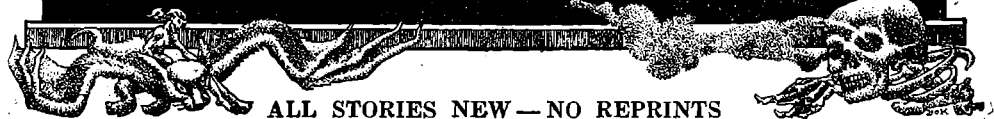


Weird Tales



March, 1944

Cover by John Giunta

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Peeper

By **FRANK BELKNAP LONG**

MIKE O'HARA approached his lodgings obliquely, his big shoulders hunched and his footsteps echoing hollowing along the narrow street. It was past midnight, but a few lights blinked cheerlessly here and there, and shadows scuttled out of doorways ahead of him to take refuge in alley-

Heading by
JOHN GIUNTA



Strands of hair hung up to dry on his doorstep, a corpse in his bed . . .

ways which were faintly streaked with radiance from a dimmed-out bowling alley near the middle of the block.

Being in a pitiable state, O'Hara had to keep telling himself there was no danger he'd be set upon. The street was deserted, and he refused to believe that anything untoward would take advantage of his condition by leaping out of the shadows and fastening its teeth in his throat.

To be sure, *Michael* O'Hara lived in dread of returning late home on a dark night, and finding himself with no redress but to leap screaming back from something with glassy eyes and bared teeth. But *Michael* O'Hara was a poet who wrote ghostly stories for the magazines and believed in evil things which waited beyond the lamplight for unwary pedestrians on deserted streets.

Michael O'Hara did truly believe in such things, but tonight he wasn't Michael. He was Mike. Plain Mike O'Hara, and to hell with spirits when they didn't come out of bottles labeled eighty-five proof.

Tonight he wasn't spiritually on the spit. He was Mike O'Hara, hard-boiled, skeptical, and far from intoxicated, he told himself with fervor—even though his steps had carried him unevenly along the pavement, and he was now ascending the brownstone stoop of Mrs. Hammerslough's shabby-genteel, lavender-decade boarding house with a treacherous feeling in the pit of his stomach.

There wasn't a sound in the darkness beneath him, and not a light showed in the darkness above. He had been humming, "Oh, my darlin'," but suddenly his throat seemed to constrict and his voice faded out, leaving him at the mercy of a silence which closed in upon him with the smothering force of a coffin-lid being riveted to his face.

He climbed higher in the darkness, his shoulders jerking, his forehead studded with sweat. Up above the darkness was of

a uniform quality except in one spot. At one side of the door and extending down over the stoop was an elongated patch of something which seemed to give off little weaving coruscations of light.

No, not light exactly. The something seemed enveloped in an odd, negative kind of brightness which kept moving about as he stared up at it. It was as though—as though a little to the left of the doorway the darkness had been ripped apart, and the emptiness beyond it was trying to shine through in fitful gleams.

Higher he climbed and higher. The stoop seemed to lengthen as he ascended, seemed to flow away beneath him, and he had all he could do to maintain his footing as he struggled to reach the top.

FINALLY, after ages so long his whole life seemed to pass in review before him, he found himself standing before the weaving something. It still looked a little like a rent in the darkness, a kind of ripped-out patch of negative radiance extending down over the stoop. But now he could make out another something hanging in the depths of the glow: a dank, heavily scented something which looked not unlike a pigtail.

It was fastened with a little peg to the upper part of the brightness, and as he stared at it a shudder took hold of his spine.

"Good God," he choked.

His vision had steadied a little and he could see now that the peg wasn't really attached to the brightness at all. It jutted from the weather-tarnished bronze bell-plate on the left side of the doorway and the glow was a thing separate and apart, a kind of luminous cocoon which cradled the pigtail without encroaching on its substance in the least.

The pigtail was attached by the peg to the house itself, a little to the left of the old-fashioned doorbell. For an instant he stood staring at it, pushing out his lips like

a schoolboy confronting an adult horror which he knew all about deep down inside, and wasn't one bit afraid of.

