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# Weird Tales

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November  
1953

- WAY STATION . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 2  
*A haunted house is a poor place for a honeymoon. . . .*
- THE LEGS THAT WALKED . . . . . Justin Dowling 24  
*. . . with every clap of thunder they came marching on.*
- THE RED BALLOON . . . . . Q. Patrick 31  
*Something "awfully funny" had happened to those kids.*
- SUSPICION (Verse) . . . . . Harriet Bradfield 41
- THE MAN UPSTAIRS (A novelette) . . . Harry W. Currier 43  
*No one else had seen him, yet the little professor could swear  
that three times he had been there.*
- THE BLACK STONE . . . . . Robert E. Howard 59  
*. . . some unspeakable monster from the Elder World.*
- THE CRYING CHILD . . . . . Dorothea Gibbons 75  
*It was two hundred years ago the plaything had been lost.*
- DEMON LOVER (Verse) . . . . . Dorothy Quick 83
- THING OF DARKNESS . . . . . G. G. Pendarves 84  
*A novelette of a Thing of Horror that brought death to Troon House.*
- THE DISC RECORDER . . . . . August Derleth 117  
*Can such contrivances be ghost-operated?*
- THE EYRIE . . . . . 2nd Cover

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

# THE LEGS THAT WALKED



EBERLE

BY JUSTIN DOWLING

I FIRST saw the legs that walked in a thunder storm. Which made it worse. But having seen them once I had to see them again.

They did that to you. They did it to Mr. Peach too who owned them.

I was one of the first to meet Mr. Peach when he bought the old widow's gloomy house on the corner. We became friendly and I used to drop in after supper for a chat and a cup of China tea with lemon.

He attracted me because there was something in his pale eyes which I could not fathom, something which I knew was haunting him but which he hid so cleverly.

It was not until I had known him nearly a year and had seen him grow old and gray under my eyes that he told me about his queer obsession.

(. . . *He collected legs!* . . .)

He said that he had collected hundreds of them—mostly of famous men and women. He had built them up from descriptions he had found in books while others he had created from photographs and statues.

He made them from a special wax which he had brought back from China.

Naturally I was interested and asked him to show them to me.

That mysterious look kindled in his eyes. He said, "Sorrison. I am too scared!"

"Why?" I asked. "What on earth is there to be afraid of in a lot of legs?"

His eyes clouded; drops of sweat gathered on the back of his hands making the hairs blacker. The blood drained from his lips.

He said: "There is something to be afraid of. Something terrible. Something which is driving me insane. Something from which I cannot escape. You must not go down there!"

"Rot," I answered severely, "I am not frightened. There is not a leg in the world that can scare me."

"All right," he said, "tomorrow night. If I am still alive!"

On the way home I pondered over his queer hobby. There must be some reason for it. What would a psychologist do? Probe back to his youth? Find out that at some tender age someone had laughed at his legs—this gave him an inferiority complex. So he collected legs when he grew up to prove to himself that his were as good as anybody else's.

But this fear of his? What was that? Persecution mania? I gave it up.

When I arrived the next evening he seemed normal. "Well, I said, "you are still alive, I see." He laughed.

"I did not go down there last night."

"I cannot wait," I said.

While we had our cup of tea the storm came up suddenly, the first indication we had of it was a low rumbling and the dipping on and off of the lights.

"Let us go down," he said.

Mr. Peach kept his collection in the basement and as we went down a flight of stone steps to it I could hear the rain weeping against the walls outside while the wind rattled the windows.

The basement was a large room with low rafters. Stacked row upon row were his collection of legs. Each pair was neatly labeled with the birth and death of their owners.

He had divided them up into sections starting with the early days of Rome and Greece through to the Renaissance; Reformation and up to our twentieth century.

It would have been impossible to have looked at each pair. In any case I did not think it over interesting. Queer, decidedly queer, but to me the legs held little fascination. I glanced at one or two as we walked through the room.

The early century chorus girls interested me for a moment. A

flash of lightning and an extra loud crack of thunder dipped the lights again.

It was then that I had a feeling that something was alive but it passed as quickly as the lights came on again.

There was only one window in the basement and it was covered by a heavy, velvet curtain.

"Well," I said to him, "you have an extraordinary collection here. Unique I should say. But nothing of a frightening nature."

