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## Contents for April, 1926

- Cover Design** ..... E. M. Stevenson  
*"She struck with her dagger, and her assailant hurled her to the floor, searing, searing at her."*
- Wolfshead** ..... Robert E. Howard 437  
*An Evil Something Wrought Frightful Death*
- The Outsider** ..... H. P. Lovecraft 449  
*An Oulé Masterpiece—One of the Strangest Stories Ever Written*
- The Contra-Talisman** ..... George Ballard Bowers 454  
*Tale of Filipino Superstition—and an Anting-Anting*
- The Hooded Death** ..... Joel Martin Nichols, Jr. 457  
*Two Milk-white Cobras Guarded the Jewels of the Temple*
- Out of the Mists of Time** ..... William Benton Frazier 465  
*A Terrible Doom Rolled out from the Fogs of Antiquity*

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- Knights of the Red Owl**.....**Elwin J. Owens** 474  
*A Portly Businessman Undergoes a Wild Night of Terror*
- The Derelict Mine (Part 1)**.....**Frank A. Mochnamt** 481  
*Three-part Mystery Serial, Which Rises to a Ghastly Climax*
- Teeth**.....**Galen C. Collin** 492  
*Old Ling Foo Plans a Terrible Revenge on his Daughter's Lover*
- The Vengeance of India**.....**Seabury Quinn** 497  
*Graveyard Tale of Hypnotism, and Corpses That Rise in the Night*
- The Phantom Drug**.....**A. W. Kapfer** 508  
*Document Found in the Burned Ruins of an Insane Asylum*
- The House in the Willows**.....**Sewell Peaslee Wright** 513  
*A Rational Ghost-Story*
- Duval's Weird Experiment**.....**F. Williams Series** 517  
*Eery Tale of a Scientist's Attempt to Pierce the Veil*
- Weird Story Reprints**  
**No. 10. The Mummy's Foot**.....**Theophile Gautier** 527  
*Hermionthis, Princess of Egypt, Returns for her Lost Foot*
- The Tiger**.....**William Blake** 534  
*Verse*
- Things That Are God's**.....**C. Franklin Miller** 536  
*The Wolf-man Comes to his Senses Through a Terrible Crime*
- The Yellow Specter**.....**Stewart Van der Veer** 541  
*Old Spanish Prison—a Terrified Bride—the Ghost of a Chinaman*
- The Glacier Lode**.....**Strickland Gillilan** 549  
*Soapy Sam Was Balmy, so his Friends Thought*
- On the Dead Man's Chest (Conclusion)**.....**Eli Colter** 553  
*Four-part Occult Serial*
- The Eyrie**..... 556  
*A Chat With the Readers*

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# The HOUSE in the WILLOWS

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

THE old Lathrop house stood on the lip of a wooded, swampy ravine that looked dismal even on the sunniest day, and emitted a faint miasma of dead and rotting vegetation. A loosely planked old bridge spanned the brook that crept into the maze of brush on each side, and when an occasional vehicle did pass that way, the hollow rumbling of the timbers echoed grumbly along the wooded sides of the little steep-sided valley.

It was always damp in the ravine, and at night there was usually mist floating there. Sometimes it was dense, enfolding fog that wrapped one about in dank, stifling folds, and sometimes one could see only faint, ghostly wisps floating here and there.

It was but very little dryer up by the house, and the ancient willows that stood grouped around the house drooped like despondent, hopeless sentries, grown old and gray in thankless service. Their trunks were soft and green with decades of moss; and the damp, dense shadow of the pendulous boughs had so protected the roof of the house from the healthy cleansing of the sun that here also a green patina added to the unwholesome atmosphere of the place.

There was something squat and repulsive about the house itself; its wide-angled gables stared blankly and the absolute lack of eaves, a characteristic of early New England houses, gave the building a bleak, inhospitable

look that fitted in perfectly with its background.

The fact that for nearly a decade it had been unoccupied, so that the flags of the crooked, narrow walk had been up-thrust by rank growths and the garden had become a choked and tangled jungle of weeds, was not due to the appearance of the house or its surroundings, however. Your typical New Englander, while often harshly superstitious, is seldom susceptible to such intangible influences.

Briefly and baldly, the old Lathrop house was not occupied because the last Lathrop of the line had committed murder there one night, and was paying the penalty down at Thomaston.

