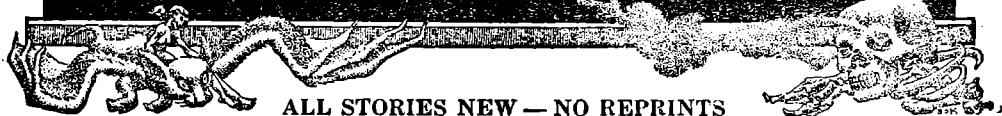


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1950

Cover by Matt Fox

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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

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The Last Train

BY FREDRIC BROWN

ELIOT HAIG sat alone at a bar, as he had sat alone at many bars before, and outside it was dusk, a peculiar dusk. Inside the tavern it was dim and shadowy, almost darker than outside. The blue back bar mirror heightened the effect; in it Haig seemed to see himself as in dim moonlight from a blue moon. Dimly but

It wasn't a question of taking a later train!



J. Giunta -

Heading by John Giunta

clearly he saw himself; not double, despite the several drinks he had had, but single. Very, very single.

And as always when he had been drinking a few hours he thought, maybe this time I'll do it.

The *it* was vague and big; it meant everything. It meant making the big jump from one life to another life that he had so long contemplated. It meant simply walking out on a moderately successful semi-shyster lawyer named Eliot Haig, walking out on all the petty complications of his life, on the personal involvements, the legal chicanery that was just inside the letter of the law or undetectably outside; it meant cutting the cable of habit that tied him to an existence that had become without meaning or significance or incentive.

The blue reflection depressed him and he felt, more strongly than usual, the need to move, to go somewhere else if only for another drink. He finished the last sip of his highball and slid off the stool to the solid floor.

He said, "So long, Joe," and strolled toward the front.

The bartender said, "Must be a big fire somewhere; lookit that sky. Wonder if it's the lumber yards other side of town." The bartender was leaning to the front window, staring out and up.

Haig looked up after he had gone through the door. The sky was a pinkish gray, as though with the glow of a distant fire. But it covered all of the sky he could see from where he stood, with no clue to the direction of the conflagration.

He strolled south at random. The far whistle of a locomotive came to his ears, reminding him.

Why not, he thought. Why not tonight? The old impulse, ghost of thousands of unsatisfactory evenings was stronger tonight. He was walking, even now, toward the railway station; but that he had done before, often. Often he had gone so far as to watch trains depart, thinking, as he watched each: I should be on that train. Never actually boarding one.

Half a block from the station, he heard clang of bell and chug of steam and the starting of the train. He'd missed that one, if he'd had the nerve to take it.

And suddenly it came to him that tonight was different, that tonight he'd really make it. Just with the clothes he had on, the money that happened to be in his pocket. Just as he'd always intended; the clean break. Let them report him missing, let them wonder, let someone else straighten the tangled mess his business would suddenly be without him.

Walter Yates was standing in front of the open door of his tavern a few doors from the station. He said, "Hullo, Mr. Haig. Beautiful aurora borealis tonight. Best one I've ever seen."

"That what it is?" Haig asked. "I thought it was reflection from a big fire."

Walter shook his head. "Nope. Look north; the sky's kind of shivery up that way. It's the aurora."

HAIG turned and looked north, back along the street. The reddish glow in that direction was—yes, "shivery" described it well. It was beautiful, too, but just a little frightening, even when one knew what it was.

He turned back and went past Walter into the tavern, asking, "Got a drink for a thirsty man?"

Later, stirring a highball with the glass rod, he asked, "Walter, when does the next train leave?"

"For where?"

"For anywhere."

Walter glanced up at the clock. "In a few minutes. It's going to highball any second now."

"Too soon; I want to finish this drink. And the next one after that?"

"There's one at ten-fourteen. Maybe that's the last one out tonight. Up to midnight anyway, it is; I close up then, so I don't know."

"Where does it—Wait, don't tell me where it goes. I don't want to know. But I'm going to be on it."

"Without knowing where it goes?"

"Without caring where it goes," corrected Haig. "And look, Walter, I'm serious. I want you to do this for me: If you read in the newspapers that I've disappeared, don't tell anyone I was here tonight, or what I told you. I didn't mean to tell anyone."

Walter nodded sagely. "I can keep my trap shut, Mr. Haig. You've been a good customer. They won't trace you through me."

Haig swayed a little on the stool. His eyes focused on Walter's face, seeing the slight smile. There was a haunting sense of familiarity in this conversation. It was as though he had said the same words before, had had the same answer.

Sharply he asked, "Have I told you that before, Walter? How often?"

"Oh, six—eight—maybe ten times. I don't remember."

Haig said "God" softly. He stared at Walter and Walter's face blurred and separated into two faces and only an effort pulled them back into one face, faintly smiling, ironically tolerant. It had been oftener, he knew now, than ten times.

"Walter, am I a lush?"

"I wouldn't call you that, Mr. Haig. You drink a lot, yes, but—"

He didn't want to look at Walter any more.

He stared down into his glass and saw that it was empty. He ordered another, and while Walter was getting it, he stared at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Not a blue mirror here, thank God. It was bad enough to see two images of himself in the plain mirror; the twin images Haig and Haig, only that was now an outworn joke with himself and it was one of the reasons he was going to catch that train. *Going* to, by God, drunk or sober he'd be on that train.

Only that phrase too had a ring of uneasy familiarity.

How many times?

He stared down into a glass a quarter full and the next time it was over half full and Walter was saying, "Maybe it *is* a fire, Mr. Haig, a big fire; that's getting too bright for an aurora. I'm going out a second."

But Haig stayed on the stool and when he looked again, Walter was back behind the bar, fiddling with the radio.

Haig asked, "Is it a fire?"

"Must be. I'm going to get the ten-fifteen newscast and see."

THE radio blared jazz, a high-riding jittery clarinet over muted brass and restless drums.

"Be on in a minute; that's the station."

"*Be on in a minute—*" He almost fell, getting off the stool. "It's ten-fourteen, then?"

He didn't wait for an answer. The floor seemed tilting a little as he headed for the open door. Only a few doors and through the station. He might make it; he might actually make it. Suddenly it was as though he'd had nothing to drink at all and his mind was crystal clear no matter how his feet might stagger. And trains seldom left on the *exact* second, and Walter might have said "in a minute" meaning three or two or four minutes. There was a chance.

He fell on the steps but got up and went on, losing only seconds. Past the ticket window—he could buy his ticket on the train—and through the back doors to the platform, the gates, and the red tail-light of a train pulling out only yards, but hopeless yards, away. Ten yards, a hundred. Dwindling.

The station agent stood at the edge of the platform looking out after the departing train.

He must have heard Haig's footsteps; over his shoulder he said, "Too bad you missed it. That was the last one."

Haig suddenly saw the funny side of it and began to laugh. It was simply too ridiculous to take seriously, the narrowness of the margin by which he'd missed that train. Besides, there'd be an early one. All he had to do was go back in the station and wait until—

He asked, "When's the first one out tomorrow?"

"You don't understand," said the agent.

For the first time he turned and Haig saw his face against the crimson, blazing sky. "You don't understand," he said. "That was *the last train.*"