties with old Gideon Light. "Couldn't be better." He slapped the little lawyer on the back and almost bent him double with the force of his mighty paw.

Gideon Light turned to Jerry.

"This is my daughter, Mr. Calhoun," his face lighted up as his eyes rested affectionately on the girl, "and," the light flickered out as if it had been turned off, "Mr. Stanley Rivers, her—her—" he paused and choked slightly.

"Her fiancé," Rivers finished for him.

Jerry experienced a sensation of shock. Was this lovely, exquisite young girl promised to that smug, oily fellow? He awoke suddenly to the fact that his too expressive face was registering his distaste at such a thought. Stanley Rivers was regarding him with narrowed eyes. Gideon Light had colored faintly and unconsciously tightened his arm about his daughter's waist. With an effort Jerry pulled himself together.

"We are to be neighbors, I think, Miss Light," he said, with an engaging smile. "Your father gives me to understand your country home is not more than a mile from the old Carewe place."

"Carewe!" the girl started. "Then you are Peter Carewe's—"

"Nephew," Jerry finished for her, with a second smile.

"But you do not intend to live at the Carewe place?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

"But I do!" laughed Jerry. "Or them's my intentions, if I am not roused out by the family ghost!"

"But surely father has told you—Don't you know—"

"Mr. Calhoun is not one who can be told," interrupted her father dryly. "He insists on taking his own advice."

"However, he hasn't passed a night in the old house yet," remarked Stanley Rivers, with an unpleasant smile.

"That's true," conceded Jerry. "Perhaps I shall have to take to my heels before morning, and if I do," he smiled at the girl, "I shall take advantage of your father's offer and claim your hospitality, Miss Light."

With this remark he closed the door, and as it shut off his view he had a curious impression of a tense silence in the room he had quitted.

II

YEARS and years before, when he was a little tad, Jerry Calhoun had looked his last on this city near which his mother's family had lived for generations.

The Carewes were a wealthy and stiff-necked clan. They owned large properties in town as well as the historic family residence some ten miles or so up the river near where the latter emptied into the gulf. Theresa Carewe and Peter, her brother, had been the last of the name. Peter had never quite forgiven his sister for marrying handsome, happy-go-lucky Tom Calhoun whom he called a ne'er-do-well and a rolling stone.

Tom Calhoun was a vagabond, a gypsy at heart, but while his wife lived he settled down quietly enough in her old home and lived a very prosaic life. On her death, however, when Jerry was seven years old, he pulled up stakes and drifted away with the tide to the wandering, irresponsible life he liked best. Peter Carewe had thought the child should be left behind with his mother's people, but Tom Calhoun had refused fiercely, and, taking the boy with him, he had left, never to return.

When he died fifteen years later in Buenos Aires young Jerry was so impregnated with his father's will-o'-the-wisp spirit he had thought of nothing else but journeying gayly on, here today, there tomorrow. Consequently Peter Carewe had been dead more than four years before his lawyers succeeded in getting a line on his elusive nephew and heir.

Now, although in every sense of the word his father's own son, Jerry Calhoun was a Carewe too. He had tender

childish memories of his mother's stately old home up the river, and when the lawyer finally reached him he found himself suddenly tired of vagabondage and quietly anxious for a sight of the old place.

Although it was mid-afternoon before his conference with the old lawyer was concluded, Jerry had determined to go up to Carewe Landing, as the house was called, before evening. By water it was a good three hours' journey. The river made many turns and twists, but the scenery was beautiful. Jerry was determined to have a motor-boat. There was an excellent highway for automobiles; Jerry meant to have a machine, too. But, lacking both these, he had discovered that there was a local train which made Heaton, a village from which Carewe Landing was only about two miles distant.

He had just time to pick up his traveling bags from the hotel (Jerry traveled light and in these bags he carried all his worldly possessions) and make the local. It was a dirty, fussy little train, making innumerable stops, but, propping his feet up on the opposite seat, Jerry pulled his hat down over his eyes and went to sleep. Inconveniences meant nothing to him. He had traveled far, both east and west, and seldom had he traveled de luxe.

A healthy, well-set-up young chap, this Jerry Calhoun, not especially good looking, but with a lean, muscular body, as hard as nails, and an intrepid adventurous spirit. His eyes were a clear sparkling blue, his skin tan and ruddy, and his fair hair sunburned a crisp brown. He had the look of one who has tasted life and found it good.

Heaton was a sleepy little southern town. A dozen or more loafers met the train and eyed the one passenger who alighted in speculative silence. It was now close to sundown. Jerry approached a dilapidated hack which stood by the side of the small station and addressed the driver, a woolly-headed old negro.

"Is your hack for rent, uncle?" he asked.

The old darky eyed him curiously, switching his cud of tobacco from cheek to cheek.

"I reckon it is," he said after a while. "Where'd you want to go, suh?"

"To Carewe Landing," replied Jerry beginning to gather up his bags preparatory to settling them in the lopsided vehicle.

"Carewe Landing!" The old negro started back. "Naw, suh, dis hack ain't for hire to go to ne Carewe's Landing, not after dark."

Jerry laughed good-naturedly and tried the efficacy of a greenback—to no avail. The old negro was obdurate.

"Naw, suh," he said, "I needs the money, but money wouldn't do dis here nigger no good, daid."

And there the matter ended. Jerry then sought out the local garage, with no better results. No one in Heaton cared to earn the money, it seemed, for a trip to Carewe Landing after dark. The best he could do was to leave his bags behind him, with the understanding that they would be sent on in the morning, and set off afoot.

Jerry was not particularly averse to the walk. His healthy young body required exercise, and it was a singularly warm and pleasant afternoon for November. The trees were not entirely bare, and so he tramped along the highway brown leaves settled across his path. The weather was unseasonably warm, however, and a bank of sullen clouds to the north and west foreboded a storm.

The sun sank. The highway branched sharply off to the west at a large country residence set well back in a grove of poplar trees. Jerry judged that this was Gideon Light's property, his face clouding as he remembered the girl and the florid man who had so suavely announced himself her fiancé.

After leaving the Light home the highway was less frequented. Jerry met no one on the darkening road. The sky was slowly growing overcast with ominous clouds and there was a great stillness in the woods on either side, such a silence as precedes a thunder storm.

After a brisk fifteen minutes' walk Jerry came out suddenly from the dark tangle of trees that overlapped the road upon the river and Carewe's Landing.

The moon, not yet overshadowed by the gathering storm, illumined the gaunt old house and mirrored it in the softly lapping waters of the river. It was an enormous house, parts of it very old, but it had been rebuilt and added to by every generation until little of the original structure remained. It stood on a slight elevation in the very bend of the river so that it edged the water on two sides. The highway ended at the great stone wall which enclosed the property. Here there was a massive iron gate and a small lodge.

Jerry was amazed at the ruin which had overtaken the house. He remembered it as a stately place with rolling lawns and glistening verandas. Now it stood black and desolate. Porches sagged, and here and there a shutter,

hanging by one hinge, flapped dismally in the rising wind. The grounds were a tangle of weeds and shrubbery, and from a tall cypress which overhung the river a rain crow croaked mournfully.

It looked what it was—a house deserted. The oncoming storm muttered sullenly in the distance, and as Jerry laid his hand upon the ancient bell a vivid flash of lightning flared in his very face so that he drew back startled. For a moment something ominous, something deadly, seemed to threaten him from the gaunt old house. Involuntarily, he remembered the old lawyer's warning. Then, with a reckless laugh, he pressed the bell. What was a ghost or two in his young life?

III

IT WAS several minutes before he received any answer. Then an old negro, palsied with age, appeared from the lodge, a lighted candle in his hand.

"Who be you?" he demanded sententiously, peering through the bars of the gate.

Jerry laughed.

"Why, it's me, Uncle Davy. Don't you remember me, Jerry Calhoun?"

The old negro was half blind with age and almost stone deaf, and it was some time before he could place the young man. After a time, however, his old face lighted up.

"Law, it's Massa Jerry," he cried, his old body trembling, "Miss Theresa's little Massa Jerry."

He unlocked the great gate with his unsteady hands and led the way toward the lodge. Here nothing would do but Jerry must let him serve a hastily prepared supper of fish, freshly caught from the river, and "co'n pone."

"Lawzy, young Massa, what brought you here dis time of night?" he asked after a time.

"Why, I've come to stay, Uncle Davy," cried Jerry. "I'm going to live here."

"Live here?" old Davy flung up his withered hands. "Lawd, Massa, ain't you heered dere's a debbil loose in his house. a evil sperit? You can't live here, young Massa."

Jerry laughed.

"I'm not afraid of ghosts, Davy, and I am going to live here." His jaw set when he made this remark, and those who knew him best would have argued the matter no further. "Come, let's have a look at the place. I want to pick out a bed for the night."

With old Davy still protesting feebly, Jerry led the way across the tangled yard to the large front entry. The steps

sagged beneath his weight, and again, as he laid his hand on the big brass doorknob, the lightning flared in his very face.

"Dat's a sign, dat's a warning!" cried the old negro, drawing back, almost tearfully. "Don't go in, Massa, don't tempt your fate!"

Jerry laughed and, turning the key in the lock, pushed the door open.

"Are the lights disconnected, Davy?" he asked.

