

# Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1950

Cover by Lee Brown Coye

## NOVELETTE

- HOME TO MOTHER** . . . . . Marly Wade Wellman 4  
*Whatever was to live through man-made catastrophe on earth would be bound to be altered into the sort of monster that alone could survive—horror piled on horror.*

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*Until now we have been free to speculate on the planetary mysteries of the universe, but on some great tomorrow these mysteries shall be known—for better or worse.*

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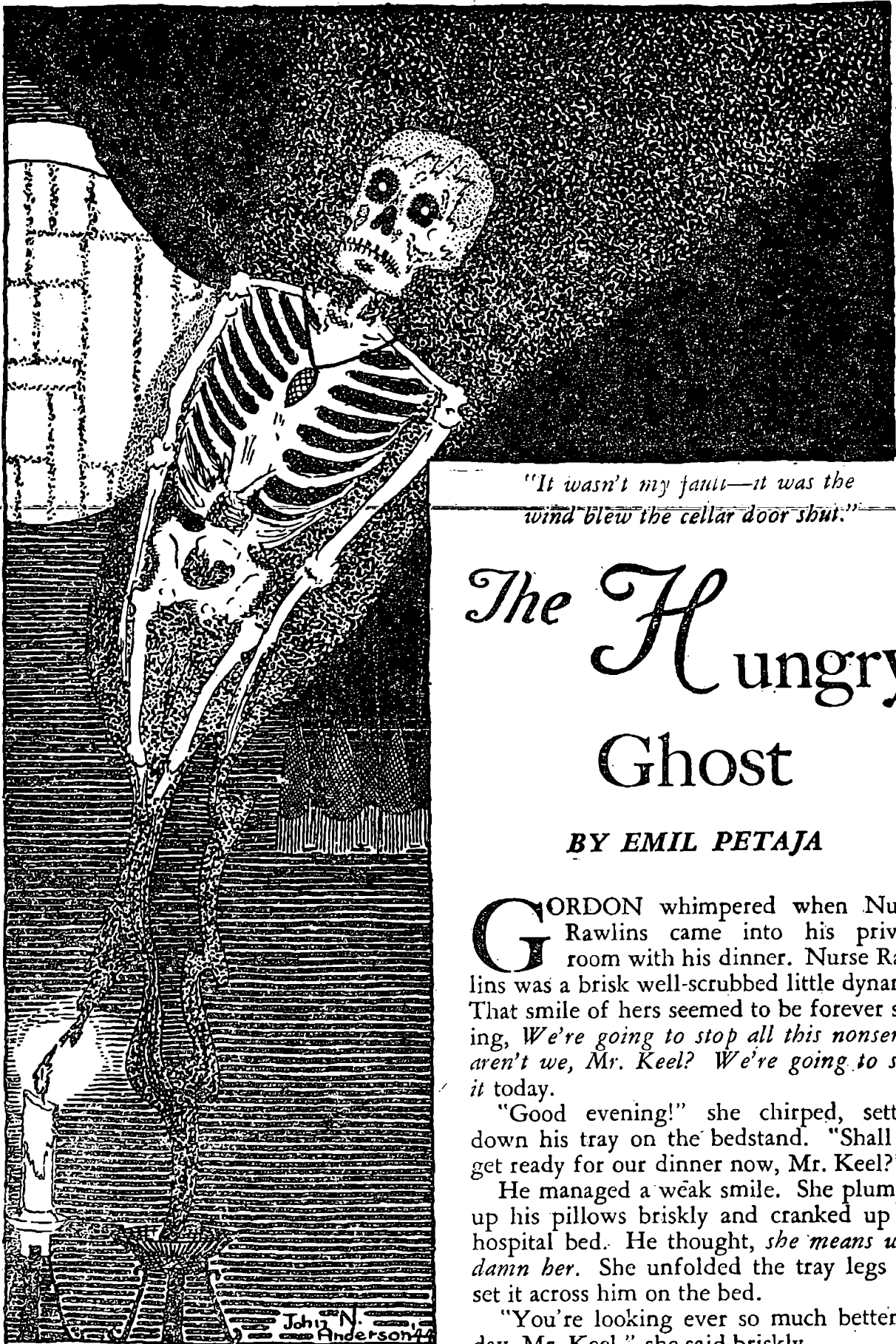
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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



*"It wasn't my fault—it was the wind blew the cellar door shut."*

# The Hungry Ghost

BY EMIL PETAJA

GORDON whimpered when Nurse Rawlins came into his private room with his dinner. Nurse Rawlins was a brisk well-scrubbed little dynamo. That smile of hers seemed to be forever saying, *We're going to stop all this nonsense, aren't we, Mr. Keel? We're going to stop it today.*

"Good evening!" she chirped, setting down his tray on the bedstand. "Shall we get ready for our dinner now, Mr. Keel?"

