

Weird Tales

MAY, 1952

Cover by Virgil Finlay

NOVELETTE

THE LAMIA IN THE PENTHOUSE Thorp McClusky 8
*Can demons be summoned up or banished at will—
 or do they sometimes get out of control?*

SHORT STORIES

RHYTHMIC FORMULA Arthur J. Burks 21
*The old jungle chief announced that one murderer in his family
 was enough; but there were other families!*

A BIT OF MOSS Suzanne Pickett 26
*She heard his voice and felt his presence, yet could not see him.
 Was he invisible or was she blind?*

THE EIGHTH GREEN MAN G. G. Pendarves 36
*The idea of any form of life not classified and labeled as belonging
 to the animal or vegetable kingdom could only be a joke.*
 (Copyright 1928 by Popular Fiction Publishing Company)

SHE WORE A BLACK ROSE Frederick Sanders 45
*Even in her coffin she wore it; her coffin sealed with
 twenty-six of the ghostly blooms.*

DARK LAUGHTER Garnett Radcliffe 50
You have only to obey the Great Masters and they will treat you with love.

THE FIFTH CANDLE Cyril Mand 57
*The old man reached back from the grave each year to light
 one candle in a fearsome candelabrum.*
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THE LITTLE TREE C. F. Birdsall 62
Did you ever hear of a dead delegate turning up at a convention?

THE NIGHT ROAD August Derleth 68
In Lost Hope Valley someone cut the seven of spades.

THE DEVIL OF MANIARA Douglas Leach 73
Too much curiosity about jungle sorcery is unwise.
 (Copyright 1933 by Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc.)

FATHER'S VAMPIRE Alvin Taylor & Len J. Moffatt 82
*Authorities, being politicians as they are, are naturally stupid,
 so they didn't try to account for any missing blood.*

DOUBLE HAUNT Joseph Howard Krucher 67

VERSE { **OUT OF SPACE** Dorothy Quick 56
GHOST PORT Pauline Booker 81

WEIRD TALES CLUB 6

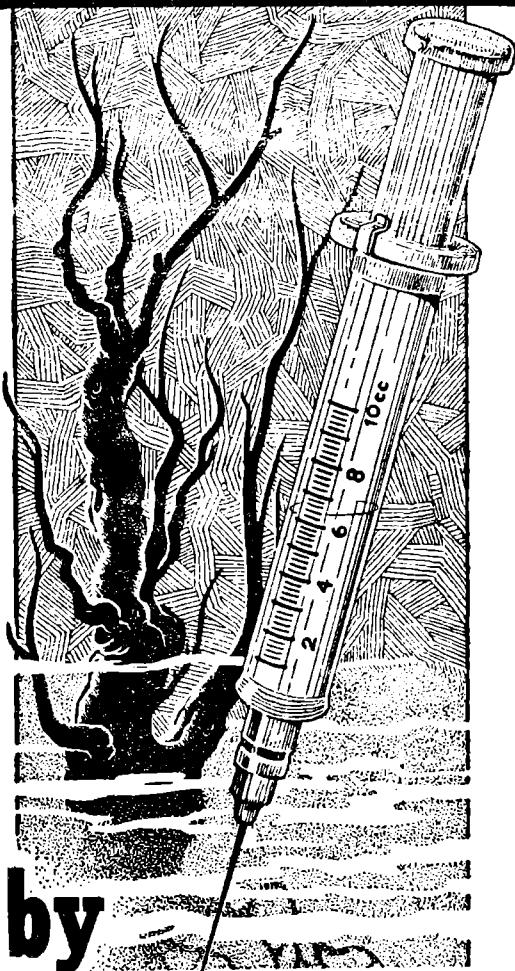
THE EYRIE 89

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173
 Vol. 44, No. 4

The Little Tree



by
C. E. Birdsall

*... One could feel the growth
impulse in the tree's tiny limbs.*

Heading by Joseph Eberle

IT WAS one of those nights in late August when the heat and the humidity seem to close in on people in a smothering conspiracy. I had motored into the small, Mid-Western city, without a hotel reservation and found a district horticultural convention in progress. I had been lucky to get a stuffy little room on the third floor of a second-rate hotel.

It was like an inferno after the air-conditioned room I had enjoyed in Chicago the previous night.

I tossed and rolled on the uncomfortable bed until my watch showed 6:30 o'clock, then I got up intending to shower and see if I could grab a breath of cool air by the window until the coffee shop opened. I had a business appointment for ten o'clock that morning, otherwise I would have proceeded on my way to Detroit.