"Naw, suh, lights and everything's just as the old massa left it. Mr. Gideon left word not to disturb nothing."

Jerry, with his candle, found the switch and at his touch the lower floor leaped into light. It was exactly as he remembered it, only gray with dust. Rats scurried away at their approach, and he felt a twinge of anger at the neglect into which the once fine old house had fallen. Nothing had been disturbed, however. The great double parlors on the right, the library and dining-room on the left, the big kitchens and scullery—he had but to close his eyes to see them 'as they had been in his mother's day.

"Well, things are not so bad as I feared," he said to Davy. "Turn a couple of scrub women loose in here a day or two, and it will begin to look natural. Now suppose we pick out my quarters."

He had suddenly remembered a suite of rooms on the first floor, just back of the double parlors. It consisted of bedroom, bath, and sitting-room, and overlooked the river. There was an outside entrance, and in every way it struck him as most suitable for his purpose. Davy followed him dubiously through the deserted house to this isolated spot.

"This will do admirably," cried Jerry, his face brightening.

The rooms were furnished with Spartan simplicity, but, once clear of dust, he was sure they would be comfortable enough.

"Can you fix me up for meals and bedding until I get some one in to clean up the house, Davy? It'll take a whole pack of servants to run this big place, but I'll do well enough if you can take care of me a day or two."

"I can take care of you, suh," said the old negro, scratching his grizzled head, "but please, young Massa, don't try to stay up here. Dere's a debbil loose in dis house, shore as you're born. Come on down to the lodge and sleep. Don't try to stay in dis old house."

Jerry laughed heartily and brushed the old negro's fears aside. Nevertheless, when he had been made as comfortable as possible and old Davy had gone

off muttering and shaking his head, he was conscious of a singular feeling of depression. Keys in hand, he made the rounds of the old mansion, locking every door and examining the fastenings of every window.

He paused for a long time in the great dusty library to stare up at a huge portrait which occupied a panel in the outer wall. It was his uncle's portrait, Peter Carewe of Carewe Landing, last of his name. Jerry stared thoughtfully into his uncle's dark saturnine face. There was little resemblance between them. Peter Carew was as dark and unsmiling as his nephew was fair. There was a lowering, almost menacing expression in his sallow face, and his stern mouth was set in forbidding lines.

He was a sparely built man with hauteur in every line of him, and his right hand was thrust forward defiantly as if he dared any one to think he was sensitive about his infirmity. For his right hand was cut off at the wrist and in its place, strapped tight to the stump, was a great iron hook!

It was this hook which drew Jerry's eyes. It had always fascinated him, the grim, hideous iron thing. As a child he had never been able to look away from it, although he realized even then that his unwinking scrutiny angered his uncle, who, despite his defiant attitude, was furiously sensitive about his missing hand.

The storm had begun in earnest by the time Jerry returned to his own quarters. The suite which he had selected was built in an L shape. The bedroom opened off the house proper by a single door. The sitting-room extended from it at right angles and occupied the furthest point in the bend of the river, with an outside door and windows on three sides, commanding a splendid view of the river. It was for this view he had remembered and chosen the suite.

The storm had brought a chill to the night, and old Davy had kindled a fire in the granite fireplace in the sitting-room. Flinging himself down in a chair, Jerry stared thoughtfully into the crackling flames. The rain beat against the house, the wind lashed it. Again and again the thunder roared, the lightning flashed.

Jerry was strangely wide awake. Something, probably the tales he had heard about the deserted house, made him curiously conscious of every sound in the gaunt old mansion, of which there were many. He had never known a house so alive with stealthy, furtive sounds. Calm reason assured him these noises were nothing more than the rats

in the deserted rooms overhead or the wind rattling the dangling shutters, still he could not deny he liked them not, these stealthy sounds.

Somehow, little by little as the fire died on the hearth, coal by coal, every nerve in his body grew tense. The muscles in his hands stood out like whips where he gripped the arms of the chair. Sweat started to his brow. He realized suddenly that he was staring with bulging eyes straight before him. Suddenly, without a flicker as warning, the lights flared up and went out. He was in utter darkness, a pulsing sensate darkness that seemed to rise in waves and beat against his face.

He could neither move nor speak. He hardly dared breathe. His heart fluttered like a wild thing in his breast and climbed up into his throat.

Then—he was aware of a presence. He was no longer alone. Somewhere near him in the vibrant darkness, there was something, he knew not what.

His hair prickled on his scalp. His breath died away in his throat. Faintly, through the darkness, something was glowing with a dull luminosity.

