

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1942

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The Possessed

By ALICE-MARY SCHNIRRING

LOYD JONES swung briskly off the train as it wheezed to a stop. The station platform was somnolent in the hot August sun; not a porter, not a ticket-taker was to be seen, even asleep—as, from his previous visits to Colville, he had confidently anticipated. Every year for the past five Lloyd had been spending his two weeks' vacation in the same little town; it was quiet—almost moribund—but it relaxed him, and his Welsh ancestry kept him high-strung enough so that he welcomed his annual coma, as he called it.

He was rather surprised not to find Joe, the station-master, inside the little wooden station that perched totteringly beside the platform; but concluded that he had probably stepped "down street" for a quick one, to counteract the heavy heat. The Anderson house, where Lloyd always boarded, was only a matter of a half-mile from the station; so he hefted his suitcase and started down the dusty white road.

The heat *was* stifling. No wonder, thought Lloyd, as he passed a handkerchief (already grubby from the stifling train ride) over his dripping forehead, that all the villagers seemed to have chosen to remain indoors. As he trudged along, it was almost unendurable to focus his eyes on the familiar landmarks that he passed. Waves of heat shimmered up from the ground and the dust-powdered grass, distorting and subtly veiling the trees and houses. The effect, he decided, was unpleasant. At moments, he could almost believe that this road which he had traveled so many times before led to some place he

had never seen, and would do better to avoid.

When the Anderson house came into sight, as he rounded the last curve, the impression persisted. His memory of it was of a small, rather shabby frame cottage, with a good bit of shrubbery doing its best to soften the rather uncompromising rectangular lines that a small-town architect had grimly planned. Today, somehow, the house looked as if it were—well, crouching; Lloyd felt oddly as if it were trying to hide behind the trees and bushes.

His relief at being almost there spurred him along the last remaining yards; and by the time he had tossed his suitcase onto the porch, he had regained his spirits.

"Hi!" he called. "Mrs. Anderson! Here I am again!"

There was no answer. He rattled the door-knob, and found that the door was locked. Then, for the first time he looked around. The house showed almost unnoticeable signs of neglect, such as a loose board in the porch (he remembered Mr. Anderson as a putterer, who would have had the board nailed securely within five minutes of noticing it); yet it had the unmistakable look of being lived-in. For example; one of the upstairs windows was open, and a curtain was fluttering in it—a rather dirty curtain, to be sure; but not with the dirt of complete neglect that an abandoned house would show. While his eye was still taking in all these minutiae, but before his mind had formed any analysis of their meaning, the door was opened. For a second Lloyd could not quite place

the tall, dark-haired boy; then he shifted his position to ease his leg, and Lloyd recognized him as the Anderson's nephew; a quiet, intelligent, and likable lad—far more likable than the Anderson's own boy, Charley.

"Hello, Henry!" said Lloyd, with real pleasure. "Where is everybody? Did you all forget that the bad penny turns up every August fifteenth?"

It seemed to Lloyd that Henry looked startled, with a peculiar undercurrent of a feeling that defied analysis.

"Why—Mr. Jones," said Henry, slowly. "You haven't—no, of course, you haven't heard. Aunt Martha and Uncle Joe—" he stopped, and bit his lip, his mouth twisting almost as if he were going to cry.

"Not—dead?" said Lloyd, unbelievably. Henry shook his head.

"No, but—worse, in a way," he muttered, looking at the circles his own toe was describing painstakingly on the weather-beaten boards. "They're both in Restways."

For a minute Lloyd was too aghast to speak. Restways, as he knew well, was an insane asylum about five miles the other side of Colville. Suddenly he thought of Charley, their boy: was it an hereditary taint, and, if so, should the two youngsters be living all alone here, in this deserted place?

"What about Charley?" he finally asked, his voice sounding hoarse from shock. "Are you two living here all alone?"

"Charley"—and now, for a second, Henry looked fleetingly at him. There was a tiny pause before he went on, and something—a flash—that Lloyd could not an-



What macabre horror haunted this place . . . a horror that caused the townspeople to double-bar their doors at dusk?

alyze looked at him out of Henry's eyes. He looked down again, and it was gone. "Charley—disappeared, one night last spring. Nobody ever knew where he went, or why; and it was that night that Aunt Martha and Uncle Joe went—went—" his voice faltered, and stopped.

THE whole thing had a macabre, nightmare quality to Lloyd. A mysterious disappearance, two cases of insanity following right on its heels, and this fifteen-year-old boy alone in an empty house; untended, uncared-for? What were the villagers thinking about, that none of them had taken the boy into one of their homes? His lips tightened, and, decisively, he picked up his bag with one hand, and took Henry's arm in firm, reassuring grasp with the other. "Come on," he said. "We're going inside and talk this over."

It seemed to him that Henry's steps dragged a little; that there was some reluctance in him to enter the house; but he came uncomplainingly. The house, to Lloyd's keen nostrils, had a musty smell—natural enough, with only an adolescent to do the housekeeping (or ignore it); but beneath that was another, almost indefinable odor, that was extremely repugnant. It was—he sniffed—yes! a fishy smell. Fishy in every sense, his Welsh instinct told him; without, however, telling him just why. He only knew that he felt uneasy.

He turned left, into the little parlor, and put down his suitcase. The fishy smell was not so apparent, once out of the front hall; and he threw open a window to air out the room completely. Then, drawing Henry down on the couch beside him, he elicited the boy's story.

Boiled down, the essence of it was just about what Henry had said: one evening Charley Anderson had been in the house—had, in fact, gone to bed—and the next morning, when Henry had come down-

stairs to breakfast, he had found his aunt and uncle in Charley's bedroom, but no Charley. His bed was empty, and the covers wrenched off it: some of them even torn. The Andersons (and the words, as he haltingly told Lloyd about this, seemed to be dragged out of the boy by some terrible, hysterical inner compulsion) were crouched in the far corner of the big, airy room. The window was wide open, and a driving Spring rain was blowing in, soaking them both to the skin (they were in their night clothes); but they were oblivious to it. Uncle Joe's face was buried in his hands, as if to shut out some sight too appalling to bear: ever since, his attendants has been unable to draw his hands away from his eyes for longer than a couple of seconds. Aunt Martha was shivering uncontrollably; at first, Henry said, the neighbors whom he had run to fetch thought that it was from the drenching rain; but that was nine weeks ago, and she still shivered. Sometimes she screamed.

Lloyd felt a sick horror as the boy's story slowly, sometimes word by word, drew to its close. He kept his eyes on Henry's face while he spoke; and, slowly a feeling grew in him that Henry was deliberately withholding something from him. It could, of course, be only that the shock he had sustained—and Lloyd remembered that he was a sensitive, artistic boy—was so great that his mind simply refused to bring certain aspects of that shock to light; but, underneath that, Lloyd sensed a deeper withdrawal, and something else—something that he was unable to put a name to.

Not until later that night did illumination suddenly come to him. He had insisted on taking Henry for a short walk to the village, in the dusk, when the heat was not quite so stifling, in order to buy a few provisions. They had seen few people, and those that they did see seemed in a hurry to get indoors. A couple of them whom Lloyd remembered from previous

summers spoke to them, pleasantly enough, but with an abstraction that was entirely foreign to the easy-going, inquisitive, friendly Colville folk. At five-thirty, the grocer, Mr. Simms, was preparing to close his shop; and usually in summer the shop—which was the equivalent of the local forum, where the village wits and political sages foregathered until late in the evening—stayed open until nine or nine-thirty every night.

Tonight there were only two other people in Simms', and they showed no intention of lingering.

Simms' rubicund face showed new lines and looked oddly grayish in the late afternoon light. His greeting to Lloyd was friendly, but he showed none of his usual disposition to engage him in lengthy, rambling conversation; in fact, he served him with remarkable alacrity, and almost shoved the two of them toward the door when the order was tucked away in big brown paper bags; following them out and locking the door. "Well, g'night, Lloyd," he said, over his shoulder. "Gotta get home quick, now—Mary gets worried if I'm not in well before dark."

Puzzling over this, Lloyd turned to Henry. A sudden realization came to him of how much he had matured since the summer before. Then, he had been a lanky, almost shy lad—except with four or five of his contemporaries, over whom he had seemed to exert a strong influence: Lloyd remembered, vaguely, that Henry had been the leader of some boys' club—now, as he strode along beside him, he seemed to have taken on a dignity and force that his limp in no measure impaired. It was apparent that he was quite capable of taking care of himself, even in the empty Anderson house, with its dreadful associations. But it suddenly came to Lloyd—he should not be *that* self-reliant. It was abnormal, not only for a boy his age, no matter how much older he might seem, but for any human

being who had been through such an experience.

That was when the light first began to come to him.

While he was tempted to bring the matter to a showdown as quickly as possible, his instinct warned him against forcing the issue; but, by means of one or two subtle questions, he strengthened his own feeling that Henry knew, very well, what was at the back of the whole thing, and in that Lloyd included the changed atmosphere of the village.

Now, Lloyd was anxious to delay, even by a little, their return to the Anderson house; while Henry seemed to be quickening his slightly halting stride. A conviction grew in the older man that the roots of this ugly plant lay in the house. As the shadows lengthened, the boy's manner changed, too; his profile at times looked almost hawk-like.

"Hold up a minute, Henry," Lloyd said abruptly. "There's a stone in my shoe."

Henry tossed his head back impatiently, as if about to say something, but tightened his lips and waited, though with a rather poor grace.

Lloyd sat down by the roadside, and shook an imaginary pebble from his left shoe. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye he saw something which shocked him.

THE town behind him seemed to have taken on an unfamiliar aspect. When he looked straight down the road there it was, just as they had left it some twenty minutes before; but on either side of the road there appeared to be oddly-shaped buildings and a landscape entirely foreign both to him and the contour of the country. When he looked sharply at either side of the road, however, the placid fields and trees, with here and there a farmhouse, were as they had been; but on the edge of his range of vision, where the town itself should be, seemed to be strange towers

and battlemented walls. It was as if a picture had been projected, superimposed upon an already existing landscape. And Lloyd knew, deep within himself, that this was not only a trick of the light.

Now he was in a hurry to get back to the house, even with this companion. For by now there was no question but that his companion was an entirely different personality from the boy whose shoe had traced nervous circles on the weather-beaten porch floor, only a few hours earlier.

They covered the remaining half-mile to the cottage in silence. When they arrived Lloyd took the food to the kitchen, made sandwiches, and brought them back to the living-room, only to find that Henry had disappeared. He went into the hall, intending to see if he were in his room when, inexplicably, he seemed to hear the tramp of mailed feet (the phrase sprang unbidden into his mind) outside the door, and low voices. For a moment panic had him in its grip; then, mastering it, he went to the door and threw it open.

He almost laughed in his relief and self-ridicule when he saw the four boys standing there. They looked familiar to him, and in a moment he placed them as the members of the club which Henry had formed, although their names, except for one, eluded him.

"Joe Domenico, isn't it?" he smiled. I know the rest of you, too, but I don't remember your names. Wait a minute—you're the Daniels boy—Billy, that's it. Looking for Henry? I think he's in his room. Wait, I'll call him for you."

With a sense of surprise he heard himself almost babbling. The contrast of these four normal, healthy youngsters with his own dark imaginings had, he thought wryly, affected him so that he sounded like the village idiot. He stepped back in the doorway, saying, "Come on in," as the Domenico boy said, gravely and courte-

ously, "Good evening. Thank you, we go up. We are expected."

The four of them, with no other greeting, filed past him and up the stairs, disappearing from his view at the landing where they turned left. All his forebodings flooded back as he watched them. They, too, looked much older than he remembered them—and surely more serious, even stern, than was natural for boys of their age?

HE WAITED for half an hour; then, as quietly as possible, ascended the stairs. Henry's room was on the top floor, he recalled; a little attic room. Even with the whole house to choose from, it was apparent he was still there, because voices issued from behind its closed door, and light poured from the cracks. Almost holding his breath, Lloyd crept along the hall until he was right outside the door. He could hear, now, as plainly as if he were in the room; but the voices sounded almost like those of strangers; even Henry's voice, which retained only enough of its ordinary timbre to be recognizable. It was Henry who was speaking.

"—from you, Andrus. But Thorvia must be governed, and Fiero is the logical lord. Remember, it bounds Maglar all along the northeastern border. Moreover, we all trust Fiero not to misuse his greater strength, do we not?"

There was a chorus of "Aye," that nevertheless sounded dissatisfied; from which one voice emerged. Lloyd thought it was probably the Domenico boy, from the slight accent.

"We trusta Fiero, Kirwan, but we like-a him, too. Thorvia is no place for one whom you like."

Henry's voice sounded almost angry. "I tell you, Horvath—and you, Andrus, Fiero and Shira—as I have told you before: Thorvia is no more dangerous than any other part of Draconia. This—the danger

isn't localized." Half under his breath, he added, grimly, "I wish it were."

There was a moment's silence, then a new voice spoke up. "Kirwan, I crave leave to speak."

"Speak, then, Fiero." Henry—or Kirwan—had a note of resignation in his voice.

"I have only one question, Kirwan, but one that we all want answered. Can you eliminate the danger—or even control it?"

This time there was a long pause be-

a glimpse of dark-vaulted ceilings and echoing stone corridors. Then it was gone, and all that remained was five angry and startled boys, and a map spread out on the table. In a split second Henry had seized the map and rolled it up and risen to his feet.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, in a cold, furious voice. Lloyd looked steadily at him.

"I don't know what you have been up to, but I gathered that you are in very

fore Kirwan replied. When he did, it was in a low voice, almost a whisper.

"I don't know. I tried inking out the swamp" (Lloyd frowned in puzzlement; it didn't seem to make sense) "but—the next day the smell was there, stronger than ever. Although nothing has happened since, I am afraid—" He fell silent.

"You are afraid," said Horvath's voice, slowly. "That the danger still exists."

"Yes."

With sudden decision Lloyd opened the door and stepped into the room. For a fleeting second he had an impression of five men seated around a council table, with a large map spread open upon it; and

great need of help," he said, equally coldly. "You had better tell me what the danger is. I am right in thinking that this will explain what happened to the Andersons, I imagine?"

Kirwan returned his look. When he finally spoke there was a white, drawn look around his mouth. "Yes," he said briefly. "Sit down."

He put the map on the table, but before unrolling it looked in turn at each of the others. He seemed to question them, silently; and each one slowly inclined his head. Not until the last one had responded, was the map unrolled.

Only a half-hour later Lloyd knew all

that there was to be known. He knew why Charley Anderson had disappeared, and why his parents were in an asylum. He knew, too, why the townspeople were at home behind barred doors when dusk fell; and he knew that it was not a trick of his vision that had shown him towers and battlements hazily superimposed upon little Colville that afternoon.

And he knew what the unpleasant odor in the hallway was.

Although he felt sick he spoke quietly in a controlled voice. "There's only one thing to do. You will have to burn the map."

He was looking at dark Horvath (no longer did he even think of them by the names they had been christened), who had impressed him as being the most level-headed of them all, including Kirwan; and Horvath stirred, with a heavy sigh, and said, "Yes. I think that, too." The others started to nod in agreement, when they were brought up short by Kirwan's voice.

"No!" he said. He was standing, leaning on one hand that pinned the map to the table.

"No!" he said again, his voice hoarse and rasping. "You can't! It's—it's not just a map; it's more than that. You can't destroy it! It would be like—destroying *us*." Behind the intensity of his look was something else. Could it be fear?

"I know," Lloyd answered him quietly. "But that's why it must be done. This is—out of hand, Kirwan. You can't control it now. Do you think I noticed nothing this afternoon? In the village? And right now—" he broke off long enough to go to the door and open it. The fetid, fishy smell was stronger than before.

"Close the door!" Kirwan commanded him fiercely. Lloyd complied, but turned, facing him, to say, "You see? How long do you think it will be before *that* turns on *you*?"

The sensitive face across the table was twisted and dead white. Finally, in a toneless voice, he spoke. "All right. Do it now, if it must be done; quickly."

Lloyd held out his hand for the map, which Andrus passed to him; reached into his pocket for matches; struck one, and lit the corner of the map. Kirwan sank into his chair, shaking from head to foot in long, nervous tremors, and buried his face in his hands.

The map curled and shriveled, as the flame, colorless in the glare of the light, silently gnawed its black, consuming path over the delicate draughtsmanship. It burned rapidly, giving off great puffs of dark smoke; in the smoke Lloyd had the illusion that he could see the ghosts of strange flowers and animals, the flash of a red cloak here, a glint of armor there; stone towers, marching ranks of men—all swirling faster and faster, around and around in a smoky spiral—and suddenly, the last bit of black ash fell to the floor, consumed, and it was all gone.

For a moment longer, they were all immobile; then Lloyd slowly went to the door and opened it. Fresh, sweet air flowed in from the stair-well. He turned to the five boys, smiling.

"Well, Henry—that does it," he said. Almost as one, the other four drew deep, trembling breaths; but Henry, his head pillowed on his arms, did not stir.

"Look, boy—don't take it so hard," said Lloyd. He went over, awkwardly putting a consolatory hand on his shoulder; then, suddenly, he stiffened. "Henry!" he said sharply. The four boys drew closer; irrelevantly, he noticed how young and coltish they looked.

He tilted back the quiet head, which offered no resistance. Henry's face, too, looked very young again, and very peaceful with its closed eyes. The little breeze from the open door blew ashes across the floor.