He managed a weak smile. She plumped up his pillows briskly and cranked up the hospital bed. He thought, *she means well, damn her.* She unfolded the tray legs and set it across him on the bed.

"You're looking ever so much better today, Mr. Keel," she said briskly.

"I look like hell and you know it!" Gordon cried. "I'm skin and bones. Take a good look at my face. I look like death.

Heading by John N. Anderson

I'm as good as dead right now and you know it!" His effort sent him shuddering back against the pillows with a strangled sob. He shut his eyes savagely.

Nurse Rawlins took a few seconds to look hurt, then she became brisk and efficient again. She smiled. "Nonsense!" She lifted the aluminum heat jacket off his entree dish. "Now if you will just try a bite of this veal scallopini. Cook's wonderful at veal scallopini. He made it for you because it's your favorite dish."

Gordon's eyes flicked open in spite of himself. The aroma of the tender, succulent pieces of meat swimming in the rich sauce was torment. He looked at the side dish of creamed asparagus, also a favorite, at the mound of mashed potatoes into which a liberal square of yellow butter had been thrust, at the tossed salad, each green fragment of which sparkled with carefully blended French dressing. There were condiments, too, and a silver pot of coffee.

Everything was chosen to tempt the most picayunish appetite, down to the freshly baked rolls. Everything was exactly as Gordon might have ordered it at his favorite restaurant.

Nurse Rawlins sniffed and couldn't help mentioning the thin lamb chop she had just finished downstairs. "It was all right, but not veal scallopini! Cook went to special pains, Mr. Keel. Dr. Green said spare no expense. The meat was hand-picked at Schwartz's and you know how expensive they are. The chef at Tivoli's made the salad dressing and rushed it over to the hospital by special messenger—"

"Shut up!" Gordon groaned. "Will you shut up!"

"Certainly, Mr. Keel," Nurse Rawlins said cheerfully. "I know you're anxious to eat your wonderful dinner." She hummed and stepped to the window, where she pretended to be engrossed in the summer sunset.

"Go away!" Gordon cried weakly.

"I was supposed to stay until you ate every—"

"Take it away!" Gordon sobbed. "Take it out of my sight before I throw it at you!"

Nurse Rawlins whistled anxiously.

"What's wrong, Mr. Keel? Don't you like veal scallopini any more? According to your case records you used to be very fond—"

Gordon swallowed hard. His stomach felt as if someone with hands like steel was wringing it. "Please take it away!" he sobbed harshly.

His tears brought all of Nurse Rawlins' dormant pity to the fore, she had to force herself to remember that this was only a phobia Patient Keel had, a psychotic delusion regarding food of any kind. But he had to eat! Dr. Green said he'd die if he didn't. The glucose injections didn't seem to help. Patient Keel's system had developed a curious immunity to artificial feeding.

"Won't you just eat something, Mr. Keel?"

"No!"

"Suppose I feed you." She stepped around the bed.

"No!" Gordon flung out his hands so violently that he spilled sauce across the white tray napkin. He wrenched around and buried his sobs in the pillows. "Go away! Take it away!"

"All right, I'll go," Nurse Rawlins sighed. "But I'll just leave the tray here on the stand where you can reach it." At the door she turned. "I'll have to tell Dr. Green you wouldn't eat your dinner again, Mr. Keel."

**A**FTER a while Gordon opened his gaunt hungry eyes and stared at the white ceiling. He wouldn't look at that tray. He wouldn't! Why in hell hadn't she taken it away like he told her? Why did they torture him like this?

She thought that he wasn't hungry. My God!

How long had it been? How long was it since he'd eaten a decent uninterrupted meal? How long? A week, a month, a year? No. It couldn't be a year. He'd be dead by now. A year ago he was in Denver. Cousin Grey Ellis hadn't been dead a year. It was actually only a few weeks since Esther brought him to Dr. Green's hospital for treatment. They'd just got back from Honolulu, from their honeymoon. Honeymoon!