Not one bit afraid of, because he wasn't Michael O'Hara tonight. He was just plain Mike and he'd even touch it, by heaven, to show his contempt for it. A tremor went through him, a tremor of resentment and anger that such a thing could be, and quite suddenly he was tugging at it with both hands, and—

"Sure, and it was a nasty fall you had, Mr. O'Hara," a gruff voice said.

Groaning, Mike O'Hara picked himself up. He had no recollection of falling, only of a kind of explosion in his brain which had seemingly lifted himself up and hurled him with violence from the stoop.

"Kilgallen, my head," he groaned. "My head—"

The fact that he was picking himself up from the cold sidewalk with the help of a broad-shouldered police lieutenant had a sobering effect on him, for it was the first time he had ever needed to be assisted to his feet by the Law, and it made him feel that he had sunk very low.

"Sure, and it is a little tight you are," the officer chuckled. "You were no doubt celebrating your daughter's wedding, Mr. O'Hara?"

"I have no daughter, Kilgallen," O'Hara groaned. "I'm only thirty-four."

"Ah, what a pity."

The officer put a steadying arm about O'Hara's shoulder and chuckled again. "A daughter steadies a man, Mr. O'Hara. Come now, up we go!"

"Hair, Kilgallen," O'Hara groaned. "Hung up to dry. Two long locks of hair, braided like a pigtail. They were wet, Kilgallen, and—"

"Come now, you can sleep it off. A pigtail, was it? Well, well, well—"

"Nailed to the door, Kilgallen. The Greeks—"

Lieutenant Kilgallen nodded sympa-

thetically. "So you've been tanking up at Joe Saripolos' place, eh? Well, I'll say this for Joe. He sure knows how to mix them."

"No, Kilgallen, no. Joe's a modern Greek and it's an ancient custom I'm talking about. It was an ancient Greek custom to cut a lock of hair from a dead man's head, and nail it outside the door, in token there was a corpse in the house. They used wooden nails, Kilgallen, and—"

O'HARA never knew how he arrived in his room. He was sure that Kilgallen hadn't assisted him all the way up, because he remembered parting from the police officer in the lower hallway with a muttered: "Thanks a lot, Kilgallen. I'll be okay now."

But he couldn't remember ascending the stairs, or locking himself in his room. Leaning against the door to make sure it *was* locked, and breathing heavily, he told himself there was only one sensible thing to do.

If he wanted to hold on to his sanity the only sensible thing was to dissolve three aspirins in a glass of water, kick off his shoes and assume a recumbent position. He was home now—and safe. If he slept it off there was a chance he wouldn't wake up screaming. Not an even chance, perhaps, but a chance, a chance—

He was crossing unsteadily to the bathroom when he saw the still, gray figure stretched out at full length on his bed.

The figure lay on the bed with something that looked like a half-consumed loaf of bread between its hands. Its arms were crossed at the wrists, and its legs were stretched out stiff and straight. There were sandals on its feet, and the flesh between the straps had a hideous, waxen look.

The face of the figure also had a waxen look, but there was about it something beautiful and strange which even the ghastly pallor could not efface. There was noth-

ing effeminate about the face, and yet more than the beauty of mortality seemed to rest upon it, so that a man looking upon it for the first time might think himself in the presence of a saint.

Later he might notice a Satanic aspect such as saints do not possess, and come to realize that the face was that of a great poet who could summon spirits from the vasty deep.

O'Hara knew of course that the still figure was not his *present* self. The still figure had graduated from Dublin University with great, eternal thoughts hovering at the back of his head. The still figure had worn his hair long, and had looked a little ridiculous walking down the street.

But he had written stories like dew-drenched spider webs, prismatic and strange and with a little gruesome wrench at the end which made people happy deep down inside. Very sensitive and imaginative people, of course, because only such people deserved to be made happy in precisely that way.

With black horror clutching at his throat, Mike O'Hara stared down at the still cold figure of his younger self.

