

# WEIRD TALES

THE UNIQUE MAGAZINE

EDWIN BAIRD, Editor

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crowded in for good measure

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# The HOUSE of DEATH

## *A Strange Tale*

By F. GEORGIA STROUP

**T**HE THREE women looked about the little kitchen. For some reason, each seemed to avoid the eyes of the other.

"My land, but it's hot in here!" Mrs. Prentis moved to the north window to raise it.

As she propped up the heavy sash with a thin board that lay on the sill, a gust of hot wind swept through the room from a drought-parched Kansas cornfield.

Seeking relief in action, her daughter, Selina, hastened to the opposite window and pushed it up, as a cloud of dust thickened in the road in front of the house. A small herd of bawling cattle were milling past the house in the heat and glare of the August sun. Their heads drooped dejectedly and their tongues lolled from parched mouths.

"My land, Selina, there goes another bunch of cattle out west. Does heat all how hard 'tis to get water in this country. Jes' seems to me sometimes like I'd die for a sight of mountains an' green things an' a tumblin' little stream that'd run an' ripple all summer."

Motherly Mrs. Collins wiped the perspiration from her large, red face and fanned herself with her blue sunbonnet.

"Didn't Mamie Judy come from the mountain country?" she asked.

"Yes; we went to the same school. When she was a girl she had the black-

est eyes and the prettiest red cheeks of any girl you ever did see. Didn't look much like she does now! A farmer's wife soon goes to pieces. She was such a lively girl, too—so full of fun. An' now jes' to think what the poor thing's come to!"

Again the three women avoided each other's eyes. Then Selina spoke nervously:

"Do you 'spose she did it, Ma?"

"There you go with your 'sposin' again! Better get to work and straighten up this house. That's what we come over for, ain't it?"

Mrs. Collins rose heavily from her chair and unrolled and donned a carefully-ironed, blue-checked apron.

"Seems kinda funny to have the funeral here, don't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. The graveyard's handy an' it's so far to the church."

"Yes, that's so; 'tain't far to the cemetery. Always seemed to me that Mamie'd found it kinda spooky, always seein' the graveyard right through that window there over the stove. Bein' up on top of that rise, an' only half a mile away, would make it seem to me kinda like livin' in a graveyard."

"Selina, take this here bucket an' bring in some water. My land, I don't see how Mamie ever got through with all her work an' took care of the baby. Her bein' so old, an' it her first, made

it harder, too. Never thought her an' Jed would have any children."

"Things do need redden' up pretty considerable," spoke Mrs. Collins, as she picked up some odds and ends of clothing from a corner, where they had lain long enough to accumulate a coating of acrid dust.

"My jes' look at the linin' in this firebox! How d'you ever 'spose Mamie managed to cook on it?"

"Must have been pretty hard. She didn't have things fixed as handy as some of the rest of us, even. You see, they didn't have much money to spend on things. Farmin' in Kansas ain't been a payin' business the last few years. When 'tain't too wet, it's too dry, or too hot, or too cold, or somethin'."

"Yes, it seems like there's always somethin'. There—I've got that sweepin' done. We'll let Selina scrub, while we fix up the front room."

The two women opened the door into the "front" room. The blinds were tightly drawn and the musty odor testified to its lengthy isolation.

**MY LAND!** look at that, will you?"

Mrs. Prentis pointed to a cheap colored glass on the center-table, which held a pitiful little bouquet of one immortelle, six pale spears of a rank grass and a carefully-cut-out letterhead of a printed spray of orange blossoms.

"Who'd a thought of tryin' to make a bouquet out o' that? I remember, when we were back in Tennessee, that Mamie was always findin' the first deer's tongues and other kinds of little early flowers. Us big girls always helped fill her little hands. Seemed like she never could get all she wanted. An' then think of livin' out here where there ain't water enough for things that has to have it, let alone flowers. Why, I remember one summer when we even saved the dishwater to use several times, and then fed it to the pigs 'cause water was so scarce."

"Yes; the way farmer's wives have to worry 'long, 'tain't much wonder so many of 'em go crazy. I read in th' paper that wa' round a bundle that come

from the store that a bigger part o' farmers' wives went crazy than any other kind of womeL."

"Yes, I've heard that too. Let's jes' step in an' pick up in the bedroom, and then sweep both these rooms out together. The wind's in th' right direction."

"Yes, you come with me. We—we could get done sooner, workin' together." "That must be the pallet an' this th' pillow. They say the baby had been dead for several hours when Jed found it."

"Yes, an' Mamie settin' out there in the barn door, with her head in her lap. Not cryin' nor nothin'."

The two women hesitated, lingered at their task. Something kept them from moving the things that the coroner had kept in so rigidly exact a position.