There were idle rumors, spread by no one knows who, that the place was haunted. Belated couples returning from a dance at the Corners had seen ghostly figures moving in the yard, and mysterious lights had flickered behind the staring windows. It was a common dare at parties to challenge some brash young man to go alone to the old house and bring back, as a token that he had actually made the trip, a scrap of the moldering wallpaper.

Usually the dare was declined, but once in a while a young man, eager to prove his bravery in the eyes of some fair damsel, would brave the midnight terrors of the place and return, usually breathless and white of face, with the proof of his courage

clutched tightly in his hand. Civilization, education, even religion are poor armor against the insidious attacks of superstition when one is alone at night in an old, deserted house, where willows whisper outside, and ancient beams and joints creak with weariness, and branches scratch on the roof and tap on dusty, bleary-eyed panes as the wind comes and goes.

THE Erskine farm was only three-quarters of a mile or so from the old Lathrop place, and so it is not surprizing that at Lina Erskine's birthday party someone suggested the trip to the old deserted house under the willows.

"There's an idea for you!" approved the hostess, her gray eyes dancing provocatively over the masculine portion of the crowd in the big, old-fashioned kitchen. "Anyone volunteer?"

It may have been accidental, but as she put the question her eyes rested momentarily on Cal Weaver. Cal had been a contestant for Lina's hand ever since the old days in the little white school house over on the Ridge. He did not hesitate.

"I'll go!" he said, and Lina's approving smile was ample reward. He felt very brave and daring there in the warm, comfortable kitchen, and he laughed off the good-natured jeers of the rest of the party with careless ease.

"Don't you folks fret! I'll bring back a section of paper big enough to recognize, all right. And I won't come back lookin' as though I'd seen a ghost, either, like Art Pebbles did!" And with this parting shot at his rival, he clapped on his hat and strode, whistling gayly, out into the night.

As long as he was on the main road, Cal's shrill piping rose triumphantly above the sharp and rather raw autumn wind, but when he turned into

the grass-grown, winding old road that led past the Lathrop house, his whistle, despite his efforts, grew faint and tremulous. The night was very dark, with fragments of clouds scudding overhead like great black bats, and the wind whistled with a soft droning sound in the pines that stood along the road.

He came at length to the edge of the wooded valley, on the opposite side of which was the house that was his destination. As usual, there was a thin, unhealthy mist down in the ravine. Cal could see it writhing and twisting over the tops of the alder bushes, and the damp, miasmic tang of it filled his lungs.

Bravely he strode down the hill, the floating fog seeming to close around him like a shroud. It reeked with the unpleasant breath of swampy vegetation, and it was an effort to breathe in the moisture-laden atmosphere.

The loose old bridge at the bottom of the ravine rumbled with starting loudness under Cal's determined heels. The noise startled a night bird into eery life, and something in the dense growth crashed through the underbrush with a sound like a man running in frantic haste. Cal's heart was pounding against his ribs with rapid, hammerlike blows, but he gritted his teeth and kept on.

The gravel crunched loudly under his feet as he emerged from the mist that concealed the bottom of the ravine and started to climb the opposite hill, and now and then a rounded stone would start rolling down the steep incline, to strike the sounding boards of the bridge, and perhaps roll from there into the murky, brackish water below with a thick and muffled plop. Gradually, in the faint and ever-changing light of the cloud-obscured moon, Cal could make out ahead and to the right the irregular black bulk of the big willows.

He paused for a moment before turning in at the weed-grown walk

that led through a gap in the low, disintegrating stone wall and peered into the darkness for a glimpse of the house. He could make out the faint outline of one weathered gray gable, with two blank windows staring unblinkingly in the dim light of the obscured moon.

Suddenly he gave vent to a startled, muffled exclamation. He saw, or thought he saw, the shadow of a man pass in front of one of the staring windows; a black shadow that moved silently and joined its fellows, leaving no trace behind.

"Nerves!" Cal decided. He spat out the word with disgust and started determinedly for the gray bulk of the old house.

As he approached, it gradually detached itself from the dense shadows that surrounded it, like some great squat beast emerging from its hiding place and preparing for a leap. From the direction of the house came a sudden creak, as of a rusty, long-disused door swinging on its hinges, followed by the sound of muffled footsteps.