"Mike O'Hara, your salary is forty thousand a year and you are the most brilliant keyhole columnist east of Chicago," said a terrible, accusing voice which seemed to come from deep inside O'Hara's own head.

"I—I—"

"Your column is well enough in its way, Mike O'Hara. But need you have killed *him* because you could no longer abide his dreams?"

"Oh, God, I—"

"You killed him, Mike O'Hara. As surely as though you had plunged a knife into his heart!"

Mike O'Hara suddenly felt his knees give way beneath him. With a strangled sob he sank down at the foot of the bed, and for an instant there was nothing but a dazzling whiteness swirling round and

round inside his head. Then there was a dimming of the whiteness and then a grayness in which nothing moved and finally a blackness in which everything was blotted out.

Morning Edition

GOD, what a hangover he had! Just inserting a sheet of paper in the typewriter brought the sweat out on him, and his hands shook, and he had an impulse to send out for a pint of bourbon and mix himself the biggest pickup on record.

Waking up on the floor had been bad enough, but getting swayingly to his feet and finding that he had slept a part of the night on his bed without realizing it had given him the worst jolt of all. His long, angular body had left an impression on the sheets which he had taken great pains to smooth out before sending for an expressman.

Well, he had accomplished one thing. He had overcome his sentimental attachment to Mrs. Hammerslough's crumbly old brownstone and was now ensconced at the Ritz, where he would probably remain for the duration. At least, his trunks were there, and he'd soon be unpacking them.

And even if a herd of pink elephants *had* stampeded over him he was going to get his column out on schedule. He was very conscientious about his column, and he took a personal pride in it, and he'd be damned if he'd allow himself to skid along on his laurels.

Strands of hair hung up to dry on his doorstep, a corpse in his bed. He—he was lucky to be alive.

Acute alcoholism was no joke. Only last week a man of seventy out in New Jersey had accepted a challenge to drink a full pint in twenty minutes. It had been a very foolish thing to do, because he *might* have lived to be a hundred and six.

Better get on with it, boy! You're drawing eight hundred a week for a column

twelve inches tall. If you don't get on with it someone else will.

The corpse of *himself!* Once he had been so thoroughly skizzled he had smashed a window in a subway train while reciting Swinburne's *Faustine* to the girl on the next strap. But never had anything so ghastly as a still cold heebe-jecbe resembling his younger self parked itself in the middle of his bed.

Shuddering, he planted both his hands on his typewriter in approved touch system fashion, and began to twiddle his fingers. The clicking which ensued placed in capitals halfway down the page *Broadway Vignettes by Mike O'Hara*, and a paragraph which read:

What after-Pearl-Harbor deb gave what buck private playboy the runaround, oh, so recently, at the Pelican Club? And why did Peggy Sanderson of the Park Avenue and Palm Beach Sandersons, treat herself to a new escort at the very same table? And whose face, and I do mean face, will be red when he reads what your columnist—

He stopped typing abruptly and stared out of the window, one side of his face sagging down over his collar. When he read over what he had written he couldn't put his finger on a single phrase that wasn't worse than corny.

With an oath he tore out the sheet, crumpled it, and tossed it out the window. Perhaps a new start—

His jaw muscles twitching, he fed another sheet to the machine, and covered it with writing which had welled up from his subconscious so rapidly it *had* to be good. His fingers could hardly move fast enough. Almost he wept with relief as the lovely words came.

"Boy, you sure can write," he muttered to himself, elevating what he had written above the carriage and reading it over, slowly. It was—lousy.

Groaning, he arose and walked out of his office. The re-write din almost deaf-

ened him as he crossed the city room between earnest young men who were turning out flawless prose at a small fraction of his weekly salary.

He felt like climbing up on a chair and immersing his head in the cool green water cooler on the far side of the big, crowded city room. Approaching the cooler, he went through all the motions of doing that in his mind. A parched throat seemed to reach out ahead of his hands for the water he was presently siphoning into a lily cup.

