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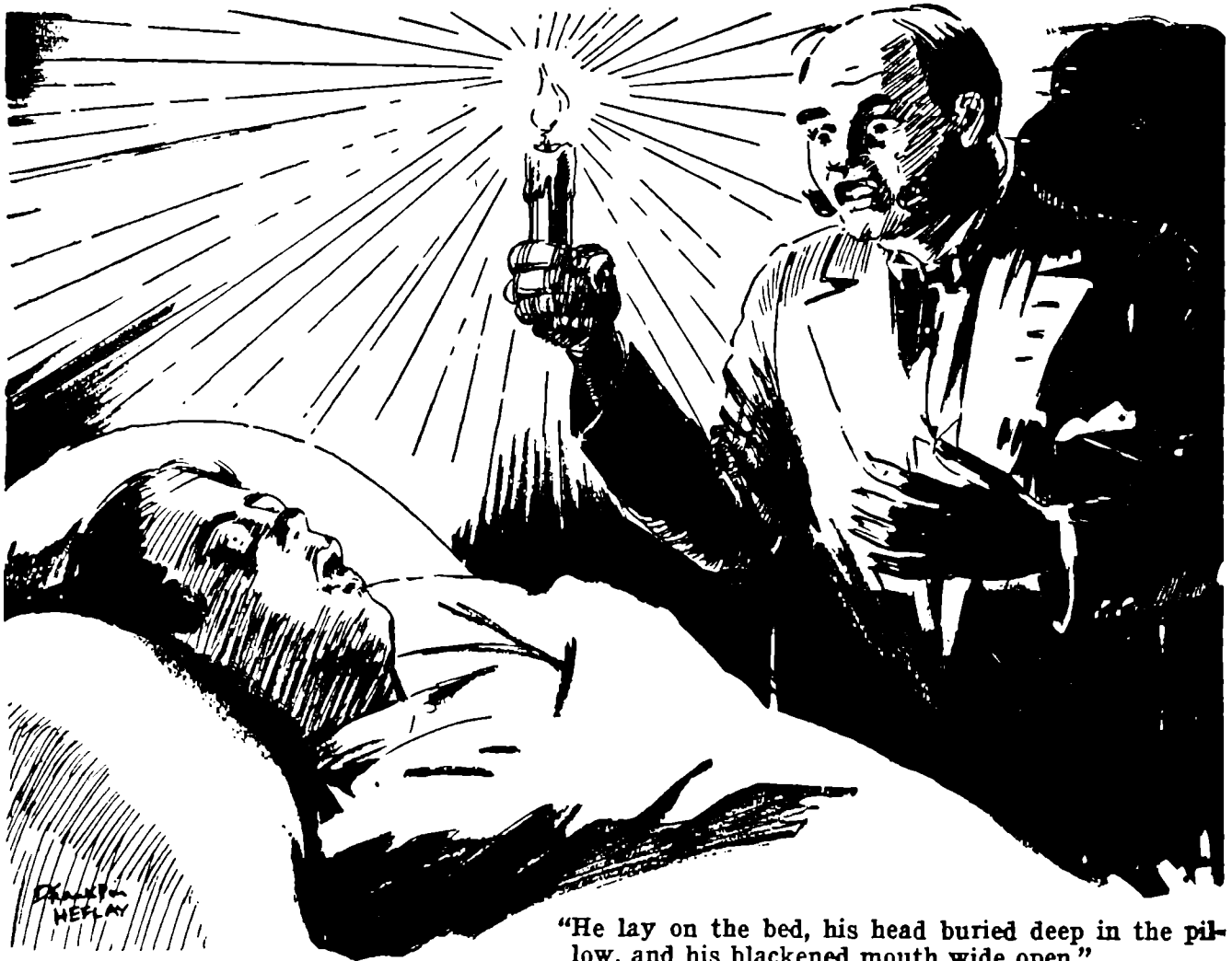
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"He lay on the bed, his head buried deep in the pillow, and his blackened mouth wide open."

