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A ghost claims his partner

"The Last Waltz"

SEABURY QUINN

WEIRD TALES




NOVEMBER

1940

Cover by
Margaret Brundage

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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.

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The Last Waltz

Even between the battlefield and the ballroom, love forged a chain no power on earth could break.

THE Eighth Zouaves, had stormed the ridge twice. It must have been five hundred feet up to the heights where the red flag with its blue St. Andrew's Cross and thirteen silver stars waved challengingly and the butternut-clad infantry lay waiting behind their rampart of boulders. Five hundred feet of steep up-grade with fallen trees and underbrush to clamber over, and veterans from Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville to meet them at the top. One out of every three men in the line had fallen, you could see the deep red of their baggy trousers and the deep blue of their jackets like bright flowers on the black soil underneath the bullet-riven trees.

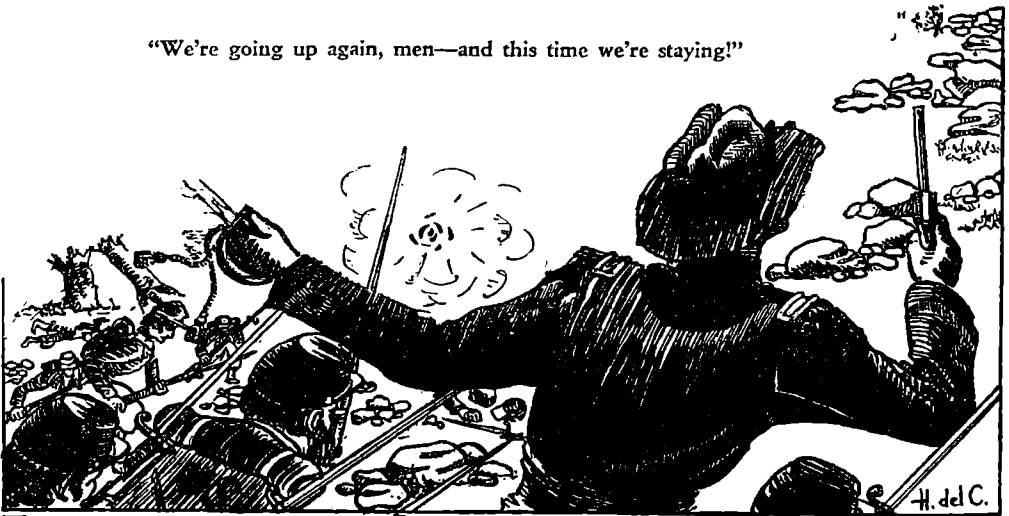
"Attention!" Colonel Dutcher's fog-horn voice smashed through the muted roar of cannonading on the left. "We're going up again, men—and this time we're

staying. Charge bayonets—forward, double quick, march!"

Dwight Fairchild transferred his sword to his left hand, wrapping the hilt-knot about his wrist, and dragged his heavy Colt from its holster. Captain Schwing was down, so was Lieutenant Ditmas; he was company commander — just past twenty, and in command. Drusilla would be proud when he wrote her about this—"Guide right; dress the line!" he shouted as he glanced along the rank of leveled bayonets. "At the double—forward!"

They were halfway up the height, now. The whine of Minié balls was like the droning of a nest of angry hornets; sometimes they cut a branch above his head with a sharp *snick!* sometimes they struck a tree trunk with a dull *pung!* When they ricocheted from the stones underfoot they screamed like demons in frustration.

"We're going up again, men—and this time we're staying!"



By

SEABURY

QUINN

"Why no, it was no bugle blowing retreat; it was an orchestra—and it was playing a Strauss waltz."



Twenty-five feet forward, thirty, maybe, a clump of boulders cropped waist-high from the loam. Funny they should stand like that—like a group of tombstones in a country churchyard—might be shelter for a Johnny behind them—

The face that rose behind the tallest stone was wreathed in a broad grin. It was a nice face, clean-shaved, boyish, and there was something almost friendly in the blue eyes underneath the battered broad-brimmed slouch hat. "Here y'are, Yank—tell Abe Lincoln I sent this!" the lad behind the rock called cheerfully, and then squeezed his trigger.