Jerry's eyes fixed upon it. He could not tear them away. It was as if he were bound by some dreadful spell. For between him and the wall, floating in space, he saw a hideous thing—the *stump of an arm and a glistening iron hook!*

IV

HOW long he sat there, his eyes fixed upon this awful sight, he never knew. Suddenly the glow which had attended the phenomenon vanished. There was a deathly silence. The darkness whirled and eddied about him, and then, suddenly, the lights flared up, dazzling him for the moment with their brilliance. He was alone.

Rising with an effort, Jerry ran to examine the doors and windows. Each was securely bolted. He stared wildly about him. Outside the wind shrieked like a mad thing and hurled itself at the gaunt old house as if it would tear it to pieces. Drawing his trembling hand across his damp brow, Jerry tried to compose his shaking limbs. For the first time in his life he had tasted fear, and it had left him shaken in body and soul.

The first thing Jerry did on arising in the morning was to set about securing scrubwomen to clean up the old house. But this he found easier said than done. Although Uncle Davy hitched up his ramshackle old cart and together they scoured the neighborhood, it was only by the most seductive promises he secured the services of three black man-

mies, and these had it distinctly understood in the bargain that their duties began after sunrise and ended before sundown.

With the odor of soapsuds and opened windows, the old mansion began to take on a more habitable air. Jerry's bags arrived, and, his own quarters having been thoroughly renovated, he felt more at home. He had negotiated a deal with the garage man for a natty red roadster, and, having set a trio of ragged negro boys to work, soon had the driveway sufficiently cleared out to back his machine into the long deserted carriage-house.

Uncle Davy received all these preparations for a permanent residence with gloomy forebodings, at which Jerry only laughed. If the strange apparition of the night had left the young man slightly paler, if his voice rang a little less true, it had not lessened his determination to make Carewe Landing his home. In the broad light of day he was inclined to make light of his ghostly experience, nor was he willing to admit that he had been in a state of sheer funk at the time.

In the afternoon he decided to try out his new roadster and at the same time pay his respects to his nearest neighbors, the Lights. After the storm of the night before the air had a delightful nip and tang, which restored the color to his tanned cheeks. The red roadster sang like a bird beneath its master's hand and Jerry's heart sang, too, but he would not admit, not even to himself, that a great part of the gladness pulsing in his breast was at the thought of seeing Aimée Light again.

Gideon Light called his country place The Poplars from the stately grove of trees in which it stood. It was comparatively new, a large brick house with stone pillars, sheared and velvety lawns on each side, and a rolling golf course at the back. Jerry was conscious of a faint resentment at its glistening perfection as compared with the ravished and desolated house he had left behind.

He found Aimée Light alone in a large sun parlor at the right of the house. She was reclining languidly on a wicker chaise longue. Canary birds sang in cages about her. The place was bright with blooming flowers and silken cushions, and yet there was something about the girl's listless figure and grave unsmiling eyes, staring a bit blankly before her, which sent a pang to Jerry's heart, he knew not why. She was too young to be so tired and languid.

At his approach she sprang to her feet, and, on recognizing him, a peculiar

expression (he had almost said, of dread, had there been anything in his eager brown face to awaken dread in her heart) leaped into her lovely dark eyes.

"You—have—decided to leave—that place?" she asked jerkily.

Jerry laughed.

"I should say not!" he cried. "I have moved in. I am only paying a neighborly call."

The girl turned so pale he feared for a moment she was going to faint. Then she put out her trembling hands and clung to his sleeve.

"But you must go away!" she cried earnestly. "You must leave that awful place! Do not risk another night in that terrible house!"

Jerry was both astonished and pleased by this plea, uttered as it was in a low and shaken voice. He was touched that this beautiful girl should be so solicitous about his safety. He was amazed that she should show such horror of his house.

"I think you are unnecessarily alarmed," he said gently, taking her cold little hands in his. "Really, I think the old place has been maligned. I am very anxious to make it my home. I have a warm affection in my heart for it, and," his jaw set, "I have no intention of being scared away!"

"But you do not know!" She was trembling violently. "I assure you, you are in grave danger. Do not trifle with it. I beg you, leave! Leave that house without an hour's delay!"

"But, Miss Light, I do not see—" Jerry began, and then broke off abruptly.

The girl was staring past him with a sort of frozen horror on her white face. He turned, her hands still clasped in his. On the threshold stood Stanley Rivers, his cold black eyes narrowed to pencil points, his upper lip drawn back in a snarling grimace. Mechanically, Jerry dropped the girl's hands.

"Ah, here is our brave ghost breaker!" cried the older man, advancing into the room. The ugly smile had vanished from his face, but Jerry knew as he looked into the cold black eyes that in Stanley Rivers he had a mortal enemy. "Are you ready to cry quits, young man?"

"Not by any means!" cried Jerry, his blue eyes matching the cold black ones for insolence. "I like the old house—and—I am going to stay."