The Mystery of the Last Guest

By JOHN FLANDERS

Out of the black night came a grisly horror—a tale of stark terror

IN HIS checkered cap and elderly overcoat, John was no longer the imposing head waiter of the Ocean Queen Hotel. He had become, for the seven-month period during which the seaside resort was dead and deserted, the unpretentious hardware clerk in Mersey Street, Hull.

Mr. Buttercup, proprietor of the hotel, held out a cordial hand to him.

"See you again next summer, John, old fellow," he said.

"God willing, yes," said John as he gravely emptied the farewell glass of whisky which his employer had poured out for him.

The sullen groaning of the high tide filled the air. The fog was low and dense.

"The season's good and over," John declared.

"We're the last folks here—the very last," Mr. Buttercup added.

A dozen silhouettes bending under great formless burdens toiled up the slope which seemed to link the Chinese roof of the microscopic railway station to the dike, checker-boarded like a Dutch kitchen.

"There go the Stalkers leaving," said John. "The light-house keeper told 'em there'd be snow today."

"Snow!" sniffed Mr. Buttercup contemptuously. "What are you talking about? It's October still!"

John studied the sky, oxidized by the salty fog. Flocks of aquatic birds were tracing gloomy figures against it.

"They've left the marshes," he remarked. "It's a bad sign when they do that."

One great, strikingly white bird flew by in a great hurry. "Snow—snow!" it croaked.

"Do you hear that?" said John in jocosely triumph.

"But snow—it's too early for snow," Mr. Buttercup protested. Then he added philosophically: "But after all, what difference does it make to me? Tomorrow the vans come for the furniture I don't leave here, and by day after tomorrow I'll be in London."

Kind-hearted John felt the impulse to add something consoling which would make the solitude of his benefactor easier to bear, but he could think of nothing comforting.

"Well, after all, it'll soon be over," he ventured after casting about helplessly for a minute or two.

In the distance, they could hear a hammer pounding feverishly on wood.

"My word!" cried Mr. Buttercup in surprize. "Windgery must be getting out, too. You can hear them nailing up the shutters of his villa."

"Well, then, if *he's* going," said John, "that leaves you all by yourself. When the last train pulls out, the station-master goes down into the village."

Mr. Buttercup started. He would be the only living creature in the place.

"That's what I get for starting up in this little new resort," he grumbled, "instead of following the crowd to Margate or Folkestone."

"But you did quite a little business," John protested gently, patting the pocket in which his bill-fold was stowed away.

"Yes, that's so," Mr. Buttercup admitted.

A locomotive whistled, down beyond the horizon. The sound was slender as a slender thread.

"Train's coming," said John. "Well, good-bye, Mr. Buttercup."

"Oh, you have plenty of time yet. Come, have another whisky!"

"Just one glass more, then, Mr. Buttercup. At my age, a man doesn't run after trains any longer."

MR. BUTTERCUP was left entirely alone, in the gloomy, empty hall. The hammer across the way had long since grown silent.

Mr. Buttercup watched the water come up and dissolve the sand castles which the Stalker children had built in the morning, in a mood of lassitude and melancholy, on the deserted, wind-beaten beach.

"Fee—nee—Fee-nee——" grated a whirling jack-snipe, fleeing across a distant pond.

"Fee—neeshed—fee-neeshed!" corrected Mr. Buttercup, obeying an impulse to prove to the twelve rateen armchairs that he still had the courage to joke.

But neither the jack-snipe nor the twelve chairs reacted sympathetically to his brave pleasantry.

Then he caught sight of a man. The

man was running with desperate rapidity toward the little station. The locomotive whistled, and his efforts grew more violent still. He struggled on like a crazy man. He moved like an unhappy jumping-jack.

Buttercup chortled with delight.

"Windgery is missing the train!" he informed himself. "Ha! ha! What a gorgeous joke!"

The sound of the telephone tore him away from his malicious amusement. It was somebody from the electric light plant, warning him that since the season was over, the current would be cut off in a few minutes.

