

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

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Cover by John Giunta

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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.*

# The House on Forest Street

*And those tired souls within were as old as the eerie dwelling itself*

THE house had about it the unmistakable ancientness of good things grown old. It was in a district and on a street which once would have been referred to by envious townspeople as "the best," and even now, was good.

It was a well-built house—good materials and good construction—so that the passing years, though adding nothing in the way of upkeep and new paint, had not taken their toll as they might. It was a large and private house, as though built for a big family whose members got along each with one another. But now it was old, and the white picket fence that once was new and fashioned with the symmetry of a Halloween pumpkin's teeth, now here and there bulged and sagged, gray wood showing beneath the worn white paint.

The lawn, formerly soft, green, and the best croquet course in the county, had come, seemingly, to grow rocks in place of grass. Or maybe in reality these were the stones of small boys who threw them at an old building that could not retaliate. So that now a stranger to town driving by casually would think no one lived here in the place on Forest Street.

But there *were* people there. Human structures like the house—old and worn. All except Leonard Oberland. He was Youth. He was the streamlined Buick in a garage of Maxwells and Moons and Stutzes. He was the six-engined airliner among boys' kites. He was zoot and hep and savvy and schmaltz among faded lace and rustling taffeta and bustling and delicate neck pendants.

"Lord!" Leonard used to expostulate to his college chums. "They're all half dead in there! Aunt Agatha and Aunt Cornelia and Uncle Ben and Uncle Joe . . . they can tell you about Harding and Taft, and you're kidding yourself if you don't think they've

heard a Fulton steamboat! But brother! Brother, from then on. . .!"

BUT Lenny Oberland had ideas, big ideas. For himself! He was the incongruity in the Oberland mansion. His parents had died (luckily for them) when he was a small boy, leaving him this plethora of aunts and uncles, none of whom he cared for, because caring for anyone outside of Lenny was beyond his capabilities.

"And besides, I wouldn't have cared for them anyway!" he used to tell his friends at the beer tavern.

He was an unpleasant youngster, as unpopular with the Oberland's neighbors as they were with them. Among a multitude of early sins he had committed, Lenny had fired several chicken coops, bringing about prematurely an embarrassment of Sunday roasts. He had done petty stealing where and when he could around town, always being discreet enough to pick "softies" who would let him go, or people who could not retaliate.

Lenny's entire life had the irreverence of a long, low whistle during a church service, and the elder Oberlands were completely unable in their tired, befuddled way to cope with him. Although obviously they would continue to try, the town knew, until with one ghoulish monster prank, Lenny would engulf them all.

As he grew older, Lenny's childish pranks became adult pranks. Roasting somebody's pet tabby cat alive had no point. He tried a few years at the State College nearby, left earlier than the rest of his class (by request), and came back to the house on Forest Street to live.

It was then that the idea occurred to him that he could and would be a man of some prominence, indulging himself in the de-

BY ALLISON V. HARDING



Heading by Boris Dolgov

lights of his heart—mainly liquor and women—but the problem, of course, was money.

Now in his early twenties, Lenny began to reason that the Oberland estate was largely non-existent except for the house and its hoarded treasures of old lace and furniture, paintings, books, silverware, and bric-a-brac. He became something of an expert on these material objects. If there was no true money to be had, these articles certainly represented money! They could be sold.

On several occasions he sneaked off to town with a piece of silverware, only to be turned down locally because the object was familiar, and no merchant would trust his word that "Aunt Agatha really doesn't want it anymore."

There were several valuable paintings in the house, and Lenny studied this subject rather meticulously, although his eye for art was always for the mercenary rather than for any intrinsic beauty.

THE full-length portrait in the study interested him. It was of an early ancestor Oberland, and time and again, he would find one of his uncles or aunts standing before it as though in reverence. He realized quickly from his cursory knowledge of such things that the painting probably was of little value. It did not compare with some rarified landscapes and other fine pieces of art elsewhere in the house. To be sure, the frame was an elaborate one, heavy and expensive.

But *their* interest in it—poor fools!—was sentimental. For himself, he'd take the damned thing out and shoot it! Probably the frame would bring a hundred bucks by itself. And he didn't like the painting. Old Man Ancestor Oberland was a fierce-looking guy, Lenny thought, standing on tiptoe to stretch his five-foot-six of height to look more fully into the steady gray eyes of his forebear.

And those absurd costumes with the ridiculous sidearms, small-sword and all! There was a Latin slogan at the side of the portrait, which translated (and God knows he'd heard his uncles mumble it enough!) went something like, "I Defend the Right."

The other paintings were more choice. Then there was old jewelry. Jewelry going

to waste around the thin, scrawny arms and necks of Aunts Agatha and Cornelia, for which he, Lenny, could get money. For which, he Lenny, could have a good time! The lace—well, that's hard to find a market for, he discovered.