Literally dripping perspiration, I looked out of the window and discovered that there was a little public park, centred by a mid-Victorian style courthouse, across the street. I remembered that some years before I had found relief from the mid-summer heat in a St. Louis hotel room by spending the early morning hours in a nearby park. I decided it was worth another trial.

Within half an hour I had showered and wearing only a sport shirt, lightweight trousers and slippers, I went down to the lobby, stopping to tell the sleepy-eyed desk clerk that I thought I'd see if the park was cooler than my room.

"Can't be any hotter, I'll bet," he said sympathetically. I cut across an almost deserted street. A red sun in the east gave notice of another scorcher.

I dropped down on a faded green bench, just off a flagstone walk that led to the front entrance of the courthouse. A tall elm tree and a smaller maple shaded that part of the

grounds. Nearby, water trickled desultorily from the broken beak of a cast-iron heron poised on one leg in the centre of a once ornate fountain.

A few pedestrians were passing by this time—wilted looking people evidently on their way to work. An occasional truck rattled and rumbled by; but so far as the park was concerned, I had it all to myself. At least I thought so.

I was studying the design of a rather pretty example of carpet bedding in front of me when a low, strangely musical voice said, "Are you interested in horticulture, sir?"

Startled, I turned and found the owner of the voice seated at the other end of the bench. He was a queer looking little man—queer looking in a sort of vague, uncertain way. What I mean is that I find it difficult now, as I did then, to describe him clearly. He seemed to be from another age, or from some part of the old world where such Bohemian raiment as green velour hats, plum-colored coats, voluminous fawn trousers and flowing black bow ties were in style. I believe he was wearing the semblance of a mustache, but as I stated, his features were indistinct.

ONE thing does stand out clearly in my mind: He had a monocle screwed into his right eye.

His whole appearance was so surprising and his presence there so unexpected that moments elapsed before I realized that he had addressed me.

"Pardon?" I answered.

"I suggested that possibly you were here through an interest in horticulture," the stranger said—and again I was struck by the low resonance of his voice.

"No," I told him, rather shortly, "I am not attending the horticultural convention in this town, if that is what you mean."

"But you are interested in the subject?" he asked.

"Nope," I replied.

"I felt that you must be from the interest you were taking in that very nice example of carpet bedding," he persisted.

"Look, fella," I said, a bit annoyed, "I'm afraid you've got me wrong. I came over here to see if it was any cooler than the ten

by twelve oven in that hotel where I tried to sleep last night. As for admiring that posey bed, it was just something to look at. I'm not sure whether those flowers are pansies or geraniums."

"But you are joking, I suggest," he protested politely. "I am sure you know that those plants are of the colorful Coleus family?"

"Brother," I said, "I'm trying to tell you that I didn't even know Coleus had a family. I thought he was an old bachelor."

My horticultural witticism went right over his little green hat. And I just couldn't squelch him.

"I wonder, sir, if you would be interested in a demonstration of growth by multi-dimensional impulse I was about to make?" he came right back at me.

"I'm sure that's all I need to round out a warm morning," I said, and I laid the sarcasm on heavy. He didn't look a bit taken back.

"You have heard of hormones?" he asked me.

"Who hasn't?" I answered.

"I have discovered the super-hormone," he informed me, modestly.

"Good for you," I said, without enthusiasm. The heat was beginning to get me again.

"Its effect when impelled into the life stream of a plant is quite unprecedented," he said.

"Really obeys the impulse, eh?" I wisecracked. It rolled off of him like rain.

"With your permission, sir, I shall show you." And with that my bench acquaintance started opening a large paperboard carton at the end of the bench.

He uncovered a small wooden tub containing a diminutive tree with tiny gnarled limbs and Tom Thumb leaves and placed it in front of the bench about three feet from me. It looked like pictures of those funny Singer Midget trees the Japanese dwarf, that I had seen.

"I have here, sir, a specimen of *Quercus lucida* in which growth has been quite successfully arrested for years," the little man informed me. "I might say I have attained some measure of success in dwarfing certain species of oaks by halting the natural hormone impulses in the life stream. I have

chosen the oak because of its antiquity and longevity."

He sure could use big words in the right places.

"The Japanese have attained their greatest success in arresting growth working with certain species of cypress and cedar," he added.

How that little chap kept so cool and pompous was beyond me!

AS HE was speaking, my acquaintance took from a coat pocket a black case resembling a doctor's small surgical kit, opened it and removed a glass hypodermic tube filled with an amber-colored fluid. Deftly he fitted on a metallic needle with plunger attachment.

"Now, sir," he said, "if you will observe closely I shall endeavor to show you how rapidly one of these arrested forms of plant life responds to multidimensional impulse."