"Stay?" Stanley Rivers echoed the word a bit blankly, his heavy brows drawing in an ominous scowl. "You haven't had enough, eh?"

"No," said Jerry shortly, and, turning his back on the man to whom he had taken such an instant dislike, he spoke to the girl, "I really must be going. I only ran over to say good bye."

He held out his hand. The girl's fingers tightened and clung about his, as if she were trying to convey some message to him, while her dark eyes besought him dumbly.

Jerry moved toward the door. Stanley Rivers had drawn nearer to the girl. It seemed to Jerry she shrank from the contact.

"There—there is a little dance at the Country Club tonight. Mr. Calhoun," she said, flushing suddenly. "Won't you come?"

It was on Jerry's tongue to refuse, but something in Stanley Rivers' eyes warned him that the man was annoyed at his fiancée's suggestion. For some reason Jerry's presence at the Country Club was highly distasteful to him, and in a fit of sheer perversity Jerry accepted the girl's invitation. Nor did he miss the dark flush which stained Rivers' mottled face at that acceptance nor the glad little smile which curved Aimée Light's wistful red lips.

On his way home Jerry puzzled over the pair he had just quitted. It had repelled him from the first, the idea that this lovely dark-eyed girl was promised to a man of Stanley Rivers' type, and somehow, now that he had seen them together, he resented the fact still more. He was convinced not only that Aimée did not love the man to whom she was engaged, but even that she was repelled and frightened by him. It was terror and nothing else Jerry had surprised in her eyes when Stanley Rivers appeared in the doorway, and he was not blind to the fact that she shrank from any contact with the fellow. Why, then, had she engaged herself to him?

It could not be for financial reasons. Everything pointed to great prosperity on Gideon Light's part, this magnificent new country home with its costly furnishings, to say nothing of certain valuable properties which the little lawyer owned in town. No, there was no earthly reason why Gideon Light's daughter should marry for money, and from what he had seen in the office he fancied that Stanley Rivers was no favorite of the old solicitor. Then why had Aimée given herself to this fellow with his mottled face and cold black eyes?

Jerry was one of the last to arrive at the Country Club. He had taken great precautions to see that the great house was carefully bolted and secured for the

night before he left. Letting himself out by the outer door in his sitting-room, he stood for a moment staring back at the darkened house. The wing which contained his quarters had been built in the very bend of the river and the steps by which he had emerged were continued a little farther on in a second flight leading down to a narrow wharf or landing from which the house took its name. The waters lapped softly about this landing and the white timbers rose and fell gently with the even breath of the river.

The club ballroom was crowded when Jerry appeared in the doorway. Knowing no one, he was on the point of turning away when Aimée passed in her fiancé's arms. Over Stanley Rivers' shoulder her eyes encountered Jerry. Instantly a soft wave of color shot into her delicate face. Jerry's pulses hammered.

"The next? May I have the next dance?" he whispered.

She nodded. Stanley Rivers turned. His face darkened when he recognized the man in the doorway and, scowling, he lost himself and his partner in the maze of the dance.

Two men, strangers to Jerry, were conversing at his right.

"Is Gideon Light really going to allow his daughter to marry that man?" said one, making a wry face at Stanley Rivers' retreating back.

"It looks like it," replied the other.

"I don't understand it. Does any one know anything about the fellow? Where'd he come from? Who is he? What's his business?"

"I don't know. He came here from up east, he says, on a land deal of some sort, got in with Gideon Light in some way, and has been here ever since."

"But what does he do? What's his line? He's always got money. What's his business?"

"Can't say," replied the other nonchalantly. "He's in and out of town a good deal, has an office in our building, always has a string of fellows running in and out, strangers to me; I never saw any of them. He seems to keep them busy though. I believe I did hear he was thinking of buying some land somewhere between the old Carewe place and Gideon Light's country house."

"That's some house! Old Giddy certainly must have struck it rich lately. It takes the lawyers to drag in the coin. Ten years ago Gideon Light was a poor man."

At this minute the music ended and Jerry set himself to hunt out Aimée and claim his dance. Stanley Rivers frowned when the younger man approached, and there was something almost malicious in

Jerry's smile as he bore Aimée away. Yet somehow there was little he found to say. The girl's sweetness, her wistful beauty tied his tongue.

They danced. She was like a flower in his arms. His breath quickened. Unconsciously, his arms tightened about her. He wondered if she were conscious of his heart throbbing against hers. He stole a glance at her sweet averted face. She glanced up. Their eyes met and clung. The world rocked about him. For a moment they two were alone, man and woman, alone in all the world.

Then the music ended with a crash, and Stanley Rivers, with a sneering smile on his smug face, claimed his fiancée and took her away.