But the old books. He got only twenty-five dollars for the set of Shakespeare he sneaked out of the study and his Aunt Agatha cried for days after she discovered the loss. Silly old fool!

Still, however, you sliced it, Lenny thought to himself, this was a mere pittance . . . mere drops in the bucket. What he needed to pull was a grand coup! In detective stories, you read of a son . . . or nephew . . . anxiously waiting for a parent or relative to die. But Heavens! What would you do about four of them! Granted they were old and not robust, but at the same time, of a strain that keeps going forever! Tottering finally to rest, he thought to himself, sometime in their eighties or nineties!

There was no reason why, he told his Uncle Ben one day, all of you don't move into the Alford Arms (a suburban hostelry of brilliant stucco, tile-roofed, built by some Big City entrepreneur—"For Transient and Permanent Country Clientele").

"You'd all be very comfortable there. And, Uncle, we could sell this place and the grounds for a tidy sum!"

Uncle Ben had looked at him through faded old eyes that seemed to water even more than usual at the mention of selling the Oberland estate and shook his head sadly.

Lenny met the same attitude about disposing of some of the bric-a-brac around the old house.

Oh yes, here and there, he could snatch this or that, but it made for little more than pin money.

THE frustration of his predicament ate into Leonard's small soul. He took to drinking even more heavily than usual and would confide where and when he could to various bartender friends and tavern hangers-on that those "damn relatives of mine are trying to starve me out of the place! Won't give me my share of the money!"

He was driven to these grown-up-quick

beer spots, because in the established part of the town, the Oberlands were revered and Leonard looked upon as one of those inexplicable Acts of God. The ugly duckling, utterly worthless offspring type.

At one of the taverns there was a girl. A honey-colored girl with mascarad eyelashes and long, long legs, encased in black hose. Leonard would look up at her—she was several inches taller than he—and think that with the Oberland money behind him, he could have her. There would be no other way, because he was smart enough to know intuitively that even with her tough accent and dubious antecedents, she would see no attraction in him over the big-bruise truckdrivers and working men who came blustering into the tavern. Except that he was an Oberland and had had money—if he could get it!

Her name was Mimi. Like the old Maurice Chevalier song, he used to tell her. And she would giggle and say she wouldn't remember that and hope fervently to herself that she didn't feel too heavy when she sat on his knee.

It was the thought of Mimi with her cloud of cheap-perfumed, orange-golden hair whirling around in his drink-befuddled brain at night that drove Lenny on to even greater efforts. And it drove him one late night to the closet in the attic which had always been locked for as long as he'd remembered.

Although he couldn't recall that the issue had ever come up, he knew that he was not supposed to tamper with the door. But that meant nothing to him now. He'd looked over his Uncle Ben's shoulder once when Ben had opened the door. There was little inside as he could remember but a few shelves with some dusty red-backed volumes. No mysterious chest or trunk that might contain other old valuables and jewels.

But for the cussedness of it, this night he worked a screwdriver and chisel at the lock, and after a short while the rusty old catch finally gave.

The room was as he remembered it from that one look long ago over Uncle Ben's shoulder. Small, with the unused smell of mustiness and dryness. The shelves with the books, and little more.

HE LOOKED at the red-backed volumes casually and found they were records of dates and marriages and deeds, and so on.

There was nothing here he needed. But wait! He saw something in the opening from which he'd drawn one of the big ledgers. It was a medium-sized, very old tan box with a clasp lock. He drew it out and shook it. There was something heavy inside, and his pulses quickened. Perhaps perhaps something of value. A stack of currency laid away here by his uncles against that proverbial rainy day! It would be just like them.

He made short work of the clasp lock with his heavy screwdriver. The lid flew up and he looked inside. It was disappointing. Just another book, its old red-colored cover peeling here and there. He could just make out the word "Diary" written across the face.

Lenny took it out and opened it. He saw quickly that it belonged to his Uncle Gerold. He remembered Gerald, older brother to Ben and Joe, but not by much. But he had been a large, stern-faced man with much more life and energy and fire than his two younger brothers—or sisters for that matter. Gerald had died when Leonard was very young. Not long after Lenny had come to live with his uncles and aunts.

He looked closer. The writing was fine and cramped but written in indelible jet-black ink. Lenny turned the pages, reading here and there, and as he read the disappointment on his face faded away.

He licked his lips once and his small hands tightened on the old diary. So he'd been sorry it wasn't a wad of currency, eh? This was better! Far better!

There was a slight sound from somewhere in the great dark house beneath him, and Leonard quickly shoved the book in his pocket. He replaced the lockup box and the ledgers in front of it, shone his flashlight once around the tiny room to see that all was in place again and left the way that he'd come.

HE PADDED down from the attic and headed for his room eagerly, wanting to read more of that precious volume in his pocket. But no. His room would not be too good. If he lit his lamp, the lumi-

nance could be seen through his door transom by Aunt Agatha, who always slept lightly in the next room and with her door open.