Esther had been so regular about every-

thing. Not that she understood what was really wrong. How could he tell her? If he told her anything at all, then he would have to tell her everything. And then she would shrink away from him, the soft love-light in her clear blue eyes would harden into hatred. He did it for Esther, so they could be married, so Esther could have all the things she should have. But Esther was sweet and good. The fact remained that he *had* done it and she could no longer love him if she knew.

Another thing was ironic. That was Gordon's fetishistic attitude toward food. Ever since he was a child Gordon had revered food. Not that he was a glutton. It was merely a delicious over-emphasis on the pleasures of the table. He loved to eat, to talk about food, to read about it.

His mind flitted back to his childhood in Grantville, a little mining town in southern Colorado. His father couldn't work, having contracted tuberculosis from long years spent underground. His mother took in washing. They were hideously poor, so poor that hamburger was a luxury. Every once in a while, between racking coughs, his father would mention Cousin Grey Ellis out in California. His voice used to be pinched and bitter.

**A**S A child Gordon had never had much or the best of anything. Maybe that's what did it. He worked hard in school and after school, picking up and delivering heavy sacks of laundry. There was nothing extraordinary about Gordon. He had fair looks, a fair mind. But he wasn't brilliant in any department. He had to work and he did work, hard, to climb up from that pit of poverty.

He was in charge of men's dry goods at Tilson's Mercantile in Denver when he met Esther Craig. He had worked his way up from stock boy, and was now next to Mr. Chambers, the floor walker. Mr. Chambers liked Gordon because he was decently subservient; it was whispered around Tilson's that one day Gordon might be floor walker. All this paled into insignificance when he met Esther. His hunger for food was nothing compared to his hunger for Esther. But

Esther Craig lived with an uncle and a grandmother, both of whom enjoyed wealth and social position. Esther was femininely fragile and sweet, he was sure money didn't matter to her. But it did to her uncle and her grandmother. They would never consent to Esther marrying a store clerk—well, department head—and Esther was too feminine to defy them.

Gordon spent many sleepless nights brooding over his unfortunate position before that letter came—the letter telling him Cousin Grey Ellis in California had died.

"Well, Mr. Keel!"

Gordon leaped out of his memories to find Dr. Green by his bed. Dr. Green was a tall brisk man, even brisker than Nurse Rawlins. Tonight Dr. Green had brought another doctor with him, a solemn little man with penetrating eyes. Nurse Rawlins hovered behind them, her brisk little cough said, see what I told you, Doctor?

"You haven't touched your dinner, Mr. Keel," Dr. Green chided. His reproachful smile identified Gordon with a spoiled child.

Gordon's eyes leaped to the food tray. He retched. He longed to tell them to get out, all of them, as he had Nurse Rawlins. But if he did they might take drastic measures. They might send him to an institution for the insane, and he was not insane.

The little man with the penetrating eyes touched Dr. Green's arm. He gestured Nurse Rawlins to take the tray and herself out of the room. She obeyed awefully, and that told Gordon that the little man was important.

Dr. Green confirmed this. "Mr. Keel, this Dr. Ramsey Folliger. Do you know who Dr. Folliger is, Mr. Keel?"

Gordon scowled at the little man. "He's a psycho doctor. But I'm not crazy, Doctor! I'm not!"

Dr. Folliger brushed Dr. Green behind him. He shook his head and smiled at Gordon. "We don't think that at all, Mr. Keel. But frankly, we do think that there is something, some mental block, at the bottom of this obsession of yours."

Gordon laughed and sobbed at the same time. "You can't help me, Dr. Folliger."

"All the same," and the little man fixed him with his penetrating eyes, "I intend to try."

In the end Gordon told Dr. Folliger everything. Dr. Folliger was that kind of a man. Maybe it was his eyes. When he looked at Gordon and asked questions, he had to answer them truthfully. He had to tell Dr. Folliger just what went on in his mind. Oh, he was clever. Within two hours after Dr. Green stepped back out of Gordon's room, Dr. Folliger had the whole story. . . .

That letter about Cousin Grey Ellis had changed Gordon's life. It put wealth within his grasp. It had traveled quite a bit before it reached him. If only it never had! He might have been happy. After awhile that hungry ache in his heart for Esther would have gradually faded away, he would have become floor-walker at Tilson's and more than likely have married Cora Anderson, who made sheep's eyes at him from behind the ribbon counter.