Quaffing the cool, bubbling drink made him feel lots better immediately. He had thought up a substitute column for the lousy one he had left in his typewriter and was turning from the water cooler when—he saw it. It was nothing much, really, just one long, black hair on the sleeve of a coat which he had neglected to brush after wearing it the previous evening.

It was nothing much, but his own hair was gray, not black, and he could tell by the sheen of his hair that it had come from a much younger head.

Somehow he knew then what was expected of him. His face streaked with damp, his nose twitching, he returned across the city room to his office, and stood for an instant with his hand on a doorknob that seemed to twist in his clasp.

FOR an eternity he stood there, while his whole life seemed to pass in review as it had on the previous evening. Then a convulsive shudder shook him, and he opened the door wide.

Although the something which was sitting on his desk had planted both its hands on his typewriter in approved touch system fashion he could tell at a glance that it wasn't human. It hadn't any clothes on, and he could see right through it, and he knew that it was a spirit, and—it was watching him.

It was watching him out of cavernous eyes that seemed to grow larger and larger,

and suddenly it was getting up, and wiping its claws on its shaggy flanks.

It did not utter a sound, but he knew that it was annoyed because it had soiled its moist but hueless claws on a heavily inked typewriter ribbon. He could tell, he knew.

The air about him seemed to congeal, freezing him solid. As though through a pane of ice he saw the something flap its stoat-like ears, and ascend straight up toward the ceiling, its arms pressed to its side.

IN ALL his life he had never wanted so badly to scream, but he couldn't at all. Not even when the ceiling broke into bubbling froth, and the long legs of the creature left a hideous swirling in its wake.

Quite suddenly the ceiling became solid again, the ice dissolved, and a whispering swept across the office, as though an artery into Nowhere had begun to disgorge invisible elves.

"Hustle this down to the city room, little brother," a tiny voice shrilled. "It is the obituary of *Michael* O'Hara, written in person by the Peeper. He's the most accomplished keyhole columnist on *our* side, but for once he has forgotten to be clever."

"Was that really the Peeper, dark sisterkin? That uncouth, shaggy—"

"It would be a mistake to hold his appearance against him, little brother. When he is deeply moved he writes cadenced and flawless prose—like a silver river striking down to the sea between the cliffs of Inishowen. How he must have loved our *Michael!*"

"Poor, poor *Michael*. For three days he will lie in state—"

"Where, dark sisterkin?"

"Why, at the Royal Coach Inn on the Queen's Highway, of course."

"But otherwise known as Mrs. Hammerslough's boarding house."

"Only to mortals, little brother. And to

Mike O'Hara, perhaps, who is standing there dead."

"Standing there dead?"

"Dead?"

"But see how he is trembling, little sisterkin! Surely a dead Mortal—"

"When a Mortal's young self lies in state the rest of him is but sound and fury signifying nothing."

"You mean—he will be pursued and cut down, little sisterkin?"

"Of course. The stalk *must* be severed when the wheat is dead."

It seemed to Mike O'Hara as though all the animation had been sucked out of his body, and that even the power to breathe had departed from his lungs.

But though his body felt like a hollow shell his vision was like that of a man experimenting with a new pair of glasses at the foot of the gallows. The brightness, the sharpness of everything seemed to increase, and for an instant it was given to him to see—five shadowy, misshapen little figures sitting astraddle his typewriter, swinging their legs and chattering away like evil gnomes in a doll house.

For perhaps five seconds he saw them. Then a mistiness seemed to swirl up over them, blotting them from view. With a strangled sob he turned, his hand fumbling for a doorknob that seemed to elude his grasp and recede from him through a shimmering veil of mist. . . .

He had no recollection of stumbling through the mist and out across the city room, and down two flights of stairs to the street. But he must have done so, for he presently found himself running. Hatless, coatless and along a street that seemed suddenly to converge upon him from all sides.

Unmistakably the street was converging and assuming the aspects of a charnel vault with dank, dripping walls, and the people he passed turned toward him dead, fleshless faces. He wanted to scream and couldn't, and he had to run faster to escape

from something that was pursuing him over the pavement.