He crept down the flights of stairs to the library and settled himself on a small divan with neighboring table and reading lamp. He snapped on the single bulb and sat in the gloomy, shadowed room and read avidly.

Uncle Gerald had written a factual family record here without sparing the details, setting them all down. Leonard had never suspected Uncle Ben's great trouble with drink. The distressing love affair Aunt Agatha had had with the Finley boy. Oh, choice, choice! Leonard could hardly keep from clapping his hands together ecstatically.

This was his means to control the whole household! The four of them. Those four dignified old fogies! And there were things about every one of them here that they thought were buried in the past. And now weren't!

There was much too much to digest and cover in one night's reading. Lenny closed the little book and just sat there in the library, his eyes roaming around the room, glittering. This, or at least what it represented, would all be his soon now. He held the key in his pocket. He had a hostage that would win out against their old-fashioned reluctance and miserliness toward him.

He'd have Mimi, because he knew she was that kind of a girl. What if she did tower above him as they walked down the street. He was an Oberland and he had money, and that, he knew, was what Mimi, like himself, really wanted out of life.

THE clock in the hall struck three with heavy muted notes that were as dignified and tasteful as its owners. Leonard got up, with his hand on the single-bulb light. As he stood there, he had a thought and he turned to look at the wall beside him where the full-length portrait of the Oberland ancestor was hung.

He smiled a crooked little smile and shook his fist.

"I'll enjoy smashing you!" he intoned as though he were talking to a real person. "I'll enjoy smashing you to pieces, preferably over Uncle Ben and Joe's heads!"

The portrait was shrouded in darkness,

but the light caught the upper part of the face and the eyes gleamed peculiarly. It was a strange picture. Lenny had never liked it nor the man it portrayed. The eyes looked straight at you, no matter how you moved your head. They looked into yours. Just as the man in life must have looked at you, Lenny thought.

He shook his head angrily and snapped off the light. But his concentration on the picture had been so intense that for a moment even in the darkness, he thought the eyes gleamed at him. He went back up to his room and spent considerable time searching around its untidy interior until he found a suitably obscure spot to hide his new-found treasure. He discovered that by removing a few loosely hammered tacks from the side of his box spring, he could lift the flap and insert the diary between the springs, from which vantage point once the flap was returned to its original position, it was not detectable.

The next morning at his late breakfast, when Lenny got up to leave, his Aunt Cornelia and Uncle Joe stopped him in the hall.

"You're not going down to spend your day at that awful tavern, Leonard, are you?" his aunt implored.

Uncle Joe shook his head sadly. Lenny flew into a rage. Of course the townfolk had seen him there. And of course someone had told one of the four. But what business was it of theirs! His anger died as quickly as it had flamed and he fixed his uncle with a cunning eye.

"Well, now that's a fine thing to ask your nephew," he whined in a stage voice. "You, Uncle Joe. You've been a man of the world, I understand. You, of all people, can certainly appreciate how it is with a guy when he must have his liquor regular-like or just go daft!"

Lenny watched the color creep up from his uncle's neck and flood the whole face. Aunt Cornelia looked surprised and shocked. He walked whistling out of the house. That would give 'em something to think about! Because certainly nobody had ever mentioned anything about Uncle Joe's "weakness" to him, Lenny, directly.

He walked around the town most of the day, bowled for an hour or so, went

to the Post Office and then stopped in at the tavern. He winked at Mimi, and when she came over, he pinched her cheek and said, "Could be that you and me are going to take a nice trip sometime soon? You'd like to go places in grand style, Mimi?"

"Would I?" she breathed and leaned close enough for him to smell the perfume of her flaming hair.

There was a letter for Agatha written in an old lady's scrawl, undoubtedly from some old crony friend, or he would have opened it to see if it had to do with dividends, for Lenny liked to keep track of such matters. He took the opportunity to take it to his aunt. He let her thank him and slit open the envelope before he said, "Aunt Agatha, I want to ask your advice about an affair of the heart. Because I know you'll understand about those things—you having been something of a passionate lover yourself!"

She let the epistle drop out of her thin, dry fingers onto the faded-flower lap. She looked up at him from where she was sitting, and the old, gray eyes were steady although the chin quivered a bit as if with a sad or distasteful memory. The way Lenny was smiling, she knew as he wanted her to know.

He nodded his head wisely. "You used to be such a one with the fellows, Aunt Agatha, or at least with one particular fellow. Mister Finley, wasn't it? I thought you could give me some advice about my Mimi!"

"Who . . . how did you . . .!" Her voice trailed off and her thin hands made themselves into fists and raised to her eyes like small knots of ancient yellow wood. The shaking of the chin transferred itself to the whole body.

That was all Leonard wanted, and he left the room, hardly waiting to be outside her door before he whistled happily through his teeth.