"Yes; there's somethin' mighty queer about it. My land, jes' think, she might be—HUNG!" in a hoarse whisper.

Both faces blanched at the hitherto unspoken possibility. A woman—neighbor and friend, and the childhood acquaintance of one of them—was imprisoned on the charge of killing her baby.

They felt that they ought to have a feeling of horror. It was a terrible crime, with seemingly only one explanation, but to both there arose visions of the unexpected satisfying of the craving mother heart of the work-worn farm drudge; of her seeming happiness and joy at the little cuddling head in the hollow of her arm and the soft lips on the breast, as the little form was held tightly to its mother's bosom.

"I don't care what the coroner's jury said, I don't believe Mamie could 'a' done it. But still—if she didn't, who did?"

"Yes, an' then, if she didn't do it, why don't she say so? She knows they might hang her."

"They say she ain't said one word since Jed found her out there in the barn door. My land, but ain't it hot?"

"Yes, there bein' no trees 'round here, jes' seems like the sun bakes right through the roof. Well, we might as well begin to pick up. The funeral's

at ten tomorrow. I can come over early; can you?"

"Yes, I'll be here. I'm goin' to stay an' set up tonight. Mr. and Mrs. Shinkle said they'd come over. Selina can get supper for her pa an' th' boys."

"We'd better change them cloths."

The women tiptoed into the little lean-to, with that expectant hush that the presence of death always causes.

On an improvised table, a little form lay covered with a sheet, above a box of slowly melting ice. The country ministrations of neighborly service were completed, and the women left the room and returned to their task of cleaning in the front of the little farmhouse.

"My land, but it's quiet here! Bein' so far off the main road, seems like a person never sees nor hears nobody. It's enough to drive a person crazy."

**T**HE older woman had been standing for several minutes, with her mind preoccupied by struggling thought. At last she spoke:

"See here, Mis' Prentis, if this pillow'd been standing up like this, it could've fell over on the baby. See?"

Both women bent over the carefully-folded bedclothing, placed upon the floor for the sake of a slightly cooler strata of air and also to obviate the possibility of the baby rolling off, while the mother was busy in some of the many tasks of the unaided farmer's wife.

Little by little, the bedroom was straightened and the two rooms swept and dusted. Then Mrs. Prentis paused as she gave a final look around the rooms, walked to one of the windows on the south and ran a speculative finger over the glass. It was so heavily coated with dust as to be practically opaque. Then she stepped to the two windows on the east side of the room and looked at them. The panes of glass in both were clean and carefully polished.

"Now why do you suppose that is?" she asked.

"Now why do you suppose that is?"

Mrs. Collins, who had been following her moves, shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered, "Did

you notice that the one in the kitchen, on the south side above the stove, hadn't been washed, either? I noticed it when I went over to look at the firebox when you spoke."

"Yes, that's so," said Mrs. Prentis, standing in the kitchen door and glancing at the south windows of one room and then at the other.

"See here, do you 'spose—that is—I mean both of these windows on the south side are toward the graveyard—do you 'spose that Mamie left 'em that way on purpose?"

"Well, there's a good deal to do on a farm, and mebbe she got as far as the south side washin' windows some day, and then had to quit for some reason."

"Yes, but these ain't been washed for months. Poor little Mamie! Mebbe she just couldn't stand to be everlastingly seein' them gravestones."

"I wish, oh how I wish, I'd 'a 'come over here oftener! We don't live so far away; but seems like I never get time to get all my work done, and when I do there's not time to walk, or I'm too tired, an' o' course the horses are always busy."

"What with fruit cannin', and hayin' hands, an' threshin', an' little chickens, the summer's gone 'fore you know it, an' then the winter's too cold and snowy, or too wet an' muddy to get out, an' the first thing you know another year's slipped by."

Motherly Mrs. Collins nodded her head in sympathy. An older and a heavier woman, all that Mrs. Prentis had said applied better than equally well to her.

"No wonder Mamie loved the baby so," she said, "though she ain't been overly strong since it was born. Jes' think of the years and years she was here all alone, for Jed used to work out a good deal an' she done all the work here. Years an' years of stillness—an' then the baby she'd never give up wantin' and hopin' for."

"Yes, when I think what a woman's got to go through here on a farm, I don't never want Selina should get married. Seems like it's enough sometimes to make a mother wish her girl baby could die when it's little—"

She gasped. Both women gave a frightened start.

"No; 'course I don't mean that," she added hastily. "I jes' mean you love 'em so that it don't seem no ways right for 'em to have to grow up to what you see in front of 'em."

"Well, we better quit talkin' an' lay out th' baby's things. 'Spose we look in the bureau in the bedroom."