"A door swinging in the wind, and a rat or mouse prowling around," muttered Cal, translating the sounds to his liking. He swished through the tall grass of the dooryard, mounted the rotting stoop, and tried the front door. It was locked, and though he pressed against it with all the weight of his body the firm old oaken panels refused to give.

"I never thought to ask how to get in," he mumbled. "Must be that you slip in a window." He tried the first window he came to, a small, many-paned affair, and gave a little pleased grunt as it slid up easily. Propping the window open with a piece of wood torn from the stoop, Cal threw a leg over the sill and drew himself into the room.

IT WAS much warmer inside, and the air was thick and musty. The room itself was utterly dark, save for

the dim rectangles that showed on three sides of the room where there were windows. Something moved in the room above, and Cal's heart raced for a moment until he recognized it as the scampering of a mouse. A low-hanging willow branch tapped lightly on a window, and Cal stared around nervously until he located the source of the sound. Then, with a little nervous chuckle, he started feeling along the wall of the room until he located a torn edge of wall-paper.

With a sharp rip he tore off a big triangle of paper and crammed it into a pocket of his coat. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction and started for the window.

A noise behind him caused him to wheel nervously in his tracks. He thought he saw something move for an instant, far back in the dense shadows in a far corner of the room, but though he stood as still as a stone image while his heart thumped perhaps a hundred times, he saw nothing more, and heard no sound save his own quick breathing.

Partly reassured, he backed toward the open window. As he moved, something came to life in the corner of the room he had been watching. *A silent black shadow, the shadow of a man with stooping shoulders and outstretched head, passed in front of one of the windows.*

The Thing came nearer, on silent feet. Cal could see it more plainly; it was huge and black, and towered over him. Here and there it glowed with patches of greenish fire, and its eyes burned out of a face that was as gray and hideous as the face of Death itself.

With a choking gasp, Cal leaped for the window. As he did so, the Thing leaped also. Something struck Cal a terrific blow just at the base of the brain. He crumpled to the floor with a groan, a mocking, high-pitched chuckle ringing in his ears.

THE searching party, brave with lanterns and numbers, found him in a crumpled heap beside the window, his dark hair matted and sticky with blood. He was just regaining consciousness as they arrived.

Two burning eyes, blazing in a gray, cadaverous face, gazed through one of the windows into the room, but the light of the half-dozen lanterns on the floor prevented anyone from noticing. After a few minutes a tall, stoop-shouldered figure in flapping clothes moved silently away from the window and started crawling through the thick underbrush that had encroached upon the doorway.

On all fours the figure crept, pushing through the tangled branches, crawling over decaying logs that sometimes glowed with the phosphorescent light of the fox-fire, stumbling over stones and out-cropping ledges. Chuckling in an excited, high-pitched voice the figure hastened on.

"Thought you'd ketch me, didn't ye? Not that time!" The shrill undertone sounded like the speaking of some great night-prowling rat.

The man came at length to the stream that flowed at the bottom of the ravine. He stood erect and gaged the width as carefully as he could in the darkness and the mist, his eyes gleaming with the light of madness, his whole demeanor accented by the weird surrounding and the un-

canny glowing of the fox-fire that had rubbed on to his clothes and from his clothes to his face and hands.

He gave a sudden leap, out over the murky, sluggish stream. His feet landed in splashing mud. He struggled wildly to regain his balance, but his muck-trapped feet hindered him.

With a sodden splash he fell backward. The back of his head struck a submerged boulder, just under the surface of the water. He shuddered, as though the water had chilled him, and raised one hand as if in protest. Then his hand dropped to his side and his head slid from the rock to the bottom of the stream. Open-eyed, staring, the pale white face looked up from the bottom of the stream, up through the brackish, polluted water and the floating gray mist . . . . up at the cloudy sky . . . .

THE *Morning Sentinel* the next day ran this item:

#### PRISONER ESCAPES FROM GUARD

While being taken from Thomaston to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Burton Lathrop escaped from his guard, leaped from the train, and at this writing is still at liberty.

Posses are scouring the country and it seems likely that the escaped maniac's capture is only a matter of a few hours. From what little information the police have been able to obtain it seems certain that Lathrop is heading in the direction of his old home, and authorities there are being warned to be on the lookout for him.

