

Weird Tales

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The Predestined

BY Q. PATRICK

His schoolmaster prophesied that Jasper would go a long way; but did not say in which direction.

I

IT WAS Jasper's tenth birthday. There had been strawberries and cream for tea on the lawn, and a party of nice-mannered boys and girls had solemnly presented him with gifts and wished him many happy returns.

But Jasper, an ungracious host, had shown more interest in the strawberries and the gifts than in his guests' comfort. In fact, there had been a scuffle with a diminutive female guest, whose pigtailed he had so continually

tweaked that she had rounded upon him in a sudden burst of impolite ferocity.

Now that the avenger had departed along with the other guests, Jasper seemed the prey to the listlessness of bored repletion. His grandmother was watching him anxiously. /

"Is your new collar too tight?" she asked solicitously, as Jasper unloosened his birthday tie and was unbuttoning his first really "grown-up" shirt. "Come here, my dear, and let me look."

Jasper, a handsome, heavy boy, moved sulkily towards her.

"Why, good gracious, your poor neck is all black and blue! Did that horrid little Richards girl scratch you, darling?" Grandmother shook her gray curls as she examined the ugly



reddish-blue weal on Jasper's throat. "It can't be the shirt: I bought it large on purpose to allow for growth. Does it hurt you, my pet?"

Jasper gave a non-committal groan. An orphan child, living alone with a doting grandmother, he knew that slight indispositions often had their concomitant advantages; such as pleasant pamperings, tempting food and freedom from school. On the other hand—

"Or perhaps it's strawberry rash. Your poor father always used to break out after strawberries. It's just struck eight, and if we hurry we'll be in time to catch Dr. Barnes. He usually stays late in his surgery Saturday nights."

Jasper was not so pleased at this. Dr. Barnes was apt to pooh-pooh childish malingerings and to prescribe nasty medicines. But this time his neck really *did* hurt him quite badly—a sort of chokey feeling. Perhaps he was going to be ill after all.

A few minutes later Dr. Barnes was casting a professional eye over Jasper.

"Where did you say the rash was, Mrs. