

Strange STORIES

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The Man Who Looked Beyond

By CAROL BOYD

Author of "Lost Skeleton," "The Terror of Night," etc.



I saw the ruddy flesh of his beaming face dissolve

None Are So Cursed as They Who See Too Much!

WITH his deep black glasses and his ravaged face, the man was the most interesting person in the room. He sat at a corner table in Casey's, nursing a tall drink and smiling now and then at some particularly clever piece of

repartee that reached him from the clever bar.

There usually was a crowded bar at Casey's, and there was plenty of clever repartee. It was a newspaperman's hangout—both the *Globe* and the *Times-Courier* had their antiquated

plants in the immediate vicinity—and after a day of pounding out “who-when-where-and-whys” all days, your reporter and your rewrite man like to range up alongside a convenient bar and be cynically clever. They generally become more cynical and less clever as the drinks pile up, but the man in black glasses never seemed to be annoyed, even when the hour grew late and the talk grew more or less maudlin.

I was new to the town and working special assignment, and because I was new and wanted to hold this job, I was a hound for special stories. Human interest stuff. Exclusives. Stuff that would be remembered when the Brass Hats sent down word to cut the staff to fit the budget.

That's why I got interested in the man with black glasses. I got a story all right. But it was the kind of story I couldn't write for fear I'd be tossed out on my ear as a rum-dum, or a nut.

I asked Jake, the bartender, who the bird in the dark glasses was. The man's face had interested me. Below those circles of black glass were lines, deep lines that one finds on two types of faces—the faces of men who have seen everything in life and those who have seen the bottoms of bottles all their lives.

“Who is he, Jake?” I asked. “I see him in here nearly every night. He never talks to anybody and he never seems to get tight. Do you know him?”

Jake gave me a curious look and went on polishing glasses. He glanced back at the man in the corner table and lowered his voice.

“His name,” he half whispered, “is Harms. I don't know his first name. I don't know nothin' about him and don't let nobody tell you I do. He don't bother nobody and I don't bother him. He pays cash for his likker, which is more than I can say about most of you newspaper guys, and he behaves himself, which also is more than I—”

“Okay, okay,” I said. “I just asked. That's all.”

But that gaunt, lined face, under the black glasses, interested me. And there might be a story there. I decided

to try to brace the guy. If he gave me a freeze, what the hell! I've been frozen by experts.

I carried my glass back toward the corner table. The tables at Casey's were crowded and I had sort of an excuse to drop into a chair opposite the guy with the black glasses, this fellow Harms.

“Crowded tonight,” I said, brightly. “Hope you don't mind my sitting here with you.”

HE SHOOK his head slowly. And when he spoke, the hair at the back of my neck started to crawl, like the time in Cleveland when I walked into a dark hallway and a guy stuck a gun in my ribs and took my thirty-eight cents.

This Harms had a voice that sounded like it was made of clay that had been buried in an ice bank for a million years. It was hard. It was brittle. And it was cold!

I once interviewed a twenty-time killer, back in the Dillinger era, and he had a cold voice, plenty cold, but it was nothing like this. You've heard those automatic speaking machines that the telephone company demonstrates around at different places. Well, Harms' voice was something like that—but colder. If a skeleton could speak, maybe it would talk something like Harms.

“No,” he said. “I don't mind—if you don't.”

“Uh—no, of course not,” I managed. “Why should I mind?”

He half smiled, but there wasn't a speck of mirth in that smile. I once knew a flyer who sold himself to the Fascists in the early days of the Spanish affair. He was a bomber, and when he came back to the States he smiled something like Harms, remembering, probably, Guernica and the other places.

“Some people might mind,” he said. Then he closed his mouth.

I sipped my drink and talked about the weather, the Brooklyn Dodgers and the latest diary divorce case. No soap. He answered in monosyllables when he answered at all. Finally, I said to myself here goes nothing and I leaned across the table toward him.

