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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Man in the Taxi

By LESLIE GORDON BARNARD

Enderby had to live with his conscience, for there were no witnesses of his crime—but who was the man who sat beside him in the taxicab?

ENDERBY walked out of the barber shop with a sense that something must be done about it. Even Jake, the barber, had noticed.

"Not looking too chipper these days, sir. Kind of thought that trip you took would set you right. I'd sure see a doctor if I was you, Mr. Enderby. Why, I mind a chap I knew——"

Lugubrious fellow, Jake. Moreover, it was a beastly sort of day—fog and drizzle that was neither mist nor honest rain. No doubt Jake was right. Maybe

he should see a doctor. "Physician of souls!" he thought, and was startled at the phrase.

He hailed a taxi. It loomed up in the fog, and came to a halt. Enderby seized the handle and, starting to get in, drew back.

"Sorry," he said. "I thought the cab was vacant."

The driver looked around sharply.

"Vacant? Why yes, sir, I'm free. Where to, sir?"

Enderby, considerably angered at him-

self, got in. He had been certain there was someone in possession of that back seat; yet obviously it was not so. He was alarmed at this hallucination. He must certainly see a doctor—or should it be an oculist?

"Doctor Coulter's, Crescent Terrace!" he told the driver.

Coulter was a material fellow, thought Enderby. Lungs, liver, heart, kidney and the rest—he knew all about those, but he didn't go much deeper. One of these nerve fellows might have probed. Suppose he should blurt the truth out—to Coulter or any other man—would they just stare or let him know, as gently as might be, that he was mad?

"Look here, Coulter," he might say, "I'll tell you what you're up against. You're dealing with a man who has committed the perfect, insoluble crime!"

Enderby shifted in his seat. The fog pressed thin fingers against the panes. It seemed to get right inside; and the driver on his seat ahead was wreathed and remote.

"On just such a day," thought Enderby, "I did the thing."

He remembered the quarrel with Anderson, his partner, a quarrel of such vehemence that it had ended in a disrupted partnership. But it wasn't Anderson who suffered. That was the irony. He recalled how he'd caught up his hat and coat, and the heavy cane he'd been carrying because of a wrenched ankle, and gone out into a fog so thick it was impossible to see two yards ahead. A man, coming along, bumped into him, and Enderby, reeling back from the contact, felt his ankle give again. It was the last straw. In one mad, distorted moment of anger he lifted the stick and struck. The man fell without so much as a groan. It was a blind, irrational impulse, over as soon as indulged. Enderby, frightened, sobered, incredulous at his

act, disappeared painfully into the fog. He had struck down a perfect stranger! It was impossible to believe—until the newspapers featured it:

"Unknown Man Struck Down in Fog—Body Taken to Morgue."

No one came to identify him.

Enderby had committed the perfect crime—without motive—without witnesses—without clues. It was a nightmare thing. The closing up of the partnership saved his sanity; that and a long trip. But one could not outdistance conscience. He thought often of going to minister, or priest, or police. But he put it off, and each postponement made confession increasingly hard.

"It's frozen in there," said Enderby. "It'll never thaw now."

He suffered intensely. Even the face of Nature was against him; no former delight was open to him; he moved among familiar scenes, and people, and events, but without communication that mattered. People did not understand, of course. They only said: "Not looking so good, Enderby. Better consult a doctor!" Just like Jake, the barber! Well, to see him sitting in the reading-room at the Club, with a cigar between his lips and a magazine held in pretense before his eyes, or propped up in Jake's chair, face covered with lather—pursuing the comfortable routine of a man well fixed in the world's evaluation—would they ever guess that within him something was crying out, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Enderby had a sudden, disturbing idea that if one could peer in upon the souls of many men in clubs and barber chairs there might be disquieting revelations.

As for his own desperate case, if he could only bring himself to tell someone—Coulter, anybody! But there was the icicle within him, and it hung suspended in a region of perpetual winter. There

were times when he would have welcomed the retribution of the law, but only he could take the initiative; and that moment was long since past.

SUDDENLY he was jerked forward in his seat, as the brakes screamed on. Steadying himself he saw another taxi bearing down, broadside on. In that split second he could see it coming; his mind actually framing words:

"This is the end. This is the end!"

The second taxi slewed. Enderby closed his eyes for the inevitable moment, but the shock, when it came, seemed chiefly an agony of laboring for breath; until he became aware that, by some miracle, he was still conscious and apparently unhurt, though he felt dizzy and queer, and as if his world, rather than two motor vehicles, had crashed.

Then the strange thing happened. He knew his previous feeling—that feeling he had had when first he stepped into this car—had been correct. *He was not alone in the taxi!*

Hallucination? Or was he having trouble with his eyes again? He was thinking that Coulter would have to see to this, when the stranger spoke.

"You look scared to death," he said.

His voice did something queer to Enderby, or else the shock had accomplished that. Without preamble, without reserve, out came tumbling all the frozen, pent-up tragedy of his guilt. What he had not been able to unburden to a living soul came from him now as easily as a spring flood.

"I do not know," he apologized at last, "why I should have told you all this—why I should have confessed to you, but that is my story!"

And now he looked at the man beside him in the cab; but the condition of Enderby was such that this stranger was not distinct, not clearly seen at all. Enderby could have endured this, but to hear some vague manifestation of humor was farthest from his expectation.

"You laugh!" cried Enderby. "My story amuses you? And I thought you so—so understanding."

"Who should understand it better than I?"

"But you laughed!" insisted Enderby.

"You must forgive me that," said the stranger. "You see—I am the man you killed!"

THE second taxicab, slewing around, shot forward a little, and the scream of brakes became the shrillness of angry voices.

"Watch where you're going, you fool! An inch more and you'd have sideswiped me plenty."

"Well, keep your shirt on. There ain't so much as a scratch, is there?"

"No fault of yours," growled Enderby's driver. "You're enough to give a guy heart-failure, you are!"

It was only when, turning to look at his passenger, he saw Enderby's body, sagging and solitary, on the back seat, the face strangely composed and peaceful, that the driver discovered what truth lay behind these casual words.