His face was the color of sawdust. Once more I saw the drops of perspiration springing up on the back of his hands, matting the black hairs.

Had he also sensed that aliveness? Absurd! It was the storm and all these stupid legs in their bodiless rows!

He whispered: "Come and see."

He led me to the far end of the room where in an alcove stood something covered in a cloth. Thunder shook the room. He flicked off the cloth. It was a glass case mounted on blocks with a gold rope ringing it.

The label read: "The Unknown Woman." I looked at the legs in the case.

They were perfect; exquisite in their symmetry; exact in their length; delicate in their coloring. I stared fascinated—the exotic curve from the knees to the thighs, a deeper white than the

rest of the legs; the calves flexed but smoothly supple; the ankles thin yet strong; the feet small and delicately formed.

Of all the legs I had seen these were the most realistic—almost alive!

Mr. Peach spoke startling me as a clap of thunder shook the room: "What do you think of them?"

HE STOOD close behind me breathing heavily down my neck. His eyes were wide and frightened. Water dripped off the back of his hands.

"I think they are wonderfully made," I answered. "They almost look alive!"

He caught me fiercely in the fleshy part of my thigh so that I cried out. He moaned: "Alive! Alive! You are right. They *are* alive!"

I thought: Had the man gone mad? Had continual staring at these legs affected his mind?

He pushed me back until I stood ten paces from the case. Then he went over to the switch. "Watch," he said.

The room was plunged into darkness. Thunder rumbled under my feet. Lightning flashing outside penetrated the curtain giving the case a weird look.

Inside the case lights came on vividly outlining the beautiful legs. I blinked. Then I stepped back horrified.

*The legs came marching towards me!*

Marching. Marching straight at me! I shouted. I tried to ward them off. But they came on. With each clap of thunder they came. Came until they were about me.

Round my throat. Squeezing . . . squeezing . . . a vice grip which bit deep into my flesh. Choking me. Squeezing. . . .

When I opened my eyes I was back in the study on the couch; Mr. Peach bending over me.

"So they did it to you too. They did it to you too! Marched until they were about your throat!" he whispered.

I scrambled up and rushed to the side-board mirror.

There were no marks on my throat! Then I laughed and said: "What an extraordinary hallucination. Thank God it was a hallucination. What with that storm and the lightning flickering on and off those legs I imagined the things walked."

"They did," said Mr. Peach.

"But it is impossible," I said.

"They have done it to me, often. That was why I was afraid to ask you to see them. Now you will have to go back. Go back for more!"

"I shall certainly not go back," I said. "Though of course there is nothing to it. It was a hallucination. And hallucinations never happen a second time."

He shook his head. "You will

go back. They do that to you. Each time the squeezing gets worse. One day they will squeeze too hard!"

"Do not talk such nonsense," I said severely. "If you are afraid of them—burn them. Get rid of them and you will rid yourself of this optical illusion."

"No matter what we do now," he answered, "they will always come marching—alive. Alive to squeeze the throat until . . . death! There is no escape from the curse of the legs!"

"Where did you get them?" I asked, "out of a tomb in Egypt?"

"No. They were sent to me through the post—anonymously. Their beauty attracted me so I put them in the special case. Then one night. . . . You know the rest."

When I left his home later I believed that I would never return.

**B**UT I did. I wanted to prove to Mr. Peach how wrong he was and the sooner he saw a psychiatrist the better. It was a month later that I called again.

What I found astonished me. Mr. Peach had changed so completely. His shoulders sagged, his hair was grayer, his eyes puffed and tired, his mouth curled down at the corners.

The man was mentally sick. So sick that he hardly recognized me. When he did he whispered:

"So you came back. So you came back."

I felt guilty at having neglected him. Was I too late to save his mind? I said: "Heavens—what have you been doing to yourself?"

But he went on whispering: "So you came back. So you came back!"

"Look here," I said, "I wish I had come sooner. I am going down there to bust forever this mad thing that has gripped your imagination like this. This time there is no storm to play tricks. When I walk up from there you will be free. Do you understand? A free man!"

But he stared in front of him without answering. Saliva drooled unheeded down his mouth. I decided to act promptly.