"Mr. Harms," I said, "I guess I ought to explain myself. I'm a newspaperman. A reporter. My job depends on me getting stories and I'm stuck for one right now. I saw you sitting here and I—well, I got the idea you might have a story for me. I know I've got a hell of a nerve to bother you, but I'm desperate. But if you haven't got a story or if you want to be left alone, just tell me to scram and I will."

He sat there for quite awhile with his long, bony fingers curled around his highball glass. Somebody at the bar got off a particularly good crack and there was a roar of laughter. I took another sip of my drink, waiting for this Harms guy to tell me to blow. Finally, his mouth curled in that mirthless smile of his, and he said in that frigid voice:

"What makes you think I've got a story?"

Well, he had me there. You can't just tell a fellow that you're interested in the lines of his face or his cold, dead voice or the way he smiles. Maybe he wouldn't like to be told that he looks like a walking corpse.

"I don't know," I floundered. "But I thought—I had the idea—"

I PETERED out and started to collect my drink and go back to the bar. That frozen clay voice stopped me.

"Yes," he said, after a long pause. "I've got a story. I might even tell it to you. But you won't print it."

Well, hell, I thought, here's another one of those guys who's going to tell me he's the real Charlie Ross that was kidnaped so many years ago, or the stepbrother of the world's richest man who was thrown into a nuthouse by unscrupulous lawyers.

"If it's a story," I said, "I'll write it. And if it's a good story, my paper will print it."

He raised his glass to his lips before he answered.

"I don't know what you mean by a good story," he said. "But it's an—unusual—story. You probably won't believe it. Frankly, I'd advise you not to."

"Oh, I'll believe it, Mr. Harms—" I began.

He raised one of those bony hands to stop me.

"You probably won't," he repeated. "Nobody ever has—the few who've heard it. Only one man *did* believe it and he's—he's—dead."

He finished his drink and signaled the waiter. I had another and paid for both, against his objections. At least, I thought, he wasn't one of these I'll-give-you-a-story-for-a-drink boys.

He gulped his drink and set down the glass with a hard rap. He leaned toward me, over the table, talking quietly.

"Here's the story," he said. "The only reason I'm giving it to you is the way you braced me for it. Most reporters would have hinted around, or tried to worm the story out of me. You asked me for it, point-blank, so here it is."

He hesitated.

"But," he said, slowly. "You'll never print it in your paper."

MY NAME (he said) is Rudolph Harms. I'm fifty-eight years old. I'm—I'm retired, you might say.

You may wonder why I spend night after night here in this place. I'll tell you. I like to come here because I can sit here at my favorite table and listen to them talk at the bar—listen to them and be sure that, no matter what they might say or do, I have no way of knowing what they will be in three years' time.

Now you're startled. You think, perhaps, that I'm cracked. Perhaps I am. God knows that I have a right to be, seeing what I went through. But hear me out before you decide.

I was born, then, fifty-eight years ago in a little Massachusetts town. The name of it doesn't matter, but it was on Cape Cod. My father was a fisherman. Apparently, I was a normal baby. At least, I never found out that I was abnormal in any way when I was very young, and memory, of course, doesn't go back to the cradle. So those years of my life were—sweet and peaceful.

I was about eighteen months old when it first happened. I was toddling around the floor of our small living room one day when my father came

into the room, returned from one of his week-long fishing trips. He bent down to pick me up as I held up my hands to be lifted. And then it happened!

The memory is still as keen today as it was that day, so many years ago. My father had on oilskins, typical of his trade. His big, kindly hands were stretched down to me and he had stooped, smiling, beneath the sou'wester he wore.

Then, I saw the ruddy flesh of his beaming face dissolve! What had been the handsome, weatherbeaten features of the man I loved best in the world fell away and in their stead was an awful sight. From under the sou'wester peered the empty sockets of a skull. Strings of flesh clung to parts of the grisly bone, but there were not many particles of skin left to cover the unbeautiful bone structure.

And tearing at one of the few remaining shreds of human flesh, under one of the sightless eyes, was a huge crab!