The meal that night was strangely quiet. Uncle Joe and Aunt Agatha said hardly a word during the repast, and their silence was caught by Ben and Cornelia. Only Lenny was talkative, and he with his magpie's chatter made up in noise for the others' silence.

That night, after the house was dark and asleep, he took the old diary out of its hiding place in the box spring, and stole downstairs.

He settled himself on the small divan in the library, lit the single-bulb lamp and started to thumb through the precious pages again.

But for some reason this night, it was hard to concentrate. A dozen times he lifted his head and listened to some small, innocent sound that, for a moment, he had first interpreted as someone creeping down the black stairs or through the hall. Again, he tried to read.

There were items here of great interest. Cornelia, he discovered with widening eyes, had failed one of her subjects her last year at finishing school and so had been unable to graduate with the rest of her contemporaries. Uncle Gerald even remarked on the catastrophic effect this had had on his young sister, but hoped her shock and humiliation would pass without leaving too great a scar.

UNCLE BEN, other paragraphs revealed, was something of a gambler and had to be restricted by Gerald playing the part of the protective older brother. On one occasion, Ben had become mixed up with what later had turned out to be a highly suspicious lottery although—Gerald took great pains to point out—Uncle Ben did not guess its dubious machinations. The lottery and those who collected money for it in good faith for a charitable cause were merely dupes in a get-rich-quick scheme of some unscrupulous promoters.

So I come by my gambling honestly, Leonard thought to himself with a smirk.

He set himself to studying the book further, but the inability to concentrate nagged at him. Finally, as though drawn by a magnet, his head swiveled and he found himself looking squarely at the dark, gloom-shrouded figure of the ancestor Oberland hanging on the wall.

The figure was ugly, certainly. He often thought it even sinister. But now it seemed menacing! The fixed stare—strange the way the little lamp highlighted those penetrating eyes—was disconcerting. Lenny put the book back in his side pocket and rose,

walking around to the side till he stood directly before the lifesize painting.

It made him angry that he had to look up at the old devil standing there so proudly as though he had life and breath and blood in him. To Leonard came a sudden feeling of repugnance and hate beyond the dislike he'd known before for the picture. He looked at the old-fashioned shoes and hose and clothing, the sword handle protruding from its hanging scabbard. But his eyes always came back to that face and he heard himself say, "When I am master of this house, you will be banished and destroyed! I hate you!"

"Then he spun on his heel, snapped the light off and walked rapidly from the study, feeling almost as though the painted eyes followed him through the darkness until he mounted the stairs beyond their range.

**W**ITHIN a week Leonard had initiated both Uncle Ben and Aunt Cornelia into their portion of the mysteries of his new discovery. He made an oblique but identifiable reference to Uncle Ben about mismanagement of money schemes and lotteries. He forced Aunt Cornelia into a discussion of the educational system, once saying that he didn't feel too badly about having been flung out of college, that some of the best people failed in their studies.

"In fact, didn't I hear somewhere, Aunt Cornelia, that you failed to graduate from your preparatory school years ago?"

He went off to town to his pet tavern and his pet, Mimi, later feeling well satisfied with himself. And the feeling of satisfaction was so deep-rooted that it was not totally disturbed when he entered the familiar bar and saw Mimi holding hands with a granite-faced stranger Leonard had never seen before.

"That's Joseph Rock," the bartender whispered to him, pointing with a wag of his head to Mimi's companion. "New Chief Clerk in town."

Rock, thought Leonard to himself, was an appropriate name with a face like that. In fact, the whole man looked as though he'd been hewn out of the stuff his name was made of. But chief clerks, he was mindful, are useful. It would be a chief clerk, for instance, who would take charge of cer-

tain desirous changes in deeds and ownership bonds, and so forth.

Lenny cleared his throat back of Mimi's honey-colored hair. She turned her head quickly.

"Oh, Lenny!" She jumped to her feet, her long legs looking very pretty. "This is a new friend of mine, Mr. Rock. Joseph Rock, Leonard Oberland. He owns that big place up on Forest Street."

She said it as though Lenny really did, and he projected himself, liking the picture, as he put his small hand in Rock's big one.

They had some beers together and made small talk about this and that. Finally Rock got up to leave, patting Mimi's hand as he departed and nodding to Oberland.

"I like the way you said that," Len stated, his eyes still on the retreating figure of the new Chief Clerk.

"Said what, babykins?" It was a name she used in moments of poorly conceived kittenishness.

"Don't call be babykins! About me owning the estate up on Forest Street."

"Well. It's just about true, isn't it?"

"Almost, my dear. Almost," he breathed and put his small hand on her knee.

Mimi winked at the bartender who was watching with cynical amusement, and said, "You're so smart, Lenny. So very smart. And sometimes I think all the things you talk about what we're going to do and the places we're going to go when you get that property and the money are all going to come true!"