▽

JERRY did not dance again. Somehow, the sweetness of the girl still lingered in his arms. He could not profane her place with another.

His blood was on fire as he raced his engine through the night. It had been his boast that he was a man's man. Women had had little to do with his scheme of life. Now, all at once, he knew that life meant nothing to him but the girl he had left behind him, dancing in Stanley Rivers' arms.

The old house stood gaunt and silent against the night when he returned. Having put up the roadster, he made his way slowly around to the steps which led up to his own quarters, and let himself in. The rooms were comfortable and his own possessions had been scattered about, and yet it was less cheerful than he had expected. Somehow, the calm with which he had come to regard his experience of the night before left him in the midnight loneliness, and to his chagrin he felt something like dread creeping over him.

Determined not to yield to this singular depression, Jerry resolutely locked the door behind him and having, as on the preceding night, tested each door and window to see that it was securely fastened, he prepared for bed. It went decidedly against his grain to acknowledge anything supernatural about the curious phenomenon which he had witnessed the night before and he had prepared an experiment.

Since the doors and windows had not been tampered with, he was convinced of one of two things: either there were duplicate keys or there was some other mode of entry to the room. With these old houses anything was possible. There might be a secret panel somewhere in the wall. He had supplied himself with a paper sack of flour. This he sprinkled

very carefully around the walls in both rooms, hemming himself in with a magic white circle.

"We'll see if Mr. Ghost leaves any footprints," he said to himself, with a grim smile.

When he had finished he switched off the lights and went to bed, taking care to place an electric torch beneath his pillow. He had determined to lie awake and wait for the demonstration, if there were any. But it was very late. He had had a long and strenuous day. After a time his eyes grew heavy. He made a desperate effort to hold them open and failed. Slowly but surely he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was to a dull, yet strangely luminous glow. He recognized it instantly. It was the light that had accompanied his ghostly visitor on the night before, and at the same moment he beheld, poised apparently in midair not a foot from his startling eyes, that hideous stump with its menacing hook!

For a second he could not breathe. Instinctively, he shrank back, but he was powerless to lift a hand. Nearer and nearer moved the deadly hook. He cringed. He would have cried out, but his tongue was a leaden thing in his mouth.

Slowly, inch by inch, the ghastly thing approached. There was a deathly cloying sweetness in the air. Jerry summoned every effort to turn his eyes away. He could not stir.

Another moment, and the ghastly hook would rip his throat from ear to ear. He began to pray for anything to end the ghastly suspense. He felt the cold, clammy metal upon his skin, shivered, cried out—and knew no more.

WHEN Jerry's spirit shuddered back to consciousness the room was in utter darkness. For a moment he lay trembling, his brow dewed with cold sweat. Then he sprang to his feet and turned on the light. The room was exactly as he had left it, doors and windows securely bolted, nor had the virgin whiteness of the flour which he had spread about the floor been disturbed.

For a moment Jerry's head reeled. Was he to admit, after all, that there was something supernatural about this weird thing which beset him? How could any human agency enter and leave at will a room which was securely fastened against all entrance, and leave no trace? Was it a devil as old Davy insisted, an evil spirit that haunted this place? Had that sinister and malevolent hook, which Peter Carewe had used in life, refused to lie silent in the tomb with its master?

Had it usurped a deadly and awful life of its own?

In the morning these speculations struck the young man as absurd and ridiculous. Despite the fact that it seemed impossible for a human agency to be at bottom of these manifestations, Jerry was convinced that there was some natural explanation for the weird occurrences if only he could fathom it.

For some reason, his presence in the old mansion was resented. Some one was determined to drive him from the house and he was equally positive it was no ghost, nothing supernatural, that was moving heaven and earth to create a solitude in this particular place.

That peculiar cloying sweetness which had accompanied his weird experience of the night had given him a clue, and something else had excited his curiosity. It had struck his attention that while everything else about the old house had been allowed to go to ruins the landing beneath his window had been but recently rebuilt of strong white timber. This was an incongruity for which he could not account. Even in his uncle's day the landing had been a thing of the past. When the house was built the river had been the sole thoroughfare. Now it was abandoned, since automobiles and locomotives had made its method of travel too leisurely for an impatient new generation. Yet the fact stood out that the landing alone was in perfect repair.

Long before the charwomen arrived for their day's work, Jerry went for a swim. There was something he wished to see with his own eyes. Uncle Davy himself was just rising when his young master returned to the house.

In the afternoon Jerry went for a spin in his roadster, pausing for a moment, though such had not been his intention, at Gideon Light's place. Somehow he had found it impossible to go by. He was drawn, as a needle is drawn to the magnet, to the girl who from the moment he had first seen her had absorbed all his thoughts.