Fairchild felt the impact of the bullet like a fist-blow on his chest. It didn't hurt, not as much as he'd supposed it would, at any rate. Just knocked the wind from him, and made his left arm feel heavy and useless. "Right back at you, Reb—take this one to Jeff Davis!" he jerked his pistol up and fired.

It was comical, that look upon the other's face. A sort of shocked-surprised expression, as if to say, "You can't do

this to me"—then the welling, gushing spate of blood that rushed out of the hole between the hatbrim and the smiling eyes; the opened gaping mouth. And then nothing. Like a jack-in-the-box the sharpshooter had dropped down behind the sheltering stone, a sliced second too late, and as the gray-clad boy fell Dwight stumbled, felt his left arm crumple under him, and lay against the leaf-mould with a spear of grass tickling his left ear and the sweet, clean smell of topsoil in his nostrils.

"Hully Gee, th' Loot's plugged!" he heard Sergeant Gilroy call, then, in his ear, but sounding far away, "Are ye hurt bad, sor?"

"Never mind me, Sergeant." Funny how he had to shout to make his voice sound even like a whisper. "Keep the men in line—"

Something bothered him. His mouth was full of sticky stuff. Salty. Nasty. And his left side hurt. It seemed as if a hand were pressed against it, holding down his chest. He couldn't breathe, and when

he tried it hurt so—hurt as if a bayonet bore into him just below the collar-bone.

As the gaitered legs swung past his face he reached out with his right hand, drawing himself nearer to the big pine tree. There, that was better. Lie here, take it easy, boy; you're going to be all right. They'll come back for you, soon as they have cleared the ridge. Mustn't ask 'em to stop now, though. This is a war we're having— Who cares about their old war? There's a flower—

It was a bloodroot, pale and pinkly-white, thrusting up through the dead black pine needles. He looked at it with his hand to his heart while the fresh, vigorous young blood trickled through his fingers and made an ugly stain on the precise blue tunic that he had always kept so carefully, brushing it each time he took it off, sponging it with a damp rag to remove dust and powder-stains. Who cares about the old coat? See that pretty flower—like the one Drusilla wore in her hair that night.

It was funny how the past reeled out before him, like one of those moving stereopticons they had in Hartley's Arcade, only run through in reverse. Somewhere near a bugle sounded—Retreat. Had they swept the Johnnies from the ridge? Why, no, it was no bugle, it was an orchestra, and it was playing a Strauss waltz. That flower was no humble country-blooming bloodroot, it was a pale pink rose, and it was in Drusilla's hair. "My waltz, Ma'am, I believe," he murmured to the little, nodding floret.

NEW YORK was in a winter mood. Since halfpast six the great white flakes had drifted through the breezeless air, the cobble stones of Broadway were cottoned by the thick snow fall, and the carriage-horses' hooves were silenced as the long parade of family broughams and hired hacks streamed northward from the

Fulton and Grand Street ferries or south and west from fashionable First Avenue to the Broadway Central where the military and civic ball was in progress for the benefit of the Women's Sanitary Ambulance Corps. Gas light blazed in every window of the hotel, the crystal chandeliers of the ballroom gleamed diamond-like with bright reflections as the orchestra struck up the music for the grand march:

De Camptown ladies sing dis song,

Do-da, do-da;

De Camptown race-track ten miles long,

Do-da, do-da, day!

Most of the men were uniformed, their gold braid and buttons and bright sashes vying with the costumes of the ladies. Everybody who aspired to be mentioned in the Social Columns was present.

Dwight Fairchild felt his fingers tremble as Drusilla laid her hand in his. "You're very beautiful tonight, dear," he whispered as he bent toward her, "and it was sweet of you to wear my flowers." He glanced down at the spray of pale pink-roses at her waist, then at the single blossom nestled in her soft dark hair. "I should have called for you, but duty—"

"La!" she interrupted with a pout. "Duty—always duty! Anyone would think that you were going to marry Mister Lincoln, 'stead of me." Then her brown eyes softened. "Why don't you resign from the army, Dwight? You know how Papa feels about this war, and," she added wistfully, "we could be married right away and have such fun together. The skating's lovely in the park these days, and all the roads are thick with snow. We could go sleighing out to Hempstead, or Freeport, and I know the sweetest little house in Williamsburg we can get for almost no rent—" The marchers separated as they reached the bandstand, and with a coaxing smile she turned away.

