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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**



"The man was outside the realm of this dream."

# The Hunch

By GENE LYLE III

*A brief tale about an uncanny premonition*

**J**OHN McCASSEY refused to admit, even to himself, that he was running away from anything so intangible as a hunch. He had to have a rest from the strain of work. This was his entirely legitimate excuse. But it was a rational-

ization too, because McCassey would not have left merely for a rest.

West, where the sun set, where nothing ever happened, was where John McCassey wanted to go. As usual he was in a hurry, and he started out in an airliner,

but it got him no farther than Santa Fe. Landing at dusk at that ancient slumberous city, the flight was canceled due to the storm. So the agent got him a seat on the first train out, to which happened to be attached a special car bearing twenty or so congressmen on an inspection tour of naval equipment.

McCassey was a thin man, taut as a violin string, with sharp nose and restless eyes continually darting from one object to another. In the brightly lighted club car he tossed his dripping topcoat on the rack and plunked down beside a heavy-set fellow.

The warmth, the commotions of other passengers settling themselves, gave him a slight sense of peace. But deep within him the notion lingered that he was being fooled by it.

A hospital odor drew his attention to the man beside him. The fellow, dressed neatly in gray serge, was thick-lipped, broad-shouldered, middle-aged. He had stubby muscular hands and he might have been a prosperous farmer except that McCassey, thinking always in terms of headlines, detected a familiar crinkle about the eyes. McCassey recognized him as the most publicized surgeon in the land. He was gazing morosely out the rain-streaked window.

On an impulse McCassey introduced himself. "I'm managing editor of *The Chicago Call*," he said. "How'd you dodge the reporters while that Brandt case is still on page one?"

The surgeon frowned. His thick lips quivered. "The little Brandt boy will pull through," he said. "It was quite simple—we merely relieved the pressure on his brain. I don't think he'll have epilepsy any more."

"But that's revolutionary, isn't it?" the editor insisted.

"Possibly. It's been thought of before. All it required was the development of a

technique. Look here," he said abruptly. "I'll tell you why I'm leaving town. I'm—well," his voice became a hoarse whisper, "I'm taking my daughter home to her mother in San Diego."

It sounded like domestic trouble and McCassey said no more about it. Besides, he distinctly felt a tightening at his throat. He had been half expecting this symptom, dreading it.

"You don't believe in premonitions, do you?" he asked.

Something in his voice made the surgeon look curiously at him. "Plenty of historical evidence," the surgeon said. "Witches, soothsayers, that sort."

"I mean living people," said McCassey.

"Such cases are reported. I wouldn't bet on one though."

"No, of course not," said McCassey. "I wouldn't either. But here's something funny. Whenever there's a major news break, hours before it happens I get to feeling tense."

The surgeon ruminated a moment. "Events leading up to a news break—movement of troops to a border for instance—could make you expect it before it happens, don't you think?"

"It's not that," said McCassey. "I never have any idea what it's going to be or where it's going to happen. That's the devil of it. I've come to rely on these hunches in spite of myself. They've never failed me. But each time the strain leaves me as limp as a wet rag."

McCassey grew more agitated as the journey progressed. Other passengers shot glances at him. The surgeon wondered if there was another seat where he could be by himself, but seeing none gave it up.

"I had one of those hunches when I left Chicago this morning," McCassey went on. "I'm afraid that's the real reason I left. Thought I could get away from it. But I can't—it's been growing stronger."

THE harsh honk-honk of the engine whistle, sounding incongruously like an old-fashioned automobile horn, signaled for a crossing. Scattered lights of a mountain town flashed past outside, trees and frame buildings glistening in the rain. McCassey jerked back his sleeve and glanced at his watch.

"We're pulling into Albuquerque," he said breathlessly. "I'm going to send a wire."

He rang for the porter, demanded telegraph blanks, and when they came he frenziedly scribbled out a message. The surgeon watched the words appear:

HYLLIS GARDNER—CITY EDITOR THE  
CALL—CHICAGO—KEEP WIRES OPEN  
HOLD STAFF READY FOR EXTRA EDITION

That was all. McCassey's pencil ripped the yellow paper as he scratched his signature across the bottom.

"You'll have me believing it in a minute," the surgeon said.

Beads of sweat appeared on McCassey's thin forehead. "At times like this," he said, "something keeps driving me. I want to start organizing the story, getting the facts sifted, the leads written. But—but the story hasn't happened yet!"

The train eased into the station. McCassey hustled the porter off with his telegram. He fidgeted with his pencil during the few minutes halt. Then the train resumed its gentle vibration.

