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Weird Tales

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Volume 24 CONTENTS FOR AUGUST, 1934 Number 2

Cover Design M. Brundage
Illustrating a scene in "The Devil in Iron"

The Devil in Iron Robert E. Howard 146
A tale of a weird and terrible adventure and an amazing island city of green stone

Dust of Gods C. L. Moore 167
The story of the funeral pyre of one of the elder gods—by the author of "Shambleau"

The Isle of Dark Magic Hugh B. Cave 185
The tale of a corpse-woman, and a man who hid himself away from the world

The Beast-Helper Frank Belknap Long, Jr. 204
The story of a dictator who sought power by a psychic alliance with a powerful beast

A Ship Is Sailing Katherine van der Veer 212
Verse

The Distortion Out of Space Francis Flagg 213
A weird-scientific story of a strange being that came to Earth in a meteoroid

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof (part 2) Arlton Eadie 221
An astounding weird mystery novel by a British master of eery fiction

The Three Marked Pennies Mary Elizabeth Counselman 248
A strange destiny awaited the holders of the pennies, with doom for one and weal for the others

In Slumber Clark Ashton Smith 253
Verse

The Marvelous Knife Paul Ernst 254
An odd tale, about a murder and a curious delusion

Weird Story Reprint:
 The Parasitic Hand R. Anthony 259
A popular story from WEIRD TALES for November, 1926

The Eyrie 266
An informal chat with the readers

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The Marvelous Knife

By PAUL ERNST

A strange tale is this, about a man who witnessed a murder, and his curious delusion about the weapon with which the crime was committed

WHY do you whisper to each other like that? Why do you look at me like that? As if I were mad! I am not mad. It is you who are mad! You, who have come breaking into this house, into this room, and now stand and stare at me as though I were a monster!

Once I was not quite in my mind. But that is not true now. It is quiet now. It has been quiet, my mind, since that cold night two weeks ago. You will remember that night. It was next morning when the body of James Colson was found, frozen stiff, by the ditch in front of his estate.

That cold black night! I will tell you about that, about what I saw and what I did. The day after it, when some of you came to my house and searched, saying Jess Clegg had sent you, I told you nothing. And your search found nothing, so you went away without me. But I will tell you now. And you will see that you are mad to look so horrified now, and you will laugh with me. You will laugh as Jess Clegg must have laughed when he whispered to you to search my house.

I could not sleep that night. You, who know me, know how many nights there have been since I retired from my classroom when I could not sleep. A fire in my brain seemed to keep me from sleep. Some of you know about that fire. Some of you have looked and whispered as I passed by, and made motions on your foreheads, long before tonight. As though a fire in a man's brain that would

not let him sleep was a thing to laugh at!

Well, that night the fire leaped high. I sat on the edge of my bed with my head in my hands. I could not sleep. I could not! So I dressed, that night, late, after midnight, and went out to walk the highway till the cold should put the fire out.

It was black, and bitter, under the ice-blue stars. The freezing black wind soothed my forehead, pressed the fire down low. I turned from the main road into the road that went past James Colson's estate.

"I will go up this road and around and back to my little house," I told the ice-blue stars. "I will be able to sleep now. I will . . . sleep."

Then I saw a great black shadow beside the road near the ditch. The tall gates of the Colson grounds loomed near, but no taller and blacker than this other shadow. I walked closer to see what this tall black shadow might be.

It was thus I saw Jess Clegg that night. Oh, yes, you look surprized. But I saw him that night. And the reason I am here now is that I saw him.

You know Jess Clegg. Such a huge man! Such a powerful, thick-muscled man! A bull throat, a heavy face, shoulders three feet across, voice that roars—that is Jess Clegg. I had never liked him because he was the loudest laugher when I passed by, and it was he that named me the Crazy Professor.

He was the thick black shadow tower-

ing beside the ditch near the Colson gates. I saw his face and at the same time saw something else under the ice-blue stars. Another shadow. But this one lay on the ground, stretched out beside the ditch, at the feet of bull-throated, roaring Jess Clegg.

As I saw this, he heard my step and saw me. He stared at me with his red face a white blotch in the night. In the white blotch his eyes shone like a cat's and I turned to run from there; for I have never liked Jess Clegg, and I feared him very much. I feared him—that fine, good man!

"The Crazy Professor," I heard him say. He did not roar—he whispered. And I felt an odd thing, then. I felt that he feared me. *He feared me!* Was that not odd—when Jess Clegg was thrice as strong and huge as I? "The Crazy Professor! Here! Now!"

I DID not run as I intended. He smiled at me. I was surprized. He has not often smiled at me. He has more often laughed, and slapped my back in pretended fellowship that has left me lame for days afterward. But now he smiled, and crooked his finger at me.