Cousin Grey Ellis had that letter written just before he died. In it he willed Gordon something. No, not his money. He willed Gordon his Cousin Aubrey Ellis. Aubrey was Grey's son and it seemed that he—

In telling Dr. Folliger about it, Gordon relived the whole thing. These memories were all too vivid, etched on his mind with inexorable acid. He remembered hiking down the wet dirt road off the highway, from the cut-off where the Greyhound bus dumped him and his three suitcases. It was evening. It had rained. So it *did* rain in California! He remembered his first sight of that big brown house, half-hidden behind those curiously warted palms with their funny drooping fronds. He had noticed how the brown paint had peeled off the rococo veranda in great patches, how the shingles were loose on that little tower leaning across the lead-gray sky. How the concrete sidewalk was crumbling in places so that tufts of new Spring grass thrust through the cracks. Cousin Grey Ellis had money, lots of money. Yet he persisted in living in this big old country house, which he didn't even keep up.

Then—Cousin Aubrey.

He was sitting at the dining room table in an arm chair. The arm chair had a strap across it, so he wouldn't fall out. He sat there drooling over a plate of fricasseed chicken. His gaping mouth was sloppy with white gravy and bits of chicken, his vacant eyes gawked up at Gordon with idiotic disinterest. He made little puppy noises at the large woman who had set down his spoon to welcome Gordon.

"Can't he even feed himself?" Gordon stared at seventeen-year-old Cousin Aubrey with sharp repugnance. Gordon had great respect for fricassee of chicken, to see it slopped over like that repelled him.

"Nope." The big woman adjusted a hair-pin in her graying knot, and then started putting on her cloth coat, which was handy on a chair by the oval dining room table. "Can't eat, nor talk, nor walk. Can't do nothin' for himself." She eyed Gordon sharply. "Case you want to know who I am, I'm Nellie Fawcett. I've been Grey Ellis's nearest neighbor for twelve years. I do his cleaning, and help out. I been takin' care of Aubrey since Grey died." She pierced a long pin through her dowdy black hat with emphasis. "Am I glad to see you. I've got my own kids to feed. Aubrey!" She shook the lackwit's shoulder. "This is your Cousin Gordon. He's come all the way from Denver to take care of you. Won't that be nice?" She turned back to Gordon with a shrug. "He don't understand, but I think he likes to be talked to. After you've fed him, take his clothes off and bathe him, and put him to bed. Oh, yeah, there's a twin baby buggy in the parlor. He likes to be took for a ride in it every afternoon. You'll find out what else there is to do for yourself. Anything comes up, give me a buzz. The number's tacked up on the almanac calendar by the phone. Phone's in the hall, by the cellar door." She gave Aubrey a last look. "Goodbye, Aubrey. Be a good boy."

GORDON soon lost his own delicate taste for food, feeding Aubrey, watching him slobber over every spoonful, wiping the drool off his chin. Whatever sympathy for him existing in Gordon's emotions was soon dissipated as weeks went by, as he watched

Aubrey whine greedily when his food was brought in, when he washed and towed that limp white body or wheeled it down the road in that strong oversize baby buggy and cleaned up the messes resulting from feeding.

Cousin Grey Ellis's will was studiously tantalizing. It hinted of a rosy future for Gordon after Cousin Aubrey passed on. Until such time the purse strings were held in check by the local bank. Only enough money was doled out to provide for their immediate needs and, according to the terms of the will, Gordon could not foist Aubrey off on some paid attendant, either. No, he had to take care of him personally.

Esther's letters alone kept Gordon at his task. The thought that some day Aubrey would die, and then they could be married and live happily ever after helped. But Aubrey was just seventeen. His doctor informed Gordon he might live a long, long time. By then the money wouldn't matter.

Feeding Aubrey was the worst. Gordon approached each succeeding meal with reluctance and horror. Let Aubrey whine. Let him starve.

*Why not?*

Why not assist Aubrey out of his futile existence? He was no good to himself, no good to anyone—alive. He was a repulsive burden. Dead he would render Gordon a beautiful service, he would make it possible for Gordon to marry Esther and live happily ever after.

It was easy. Gordon didn't even have to change his routine. He simply chose the day after the grocery truck delivered the week's provisions to get himself locked in the cellar. Nobody visited the Ellis house except Nellie Fawcett, and she only occasionally. The old fashioned cellar with the big refrigerator in it had a stout oak door, and on this door was a heavy snap-lock. If someone forgot to unsnap the lock when they went down the wind from the hall window might easily blow the door shut and lock that someone in the cellar. There was only one window, high up, and it was barred against roving animals and burglars. There were no cutting tools in the cellar, they were kept in the old carriage house.