With that he jabbed the needle into the base of the little tree and started pressing the fluid from the tube.

And right then my indifference disappeared. I'm telling you that little tree literally exploded in size. One moment I was looking down at the top of it, the next moment I was gaping up at the top.

"It is rather startling, isn't it?" said the little man, reading my thoughts. "Come nearer, sir, and feel the growth impulse in the limbs."

Rather gingerly, I placed my right hand on the limb nearest to me. I felt a queer, pulsating sensation. The limb expanded and extended under my hand. A branch swept past my face.

"Good God, it's uncanny!" I heard myself saying.

"Grasp the limb firmly with both your hands, sir," the little man urged.

Fascinated, I did as he directed. He shot the remainder of the fluid into the trunk.

I was jerked off my feet. An unseen force lifted me upward, as if I were on the end of the rope of an ascending balloon. Then I felt myself falling. I clutched wildly at branches that were rushing all around me. And that was all I remembered until a gruff voice brought me back to my senses.

"What's going on here?" the gruff voice asked.

I looked up and saw a red-faced police officer standing over me. I was lying on the grass, near the bench.

"O. K., buddy," said the policeman, "the celebration's over. Up on your feet and out of here or I'll run you in!"

I struggled to my feet, dizzy from my fall and looked about me, bewildered. Sharp pains shot through my head and down my spine.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Where is who?" asked the cop.

"The little man with the magic tree," I answered, inanely. "The tree that jerked me up into the air—it was right there."

"I don't know what you were drinking, buddy," said the cop. "Sounds like squirrel whiskey."

"But didn't you see a little man in queer clothes with a tree in a tub?" I pleaded.

"Listen, buddy," he replied, "all I saw was you sprawled out there on the grass beside that bench, and the only trees are that big elm and that maple over there."

"You sure must have tied on a dandy one last night," he added. "I guess you convention delegates are all alike when you get away from home."

"But there was a funny little man with a tree in a tub and a hypodermic syringe," I protested. "I'm not a convention delegate and I haven't been drinking, officer."

"If you want to keep on arguing, you can tell it to the desk sergeant, or you can move on peacefully," he said. "You got any place to go?"

"I've a room in that hotel across there," I answered, "but I insist, officer, there was a little man and a tree that jerked me up into the air."

I ADMIT now that must have sounded like the aftermath of an alcoholic nightmare to that policeman. No wonder he lost his temper.

"A little man and a little tree that jerked you into the air," he mimicked, nastily. "I've been patient with you, young fellow, but I'm not going to be any longer. If you want to keep on raving, we've got a nice cell over in that building (he pointed to the old courthouse) where you can enjoy yourself chasing pink elephants and bob-tailed butterflies."

"O.K., officer," I said, resignedly. "I'll forget about it."

But I couldn't forget about it. I was still woozey when I got back to my room in the hotel. My watch showed me I had been gone less than half an hour. The temperature in the room must have been around eighty; but the bed looked welcome. I sprawled across it, head throbbing and every bone in my body hurting.

Something proceeded to irritate the back of my neck. I reached up and pulled out a small branch that was stuck under the damp collar of my shirt. I glanced at it through half-closed eyes. Then I sat up in a hurry.

There were three leaves attached to that piece of branch, and I was horticulturist enough to know they were not elm or maple leaves. They were large-sized editions of the tiny leaves I had seen on that dwarf tree in the park half an hour previously.

FORGETTING my aches and pains, I hurriedly made myself presentable by donning another pair of summer trousers and a clean shirt and tie and went down to the lobby again. The piece of branch with the three leaves attached to it was in an envelope in my briefcase.

I had one thought in mind. I must find somebody who could clear up this strange mystery.

The same sleepy-eyed clerk was at the desk. "Can you tell me where the meetings of the horticultural convention are being held?" I asked him.

"In the Jefferson Hotel just around the corner on the next street," he answered.

I knew where the Jefferson was, having tried to get a room there the night before.

As I started for the door, the clerk called: "They're meeting in the ballroom on the second floor. It's air-conditioned—but they don't start until nine o'clock," he added.

"Thanks," I called back, "maybe somebody will be there early."

I was lucky. There was a distinguished-looking, middle-aged man, with a trim, iron gray mustache and Van Dyke beard, seated at a long table at the far end of the big room. He was busily writing in a notebook, loose papers and brochures scattered in front of him. He looked up and smiled pleasantly as I approached.

"Pardon me," I asked, "but are you one of the convention delegates?"

"I guess you can call me a delegate," he replied. "I am Dr. Bassett, curator of the State Arboretum. I came here early to prepare a talk I am giving this morning. Was there something you wanted?"