"But *I'm* still here, I tell you!" protested Mr. Buttercup.

"So you expect to keep the season going all by yourself?" inquired the light-man sarcastically.

"It's none of your business what I expect to do!" declared Mr. Buttercup, losing his temper.

"And it's none of yours what we do here! Do you think we're going to keep this dynamo going to give you the juice for your pocket flashlight?"

"Pocket flashlight! Pocket flashlight!" sputtered Mr. Buttercup, who had dazzling chandeliers in his dining-hall.

"Yes, I said pocket flashlight, old lady!"

A third voice broke into the conversation. It was the station-master.

"Hello! Hello! The telephone service will be discontinued at once. We are closing the station office, and stopping telegraph service."

"And he says he's cutting off the electricity!" Mr. Buttercup wailed.

"It's all the same to me!" growled the man of the rail. "We never had night service here. We've got our own acetylene outfit, and I'm ready to cut loose right now."

By this time Mr. Buttercup was completely beside himself with righteous indignation, and he publicly compared both his interlocutors with certain necessary but unpleasant domestic utensils.

"Sir!" howled the station-master, "you're insulting a public official, you contemptible hot-water peddler, you!"

This vivid phrase excited the spirit of emulation of the electrician, who contributed some original metaphors drawn from his Sunday piscatorial experiences.

A copious dictionary of insults was rapidly accumulated from three sources. And the two professional gentlemen united their voices to invite Mr. Buttercup to free that maritime region of his presence, to transfer himself to London or Hades as he preferred, and offered him the alternative of an application of large boots to his neat white flannel trousers.

Mr. Buttercup took one of the two torsades of green stearin which adorned his piano, improvised a candle-stick of a lemonade-bottle, and sadly poured himself a glass of whisky.

A chaplet of pale mother-of-pearl hung from the last fingers of light which still glowed in the west. From scraps of dune and rags of fog the approaching darkness built a city of hypethral temples.

The flame of the green candle wavered here and there, and its tip pointed fearfully at the uncanny shadows which skulked in the corners of the hall.

All at once somebody pushed the door open and with a great sigh sank into one of the rateen armchairs.

MR. BUTTERCUP gazed at the newcomer incredulously.

He found it hard to convince himself that this was not merely another of the shadows which by this time were moving freely about the empty hall; but a second sigh, more piteous than the first, proved to him that the occupant of the

armchair was a human being, a creature of flesh and blood.

The candle did not give light enough to see anything that was more than two steps away. Mr. Buttercup approached the visitor.

"Mr. Windgery!" he exclaimed, very much relieved. "This is a surprize, to be sure!" There was real emotion in his tone, instead of the obsequious correctness which usually characterized this model Boniface. "I thought I saw you going to the station."

"Missed—the train——" the poor fellow panted.

"You certainly tried your best to make it. I saw you running. Good gracious, you're completely winded, aren't you?"

"Lungs"—the man breathed—"very bad shape—lungs attacked—I—thought I had to leave—snow——"

"You're afraid of the snow, too? But it won't snow, I'll guarantee that!"

In lieu of verbal reply, Mr. Windgery lifted a meager, transparent hand toward the darkening windows, and the innkeeper saw little irregular flakes floating down through the gloom.

"Well now," he murmured, "I wouldn't have believed it. But what's the harm if it does snow?"

"Isn't—good—for my—lungs——" groaned the invalid.

"I'll take you back to your villa," said Mr. Buttercup. But the other shook his head.

"I don't want to go. Every room in the villa is empty or locked. I wish I might stay here—if you have a room and a little hot tea."

"Why of course you can!" said Mr. Buttercup hospitably. He had entirely recovered his air of professional business-getter. "Do you want some supper? There's still some cold beef and a corner of meat pie, and some kippered fish, and all the cheese you can eat."

"Thank you. All I want is—some hot tea and two drops of old rum, if you can get it for me."