I was only eighteen months old then, remember. At eighteen months, a child remembers little if anything. But he sees what he sees. And the transformation of my father's face filled me with a horror that stamped itself indelibly on my memory.

I gave a wild scream and turned to run from him. His big hands—only now they were the grasping hands of a skeleton—caught me up. I struggled and kicked, trying to free myself from the embrace of this awful monster, but he held me tight, laughing at what he thought was a new game of my invention.

Blackness overcame me. My mother told me later that I was seized by convulsions.

I remained unconscious for several days. The family doctor charged it to indigestion or colic or some such familiar ailment, and laughed away my parents' worries. By the time I was fully myself, my father had left on another fishing voyage; a long one this time.

IT WAS the same when he returned, some three months later. The same horrible half-human skull,

the hands stripped of their flesh. Except this time, an eel was fastened to a point on my father's jawbone, gnawing at the last remaining particles of flesh.

More convulsions then. More doctors were called. It was before the day of child psychology and complexes, but the doctors could see that the sight of my father filled me with horror. To save my mind, they ordered my father—my bewildered, heart-broken father—to keep out of my sight. They could not say why, because my speech at that time was little more than a few lisping words, but they could not help but connect my father with my strange malady.

I learned later—much later—that my father was a broken man from that day on. He left on six-month fishing trips and, when he came home, stayed at the inn rather than come back to a home where he would be greeted by a shrieking, maddened child. His hair grayed. He grew morose and unfriendly.

Then, one day, friends brought my mother the news that father never would be coming home again. His ship had sunk with all hands during a storm off the Grand Banks. That was three years, almost to the day, from the time I had had my first strange seizure.

I grew up without any untoward incident. Of course, I was regarded as a queer child by those few people who knew the story of my father. Then, one day when I was eight years old, I was in school. I was particularly fond of a little girl in my same class, a child with pigtails whose name, as I recall, was Sarah Nickerson.

Sarah sat across the room from me and, as boys will, I spent much of my time peeking at her from behind my school books, admiring those golden brown pigtails.

I was thus engaged one afternoon when it happened again. As Sarah half turned to peek back at me, I saw the right side of her forehead suddenly dissolve into a bloody mass. White edges of bone stuck up through the foamy blood which was flecked with gray. One of Sarah's bright blue eyes dangled on her cheek, held by

one shred of muscle. Her mouth was twisted in a ghastly grin.

I gave a scream and leaped to my feet. The others stared in amazement. I pointed a shaking finger at Sarah and shrieked:

"Look at her! Look at her! What's happened to her face?"

The teacher seized me and hurried me out of the classroom. I was sobbing hysterically by then. I told the teacher what I had seen and he sent for the principal. He, in turn, sent for a doctor—our old family doctor.

"Take him back into the room again," the old doctor said. "Let him see the girl again. Let him get this out of his system by seeing that the girl's all right."

THEY led me back, screaming protests. The class was pop-eyed with excitement. I kept my eyes on the floor until I was led up to Sarah Nickerson's desk. She, poor child, was panic-stricken.

"Look at her, Rudolph," the doctor said, grimly. "Look at her and see what a fool you've been."

It took an effort beyond my years to raise my eyes. There was Sarah Nickerson, the girl I knew, looking back at me with round, blue eyes. And then—the same horrible dissolution of the flesh and features, the same ghastly caricature of the girl who had been there a second before.

The old doctor was shaking me as I stood there, palsied with fright.

"You've got to stop this nonsense," he was telling me, "or first thing you know, you'll find yourself in the insane asylum."

The old doctor was cruelly blunt in his methods, but his words taught me a lesson. I didn't want to go to an insane asylum. To me, at eight years of age, such a place was a hell on earth. I reasoned that if I lied, if I told them I did not see what I saw, I would escape that fate.

I forced myself to look again at the horribly wounded face of Sarah Nickerson. My stomach heaved and churned, but the fear of the doctor's threat was overwhelming.