He kept time with the music as he followed the stout captain of hussars who marched before him, but though he still smiled he was troubled. It had not been easy to win Drusilla Willemese, for the dark-haired, pale-skinned heiress was conspicuous for her beauty even in the Brooklyn Eastern District, where pretty girls were by no means a rarity, and her suitors numbered scores. Afterwards, her parents' consent had been even harder to obtain, for the Willemese fortune was based upon the Southern cotton trade, and "Mr. Lincoln's war" had all but wrecked the cotton-factoring business. Only the insistent teasing of a pampered only daughter had secured a grudging assent to the engagement, with the understanding that no wedding should take place as long as young Fairchild continued in "King Lincoln's livery."

Now Drusilla urged him to resign, to quit his country in its time of peril. What if her father forced her to return his ring? There was Harold Martense, rich and handsome and outspoken in his Southern sympathies. Suppose the old man made her accept his suit?

The lines of marchers were together once more; her hand was in his again, her eyes were turned on him in entreaty. "Please, Dwight? They don't need you to fight their old war; there are plenty without you. Resign your commission and Papa will let us marry right away."

He danced a polka with her, then a rollicking mazurka; after that young Martense claimed her for the schottische. Now the orchestra struck up the *Blue Danube*, and he bowed before her. "My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

They whirled around the floor once, twice; he held her tighter than convention permitted, for he was young, and terribly in love, and fearful of losing her. The power of his wanting was in his arm, and his almost fierce grip hurt her; but she

loved the hurt. After all, he was a man, her Dwight. She lowered lace-veined lids and gave herself up wholly to the captivating rhythm of the music and the strength of his encircling arm.

Now they were by the ballroom vestibule and as he looked across his partner's creamy shoulder Fairchild saw a young man in zouave uniform who beckoned him imperatively. "Excuse me, darling," he whispered, then, as he reached the young enlisted man:

"Yes, Corporal?"

"Colonel Dutcher's compliments, sor. All officers are ordered to report at once to the armory."

"I'm called for instant duty, dear," Fairchild murmured. "Don't know what it is, but it's important, or they'd not have sent for me."

"Oh, Dwight, can't we even finish this?"

"No, dear; every minute counts. This is a war we're having. But"—as her eyes darkened with rebellion—"I'll be back to claim the dance, my dearest, never fear. Say you'll save it for me."

Her eyes were wide, moist, starry, and her lips trembled like a little child's. "Always and forever, dear heart. Come what may, this dance is yours, and yours alone. I'll never dance the *Blue Danube* with any other man. Claim it when you will. I'll hold it open for you—always."

Then, to the scandal of the chaperoning dowagers who were lined in straight-backed chairs along the wall, he bent and kissed her quickly. "I'll remember, dearest love. When you hear me say, 'My waltz, Ma'am, I believe,' you'll know that I've come back to claim the *Blue Danube* from you."

It had stopped snowing and grown colder since the ball began. A wind that seemed to scream with gleeful malice whipped down Broadway, snatching at their hats and clutching at their greatcoats as Lieutenant Fairchild and Corporal Gil-

roy climbed into a handsom-cab and set out for the armory.

Two hours later they marched to the Jersey City ferries and entrained for the South.

DRUSILLA sat before the cherry writing desk in her boudoir. Two candles in tall silver standards shed their light across the pad of correspondence paper which lay bare and blank before her, their flickering luminance struck flashes from the little diamond setting of the ring that lay beside the opened pad of paper, and from the larger stone that graced the circlet on the third finger of her left hand. "Dear Dwight," she wrote, then paused and nibbled at her penholder. This was going to be harder than she'd thought. She crumpled the sheet to a ball and threw it on the floor, then began again, "Dwight dearest." That was better, less formal, but—one couldn't be too affectionate when— She threw the second sheet of wadded paper down beside the first and started afresh.