Gordon was very careless that day. He went down in the cellar to fetch some fruit to tempt Aubrey's appetite and he forgot to unsnap the lock. The door blew shut. Gordon was locked in the cellar for five whole days. There was plenty for him to eat down there, but when Nellie Fawcett let him out they found Cousin Aubrey still sitting by the oval dining room table where Gordon had left him, with a plate of five-day-old beef casserole in front of him, quite dead.

Gordon performed beautifully at the inquest. He was the object of much commiseration, not to mention well-concealed envy on his good fortune. Gordon promptly went back to Denver and married Esther. They were in Honolulu, on their honeymoon, when

It came like a shadow, it leaped down like a super-imposition on a projected slide. They were dining fashionably late on the hotel terrace. Everything had been ordered with the utmost care, and the waiter was given to understand that Gordon was a very particular diner. The breast of guinea hen would go back if it wasn't just right.

The hotel orchestra was playing a sugary waltz. Gordon lingered a moment before applying his knife and fork. He was lifting a succulent morsel of guinea hen to his lips and smiling across the table at Esther as if the food were nothing.

The shadow came down.

Gordon blinked and set down his fork. Why, for a minute Esther wasn't Esther. She was—

"What is it, darling?" Esther's voice lilted reassuringly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

Gordon made his lips form a smile. "Because I love you so much," he said gallantly.

He picked up his fork and was touching his lips with it when the shadow came down again. It wasn't Esther sitting there across from him. It was Aubrey, Cousin Aubrey. He was drooling, begging for his dinner.

"From that moment on," Gordon told Dr. Folliger, "my life has been a living hell. I can't eat, Doctor! Every time I start to take even one mouthful I see Cousin Aubrey, staring at my food and mouthing

Don't you see? When he was alive the only thing that he responded to was—food. I starved him to death, Doctor! He's come back! He won't let me eat because I starved him!"

"I see." Dr. Folliger paced the room and stroked his bald spot. He turned. "You must realize, Mr. Keel, that this apparition exists only in your mind. You blame yourself for what happened. Oh, perhaps," he waved his pudgy hand, "perhaps subconsciously there were moments when you wished him dead. It's understandable. It's perfectly human in such circumstances. But you must not blame yourself for what happened. *It wasn't your fault.* The wind blew the cellar door shut. You couldn't get out. There was nothing down there you could use to batter the door down. It wasn't your fault, Mr. Keel!"

"Cousin Aubrey thinks so," Gordon whimpered. "He won't let me eat because he's still hungry."

Dr. Folliger shook his head. Then he went to work on Gordon's mind. Within three weeks his daily sessions with Gordon reproved his wizardry at hypnotic suggestion. Gordon ate again. He ate like a horse.

Soon Gordon stepped on the bus with a contented stomach and the slightly drunken joy which the realization that he was on his way to resume his interrupted honeymoon produced. He was glad now that he hadn't allowed Esther to visit him at the hospital. He hadn't wanted her to see him all skin and bones. After all, they were hardly man and wife in actuality. He took out her letter and reread it.

"Darling, I know you wanted me to go back to Denver until you got well, but I had a better idea. You know how we talked of fixing up Cousin Grey Ellis's country house? Well, I've done it, darling! Wait until you see it now. You won't know the old place!"

Gordon sighed at the idea of spending his honeymoon in that house. And yet, why not? Even Dr. Folliger thought it might be good for him. It would cast out his mental delusions forever. To reassure himself he recited the little ritual Dr. Folliger had taught him, jokingly referring to it as a litany of exorcism.

*It wasn't my fault. The wind blew the door shut. I only thought I did it because once in a while I wished Cousin Aubrey dead. My guilt complex made me think I planned it, but it wasn't my fault!*

What Esther said about him knowing the old place was true. This couldn't be! Stepping through a rose-trellised gate Gordon blinked at the delightfully rambling house with the red roof and didn't know it. Gone was the baroque veranda and the slanted tower. A cobblestone path led up to a modern porch and a white door with a shiny brass knocker on it. Halfway down the path the door burst open and Esther ran into his arms.

"I've fixed a wonderful dinner for you, darling!" Esther crooned from the kitchen. "I thought it would be nice to be all alone our first night. Comfortable, darling?"

"Wonderful, wonderful." He yawned and looked around the room. Everything was new and shining. Then Esther began setting the table.

"I just love these old-fashioned oval tables, don't you, darling?" she chattered. "It doesn't quite fit in but I couldn't bear to part with it. Or these wonderful old dishes."

Gordon looked at the table and at the dishes. A faint twinge made his shoulders quiver under the port dressing gown Esther had given him as a home-coming gift, along with the slippers. It was as if someone were pinching his spinal cord with a fine pair of tweezers.

"Yes, dear," he said.

He looked at the dinner plate with the blue turkey design on it and burst with a sudden desire to retch. But he forced a tepid smile and wrenched his eyes away from the table and the plates. Everything was to be so perfect tonight. He told himself grimly that he would eat off one of those turkey plates if it killed him.

Just before she served the beef casserole Esther clapped her hands in feminine glee. "I've got something to show you, darling! The most wonderful thing I found!"

Gordon smiled indulgently as she ran out of the room. He was famished after his

long bus ride, but he could wait. Esther got so excited about these little surprises. She was so sweetly feminine.

His smile died when Esther wheeled in the baby buggy, the oversize baby buggy.

"Of course I had to have it repainted, and a new cover put on," she prattled proudly. "Isn't it divine? It's so well made. Don't look so shocked, darling! I told you I want to have children, and I've always adored the idea of having twins. I just know that our first—"

"Take it away!"

"Why, darling! Don't be so provincial!"

"Take it away!" Gordon strangled.

"All right. Oh, I know why you're so touchy. You're hungry, poor darling." She wheeled the buggy out in the hall. "I'll hurry, dear. Dinner's coming right up. It's something very special, just for you!"

Gordon took his place at the table and tried to act like a new, happy husband. That the buggy was out of his sight helped. But here he was sitting at the same oval table, with those same round turkey plates staring him in the face. As she served Esther chattered on about her fondness for old dishes and silver. She held up a fork with an ornate handle. One of its tines was bent. Gordon stared.

"Isn't it lovely, darling?"

Gordon shivered. That bent tine. It was Cousin Aubrey's fork. He remembered the day it happened. He watched Esther put it in her mouth and shuddered.

"You haven't touched your dinner, darling!" Esther chided. "And I spent all afternoon cooking it, just for you."

Gordon looked down. "What—"

"Beef casserole, dear."

The plate of tender, spiced meat swam before his eyes. Under the drifting wisps of steam the pieces of beef seemed to dry and rot, like—

He shut his eyes and recited Dr. Foliger's litany of exorcism. *It wasn't my fault. The wind blew the door shut. I only thought I did it because. . . .*

"Silly me!" Esther exclaimed. "No wonder you're not eating. You never eat beef casserole without horse radish. You must

have told me that a dozen times. I'll run right down and get it. I won't be a moment, darling."

Deep in his ghost-laying litany, Gordon didn't even hear her. His eyes were closed tightly, he muttered the words over and over. Then he opened his eyes. He looked across the table at Esther.

He screamed.

Esther heard him scream and slammed the refrigerator door shut hastily. Horse radish bottle in hand, she ran up the cellar steps. The door was shut. She turned the handle but it wouldn't open. It was snap-locked from the other side.

Nellie Fawcett knew all about the honeymooners, and she thought it prudent to wait a couple days before she brought over some of her nice home-made strawberry jam for their breakfast. She poked her head in the open kitchen window when no one answered her knock.

"Woo-woo!" she called.

A thudding sound from the hall was her answer. Nellie Fawcett frowned and cocked her head. It came again. It was like before, like somebody beating on the cellar door. Nellie Fawcett pursed her lips and hiked her bulk over the sill. She waddled down the hill. Funny. Funny how Cousin Aubrey's buggy had rolled down the hall and pushed the cellar door shut. She shoved it aside and opened the cellar door. Esther Keel fell into her arms, screaming, "Gordon! Gordon!"

They went in the dining room to find him. Why hadn't he answered? She had screamed and screamed. He must have heard her. Esther's fingers were torn, and the clotted blood on them matched the red streaks in the cellar door.

Why hadn't Gordon heard her, and let her out? Why?

He was sitting at the table. After two days, he was still sitting there.

"Gordon!" she cried.

He looked up at her with lack-lustre eyes, then he looked back down at the plate of beef casserole in front of him. Then he started to babble and drool hopefully. Gordon was hungry.