

Weird Tales



JULY, 1952

Cover by Jon Arfstrom

HELL'S BELLS	Duncan H. Munroe	8
<i>A lingering relic of a forgotten age whose sciences today would seem as so much priestly magic.</i>		
WHICH'S WITCH?	Harold Lawlor	21
<i>Even a syndicated columnist can't afford to treat witchcraft with flippancy.</i>		
THE EMPEROR'S LETTER	David Eynon	31
<i>One way to record history; each man a frozen page to show the way he died.</i>		
ELMER BITTERSNIFF AND THE THREE BEARS	Harry Botsford	35
<i>One could certainly understand why Elmer was allergic to honey—clover honey especially.</i>		
THERE WAS SOOT ON THE CAT	Suzanne Pickett	47
<i>I was the only one who had read the diary; I, too, had seen the cat with the awful eyes; and I had felt the horror emanating from the house.</i>		
THE GREEN PARROT	Joseph Brennan	52
<i>A pheasant or a woodcock or a hawk might have flapped across the road; but a large green parrot, in New England, late in November. . . !</i>		
THE TEMPLE OF SERPENTS	Paul Ernst	56
<i>"I am about to make a wish, and may the devils that hide in the dark places see to it that my wish comes true. . . ."</i>		
<small>(Copyright 1928 Popular Fiction Publishing Company)</small>		
THE PLAID	Abrach	64
<i>In some strange way it seemed as if the child completed the glen; without her it could be naught.</i>		
LIVE EVIL	Emil Petaja	69
<i>All sorts of machines are being invented daily, hourly—why not a deghosting machine?</i>		
THE LAKES OF NAI LOODIE	Donald F. Vieweg	77
<i>The story of a strange goddess with red eyes and blue skin who was the incarnate spirit of a glacier—well, that didn't help one to keep things in proper perspective.</i>		
VERSE {		
{ ALETHIA PHRIKODES	H. P. Lovecraft	43
{ BLACK CANDLES	Yetza Gillespie	51
THE EYRIE		4
A WEIRDUTATION	Joseph Howard Krucher	55

Published bi-monthly by WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, \$1.50. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession.

Copyright, 1952, by WEIRD TALES. Copyright in Great Britain
Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

 178
Vol. 44, No. 5

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

D. McILWRAITH, Editor

The mother's keening could be heard above the flood.

The Plaid

By Abrach



Heading by Virgil Finlay

A BRIEF account of a mysterious occurrence in a Highland spate told in a letter written by Raymond Sedgwick, Lieutenant, serving with His Majesty's Forces in northern Scotland, to his friend, the Hon. Rolfe Hayter, on the staff of the Ministry of Information in London: and now published with permission of both.

S. B. Q. No. 3
c/o G. P. O.
June 1st, 1941.

DEAR Rolfe:
I fear you must be thinking I have behaved rather scurvily in keeping you waiting so long for an answer to your last letter, especially as it brought me the exciting news of your promotion; but when you read what follows, I am sure you will understand and acquit. As I told you in my last, the "hush-hush" stuff I am on at present (its nature must not be hinted at even to a brass-hat of the M.O.I.) gives me precious little time for writing, even when things are normal. But things have been far from normal recently. We have had tremendous, unbelievable, floods out here, and for about a fortnight I was flood-fighting day and night. It was the most nerve-wracking and exhausting job I have ever tackled, or ever expect to tackle, and I have had neither time nor strength for anything else. It was when the floods were at their worst that I was brought into close contact with a most mysterious and tragic happening. It has had such a curious and unsettling effect on my mind that I feel I must share it with you to help me back somewhere near to normal. I shall tell you what happened as clearly and exactly as I can; but I shall not offer any explanation because I have none to offer.

I am writing this in the tiny garden of the shepherd's cottage that has been my quarters all the times I have been here. It is a riot of old-fashioned flowers and herbs—sweetwilliam, lad's love, honeysuckle, double daisies, and many others whose names I cannot remember, though Morag has told me them all. There is also, of course, a rowan tree, to guard the house from evil; but, alas, as a prophylactic against evil it has been a complete failure. If I look southwards, I look down a long glen with rocky hills rising literally into the clouds on both

sides and with a swift strong stream, foaming over linns and boiling through deep pools, twisting through it like a shining serpent as far as one can see. I wish I had the ability to put it on paper for you as it is now. But, as you know, I have never been able to describe anything except engines, and they can be described in a few dull technical words. I'm afraid I've never taken much interest in natural beauties, unless they were of the feminine gender, and I have not always wanted them to be too natural. But this glen somehow takes you by the throat. Even in mist or rain it fascinates. Today it is a faeryland of gold and amethyst with a stream of quicksilver bickering and flashing through it, and lays a faery spell on one's mind. It is so enchantingly lovely and peaceful today that but for the pathetic silence in the cottage behind me I should be tempted to think that the memories of three weeks ago were the memories of a nightmare.

The cottage itself is more picturesque than comfortable, but when I came here eight months ago its dry-built walls and thatched roof certainly enclosed one of the happiest bits of space on the planet. Shemas (that's what it sounds like; they tell me it's Gaelic for James) MacGillivray, the shepherd, is a tall, supple, big-boned, granite-faced Highlander about forty. Johan, his wife, is a hard-haired, high-cheekboned woman a year or two younger, with a voice too soft to belong to anything human, and a face that always seems to be listening to something unseen. Morag was there then, too, "little Morag" everyone called her, though she was really rather tall for her age, a freckled delight about nine years old, with cornflower-blue eyes, a sudden radiant smile, and the beginnings of her mother's listening face.

Morag is not here now, and the little house is like a lantern without a light.

SHE was a favorite with all the people for miles round, the most vividly alive thing in the glen. Indeed, in some strange way she seemed to complete the glen, as rose completes a rosetree. Poetry has never meant anything to me, but she made me recall two lines of Wordsworth in some poem I read for School Cert, and have now forgotten:

*A dancing shape, an image gay,
To haunt, to starve, and way-lay.*

She knew the names of all the birds, and where their nests could be found. She could manage a sheep-dog nearly as well as her father, and she nursed new-born lambs with an exquisite but very practical tenderness. She had a little forlorn lamb of her own that she fed out of a bottle, talking to it all the time as if it were a little human. I had never seen a lamb at close quarters before, and I got a lot of fun out of watching that one at feeding time. When it was sucking its bottle it wagged its tail in an absolute ecstasy. At least, it wagged the top part of it at a great rate. But the whole tail was really too long for it to manage, so the top part went to and fro with the speed of a Hurricane's propeller and the bottom part wobbled ludicrously trying to keep up. I think it was that lamb that cost her life, but none of us know what happened or how it happened.

Shemas and his wife literally worshipped Morag, and I had not been long with them before I, too, was worshipping the same vivid little divinity. She got me first by showing me how to tickle a trout, "gud-dlin'" she called it. I came upon her suddenly one day lying face downwards over the edge of the Luath (that's the name of the stream) her right hand was in the water, and when she saw me she made a hurried signal with her left to approach softly. In a few moments she had lifted a spotted beauty ten or twelve inches long out of the stream with a true hunter's delight. I watched her catch several after that, and she did it always with the grace and economy of movement of a cat catching a mouse. We became great friends, and she used to accompany me up and down the glen whenever I could allow her. She seemed never to grow tired, and whatever her mood might be, her spirit was always alive. What a glorious woman was unfolding in that child, and how senseless it seems that the blind forces of nature be allowed to extinguish that exquisite flame!

The floods began to rise in the middle of April. It had rained steadily for over a month. And such rain! Not tropical. Not like a thunder shower. Pitiless, pelting, dour rain that just went on and on without stop-

ping day or night. The hills were always obliterated by masses of tawny clouds, and the rain came crawling down the glen, inspissated at regular intervals, like a never-ending army of wraiths bent on some weird vengeance. We saw neither sun nor star for days and nights on end, and at last the relentless rhythm of the rain became maddening, like myriads of tiny feet trampling through one's very brain. But I do not think that even rain like that could have been entirely responsible for the terrific floods that followed. I think some snow lying hidden in folds of the hills farther north must have melted and come down.

BY THE first of May the Luath had swollen into a great river that came roaring down the glen brown as umber. Even where it flowed most smoothly long white weals showed under its brown skin, like livid streaks of anger in a human face. A few days later MacGillivray came in with the news that some of his lambs had been carried away. At that news a spasm of intense pain passed over Morag's face. "O, the poor things," she said in her soft accent, and ran out into the rain to look for her own lamb. It was evidently safe, for she returned in a few minutes.

"I mind some yearss ago," said MacGillivray to me, "the floods came out all over the glen. Many sheep and cattle wass lost. A man too (his voice grew impressively solemn) wass lost. Pray God, we haf not another like that."

The floods continued to rise and I received orders to collect every possible man and give all the assistance I could to the people of the threatened area. For days and nights we worked like slaves. We moved people and animals to safety. We transported corn and hay ricks above any possible flood level. We salvaged furniture and farm implements. But the utmost we could do was as nothing against what cried out to be done, and the floods got the honor of the battle in the end. The Luath rose so rapidly that the whole glen became a raging torrent in which trees, sheaves of corn, milk churns, carts, household utensils and the bodies of dead animals went rolling and swirling down in a ghastly turmoil. Happily MacGillivray's cottage stands high on the hillside,

so I was able to return for an occasional meal and a little sleep.

Tired almost beyond bearing, I went squeelching back to the cottage one night, just as darkness was falling. I was surprised, and, unreasonably, a little annoyed, at having to open the door for myself, for Morag usually had it open long before I reached. Inside, I found the lamps unlit, and when my eyes had got used to the darkness, I saw Johan MacGillivray slumped in a low chair by the fire, her clothes steaming, her hair tousled, her whole body an image of misery. She was weeping softly with a kind of exhausted moaning sound which was terrible to hear. I spoke to her, but she did not even look up. I stood helplessly looking at her, wondering what was the matter, and after a time her natural courtesy broke through her grief. She spoke in a broken voice scarcely audible:

"Little Morag iss gone," she said. "We haf not seen her since breakfast. She went out to look after her lamb, and she did not return. Shemas is looking for her now. I looked myself until I wass unable to walk any more. But . . . she iss not to be found."

THEN in her grief she forgot I was there, and broke into a kind of croon; the most pathetic thing I have ever heard.

"O my Dawtie," she keened, "My poor little Morag. She iss gone, she iss gone. No more. No more. She iss in the watter, the dark, dark, cold, cold watter."

I have never heard anything like it before. I hope never to hear anything like it again. I spoke stupid words of comfort to her. I told her I would find Morag; but the words did not come from my mind. Then I stumbled out into the darkness. My first thought was to find someone to be with her while her husband was away, and I went to get a Mrs. Munro who lives in a cottage about half a mile away. Her husband is with the forces and she has no children, so, when I explained the position to her, she came with me at once. Torches were flashing far down in the glen when we got back together to the MacGillivray's cottage, so, leaving Mrs. Munro to go in alone, I made towards the moving torches as quickly as I could.

All the able-bodied men of the district as well as a number of our fellows were

moving along the edges of the torrent in the darkness looking for the lost child. It was a dangerous job, for a single false step might mean death any moment. Every man there risked his life a hundred times before morning broke. But they were used to danger, and they did not think of themselves. We searched all through the night and the day that followed it in the pitiless rain, but without success. The flood kept its secret. Women brought us food from time to time, but though we had fasted so long we had little appetite.