"Come here, Professor," he said, smiling, his face a white blotch in the night. "Come here. You have seen this much, you may as well see more."

I came nearer and as I came I looked at the shadow stretched at his feet beside the ditch. And I saw that this shadow was James Colson, seeming to sleep there with his mouth all twisted and his eyes tight-closed. And I saw that in Jess Clegg's big hand there was a knife, and the knife dripped red. . . .

I say I saw. But I do not mean that, as you will realize very soon. For I did not see it. I only *thought* I saw it. Jess Clegg explained it very patiently and

thoroughly, as I am now explaining to you.

But at that moment I thought I saw the knife, dripping red, in Jess Clegg's huge hand. And I thought I saw a red hole in Colson's throat. Then as I came nearer, Jess Clegg's hand opened and the knife flashed to the black ground beside the road.

"Come here," he said again, as I stopped a few feet away. "Closer, Professor, closer. And tell me what you see."

"I see James Colson, dead," I said, in my ignorance, walking slowly closer. "And I see a bloody knife beside him."

Then I was very near to Jess Clegg, and his right hand came out quickly and caught the lapels of my overcoat. He drew me near—smiling, eyes gleaming in his face. His great left hand slid across my right shoulder and hooked around the back of my neck. It held me as though a great thick clamp of steel were thrown around me; held my head cupped immovable in its vise. And his right arm drew back a little as though about to strike. But still I was not afraid of him because I felt that he feared me.

"You have seen a lot, Professor," he said, his bared teeth showing yellow and broken in the red cave of his mouth. "You may even have seen me take money from Colson's pocket, eh?"

"I did not see that," I replied. "But I see him dead, and your knife——"

His right hand thrust forward. It was not doubled. It was open. The heel of his palm struck against my forehead with his thick arm stiff behind it. His left hand held the back of my head so that the blow could not be dodged.

It is hard to tell you of the power of that blow. But you all know Jess Clegg, how strong he is. You have seen him lift a thousand pounds of flour.

He struck me again, the heel of his right hand coming against my forehead with a padded thud while his left hand held my head from jarring back. A white light was the light of a cracking sun searing my brain.

"Listen, Professor." The words came slowly from between his bared teeth. "You have not seen these things. You understand? You have seen nothing."

The heel of his hand was like a pile-driver. The white light climbed high and exploded with every blow. And each explosion seemed to leave behind a link which formed a chain creeping to encircle my brain in an iron ring.

"You understand?" he said to me. "You did not see these things. You saw no knife. Nothing. You understand?"

WITH every few words his huge right hand banged against my forehead. The iron chain formed a complete circle at last. It tightened and tightened around my naked brain. His left hand was all that kept me from collapsing to the ground.

"You understand, Professor? There was no knife. Colson lies here asleep. Only asleep. You understand?"

The padded pounding of his hand, with arm and shoulder heavy behind it! The chain tightening . . .

"You did not see me here, Professor. You saw nothing."

With that, I felt the warm blood spout from my nose. And then a great thing happened, gentlemen—a fine thing, done for me by my fine friend, Jess Clegg. It would never have happened if I had not risen in the black cold night, walked because I could not sleep—and chanced to see him beside the sleeping Colson.

With the gush from my nose the chain snapped from around my naked mind. The pressure was at once released. And

with that release came also release from the burning fire that has plagued me since I retired from my professorship a year ago.

I tell you it was marvelous, the relief that came with the spurt of blood! My mind felt cool and well again. Cool and well. And I looked at my benefactor.

Jess Clegg must have seen the difference expressed in my face, for suddenly he stopped hitting me. He stared into my eyes, and he moistened his lips, and I thought his white face went whiter.

"God," I heard him say, "what did I do to him? His eyes. . . ."

Then, staggering a little, I stroked his huge right hand, that had worked such a miracle, and I smiled at him, and as I smiled I felt his left hand tremble and release me hurriedly.

He turned to run from me. Why, I do not know.

"Wait," I called to him. "Wait. Why do you run from this man sleeping here? He must be moved or he will freeze."

He stopped and looked at me, wide-eyed, over his shoulder. Then he came back. He moved slowly, watching me every second. And then I saw him nod his head, and saw his eyes go narrow and cunning.

"Sleeping?" he said. "Sleeping?"

"You told me he was sleeping," I reminded him.

He nodded again. "Yes, yes! That is right. He is only sleeping. We must not wake him."

He bent down and picked up something—the bloodied thing I had seen—or thought to see—in his hand.

"Take this knife, Professor," he said, the cunning light growing in his eyes. "Take it home with you and keep it. Keep it safely, for it is a very wonderful knife. It is a magic knife. And this is its magic: *It does not exist at all!* You

think you see it. You think you feel its weight in your hand. But all the while there is no knife at all."