The small ormolu clock on the dresser ticked away the minutes, and her pen scratched with a gently scraping sound across the linen paper. Sheet after sheet was torn or crumpled as she finished it; but finally the note was done. The writing was bold, ill-formed, altogether fashionable; its message was plain as any epitaph upon a tombstone.

Dear Dwight:

I loathe writing this, but Papa thinks I should tell you right away. After thinking matters over I know that our engagement was a mistake. You were young and so was I; you were fascinated by my pretty face (for I *am* pretty—my mirror tells the truth, even if the young men lie), I loved your pretty uniform and the pretty things you said, and we were both much more in love

with love than with each other. After all, Dwight, what have we in common? You are devoted to your military career, "seeking the bubble reputation at the cannon's mouth," as the poet says, while I want a home, and a husband who can be with me and think as I do.

Papa says Mr. Lincoln's war may last another five years, and by that time I should be an old maid, even if you came back and still wanted me. You see, I'm twenty-one next April.

So, I think we'd better let by-gones be by-gones. Harold Martense wants to marry him, and I'm sure that I've found love this time.

I'd send your ring back through the mail, but I'm sure some horrid Yankee soldier would steal it, so I'll just hold it here for you, and if you come back from the war, or when you're home on leave, if you'll call at the house Papa will give it to you.

Drusilla.

There, it was done, and a clever piece of composition, too. Not too flippant, not too serious; just the proper balance of gravity and frivolity. But final. Oh, definitely final. She picked up the small ring and looked into its tiny diamond, like a seeress gazing into a crystal. "You *were* a sweet old thing, Dwight," she murmured impulsively as she brushed her lips across the gleaming stone.

The evening had been hot and oppressive, but now a light breeze blew in from the river, fluttering the primly starched scrim curtains, making the straight candle-flames sway dancingly. And with the breeze there came the distance-muted music of the orchestra of an excursion boat steaming home late from Block Island.

For a moment she heard without recognition, then suddenly her senses fitted the notes into the pattern of her memory. The

Blue Danube! Against her will her heart echoed and re-echoed the music.

"Oh, Dwight—Dwight dearest, Dwight beloved!" Her sob-choked exclamation was half moan, half scream, pitched shrilly, but controlled. Papa must not hear her. She'd promised him—

She threw herself across the bed and pressed her face into the lavender-spiced pillow, weeping helplessly, noiselessly, till sheer exhaustion gave her a degree of peace.

DR. BOGARDUS splashed the soap-suds from his hands and wiped them on the fresh huck towel which the orderly had just brought to the lavatory. "Dum it, Frisby," he said as his colleague took possession of the wash basin, "I can't understand that young Fairchild in B-2. The feller should 'a' died two weeks ago, with the apex of his left lung almost shot away, but—dum it all!—he hangs on like a pointer pup to a root. Seems as if he's waitin' for something before he finally decides to kick the bucket."

"H'm?" Dr. Frisby laved his hands and dried them methodically. "Funny thing about these tough young 'uns. Half the time they get well when we've given up all hope, and spoil our reputations—"

"This one won't," Bogardus denied. "He can't. Hasn't got an earthly chance; just livin' on his nerve. When that breaks—" He shrugged into his blouse and bent his head back as he hooked the collar fastenings. "Come on, let's eat. I've done ten amputations today, an' I'm hungry as a wolf."

"Any mail, Sister?" Dwight looked up hopefully as the young woman in the blue habit bustled past his bed, the points of her starched *cornette* flapping like a bird's wing with the motion of her walk.

The young sister of charity looked down pityingly. She had not withdrawn from

the world long enough to regard men impersonally, and this pale-faced boy with the great eyes who asked so plaintively for mail each day wrung her heart. "No mail today, Lieutenant," she responded gently. "The trains from the North are all delayed by troop movements. Maybe you'll get your letter tomorrow."