By now McCassey was powerless to fight off this sense of impending catastrophe. It had nothing to do with logic. It was maddeningly like a memory one tries to recall and can't. And like the memory of a thing that has happened, it was somehow irrevocable. It was the crashing drive of fate. He had to accept it as though it were fact and yet not completely fact either. Such thoughts have driven men crazy. Again he glanced at his watch.

"I sent that wire half an hour ago," he said aloud.

His voice startled the surgeon out of a deep reverie. "Why, you're trembling like a leaf," the big man said.

"I've got to stop this train!" McCassey burst out. He started to rise, but the surgeon grasped his thin shoulder and eased him back.

"You need a sedative," the surgeon said. "You're on the verge of hysteria."

McCassey did not resist. Like a man in dread of the operating-table, he welcomed an anodyne to blank out his mind. The surgeon pulled down a grip and brought out a medicine-case. He brought a paper cup of water and handed McCassey a pill.

"Here," he said. "You'll feel better."

Greedily McCassey swallowed the pill.

The rhythm of the train pervaded McCassey as the drug touched and soothed his jagged nerves. The surgeon sighed, and slumped back in his chair as though exhausted. It struck McCassey as odd how phlegmatic this much-publicized man now seemed. For a short time McCassey remained aware of the imminence of disaster without much caring. And then even the awareness left him. A comfortable drowsiness crept over him.

He blinked, for he thought he saw a young woman bending over the back of his seat, talking to the surgeon. Possibly she was a deception of the eyes. He could not be sure. Still, he became aware of certain features. Lacking any make-up, with skin like ghostly blue marble, she had a sensuous, full-lipped beauty. Her voice came clear and bell-like. McCassey forced himself to concentration. He distinguished words.

"Daddy, daddy! Listen to me!" She seemed to be pleading. Strangely, the surgeon did not hear her. He was dozing, his head bowed over his thick chest. Yet the girl seemed frantic.

"Why don't you shake him?" McCassey asked.

Wildly, uncertainly, the girl looked about. She saw McCassey, and there was terror in her eyes. "I've tried," she said despairingly. "It doesn't do any good. But I've got to tell him something—I've got to! Maybe you——"

And then an odd realization came to McCassey. He was like a man in a dream who is restrained from doing certain ordinarily simple things. The surgeon was outside the realm of this dream.

"I guess I can't do it," McCassey said. "But wait—try this." He brought out his notebook and pencil and offered them to her. "Write down what you want."

She snatched the pencil and wrote frantically. "Oh, hurry—make him read this!"

As McCassey tore the sheet out of his notebook he saw what she had written.

"Stop the train," he read. "Bridge out. Alice."

He looked up, but the girl was not there. With a sudden chill the impending catastrophe flashed back to him. This was it, the thing the future had withheld! He tottered to his feet and ran stumblingly toward the vestibule. He found the emergency airbrake line and yanked it, hard.

Airbrakes screeched, couplings clashed. McCassey lurched to the floor. He felt the train shudder to a full stop. And then he wondered if he were mad, doing this thing. No longer did he have that feeling of imminent danger.

Excited passengers brushed past. McCassey pulled himself up, made his way through the vestibule and down the steps. People were running toward the engines, their feet grating in the wet gravel of the roadbed.

McCASSEY ran past the two locomotives, feeling the heat of their big driving-wheels. A crowd was gathering on the tracks in the headlights, not more than fifty feet ahead. He pushed his way through. He saw the approach to a trestle bridge. Twisted girders hung limp into the black chasm where the bridge had been. From far below came the rumble of torrential waters.

"There's the guy who stopped the train!" someone yelled. The voice sounded awed.

People crowded around McCassey. One man displayed a badge in his palm. He was a Secret Service man, and McCassey remembered the congressmen in their special car.

On the edge of the crowd McCassey saw the surgeon.

"It must have washed out only a few minutes ago," the Secret Service man said. "How'd you know?"

McCassey wiped the rain out of his eyebrows.

He called to the surgeon.

"Your daughter gave me a note," McCassey told the surgeon. "The note said the bridge was gone."

The big doctor stared at him, his thick lips gaping slightly. He seemed almost terrified. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Her name was Alice," McCassey said. "Here——" he reached into his pocket, but his hand came out empty. "I must have lost that note," he said.

The blood had drained from the surgeon's face. It was gray.

"Alice was her name," he said. "Listen," he said, grasping McCassey's lapel, "she's—she's up in the baggage car!"