"It was a joke," I said. "It was all a joke."

For that, I got a caning such as was given only in those old days. But I swallowed my tears and went back to my class, wearing, now, the nickname of "Asylum" Harms.

I stayed in that class with Sarah Nickerson. And each time, during the next three years when I looked at her, there was that hideous sight, that impulse to scream, which I had to overpower.

Three years after my outburst in the classroom, Sarah Nickerson was kicked by a runaway horse. Her skull—the right side of her skull—was shattered. Her eye was gouged out. She died almost instantly.

Nobody connected my hysterics of three years previous with the death of Sarah Nickerson, and you may be sure I never reminded anybody. By that time, I was growing fairly accustomed to the demon in my eyes.

For instance, I would walk down the main street of our little town, eyeing passersby. And every once in awhile, I would see one who, I knew by then, was marked for death within three years. Many of them were white-faced, with placid features and eyes closed as though in calm sleep. Others wore distorted faces, as though their last moments had been spent in a hell of agony. I met the town marshal outside the postoffice one evening and saw a round hole in his forehead from which the blood trickled ceaselessly.

Three years from the evening I saw him, the town marshal was drilled through the forehead by a burglar he had surprised robbing the general store.

I KEPT my own counsel. To talk was to risk commitments to an insane asylum; to revive the nickname of "Asylum" Harms which had fallen into disuse. Besides, the evil thing had become easier for me to bear. At times, God help me, I made a game of it. I'd walk along saying to myself: "There goes a man who will die of smallpox in three years. The spots are on his face. There is a woman who is laughing. She wouldn't laugh if she knew she had only three years to live. There is a baby who will be dead soon."

Horrible? Perhaps, but remember that I was a young boy then. Outside of my father, this thing had not hurt me. I grew rather proud, as a matter of fact, of my ability to see what nobody else could see. The parade of the living dead. But I kept my secret, guarded it well.

Then, when I was fifteen, it struck at me. I was working by then, and I came back from the store where I was employed one evening to be greeted by my mother. I remember it now as though it was tonight. She met me at the front door, as she always did, answering my whistle from the street corner. She held up her face to be kissed—and she wore the white, pallid mask of death.

I forced myself to kiss her, and her lips were cold and lifeless under mine. Her eyes were shut, her cheeks were waxen and from her flesh came the faint, cold odor of the dead.

I turned away from her and her voice came to me, warm, lively, still beautiful despite her years and the sorrow of my father's death. I looked at her again. Her face was the same death mask. I turned away and she lived again.

For three years, I told myself, this must go on! And then, when her three years are up, the voice will be stilled, even when I look away.

Imagine, young man—if you can—what this must mean. I loved my mother as few men do because, afraid of the world that had called me "Asylum" Harms, I was drawn closer to her. I never had told her my secret because this was one person who *must* never have cause to regard me with anything but the all-embracing love she gave me. And now she was a corpse when I looked at her. A peaceful corpse, of that I was thankful, but a corpse, nevertheless. She lived only when my eyes were not upon her. To have her, I must avert my eyes.

For three years, I did just that and those three years were hell. Naturally, I lavished every luxury I could afford on her. I tried to give her in those three years the things she had always wanted. Maybe she was happy, during those ~~last~~ years of her life. I don't know. Certainly she saw the change

in me. She used to question me, gently reproachful, about the increasing sparseness of my kisses. She couldn't know that to kiss her, I must first look at her, and then I would be kissing her cold corpse.

I have often wondered since why I didn't end everything then or, failing that, how I held my reason. Maybe it was the knowledge that my mother was to be with me only a little longer and had had so few things from life that kept me going.

ANYWAY, in those three ghastly years that preceded my mother's death, I worked harder than I ever had worked before. I needed money to give my mother things. My wages went up and up. I became what the town called a successful young business man.

Successful! Ha!

My mother's death, when it came, was a death as gentle as herself. She died in her sleep. Her heart simply stopped beating.