She met Dr. Frisby as she left the ward. "Dr. Bogardus seems so sure that young man's going to die," she volunteered, "but I'm not certain. He has a dreadful wound, it's true; but I never saw a man who clung to life so fiercely—"

"Yep, Bogardus said he seemed to be waitin' for something before he finally makes up his mind to die—"

The sister smiled. A knowing, woman's smile. "He's waiting for a letter from his sweetheart, Doctor. The hope of it's sustaining him. When it comes—unless it comes too late—I shouldn't be surprised if he got well and fooled us all."

LIEUTENANT FAIRCHILD, here's your letter!" Sister Mary Agnes almost stumbled in her haste to reach Dwight's cot. "Now everything will be all right, and you'll get well—shall I read it to you?"

The big, unnaturally bright eyes in his pale face shone with an ethereal light. "Yes, please, if you will. I'm afraid I can't quite—"

"Never mind. Just rest quietly; I'll read it—" She had broken the seal and drawn out the sheet of folded paper. With a quick glance she scanned the irregular, fashionable writing, and for a moment all expression left her face. Then she smiled at him, not only with her lips, but with her eyes; eyes that were warm and understanding and kind. "It's a beautiful, sweet letter," she assured him. "Listen":

Dwight, my beloved:

They tell me that you have been

wounded, and when I heard the news it seemed the bullet tore through my flesh, too, for we are so soon to be one, my darling, that whatever hurts you hurts me, just as everything that gives you happiness makes me happy.

Do you know they say the war will soon be over, dearest one? And you'll be coming back to me with all your honors thick upon you. But I'll not see the hero with his medals or the victor who returns in triumph from the battle; I'll only see my own true love, for whose return I've hoped and waited so long. How happy we shall be, my dear! All the happy times we've had together were but the prelude to the happiness we have in store for us.

Good night, my dearest, and know that every day I miss you, and every night I pray for your return.

Always and forever yours,

Drusilla.

She glanced down at him as she finished. He was looking straight before him, eyes wide, as if he saw a glory he had never dreamed of limned against the whitewashed wall of the hospital ward. She heard his quick, light breathing, she saw the sweat that started to his forehead just below the hair-line. She knew the signs. Hastily she rose to summon Dr. Bogardus, then returned to kneel beside the cot and recite prayers for the dying. And for herself. It was a sin to lie, but she was not repentant. Even as she asked forgiveness for the lie she knew that she would do the same thing many times again if by such sinning she could guard a dying boy from heart-hurt.

Presently she heard the doctor grunt. "All right, Sister. Call the orderlies. Get 'im out o' here. We're short o' beds."

Outside in the warm sunshine an almost convalescent trooper from the Fifth Michigan Cavalry baked himself luxuriously

against a wall and played his accordion. The notes came wheezily, and plainly the musician played by ear, but the tune was easily distinguishable. The *Blue Danube*.

THREE hundred guests had passed the bride and bridegroom, showering congratulations and good wishes on them; now the wedding supper was completed, the last champagne toast drunk, and the company repaired to the ballroom where the orchestra was playing a soft prelude to the dance. The older people found seats by the wall, the youngsters looked expectantly toward Martense and his bride, for till they led off none might dance, and their feet were tingling to begin.

It had been one of those intolerable late-August days that sometimes afflict the west tip of Long Island, a day of humid heat that stopped the nostrils and clogged the throat, with neither life nor freshness in such air as moved, only more heat. But now a breeze was rising, whimpering through the pear trees in the garden, bringing a promise of rain. Thunder rolled and grumbled in the east out by Jamaica Bay, the horizon was brightened intermittently with the white glow of lightning.

"Shall we dance, my dear?" Young Mr. Martense bowed, reached out a white-gloved hand and clasped her small, sweet waist. The violin and clarinets struck up the *Blue Danube*, and in a moment they were whirling round the brightly lighted, mirrored room, the center of a hundred other whirling couples.

"You're cold?" he asked as she shuddered slightly in the circle of his arm. "Shall I have them close the windows?"

"Oh, no, please," she denied. "It isn't that I'm cold; it's just that—"

The storm burst on them with a screaming war-whoop. The building fairly staggered with the impact of the wind, the rain dashed with an angry hiss against the walls, and through the opened French

windows lashed a spate of water almost solid as a rising wave.