When darkness again fell, MacGillivray and I, by common, despairing consent, turned towards the cottage. We walked in dumb silence. We were too tired and heart-broken to speak. MacGillivray's face was like carved rock. He had aged many years in a few hours. We found Mrs. Munro still with Johan. Johan was no longer weeping. She was sitting in her usual low chair beside the fire, the chair in which she had nursed Morag as a baby, and her face was set in a stony look of resignation. In her arms, held as if it were the baby Morag still there, was a large plaid of some bright red tartan, rolled up into a long roll. I happened to see MacGillivray's face when he saw the plaid in his wife's arms, and I saw a strange, haunted expression break its iron despair for a moment. It was a tremor of something akin to fear. It passed swiftly. He moved forward as if to comfort his wife, but before he could get to her Johan spoke. Her voice did not seem to belong to her. It reminded me of the voice of that medium we heard at the Harrison's.

"I have got out the plaid," she said; "my great-grandmother'ss plaid. It gathered her husband from the floods yearss ago. It will gather my little Morag this night. Take it Shemas. Lay it on the floodss. Perhaps Mr. Sedgwick will be so good as to go with you. In the morning we shall find her in it."

I can't describe to you, Rolfe, the tragic unearthliness of that moment. I felt suddenly weak, as if something unseen were drinking my very blood. I didn't try to say anything. I just waited for McGillivray to act. I never dreamt he would agree to his wife's eerie proposal, which, though it had stirred the uncanny in me, seemed at the same time the expression of a deranged mind. I ex-

pected him to reason with her, to explain to her the futility of the thing she suggested. But MacGillivray said nothing. He stood for a moment with bent head. Then he took the plaid from her and turned towards the door.

I followed him out into the night. The rain had stopped and a raging wind was tearing the clouds away from stars that gleamed menacingly like drawn daggers. We picked our way down to the edge of the rushing water. We stood for a moment in the tearing wind. Then MacGillivray opened out the plaid and thrust one end of it into my hands. Together we flung it out over the dark, swirling water. The wind caught it. For a moment it thickened the shadows between us and the stars. Then it was gone. We returned in silence to the little silent house. We were all exhausted, but we could not sleep. We sat together in the yellow lamplight until the morning.

THE moment it was light enough to see, we went out together, for the women insisted on coming. About a mile below the cottage there is a broad ledge of rock. In normal times it is far above the water, but during the floods it was just awash. As we worked our way down the edge of the torrent in the increasing light, Johan gave a sudden cry and flung out a pointing finger. We all looked, and we all saw the brightness of the tartan on the brown rock.

Instinctively, we all started to run towards it. An irrational fear that had no shape rose in me as I ran. As the floods had risen in the valley and swept away the work of men's hands, so that fear rose in me, sweeping away all my neatly arranged scientific understanding of things and leaving me just like a primitive savage in the presence of the unaccountable. I did not know what we should find on the rock. Yet, somehow,

I took it for granted that we were approaching something weird, something beyond the reach of explanation.

As we got nearer to the rock I could see that the plaid was wrapped round something, almost as if human hands had arranged it. First on the rock, I waited instinctively with bowed head for the others to come up. We stood together for a moment in silence. The MacGillivray himself bent down and tenderly unfolded the plaid. There, within its tartan folds, the limbs flexed, as if she were sleeping in her bed at home, a soft smile on her marble-white face, as if she were dreaming some happy dream, was the body of little Morag. We carried her home, and a week later she was laid to rest in the little churchyard far up the glen. There was a hazel tree over her grave.

For over a week I was confined to bed as a result of strain and exposure. I am almost all right again now but have not yet returned to duty. I cannot understand the occurrence I have just related. I have discovered since that a belief has been widely held in this part of the country from time immemorial that if any one is drowned a plaid thrown on the water at night will recover the body by the morning. How such ideas take root in the human mind is very difficult to explain. I do not believe there is any real explanation. Where little Morag's body was until it was caught in the plaid. Why the flood had not carried it far farther down the valley. These things I don't know. But I do know that when that red plaid was unwrapped in the morning, her dead body was in it.

Now I must stop. I shall have some leave soon and shall spend some part of it in London; so we shall be able to see each other. Till then, all the best.

Yours as always,

RAY.