They moved again to the inner room and pulled out the top drawer of the old-fashioned marble-topped bureau.

A few shirts, a pile of carefully mended underwear and some socks, rolled and turned together in two's, met their gaze.

"That's Jed's drawer. Let's see what's in the next one."

The second drawer revealed a freshly-ironed white waist carefully folded above a meager pile of woman's underwear. Without a word, Mrs. Prentis pushed it shut.

The third drawer proved to be the one they wanted. Small piles of carefully made baby clothing of cheap material, but workmanship of infinite pains, met their view.

Mrs. Collins wiped the tears from her cheeks with the corner of her apron.

"See—they're nearly ever'one made by hand and all white. Most of 'em jes' flour sacks, but look how Mamie's bleached 'em. An'. see this drawn-work."

As she spoke, she placed a work-redened hand beneath a narrow strip of openwork.

"Yes, you can go home now," in answer to a question from Selina in the kitchen.

"My, the pains she's took on all these little things! Seems 's if she must 'a' been gettin' 'em ready all these years, an' now—" Her voice trailed off into silence.

The little clothing was laid on the bed in readiness for the morrow, and the women looked about as though hunting something more to do. Used to the busy hours of farm life, they felt impelled to some task that would occupy the passing hours.

"Let's see if there's anything we ought to do upstairs."

They climbed the narrow ladderlike stairway to an unfinished half-story garretlike room above.

**MY LAND**, she was house-cleanin' this hot weather!"

Half of the stuffy little room had been thoroughly overhauled and the other end begun. A little old horsehair trunk stood in the middle of the floor, with portions of its contents scattered about.

"I'll bet she was goin' to empty that for the baby's things. I showed her mine, jes' like it, that I fixed up for Selina when she was little."

"Well, we might as well pick up the things and put 'em back," said orderly Mrs. Collins, who suited the word to the action by laboriously bending with a slight grunt.

Mrs. Prentis pushed her back.

"Here, let me pick 'em up. There ain't no call for you to go stoopin' 'round in this heat. First thing you know you'll be havin' a stroke."

Some clothing and small articles were collected, and several bundles of yellowed old letters lay on the floor. From one of the packages the string had broken, evidently when it had been lifted from the trunk. One letter lay crumpled near its empty envelope, where it had been dropped.

With a wondering glance, the two women smoothed it out. The first paragraph was so yellowed and faded as to be illegible, but part of the second paragraph had been protected by the folded paper and they could read:

*" . . . will say that your wife is hopelessly insane. She may live for years, but will never regain her mentality, as cases like hers are incurable. We find upon investigation that the women of her family, for several generations, have become hopelessly insane at her age.*

*"In view of the fact that your small daughter is tainted with this inherited insanity, we strongly advise you to take her to some new environment and, when she grows older, explain to her why marriage*

should be considered impossible for her.

"As we can see the matter now, it is too bad that her mother was not warned of the same fact, and in view of all our information it would seem to have been better if we had not pulled her through that severe illness. If you—"

The remainder of the letter was undecipherable. The two neighbors looked at each other, their eyes wide with horror. At last Mrs. Prentis gasped hoarsely:

"Do you 'spose that bundle broke open and Mamie read this letter? Her father died 'fore she was old enough to marry and left her this place partly paid for, and I remember when her and Jed was married how they planned to pay the rest of it off jes' as soon as possible."

"But," interrupted Mrs. Collins, "the coroner's jury said yesterday that they wasn't any manner of doubt but that she wasn't crazy. She jes' set there, with her solemn big eyes, and looked straight ahead and never said a word."

"I wonder how a woman'd feel to know that the baby girl she loved better'n her own life would have to grow up in this drudgery and then finally spend the last of her years in a 'sylum?"

"Yes and 'spose Mamie went crazy herself long 'fore the little girl grew up?"

"I wonder if a woman really loved her baby girl if she wouldn't rather—" she stopped once more with a frightened look.

Wheels were heard coming down the lane.

Mrs. Prentis spoke quickly: "Sarah Ann Collins, we're goin' right downstairs and stick this letter in that cook-stove, quick!"

IN THE little kitchen below, the women were cooking supper when the county attorney and another man entered.

"Good evening, ladies," said the attorney. "We decided to come out again and go carefully over the field to see if we could find any evidence. You haven't, by chance, found anything, have you?"

Mrs. Prentis looked covertly at Mrs. Collins, then answered:

"No; we jes' been cleanin' up. We ain't been lookin' for no evidence."

"Well, Walters," said the attorney, "you know juries when it comes to women. If there never is found a definite reason for her wanting the baby to die, no jury will ever believe she is guilty."