The flaring gas flames in the chandeliers were fluttering like tattered banners in the gale. One after another they wavered, flattened, and went out. The room was dark as Erebus, the shrouding blackness echoed with the startled screams of women and the men's ejaculations.

"Excuse me, dear, I'll have things right in no time," Martense murmured, and in his excitement forgot to escort her from the floor.

She looked about her in bewilderment. Accustoming themselves to the darkness, her eyes could descry figures, but not features.

The orchestra was still playing and a few of the more daring couples danced, but she stood in a little zone of vacant space clutching her bouquet of bridal roses in the bend of one arm, her trailing veil

of Valenciennes lace looped across the other.

Clear and piercing-sweet, the second movement of the waltz tune eddied through the darkness. She turned to make her way from the floor, but stopped in mid-step as a shadow, a bare shade darker than the darkness of the lightless room, loomed directly in her path.

"My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

She felt her waist encircled by a strong arm. Not the formal embrace of conventional dancing, not the precise, stiff hold of her husband, but a tightening, almost stifling clasp that drew her to a broadcloth coat set with a double row of buttons. As she raised her hand involuntarily her fingers touched the gold lace of an epaulet. No one at the reception had been uniformed, a soldier would have seemed incongruous in that company. But this man—

[Turn page]

"My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

She drew back from the clutching, fierce embrace as she recalled his last words—her promise—but the arm about her tightened, and a laugh that had no hint of happiness or humor in it sounded softly in her ear.

"My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

The words were taken up by the wind shrieking through the windows. They fell into a rhythm matching the cadences of the music.

She dropped her bouquet, and her stiffening fingers crawled up to her lips to stifle back a shrill cry of sheer terror.

Her heart was jerking like a thing in its death-throes. Her throat closed with compelling panic, and into every vein and artery an icy fluid seemed to pour in place of blood.

Her nerves were fraying out like slowly breaking threads. Her knees were weak as water, and she faltered, stumbled, all but fell; but the hungry-clasping arm about her held her up.

"My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

Something burst like a bomb in her head. She was no longer fearful. This was glorious! The arm about her held her so close that it hurt; and she loved the pain of it.

Closer, tighter; hold me closer, dear, dear lover! Drag me down to hell or up to heaven with you. Anywhere—anywhere, as long as we're together!

She was sobbing; hard, dry, ugly sobs of heart-break, and laughing as she sobbed.

"My waltz, Ma'am, I believe."

"Yes—yes; your waltz! This and all my waltzes, beloved. Never will I dance again with any other man; never shall another man so much as touch my hand.

The hurrying waiters forced the win-

dows shut. They brought lights for the blown-out gas jets. Once more the room shone with the gleam of blazing chandeliers. The orchestra stopped playing, the dancers stood in a wide, frightened circle, watching the wild, whirling, pirouetting, spinning figure in the center of the floor.

Her bride's bouquet was thrown away and trampled underfoot, her veil was rent to tattered streamers, across her white shoulders the dark hair floated unbound, like the tresses of a drowned girl floating on the tide.

"Drusilla!" Harold Martense strode to her, laid a hand upon her arm. "Control yourself!"

She turned strange, empty eyes on him. Cold eyes, lifeless as the windows of a vacant house with all the curtains drawn—but with something peeping furtively underneath the lowered blinds.

She was humming an accompaniment to her dance. The *Blue Danube*. Her voice rose higher; rose and mounted like a quickening flame. It rose and shrilled and sharpened till it seemed no human throat could stand the piping strain of it.

Then, like a snapping violin string, its sound stopped suddenly, abruptly; utterly.

Her husband took her by the shoulders and shook her. "Stop this nonsense!" he commanded sharply. "Everything's all right, now—"

She looked at him as if she'd never seen him before; then, in a small, cold voice:

"He came back to me; back from the grave to claim the waltz I'd promised him the night he went away, and"—the racing, breathless words came in a tittering whisper—"he took me with him!"

Three days later she was sent to Blackwell's Island, pronounced incurably insane.