"Now I'll have company," said Mr. Buttercup, in an extremely good humor. "You see, I was left all alone here in this deserted place. Everybody had moved out—and you were the last. I shouldn't have had a soul to talk to this uncanny October night, with the sea bellowing outside and no living voice to hear but the screaming of the wild geese. It would have been a little lonely and trying for any Christain."

But his new companion was quite as morose as the night. Mr. Buttercup noticed with alarm that when he took his handkerchief away from his mouth, there were great red spots on it. In the meager light of the candle the spots looked black instead of red, as black as shoe-polish, but that did not make the situation any more agreeable.

Finally his guest moaned out a "Good-night" and went upstairs to the room which Mr. Buttercup had offered him, carrying the other green torsade. It wavered like a faint torch in the hands of a drunken helot.

Mr. Buttercup sat alone again, more alone than ever, beside his tiny flame, which had burned down to the neck of the bottle. The whisky tasted bitter to him, and he drank it in great gulps without any pleasure; now and then he cast a furious glance at one of the great wicker easy-chairs, in which his truant fancy had chosen to locate the comfortably sprawling station-master.

But that chair was as empty as all the others, as empty of everything but tortured shadows and the trembling reflection of the snow which shone pale in the darkness.

MR. BUTTERCUP awoke. His flesh was quivering and pricking with terror, but he had not the slightest idea

what caused the feeling. The night was upholstered with snow and silence, and flooded with moonlight. He had fallen asleep grumbling at the tearing, penetrating cough of Mr. Windgery. Now he could hear it no longer.

"He has gone to sleep," he said to himself. But he was unable to explain the sensation of apprehension which made him shrink up into a ball in the warm cavern of the bed-clothes.

The evening before, with its phalanx of shadows, might naturally have seemed more hostile than this noiseless night with its splendid brightness; and yet Mr. Buttercup had not been particularly afraid of the shadows, whereas he was asking himself now, in a strange, thin little voice: "What can be the matter? What can be happening?"

Apparently nothing was happening. The moonlight made the silence more unmistakable. And that was all.

"What in the world can be wrong?" he said aloud again, in the strange, troubled falsetto.

And at that same moment, from the depths of the motionless night, the answer came. It came in the nature of a heavy sound, a sound that awoke no echo, the sound of leaden steps. Somebody was walking through the house, and the steps came one by one, dull, heavy, monotonous.

"Mr. Windgery! Mr. Windgery!" called Mr. Buttercup.

But the only answer was the regular thumping of the steps. They seemed to be coming out of the guest's room and calmly descending the stairs.

The innkeeper reached hurriedly for several garments at random and pulled them on as they happened to come. He was still struggling with a mysterious feeling of terror, which bore down on him like the dark waves of the ocean.

W. T.—6

He made a foolish effort to joke with himself:

"Well, I can't complain any longer that I haven't company. First I get Mr. Windgery, and now it seems that I have another guest too."

He leaned over the railing and peered down into the stairway well, but he could see nobody, although the stairs were distinctly visible in a fine white light. Yet he could hear the feet going down the lowest steps.

"Ah!" stammered Mr. Buttercup. "I say, sir—listen, sir—won't you let me see you, please?"

But his voice was finer than the tiniest thread, and he could scarcely push it out beyond his trembling lips.

He made no attempt to call Mr. Windgery any longer. He pulled himself together and started down the stairs.

He could hear the steps crossing the great hall; then, although Mr. Buttercup heard no sound of opening doors or keys turning in locks, they descended the steps into the cellar.

When the innkeeper thought the matter over later, he wondered that it had never occurred to him to provide himself with a weapon.

The sound of the steps died away, and in the silence Mr. Buttercup's courage came back a little and he went down the stairs more confidently. But he went down with such careful precautions that he reminded himself of a robber in his own house. The door of Mr. Windgery's room was not locked, in spite of the warning BOLT YOUR DOOR AT NIGHT which was displayed prominently in three places, and his host was able to open it without making the slightest noise.

The moonlight told Mr. Buttercup at once what the dramatic and terrible thing had been that had happened in that room.