"Yes, there is, Doctor," I said, "but first I want to assure you that I am neither intoxicated nor dilly with the heat. That may sound strange, but I've got to convince you that I'm rational."

Dr. Bassett's eyes twinkled.

"You appear quite rational," he said, "and so far I haven't detected any alcoholic odors."

"O.K.," I said, and I placed my briefcase on the table, opened it and took out the envelope containing the twig and the leaves. "Can you tell me what kind of a tree that is from?"

Dr. Bassett put on a pair of shell-rimmed glasses and examined the exhibit closely.

"H'mm," he mused, "this is a bit unusual. May I ask where you got this?"

"I got it from a tree near here," I said.

"But, my good man," he said, "I know of no trees like this growing anywhere near here—and this branch is freshly broken."

"What kind of a tree do those leaves belong to?" I asked.

Dr. Bassett again peered intently at the leaves. "Unless I am mistaken, and I don't think I am," he said, "they belong to a species of oak that is indigenous to the tropical parts of Asia. It is commonly called the Malayan oak. Now will you satisfy my curiosity and tell me where you got it?"

"Doctor," I said, evading the question, "do you know a funny little chap with a soft, musical voice who goes around wearing a green hat, a plum-colored coat, fawn pants and a black flowing tie, with a monocle stuck in his eye?"

"That sounds like a description of the Baron," he said.

"The Baron?" I asked.

"We called him the Baron because he claimed to belong to the Dutch nobility," Dr. Bassett enlightened me. "His name was Jan Vanderklass. His origin was somewhat of a mystery. He was supposed to have come from the Dutch East Indies."

"He was a strange little man," Dr. Bas-

sett continued. "We could never decide whether he was a genius or a charlatan. He made fantastic claims about gaining control of the laws of nature and used to get off some twaddle about dimensional impulses; nevertheless, he did possess quite advanced knowledge of plant genetics. In fact, he did some unusual research in the use of the so-called wonder drug, colchicine, in doubling chromosome numbers, at the Arboretum. But why this inquiry about the Baron? It's the first mention of him I have heard in months."

"You speak of him in the past tense, Doctor," I said.

"Naturally one speaks of the dead in the past tense," said the Doctor.

"Dead!" I exclaimed. "This—this Baron is dead?"

"Very much so," Dr. Bassett answered. "He died about two years ago, at the time we held our first convention here. And there was a bit of mystery even about the poor little devil's death."

I felt a cold fear creeping through me.

"Mystery about his death?" I asked.

"His body was found pretty badly broken," Dr. Bassett said. "I believe the autopsy showed that both legs and one arm were fractured, but that death was due to a severe skull fracture."

Responsive pains shot through my head and down into my spine.

"The police investigated the homicide angle but couldn't find any evidence of foul play. There was no motive. No one would have robbed the Baron because he was barely able to subsist on an insignificant pension—some said it was a remittance from the family estate in Holland. I think that's the reason he wore those comic opera clothes; he couldn't afford others."

MY MOUTH tasted dry as I asked, "What do you think caused his death?"

"I think he was either struck by a motor vehicle or he died from a fall," Dr. Bassett

said, "but what puzzled the investigating authorities is how his body got to where it was found, unless it was carried there."

I dreaded asking the next question, but I had to: "Where was his body found, Doctor?"

"It was sprawled out grotesquely on the grass in the courthouse square, near the antiquated fountain," he answered. "One would almost think from its position that the Baron had fallen from a considerable height. But now, young man, what's this all about? I want to know. You've got my curiosity aroused; and you still haven't given me a satisfactory explanation concerning this bit of Malayan oak tree."

I wanted to tell this kindly man what had occurred to me, but I hesitated.

"Dr. Bassett, I have had an unbelievable experience this morning—" I began, when a bellhop hurried across the big room.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Dr. Bassett," he called. "It's long distance and the party calling is waiting on the line. You'll have to take the call downstairs off the main lobby."

Dr. Bassett turned to me as he was leaving.

"Excuse me; I think this call is important. But don't leave, please," he requested. "I'll be only a few minutes and I want to hear all about your unbelievable experience."

Well, if Dr. Bassett should happen to read what I have written, he will know now what I didn't have the courage to tell him last year during our little chat in that little Midwestern city that I hope I will never have to visit again.

And if he wants to know what became of that piece of tree branch with three leaves on it, I have it locked in the office safe.

It might also interest the good doctor to know that I looked at that memento of my strangest experience only this morning. The leaves have never wilted nor turned brown; and the branch still looks as if it had just been broken off!