I hurried down the steps to the basement. I realized how on the other occasion my fears had been magnified by the storm. Now it seemed laughable. There was nothing to be afraid of now.

I stopped to look at one or two legs before going over to the case to remove the cloth.

The legs were the same. They were certainly well made but I had lost my awe for them. Bits of wax in a glass case!

Then I went over to the switch and flicked off the light. The room was even darker than it had been on that other occasion because the curtain effectively shut

out any light from the outside and there was no lightning to flash on and off.

I stood before the case and waited for the lights inside it to come on. When they did I found I was too far away and moved closer.

I halted—stupefied. Horrified. The legs were marching! Marching straight at me! I tried to turn and run but found myself rooted to the ground.

They were out of the case. Walking on air. Walking at the level of my head towards me. Walking in perfect rhythm.

Then they were about my throat. Firstly they gripped me between their calves—squeezing. As my breath gasped from my lips they slipped up until the thighs smothered my face.

Tighter, Tighter—they gripped. I could feel the flesh, alive. Alive—biting into my neck until I could breathe no more and my lungs hurt with a bursting tightness.

As I twisted to the floor the grip loosened—gradually. I fell clawing at the floor my chest heaving in great convulsions as I fought for air. Then there was no more pain—only blackness.

Something cold hit me in the face. I opened my eyes. My head throbbed. Mr. Peach stood over me with a bucket of water.

"So it was my imagination, was it? So they could not walk?

So it was an optical illusion? Well you do not think so now, do you?"

He laughed hysterically. I knew then that he had been watching and that his last shred of sanity had vanished. Then I discovered that my hands were tied behind my back.

I was alone with a madman and a pair of legs that walked until . . . death!

Every now and then he laughed insanely and shook his head violently. He gibbered and muttered. I heard a word or two: "Came back. Illusion. Marching. Squeezing."

He held an iron bar in his hand and with it pushed me backwards. He thrust his bloated face near mine and slobbered at me: "Watch! Watch and see them. See them march to my throat where they belong!"

He let out another crazy laugh and went to the switch. I was afraid to move in the dark. He may have struck me with the iron bar.

The lights came on in the case. He stood there arm raised. He was going to fight the legs!

The legs stirred. They were through the glass. They made straight for him. It was a fantastic sight. He swung at them viciously with the bar.

A blow raised a huge weal on the left leg. Then I saw the trickle of blood and heard a low moan.

With a sudden swiftness the legs were about his throat. He twisted and turned, dropping the iron bar with a clatter.

He tore at the legs with his hands until the blood ran down over his hands and down his arms. Then his fingers went stiff. He lurched forward and fell onto his knees.

I could see the muscles on the legs tightening. Tighter! Tighter! There was blood all over his purple face—his eyes were pressed from his head—his twisted mouth stayed wide open.

The legs released their grip—and were gone. I rushed over to him. By the light from the case he looked a horrible sight. He was dead!

The legs were back in the case. Already the fingers of madness were about me. I tugged insanely at the ropes—they slipped. I was free.

The legs had not moved again. I stared and waited for them.

I wanted to share his fate. His agonizing death. Then I realized. The legs would never march again. Never move again. Never squeeze again.

They too were dead!

I rushed from the room for help. My half insane shouting at the servants stirred them into action and they phoned for a doctor and the police.

The anti-climax had nearly the

effect of turning my brain completely. When I led them down to the basement they found Mr. Peach slumped on the ground. But there was no blood on his face. Nor did his eyes protrude from his face as I had seen them. There were no signs that he had been strangled.

"Heart failure," said the doctor. "But I will tell you for sure after a post mortem."

Dazed I walked over to the case. The legs were the same as before. They were free from any marks or scratchings!

Had I imagined the whole thing? Blood pounded into my head and I reeled dizzily. Then I crashed to the ground.

My break-down was a severe one. And it took me months of rest before I became well. With the help of a psychiatrist I convinced myself that the whole thing was a colossal hallucination.

Then one day I picked up an old paper. I read, "A pair of legs among the late Mr. Peach's collection of legs has been identified. They were his wife's preserved in an ingenious way. It is now alleged he must have murdered his wife and. . . ."

I read no more. I knew now there had been no hallucination. I knew now why the legs had marched until . . . death. I knew, and once more I was afraid. . . .