Mr. Windgery lay on the bed, his head buried deep in the pillow and his blackened mouth wide open in an inaudible cry, a cry which seemed never to end, while his wide, staring eyes reflected the blue light from the window.

"Dead!" stammered Mr. Buttercup. "Dead! Good God, what a business!"

Two seconds later he was fleeing madly up the stairs. The steps had suddenly crossed the hall again and were coming up from below.

Mr. Buttercup climbed up and up, driven by abject terror.

He had reached the attic floor, where the employees of the hotel had been lodged. He stumbled over a disorderly mass of debris left by his discontented minions when they were no longer under his supervision. He could hear the steps below, passing from room to room, as if somebody were making a careful tour of inspection.

"It's in Number 12," the innkeeper murmured to himself. "Now it has gone into 18—into 22—good heavens, now it's in my room!"

His heart stopped beating at the thought that the Unknown was going about in the night, moving among the familiar, personal objects which he had left but a moment before; so that it seemed to him that a part of his being adhered still to the contents of the room.

IN THE last attic room, which two or three of his maids had occupied, he saw standing against the partition a holy-water vase of plaster and a scrap of consecrated boxwood twigs. With a sudden grotesque inspiration, he piled up several small articles in the door, one on top of the other, and crowned the whole with the little basin, which was still moist, and with the withered little branch.

"He'll have to come this way," he mumbled to himself, "and then——"

Mr. Buttercup would have been put to it to explain what impression he had of the personality of this "he".

But he was allowed very little time for reflection and reasoning. The steps had begun to fall heavily on the uncarpeted stairs which led up to the garret rooms.

The sound was more lugubrious and more coldly ferocious than ever. It seemed as if the whole structure were moaning with fear.

"I must go higher yet!" the poor fugitive groaned.

He climbed another flight and stood in the empty, sonorous space under the rafters. He could go no farther. Was this to be the scene of his last agony?

Suddenly, in the darkness, his hand touched a slender metal ladder. He remembered that there was a cupola above, although he had never made any use of it. He struggled panting up the ladder. The trap-door above his head gave way a little, but refused to turn on its hinges stiffened by rust and dirt. The corridor of the attic floor below him echoed to the relentless steps, and they came right past his childish barricade, without an instant's hesitation.

"Even that doesn't stop him!" whispered the innkeeper. And with a desperate push that bruised his head and his hands, he drove the reluctant door wide open and saw above him the boundless blue night, cushioned with snow and studded with stars.

This belvedere was a large platform from which miles of the surrounding country were visible.

It was a new place for Mr. Buttercup. He had climbed on a chair, and his head was turning.

"I'll jump off this place, if necessary," he cried, "rather than let that Thing get me!"

He walked across the thick carpet of snow to the edge of the platform, and

an immense desolation took possession of his heart.

Far away, out on the black vastness of the sea, two lights were moving. And the yellow eye on the pier ogled him insolently from the blackness.

"Yes, that would be better—better——" the plump citizen sobbed.

A creaking of metal made his heart jump. It came from the rusty rungs of the ladder. The Thing was coming nearer and nearer. It had reached the trap.

Then Mr. Buttercup saw before him, shining gently in the light of the moon, the long, firm line of the lightning rod. Seizing it with a hiccup of terror, he clambered over the railing and with a cry like the shriek of a damned soul he slipped out into space.

Something leapt up on the platform.

A PALE streak of light licked the horizon.

Away out in the ash-colored trench which was the railroad, a green light began to appear. The windows of the little station whitened under the cold flame of an acetylene lamp, and the first train whistled lazily in the invisible distance. Mr. Buttercup left the pile of creosoted railroad ties on which he had spent the night, and with creaking bones, bloody hands, and a brain on fire, he staggered toward the little station, lighted and inhabited, which seemed to him the loveliest paradise on earth.