Stanley Rivers was in the lower hall when Jerry rang the bell. He saw him distinctly through the glass panel at the side of the door. As the butler started to answer the bell, Rivers beckoned him and whispered into the man's ear, disappearing immediately afterward into the interior of the house.

"Miss Light is not at home," said the butler. This although Jerry had seen the flutter of her white skirts in the sun-room.

For a moment the young man was tempted to smash in the butler's smug face, then, realizing violence could not

aid his cause, he flung off in a pet. As his car roared down the avenue he saw Stanley Rivers' face grinning at him sardonically from an upper window.

True to their promise, the negro women left at sundown, and when Jerry reached the house, after dining at the Country Club, the dusk had settled wanly. Old Davy had retired to the lodge, but in Jerry's own quarters a fire had been kindled. Turning on the light, he sat down beside the fading coals. The night was cloudless, but the wind soured restlessly about the house, and once again Jerry was conscious of the countless furtive noises which encompassed him.

A log broke on the hearth, sending up a shower of sparks. Jerry started, his lips tightening, his hand instinctively flying to his hip pocket, and at that instant there was the sharp tinkle of breaking glass and a stone crashed through one of the windows facing the river and rolled to his feet. For a moment Jerry did not move. Then he snatched up the missile. A bit of dirty paper was wound about it. He tore it loose and read:

"Get out within the hour, or you'll go out in a coffin."

Jerry read this sinister note a second and third time, then he turned toward the broken window through which it had come and smiled grimly.

"Ghosts don't write notes," he said. "Somebody wants me out of here mighty bad, but—" and his face hardened—"somebody's made a fatal mistake. I don't scare worth a cent."

It was ten o'clock by his watch. His ghostly visitor was unlikely to appear before midnight. Putting out all the lights, Jerry sat down to wait. There was no going to bed for him tonight. With flashlight in easy reach and an ominous blue-black revolver in his hip pocket, he assumed his vigil. He was taking no chances. He knew he was dealing with desperate men. He felt sure they meant to play their trump card tonight and he was prepared for any expedient.

An hour, an hour and a half, passed. By the radiant dial of his watch he saw it lacked fifteen minutes of midnight. Every nerve in his body grew taut. The moment was almost at hand.

Suddenly there came a cautious tapping at the outer door. For a moment he sat perfectly still. Then every drop of blood in his body leaped as a low voice spoke his name. It was a woman's voice.

Leaping across the room, he unbolted the door, and flung it noiselessly open.

Upon the threshold, a dark cape wrapped about her, stood Aimée Light!

VI

JERRY drew her after him into the room. She was breathing rapidly as if she had been running.

"Thank God, I am in time!" she panted. "You must not stay here another minute. Quick! your very life is in danger!"

She clung to him in an agony of terror. Jerry's blood quickened to a tumult in his veins. She loved him, this starry-eyed girl! Every accent of her low anguished voice told him so. She loved him, and she had risked everything to save him!

"Beloved!" his arms closed about her, the sweetness of her raced through him. He drew her to him, his lips met hers. He grew giddy with their clinging rapture.

"Beloved!" he cried again but the words died on his lips, for with a dreadful cry Aimée had torn herself from his embrace. She drew back, and between them, hideous with its menacing glow, Jerry saw the iron hook!

There was a blinding flash, a deafening report. Lights flared up suddenly. A great hole yawned in the sitting-room floor, a trap-door, and beside it, crouched like a leopard for its spring, stood Stanley Rivers!

He was dressed in black, even his face was smeared with charcoal. On one arm he wore an iron hook, strapped on with leather thongs and made luminous with phosphorus. He was glaring with baleful eyes and snarling updrawn lips at Jerry, who, one arm about Aimée, leveled a pistol full at the rascal's heaving breast.

"Our friend, the ghost!" cried Jerry, his blue eyes narrowing ominously, his finger tightening on the trigger. His face hardened. "The jig's up, Rivers, I'm on to your game. You made a bad blunder when you rubbed the hook with the stuff. Of course, you didn't know I spent five years in the tropics as Deputy Narcotic Agent. I know that smell, Rivers, and the minute I caught a whiff of it I was on to your game."

Stanley Rivers said nothing, but his heavy face turned pasty.

"Today in my uncle's desk I came across certain papers," Jerry went on. "I know now why you came here. Somehow, you got hold of the fact that Gideon Light had misused some of my uncle's funds. You went to my uncle and offered to sell your information. He had you thrown out of his house.