**J**UST how smart he was, brought itself home to Leonard when he got back to the Oberland mansion late that evening. First he noticed there were more lights than usual on the downstairs floor instead of the one bulb left on in the entry hall to await his arrival. The living room and study lights were also ablaze.

It was past their usual bedtime, but the four were up waiting for him, sitting silent and stern-faced when he came into the library in answer to Uncle Ben's call.

"Leonard! Just a moment, please!"

He faced them, for a moment awed by his own audacity, but the beer inside still kept him warm and the thoughts of Mimi and her saying, "You're so smart."



He waited, and finally Uncle Ben cleared his old, congested throat and said deliberately, "Leonard. Your uncle, aunts, and I have been discussing you and certain statements you have made recently to each one of us."

Ben took off his nose-glasses and polished them nervously with a large white handkerchief. His uncle's statement called for no answer and Leonard stood silently in the center of the room waiting for what else was to come. Ben clamped the glasses back on his thin nose.

"We have, I shall admit, compared notes!"—Lenny noticed now that both his aunts had been crying—" . . . and we find that you have dug far into the past of each one of us. Now . . ." His uncle raised a palm upward stopping Len who had opened his mouth to speak. ". . . Now we know full well that nobody in this household has ever mentioned to you any of the four matters you have uncovered, and there could be no other way—excepting Gerald's diary! Leonard, we want it back!"

So they'd gone up to the attic, had they! Gone into the locked closet and found the empty diary box! As Leonard stood there, his feeling of strength and power grew. He now held the cards, the trumps. Some of his smug satisfaction must have been shown on his face, for Uncle Joe put in:

"Yes, Leonard, we must have Gerald's diary back! It does not belong to you but to the family and to the house!"

THE fools, Leonard thought to himself, and I am smart, so smart! Mimi's phrase floated through his brain, helped along by waves of beer. He would neither argue with them nor placate them. He would not deny that he had the book. He would not say that he did have it, and as he looked at the semi-circle of his relatives, the sneer on his face grew. There was no need any more to hide it. He was master of this house!

And with that thought exploding in him, he wanted to laugh, wanted to laugh so much that finally he did, and it burst distortedly into that ancient, dignified old room with its ancient, shocked people sitting around staring at him as though he were some demon from another world.

"You fools! You fools!" he finally articulated out of laughter. "You poor, stupid idiotic old fools!"

And then he stomped out of the room and up the stairs to his own chamber, shutting the door carefully after noticing no one had followed him, and checking on the hiding place of the precious diary. Although he knew it would be quite the opposite of the ethics of the four to search his room, they were stupid enough to ask him for the diary and expect him to return it. Even so, he reflected, it might be a good thing to find another hiding place for the red-covered volume. For it was his life now and his liberty. His magic wand, his Aladdin's lamp!

It pleased Leonard to prolong the suspense. This was an epic, dramatic moment for him, and his two uncles and two aunts acted their supporting parts perfectly. They waited with the dogged determination of the old, and every once in a while, one of them would say to him reproachfully, "Leonard, you *must* give us back Gerald's diary!"

Never anything stronger than that, mind you! No threats. Nothing. For this had changed their whole thinking, their very routine of life!

Night after night when he returned from town and an evening at the tavern and with Mimi, he found them sitting. Four old, bemused, harassed people, in the study with heads in hands, voices summoning him before them. And then having no greater strength or persuasion than just the tired, righteous, "Leonard you *must* give us back Gerald's diary!"

It amused him, because of course now he had won. It remained only to take the final simple steps and consummate the whole deal.

HE HAD pictured in mind's eye the way it would go. The family would summon aged Mr. Buckley, their lawyer. He was a dottering old fool, looking much like the walrus in "Alice in Wonderland," but thoroughly without the walrus' gift of speech. And Leonard would have Chief Clerk of the Town, Joe Rock. He'd been building a last bulwark. He'd already hinted of the affair to Rock, hinted at how the family had "done" him out of what

was rightly his; *i. e.*, the entire estate, although this was, in no way, remotely true, and anyone who'd been longer in town than Rock would know it.

He also intimated to Rock and anyone else he ran across in those final days of his strategy, the proposition that sometimes at the old house, he feared for his welfare. Even his life!

And this was an idea more readily accepted by even the veteran townspeople, for Leonard was certainly known as a bad one and it should be a temptation for the nice Oberlands to get rid of him one way or another.

"I really think they'd do it if they knew how they could put me out of the way," Leonard used to stage his act to Joe Rock and Mimi at the tavern and then shake his head woefully. "Imagine! And me their only nephew!"

Of his four Oberland relatives, Leonard could talk most easily to Aunt Agatha. Not that it was easy, but it was less difficult, for through his life of escapades and misbehavior, she had seemed, he sensed, less disapproving. Or did it merely appear this way? He had never been quite sure. But now he used Aunt Agatha as the sounding board. She was the intermediary, the go-between.