It was not till along toward eleven o'clock in the morning, after having eaten humble-pie and effected a reconciliation with the station-master, and after the physician who had come over on his bicycle from the neighboring village had assured him that Mr. Windgery had died very naturally from his sad affection of the lungs, that Mr. Buttercup ventured back to the hotel.

He found absolutely nothing suspicious there, and he had nearly reached the point of blaming the whole unpleasant affair on his loneliness, his fear and his whisky, when the idea struck him to examine the platform of the belvedere.

Like every good Englishman, like every well-informed citizen of any country for that matter, he had read *Robinson Crusoe*; but it did not occur to him, when he started back in horror at the sight that met his gaze up there, that he was repeating the celebrated gesture of the solitary mariner, when he discovered one morning on the sandy beach of his island a menacing footprint.

For Mr. Buttercup saw beside the marks of his own boots, distinctly printed in the faithful medium of the snow, two strange impressions, hideous, enormously large, which, just like his, continued to the very edge of the platform, and like his never returned, as if the Thing that walked in the night had flown off into the air like some monstrous bird of prey. . . .

Mr. Buttercup stumbled down into the hall again, and cried out with joy when he saw the somber vehicle arrive which was to carry away the mortal remains of poor Mr. Windgery.

He managed to keep the black-clad undertaker's men in play, with whisky and jocular conversation, till his moving-van arrived with its crew. And he promised these last-mentioned individuals such magnificent largess if they should have everything loaded on the van an hour before the last train went through, that the poor fellows came near breaking their own limbs and the furniture in their earnest zeal.

But they did themselves proud, and a full hour before the last train whistled, Mr. Buttercup stood on the platform at the station.

He had brought two bottles of whisky

for the station-master, and that functionary helped him on the train with fraternal tenderness and stood waving farewells to him till the last car was no more than a black speck on the horizon.

AT THE long table of the Silver Dragon, a substantial tavern in Richmond Road, Mr. Buttercup told the company his story just as they were calling for cards, dice and a checkerboard.

"That's what they call suggestion, auto-suggestion," said Mr. Chickenbread, who has charge of the handsome big music-store next door to the tavern.

"You might call it a hallucination," condescended Bitterstone, who handles oils and linseed cakes.

Mr. Buttercup scratched his chapped face.

"A man doesn't have hallucinations," he replied coldly, "when his—when his name is Buttercup." Then it struck him that he had implied what might be taken as an aspersion on the honorable name of his ancestors, and he added with a touch of self-importance: "And when a man is proprietor of the Ocean Queen Hotel."

The dice rattled, and the fly-specks on cubes of yellow bone made some of the company richer and others poorer.

White disks melted away before the somber onslaughts of black disks on the squares of the checkerboard; a proud king stood dangerously isolated in a neatly enameled No Man's Land. But old Doctor Hellermund sat and thought, very seriously.

"I know," he murmured, rather to him-

self than to the placid Mr. Buttercup, who had completely regained his composure, "I know that step that paced the hotel. . . .

"For many years I was resident physician in a hospital. I heard that step often in ghastly nights when the air was filled with formalin and the death-agony. It paced round and round in the reddish gloom of the smoke-consumers; it sounded its dull 'tramp—tramp' down the long corridors with their tiny night-lamps. It went ahead of the litters that moved silently out at night when the attendants, with muffled foot-steps, carried their melancholy burdens to the dreary, icy dead-house.

"We all heard it, but there was a silent agreement among all of us—doctors, nurses and attendants—never to mention it. Sometimes we would hear a green hand saying his prayers aloud. But every time that step sounded, we knew that one of the sufferers in that row of terrible white halls had ceased to suffer.

"The gruesome bailiffs in Newgate Prison, as they make ready to hang out when dawn comes the black flag with its capital N, hear that step approaching down the stone gallery, and they hear it stop before one dreadful cell which has taken on a ghastliness more terrible than all the other cells."

Old Doctor Hellermund fell silent and began to follow with interest the game of checkers, with his eyes on the board, a bright ocean on which from moment to moment the light raft of a man or the imposing galleon of a king suffered shipwreck.