"Unfortunately, just then my uncle died—and you went to Gideon Light with threats of exposure. But he had no money to pay. Then a daring scheme entered your mind. Carewe's Landing formed an ideal base for smuggling dope in from Mexico. By means of motor-boats the stuff could be brought in at night from some schooner safely anchored out in the gulf. An underground trench could be dug from the landing to the house, with an exit by means of a trapdoor in this very room. This morning I went swimming, and I not only traversed your underground passage way but even examined the cellar where your supplies are stored.

"Having compelled Gideon Light, by threatening him with ruin, to accede to your scheme, you proceeded to put your villainy into execution. Having bought yourself an iron hook similar to that worn by my uncle, you terrorized every one who entered the place until it was finally deserted to your pleasure. You scared every one in the neighborhood so thoroughly no one would come near the place at dark. The only guard was a palsied old negro, half blind and nearly deaf with old age. Once or twice a month your schooner arrived and its cargo was stored in the cellar, from which at your leisure the goods were slipped away in trucks under cover of night by the villainous crew you brought in with you.

"Not content with your ill-gotten wealth, you next demanded that Gideon Light give you his daughter's hand. By

this time he was cowed body and soul. He dared not refuse. Then—I arrived on the scene. Unfortunately I did not scare. You came here tonight determined to be rid of me even at the cost of murder. But your plans have failed. I have notified the authorities in town of the whole plot. Your office has been raided. Your confederates are already in jail and a posse is on its way here to confiscate your illegal goods and carry you, most noble ghost, to prison."

"Is that so?" cried Stanley Rivers, his thick lips writhing furiously, his bestial face convulsed with rage. "Do you think, you young whippersnapper, you can outwit me! My boat lies at the landing. I'll have you yet and the girl, too, before your posse arrives!"

As he spoke, he lunged forward like a maddened bull. The revolver fell from Jerry's hand at that unexpected onslaught. Rivers' mighty arms shot out, encircling the younger man, and together they crashed to the floor, writhing over and over together, the larger man seeking furiously to rip the younger man's throat with the hideous hook on his right arm.

Terrified, her eyes dilating in her white face, Aimée watched that desperate struggle, too fearful of the outcome to turn her gaze for a second. Rivers was by far the bulkier of the two, but Jerry was as lithe as an eel, and again and again he writhed away from that cruel hook as it would have ripped his throat.

Back and forth they lashed upon the floor. At length, by an almost superhu-

man effort, Jerry struggled to his feet. Rivers dashed at him, the murderous hook glistening in the light. Aimée shuddered and tried to tear her eyes away. Rivers bellowed like a savage beast and drove straight at Jerry's heart.

The younger man's fist shot out, landed full on the heavy, mottled jaw. Rivers groaned and reeled back. His foot struck the pistol which he had jarred from Jerry's hand. Uttering a cry of furious triumph, he stooped and sought to seize the weapon with his left hand. Somehow, they never knew how, in his maddened haste he lost his balance and fell headfirst into the dark cavern where the trap-door yawned on the blackness of the underground passage.

There was a dull thud, a shuddering groan, then silence.

Kneeling, Jerry flashed his pocket torch into the abysmal darkness. Rivers lay where he had fallen in a shapeless huddle, his head bent under the weight of his heavy body. He was quite dead, his arms sprawled out, the hook gleaming like an evil thing at his side.

"Aimée!" Jerry drew the shuddering, trembling girl into his arms. "Do not cry. Your troubles are over. The 'ghost' is dead. Your father is freed, and—" the words caught in his throat—"I love you."

Aimée, looking up through her tears, tried to smile as she laid her head on his shoulder, and, for the second time, she surrendered him her lips.

Table of Contents

The contents of *Weird Tales* is fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. All communications should be addressed to the publishers main office at 854 North Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

THE ABYSMAL HORROR	3
B. WALLIS	
BLACK SORCERY	13
PAUL ANNIXTER	
THE HAND OF FATMA	21
HARRY ANABLE KNIFFIN	
THE MAN WHO BANISHED HIMSELF	25
FERDINAND BERTHOUD	
A GAME OF CHANCE	29
HENRY LIEFERANT AND SYLVIA B. SALTZBERG	
THE OPEN WINDOW	33
FRANK OWEN	
THE CAT CALLED CARLOS	37
H. F. LESLIE	
THE PICTURE IN THE HOUSE	40
H. P. LOVECRAFT	
DRACONDA	43
JOHN MARTIN LEAHY	
THE HOOK OF DEATH	56
MRS. HARRY PUGH SMITH	
THE MONSTROSITY	64
GEORGE W. CRANE	
THE COBRA LILY	69
LEDYARD M. BAILEY	
WEIRD CRIMES	78
SEABURY QUINN	
THE BLACK CAT	83
EDGAR ALLAN POE	
THE EYRIE	86
THE EDITOR	

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