He let it be known frankly that he wanted the deed of the house signed over to him and a fair share of the material goods therein too. He was of legal age. He felt that as they were all getting old, he should step in and act as manager for the estate.

Who knows? It might be to the family's advantage to sell the old place and the Forest Street property. Come now, they would not find it so bad living at that stucco apartment building in the village!

Then he would add fatuously that he felt so strongly about this that he would have to help make them make up their minds, and he hinted more than broadly at matters that he now knew of. Uncle Joe's drinking, Aunt Cornelia's girlhood failures, Uncle Ben's money mixups. "And you, Aunt Agatha! That, shall we say, affair of yours with the Finley man!"

"Well, anyway," he would hurry on in his sales talk to his old aunt. "You don't want these things to become known, I am

sure!" And when he left, Aunt Agatha was always in tears. The silent, broken, shaken sobs of the old.

IT OCCURRED to Leonard but once that possibly they might call him on the thing and say, "Look here! You've dug up some stories about us from a family diary. It's unfortunate and it's unfair, but without attempting to deny these things are untrue, let's see you go ahead and spread them about town. We won't like it. We won't like it at all. But what does it really matter? A few curious stares at us in the street by the townspeople or perhaps a giggle and a remark here and there. That's a small price for us to pay to hold onto this house; for signing it over to you would be the same as losing it!"

But Leonard knew that the family was too old to stand up against him on this. To these four with their old-fashioned bringing-up, honor and reputation had a higher value than these considerations seemed to today. To them, he knew full well, that the most awful thing in the world would be not poverty or death or any other worldly horror or discomfiture. But the public revelation of these one-time slight and really innocent misadventures would be more than they could stand.

That he was right without question about this came home to Leonard with an impact that even shocked his callow soul. When he came home and saw the doctor's car in front of the house. He entered just as the physician was coming down the stairs. Old Dr. Towles, with the two uncles in tow.

They stood for a moment in the hall just inside the front door and talked as though Leonard were not standing there. He grasped from their conversation what had happened, and with the shock of the situation, there was triumph inside his small soul.

Finally his Uncle Ben, still talking to the doctor, fixed Leonard with a sad, penetrating stare.

"Poor Agatha really hadn't been well for days. She'd been terribly unhappy, worried."

The doctor nodded his head sadly. Leonard climbed the stairs to his room without a word. As he went inside the chamber, he saw Cornelia broken and sobbing, sitting

beside what had once been Aunt Agatha on the bed in the adjoining room.

IN THE next few days Leonard stayed his campaign briefly. He was even docile, but he knew it was now his most splendid opportunity. All his uncle's mouthings about poor Agatha dying of shame and a broken heart stirred him not.

Leonard picked a meal only a week later to announce to his relatives that he meant to have the house. He added, because his was the kind of mind to which almost everything occurred, that it was known in town that there was little love lost between himself and the three—especially since Agatha's death, which they were trying to blame him for, as though he could be responsible for the demise of every frustrated old buzzard!

But he wanted to have it known that there were well-wishers and friends of his who'd know just what the score was if anything happened to him, so he'd better stay very, very healthy! His Aunt Cornelia answered this sadly.

"We have no violence in our hearts, Leonard. You have disappointed us, but there is a greater judgment than ours!"

He'd sneered his typical sneer in reply. Later, he cornered Uncle Ben in the study.

"I'm afraid I must become very insistent, Uncle," Leonard pushed. "I want you to sign the house over to me and give me a generous share of what we have around here for my own!"

Uncle Ben pursed his lips and made no answer.

"You know," Leonard said loudly, and his voice seemed to reverberate around the shadowed walls, "I'm buddies with Mr. Cobbs. You know, he prints the *Town Courier*. Cobbs is a man with big-city ideas even in this small dump! He'd just love to get some of these stories, and we'll start off with the one about dear Aunt Agatha and her carryings-on with Finley! She won't mind, being dead."

Ben winced.

"I mean it, Uncle!"

"All right," Uncle Ben finally said, raising gnarled hands to his head as though he could stand no more. "I'll get Lawyer Buckley and we'll do what you want."

LEONARD went whistling off to town, stopping as he'd planned these many months at the car agency near the station. He'd already been eyeing the yellow convertible job, but out of his own money, after his gambling debts and drinking and carousing expenses were paid off, there was little left.

He'd spoken to the salesman many times, and when he opened the chrome-handled door, that worthy greeted him.

"Hello, Mr. Overland!"

Lenny indicated the flashy auto as his choice.

"I'd like to take her out for the day. Try her."

He hadn't wanted to before. It would have been too much of a hardship to take the car back, too much of a temptation to keep it. And then he hadn't had the money or the sure prospects. Car-stealing was a little deeper in than he cared to get.

The salesman rubbed his hands together.