He heard the something behind him, and tried to turn and couldn't, and then he was backing away from it up a long, dark alley and it was pursuing him with relentless speed.

"No, no!" he shrieked, backing faster and faster away as though a suction had seized hold of his coattails and was pulling him in a direction where everything was covered with graveyard mold.

It might have been better if he had not tried to escape, but had remained with his feet firmly planted on the dark, mouldy earth, for then it would have happened more quickly, and he would have been spared the torment of being overtaken at the bottom of a circular pit choked with corpses, and filled with the loathsome titterings of little dry-fleshed shapes which could only have been ghouls.

He saw the scythe for an instant, looming bright and sharp above the pallid charnel glow which hovered over the pit. For an instant he saw too the thing that had pursued him through the shadows—saw its huge, bony hands and the monstrous darkness where its face should have been.

Then—the scythe swung down toward him, and he felt the thrust of something that seemed to lift his head, and a wetness coughing up from his lungs.

He felt nothing more.

Final Edition

DR. HILLARY stood staring down at the dead columnist with troubled eyes.

Out beyond the city room typewriters clattered and telephones buzzed.

The young interne knew, of course, that the life of a newspaper took precedence over the death of even such a famous columnist as Mike O'Hara. But it seemed a little irreverent somehow, and it shocked him.

The city editor had closed the door, and Hillary was free now to speak his mind without exposing himself to a white blaze of publicity. The publicity would come and be a feather in his cap, for Mike O'Hara had been found dead under unusual circumstances—hunched in his chair before his typewriter, his arms outflung as though to ward off the blows of an invisible assailant.

The publicity would be fine for a young interne arriving in a hastily summoned ambulance a half-hour after O'Hara had been found like that. But now he wanted to speak his mind in a quiet way to just one intelligent individual, and the city editor seemed both intelligent and sympathetic.

"People *have* been scared to death," he said. "I don't claim it's common, but it *has* happened. There's a sudden shock, and the body tries to build up a foil of courage too—well, instantly. Too much adrenalin is poured into the blood-stream, and—"

"But what could have scared him?" the city editor wanted to know.

Hillary shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Fright can be subjective, you know. Something he imagined—"

"Like that discoloration around his throat," the city editor suggested. "Now that we've started that line of thought, why not follow it through? He imagined there was a killer in here with a noose, and it made such an impression on him it did something to his throat."

Hillary returned the other's stare unflinchingly. "I'm almost sure that's a birthmark, but, of course—it mightn't be. There are a dozen post-mortem appearances it could be, all orthodox. There's no evidence of foul play, if that's what you're hinting at."

"You're not a medical examiner, Doc."

"No, I'm not. But I can assure you—"

"And you're not a psychiatrist," the city

editor said. As he spoke he tapped the smudged sheet of paper which projected from the dead man's typewriter.

"Look for Michael O'Hara below the cliffs of Inishowen, where the silver lark takes wing," he quoted. "Look for Mike O'Hara here, where he shall run from the Reaper, and be cut down.

"It's signed: 'The Peeper.'"

"What are you suggesting," Hillary asked.

THE city editor frowned. "Well, that's pure gibberish, isn't it? It sounds like the ravings of a lunatic. Mightn't O'Hara have had a brainstorm, tried to strangle himself, and succeeded in—well, fracturing his larynx, or something."

"It is physically impossible for a man to do that," Hillary said, with a wry grimace. "Besides, his larynx *isn't* fractured."

The city editor seemed not to hear him. He was staring intently down at the sheet of paper which contained the lines he had just characterized as the ravings of a lunatic.

"Say—that's strange!"

"Huh? What is?" Hillary wanted to know.

"Why, that smudge there. It looks exactly like a—a claw."

"Oh, nonsense," Hillary said, reaching over and ripping the sheet from the carriage.

For an instant he stared down at it, and then he stared at the city editor, and then back at the sheet again, all the blood draining from his face.

"Good Lord," he choked.

Between his shaking hands young Dr. Hillary held a sheet of paper on which there was not so much as a single typed line.