I stared and stared at the knife in my hand. It was indeed miraculous. I could see every detail of it—a plain butcher-knife ground thin. I could see every spatter of blood on it. And yet I did not see it at all!

I held this treasure close to me.

"And there is no wound in Colson's throat?" I asked Jess Clegg.

"No," said my good friend. "No. With this wonderful knife you could stab a man again and again, and there would be no wound. For it does not exist, you see. There is no knife. There only seems to be."

He caught my shoulder and put his face close to mine.

"If anybody sees you with this marvelous knife, tell him all about it. Tell him how it doesn't really exist, and how you can stab with it and leave no wound and do no harm. And remember, you did not see me here tonight, either. Understand?"

That was what Jess Clegg told me, and I believe Jess Clegg. For he was the one who put the fire out in my brain. And I took the knife home with me, as he told me to, and I hid it very carefully. And when next day some man came and looked all through my house, as Jess Clegg whispered to them to do, they did not find the knife. They found blood on my overcoat, but they also saw how blood had gushed from my nose, and they said the blood on the coat was my own blood and they would not take me, because they knew where to find me. I did not understand what all this meant, and I did not understand why Jess Clegg should send men to search my house when he knew I had the marvelous knife there which might be stolen. But some of you were

with those men, and perhaps you understand.

It was then that I heard of the finding of Colson's body, frozen stiff, and I blamed myself. For in the excitement of getting the knife safe home I had forgotten to wake Colson.

So, then, you understand? You see how it all was? But I suppose you wonder why I am in this room. I suppose that is why you stare at me in that strange way. Well, I will tell that, too.

AFTER the fire had been put out in my brain that night by my kind friend, Jess Clegg, I could sleep. And I did sleep. Very much. Twenty hours a day, for a few days. It was all right, as I live alone and had no one to reproach me with sleeping that way, like a little child. So I slept and slept.

But between sleeps I always got out the marvelous knife and played with it. And always I desired to admire its strange power. I wanted to stab and stab with it, and see, miraculously, no wound result. How solid and real it felt! I laughed at that solidity, knowing the truth.

I thought of going out to the roadside and asking the first person who approached to let me show him how my wonderful knife could stab without wounding. But then I thought of my kind friend, the man who had generously given this thing to me. I thought of Jess Clegg.

"He will most enjoy this game," I told myself. "I shall go to him."

And then I had another thought, a delightful thought, one to laugh aloud over.

"I shall go to him at just the hour when he demonstrated the wonderful knife to James Colson beside the ditch!"

So I left my house at five minutes after midnight, hugging the precious knife

close to my breast. And I came to Jess Clegg's house. This house.

He would be sleeping, as Colson had been sleeping. I chuckled. He would be sleeping. After the game I would wake him, and tell him how wonderful was the thing he had given me, and thank him for all he had done for me. Then he could take the knife that did not exist and use it on me, if he liked.

Because I did not want to wake him, I came very silently through the window opening onto his porch. And very silently, chuckling to myself, I came up to this bedroom.

He was there, sleeping on the bed next to the window. The light through the window fell on him. He was on his back, with his immense arms flung wide, and his massive legs sprawled. He was moaning a little in his sleep.

I crept without a sound to the side of the bed, chuckling at the joke. I stood there watching him, listening to him breathe, listening to him moan and whisper James Colson's name. I raised the marvelous knife.

"Shall I wake him first?" I asked myself, with the knife held high over his chest.

But I told myself that it would be more delightful if I went through with the game first and then woke him, even as he had gone through with the game while Colson lay by the ditch asleep.

It was thirty-one minutes past midnight, the time when I had first seen him

beside the ditch with Colson at his feet.

I drove downward with the miraculous knife that can stab without leaving a mark.

He shouted aloud in his sleep, screamed and shouted and begged. And I laughed, for he was evidently too sleep-fogged to remember that it was all a game. And the knife did look very real. So, too, did the red flood that seemed to well from his chest.

He reached for the knife and caught the naked blade in his hand, but I pulled it free though he gripped hard. Then I struck again and he went back to sleep—as Colson had slept in the bitter blackness beside the ditch.

I went on with the game. Again and again I plied the knife, stabbing and stabbing, cutting and cutting—and leaving no mark! That was the marvelous part. No mark, as you can see for yourselves. For those red gashes and holes are not really there. Jess Clegg will tell you, as he told me so carefully that night as he pounded and pounded at my forehead.

Then you came bursting into the room. . . .

But why do you whisper among yourselves? Why do you stare at me like that? I have explained all about it now. You should understand the truth now.

This knife, dripping red? It does not really exist. The marks on Jess Clegg as he sleeps here? There are no marks. That is the wonder of the knife.

Sssh! You'll wake him. . . .

Why do you *stare* at me?