Perhaps someone may have wondered at my attitude, others may have remarked about my Spartan fortitude. They knew how much I had loved my mother and they saw me, dry-eyed, at the funeral and at the grave.

What would they have thought had they known that my mother's death actually came as a blessed relief; a surcease from the days and nights of agony when my own mother had been one of the "living dead"; a corpse which walked about our home; the mere earthly shell of a beautiful spirit each time I looked at her?

After my mother's death, I sold out my holdings in my home town and came here to the city. My affliction—for now I knew it for what it was—came with me. My move had been half motivated by the forlorn hope that perhaps this evil thing was connected somehow with the Cape Cod town where I lived. When, as I emerged from the train in the city and looked about me at the hurrying throngs to see more of the "living dead" than I ever had seen before, I knew that this horrible thing was within me.

I was successful here, after a man-

me: I made few friends. I stayed by myself, outside of business hours. I could not bring myself to cultivate a friendship that would have to be broken the instant I saw that my friend had joined the procession which my mother had followed for three years, all unknowing that her son shuddered with dread each time she raised her lips for a kiss.

On occasion, I used my affliction to my monetary advantage. For instance one day I happened to meet one of the greatest financial tycoons of his day. He was a tremendous power in the money market. His hands held the guiding reins of a dozen of the most gigantic interests in his field. And he held those reins alone. It was a legend that he allowed himself no subordinates. A young man, he often was quoted as saying there would be time enough when he grew old to pass on his secrets to others.

I met this man several times after that, and on one of those occasions a single glimpse of his face showed me he had but three years to live. His countenance, as I saw it, was a brilliant crimson, with staring eyes and knotted muscles. His face fairly shouted apoplexy.

I marked the date. Three years from that day, I began selling short, with every dollar I could lay my hands on, trading in the interests that were controlled by this man. They called me a fool. The financier's stocks were rising, skyrocketing, soaring.

AND then, one day, the financier dropped dead. As I had foreseen, there was no warning. He was lunching with friends when he was seized and he was dead before a doctor reached his side.

The market collapsed. The great man's stocks hit bottom. I took a tremendous profit.

I'll confess I used more unscrupulous methods. I had in my employ several young men. One day, I saw the look of death on one of them. I evolved a scheme. I called him into my office, gave him a fatherly talk about wanting to see him build for the future and advised he take out a great deal of insurance. When he protested

that he couldn't shoulder that heavy an insurance burden, I played the philanthropist. I said I would pay the premiums until he was in a position to repay me. For security, I asked only that he assign half the value of the policies to me.

Of course he was eager to do that. And, of course, he was killed three years later in a particularly messy accident. With double indemnity, I realized an attractive sum.

Crooked, you say? Why? That young man's widow got a hundred times as much as she would have gotten if I hadn't stepped in. And why should I not be reimbursed for the ghastly things that had happened to me?

I did that insurance trick five times, all told, and in each case but one I took my profit. That one exception was the case of an employee who, eighteen months after he had become insured, learned he had an incurable disease. He shot himself before the two-year suicide clause of the policy had expired. I could anticipate death, but not always its cause.

Am I heartless in speaking of these things this way? Perhaps, but you must remember that, to me, men and women died twice. Once, when I first saw the look of death upon them, and then when they ceased to move and talk.

Things went along. I grew more and more wealthy. And then I fell in love.

She was a beautiful girl, the daughter of an older business acquaintance. Her name was—well, you do not need her name in this story.

I fell deeply, hopelessly in love with—we shall call her Irene, though that was not her name—the first time I met her, and she fell as deeply in love with me. I had allowed myself no friendships with women for just this reason—that I might fall in love with one of them and then, some day, be forced to relive the agony of those last three years with my mother.

But I was helpless with this love for Irene. I told myself that I would die before she—she was quite a bit younger than I—and there would never be that awful day when I would

see her beautiful face dissolve into a death mask. I was made reckless by love; I turned my mind away from the dangers I faced. I asked her to marry me.