"She's yours, Mr. Oberland! Just let me have the mechanic slip some dealer's plates on her."

They both laughed.

"You think—of course if she's satisfactory in every way—you think you'll be buying her?"

Leonard nodded his head and stood admiring the shiny nickel and yellow paint. This would be some surprise for Mimi. He struggled hard to hide his impatience as they backed the car out of the showroom.

He slipped behind the wheel, hardly heard the auto man's last-minute sales talk, and drove away toward the tavern.

He parked out of sight around the corner and sauntered in. Mimi was over in the corner talking to Joe Rock. Well, Rock didn't have a brand-new car or a house and property worth plenty! He went over to them.

"Lenny!" Mimi seemed glad to see him. She'd better be!

He nodded but spoke first to Rock.

"Say, we're going to have a little transaction. This evening, I think. Can I count on you to be up at the place?"

Rock showed some interest.

"The house and property are going to be made over to me."

Mimi squealed with delight and the Chief Town Clerk raised his eyebrows.

"Sure!" he said and grinned wolfishly. "I'll be there. Got to have everything nice and legal, eh?"

As Mimi went off to get some celebration whiskey, Rock leaned forward.

"I like a man who makes his own opportunities and then grabs 'em."

Lenny toyed with the idea of telling the fellow to see less of Mimi, but decided against it. Chief Town Clerks could be very useful in many ways, including the disposal of property and worldly goods.

**F**INALLY Rock left and Leonard made Mimi come out to the car with him. She was ecstatic as he knew she would be. He agreed to pick her up later when the evening came, his triumphant evening.

It was late afternoon when he drove up Forest Street. He parked ostentatiously outside the house and swaggered in. He hoped one of his relatives would see him from the window, but they were an incurious trio.

Inside the front door he slowed his step. He heard a voice from the study and he stole toward the sound. It was his Uncle Ben. Leonard eased himself to the side of the door and looked through the crack between portal and molding.

Ben was standing in front of the ancestral painting and he was talking. Why, the old coot was having a regular conversation! Once or twice his uncle raised his hands up in a gesture of imploration. Leonard heard his name mentioned and other details of the last few weeks. He stepped into the room then, angry, he knew not why.

"You old fool!" he yelled. Usually, politics had dictated at least a superficially tolerant attitude toward his uncles and aunt, but now he had no use for sham.

Uncle Ben whirled toward him with surprising speed for one of his age.

"What do you think you're doing, mumbling down here to that picture!"

"He judges us all, Leonard," Uncle Ben said with a strange smile on his face.

He stepped to the picture and traced the legend on the coat of arms, saying aloud, "I defend the right."

"You must watch out, my nephew!"

For a moment it was a temptation to strike

old Ben, but the other man merely stood his ground and looked levelly back. Instead, Leonard vented his rage on the life-size portrait. He turned his head and spat at the painting and had the satisfaction of seeing his spittal run down over the sacred image.

As he started out of the room, he shrilled back, "I'm having the Town Clerk up tonight at nine! I hope you'll have that damn fool of a lawyer of yours!"

"Lawyer Buckley will be here this evening," Uncle Ben replied.

Leonard took the stairs two at a time and gamboled down the long hall that led to his end room. Off somewhere from the depths of the house he could hear his Aunt Cornelia playing the spinnet.

The damn fools! he thought to himself. But they were through now! They're finished! I'll have 'em out of here in a few days!

**H**E EXAMINED the hiding place of the diary again, although by now that volume had served its usefulness. He debated whether or not to burn it but decided against that.

At supper Uncle Ben cleared his throat.

"Leonard, your uncle, aunt, and I somehow don't feel you know what you're doing. We think that when you take this house over, which you've been enabled to do because of your willingness to drag the family name in disgrace and scandal, you intend to sell it and the property. Now, we would be happy to know that you were going to remain as owner and tenant. That's something entirely different. . . ."

"I'll do as I damn please!" Leonard interjected.

Cornelia wrung her hands and murmured a prayer ceilingward.

"Aren't you afraid?" It was his other uncle who directed the question.

Leonard tried to stare Joe down and failed.

"Afraid! Afraid of you old fossils! Or do you think I'm scared of that painting in there!" His lips curled in scorn.

"There are forces to be afraid of," Uncle Ben said firmly. "Right *is* mightier than wrong."

"I defend the right!" parroted Leonard "Oh, you poor old fools!"

He got up from the table, cutting short what he knew would be the last meal he would have to have with them.

On a sudden impulse, he went into the study and looked at the ancestral Oberland.

"Probably a phony, too!" he murmured.

He noticed that his uncle had carefully wiped off the mark of his insult. Leonard suddenly grabbed for the painting. He lifted it off its wire hook, and staggering a little under the weight of it, carried it upstairs. Tomorrow he'd burn the portrait and dispose of the frame.

He put it in the back of his closet and then noted by his wristwatch he just had time to get down to the tavern to pick up Mimi. As he ran down the walk, he saw old Buckley's out-of-date sedan drawing up in the twilight.

Even the "Hello, babykins," was sufferable this night. Mimi gave him a moist, fragrant kiss and they drove back up the hill toward Forest Street.

"This won't take long, Mimi. You wait outside here in the car for me, and after everything's all fixed, we'll drive somewhere and do a little celebrating, eh?"

She said she'd wait, kissed him again, and murmured, "I think you're *so* clever!"

HE went hurriedly inside and found them already gathered in the study. Lawyer Buckley looked very grave and perturbed, his three relatives resigned. The only cheerful face was that of Chief Town Clerk Joe Rock. Rock nodded at Leonard.

Ben rose immediately as Lenny entered the room. "Where is he!" He gestured at the empty wall where the ancestral Oberland had hung.

"Never mind that now!" said Lenny, waving his hand.

"But you've got—!"

Lawyer Buckley put in a word. "Let's let that go for now, Benjamin, and get on with the business matter at hand. I've tried to dissuade you from this completely insane act, but for a reason, or reasons, best known to yourself, I understand you three have decided to deed over to your nephew, Leonard Oberland, this house and a major portion of its material goods."

The three nodded almost in unison. But they seemed far more concerned with the

empty space on the wall. It amused Leonard to see how their eyes kept turning that way.

Lawyer Buckley spoke: "There's one point that I would like to make. A condition of this deal. It seems, I am told, that a certain family diary has disappeared from its usual place in the archives of this house." He addressed himself to Lenny. "Your Uncles Benjamin and Joseph and Aunt Cornelia would like the return of that diary before the papers are signed."

Bluster grew up in Leonard but subsided quickly. What the hell, he thought. He was going to burn it.

"Agreed," he said.

"And now the diary!" Buckley persisted.

"All right. All right!"

Leonard left the study and walked upstairs. Sweet moments, these, he thought reflectively as he passed down the long, dark passageway that led to his room, and he thought of Mimi waiting outside for him in the car.

When he came to the end of the hall, he went in, lit the small bedlamp and bent over at the foot of the four-poster. His fingers started to work on the tacks that held the ticking in place. They came away easily and he lifted the loose flap, inserting an arm, groping with his fingers.

His hand had closed around the old volume that had been the key to his overwhelming victory when he heard the sound and remained fixed for a moment in that position. It was . . . yes, the door of his closet slowly opening with its familiar squeak.

Leonard, not a particularly courageous soul, was afraid to look. He knew he'd left the others behind him downstairs. None of them would have had the chance to get up here. But could the family have been smart enough to think up a way to retaliate? Had they planted someone up here—like the fictional private detective stuff—to watch him and take the diary, perhaps not realizing he'd be willing to give them the now-worthless volume?

IT WAS the sound of the step, soft and stealthy, as much as his reasoning, that made Lenny turn his prickling head. And then he screamed!

They said the first scream was more horrible than the second. It was the desperate, horrifying screech of an animal, insane with fear within a split second. It was loud in their ears downstairs, and even Mimi, waiting outside in the yellow convertible, heard it.

The second scream was different, but in its way, as awful. A gurgling, tearing, spouting sound, punctuated suddenly as though a rubber stopper had been inserted abruptly.

They raced upstairs and found Leonard lying with the old diary in his hand, lying by the bed, with most of the blood of his small man-body in still-moving pools and rivulets around him.

And through his throat completely and coming out the other side was an ancient, swordlike weapon with hammered silver guard and hilt, which caused the police the greatest amount of puzzlement.

His three relatives, Lawyer Buckley, and Chief Clerk Rock had rushed upstairs at Leonard's screams. There was no one else in the room beside the dead man. A careful search of the house revealed nothing. Even the room windows were locked from the inside.

It was completely inexplicable. Experts said that the death weapon was "an ancient small-sword, an object from another

century, a light, tapering weapon for thrusting, used chiefly in dueling and fencing." The instrument rightly belonged in a museum rather than in a police-exhibits list.

Finally the old Oberland house returned to a semblance of normalcy. Leonard's room was cleaned and closed forever, but not before the uncles, Ben and Joe, had discovered the portrait of the Oberland ancestor tucked safely away in their late nephew's closet.

They hung it with tender care back in the study where it had always been and where it belonged, and after they had switched it this way and that as picture-hangers do to satisfy themselves, they both stopped for a moment as though caught with the same, sudden thought.

Then they turned to look at one another and they nodded, as though saying, "Of course! And why not? We should have thought of it and known it before!"

For it was plain to anyone who knew the picture and remembered it well as they did, that there was a certain something missing. An object of ornamentation, a subtle change.

Though the scabbard hung as it had before on the fine old figure, it was now empty. For the protruding sword hilt with the hammered-silver guard was gone. . . .