WE BECAME engaged and set the date for the following Christmas Eve, her birthday. I was happier than I ever had been in my life.

This fool's paradise continued for about three months—until one night, late in November, shortly after Thanksgiving. I was calling on Irene, to take her to the theater.

She was her usual, charming self as we chatted, waiting for another party to join us. I lit a cigar and went to the fireplace to throw the match into the flames. I turned back to the woman I was going to marry.

I see it now. She was sitting on a divan, looking across the room at me.

I gave a stifled exclamation, and dropped my cigar.

"Clumsy," she laughed, as I stooped to pick it up. "You'll set the house on fire, I'll bet, after we're married."

After we're married! Oh, God! We never could be married!

For, sitting on the divan was one of the most horrible things I ever had seen or dreamed of. Irene—my Irene—was gone! In her place sat a creature whose face was one scarlet blister! Mouth, nose and eyes were indistinguishable in the puffy red mass that now covered her head. The black, thick hair I had loved so was gone—burned away!

I staggered across the room and fell into a chair, my eyes tightly shut. For a moment, I felt that my brain was going to crack at last.

"Rudolph!" she said. "What's the matter? Are you ill?"

I couldn't bring myself to speak. I nodded dumbly. Half hysterical, she called her father. I could look at him, and the sight of his face helped restore sanity.

"It's nothing," I muttered. "Felt faint. Afraid I'm catching a bad cold."

I kept my eyes fixed on the old man's face. I couldn't—God, I *couldn't*—bring myself to look at the creature who knelt beside my chair, sobbing.

I looked at the floor as Irene's father helped me to a cab and took me home. There, I threw myself on the bed and, for the first time since I was a child, wept like a normal human being. I cursed this thing that had afflicted me. I cursed myself for ever showing Irene my love. I cursed everything and everyone. I was virtually a maniac during those first few hours.

Then, when I got control of myself, I swore an oath. I swore that this evil thing that had lodged itself within me could not rob me of this, the one love I had known since three years before my mother died. This curse had taken all happiness from me since the day I was a child, toddling toward my father. It would not take Irene from me!

WE WERE married in January—there was a slight delay because I was in poor health during the holidays. Irene and I were happy, if the word happy can describe it. Really, it was more than that. For the first time in my life, I was free of my curse. I could take Irene in my arms and hold a warm, living human being, a human being who lived to love me.

Then—just a few months short of our third wedding anniversary—there was an accident. A servant was sick and Irene was piling fresh logs into a fireplace. Her dress caught fire. She—she was badly burned. She died the next day.

* * * * *

The guy with the black glasses stopped talking. I looked at my drink and saw the ice had melted. I swished the liquor around in my glass and took a long gulp.

Yeah, it was a story. A story nobody would print, even if it was true, which it couldn't be. But it had passed an hour or so, and had saved me from listening to Whitey Henrich at the bar, telling what a hot-shot he was in the old days.

But, even if it wasn't true, the story had a hell of a big hole in it. I took another swallow and said:

"Look, Mr. Harms. How was it you didn't get the heeby-jeebies—I mean how could you avoid feeling to-

ward Irene after you married her what you did that first night you saw her? You mean this—this second sight of yours just disappeared when you took this oath to beat it?"

He gave that hard smile again and reached behind him. He pulled a cane out of the corner where it had been standing.

"Not exactly," he said. "You see, that night when I came home from Irene's and swore that oath, I had an accident—myself. I was reaching for something—perhaps a sedative—in a high bathroom cabinet. I tipped over a bottle of a very caustic acid."

He smiled that unholy smile again. "The acid struck my eyes. Nothing else, only the eyes. Strange, wasn't it, that such an—an accident should give me the only really happy years of my life?"

I sat there while this guy Harms got up and started slowly down the bar-room, toward the door, his cane just a little ahead of him, tapping gently against the floor.

I sat there as the door closed behind my Mr. Harms. I took another big gulp and then another.

"What the hell," I said to myself. "What the hell."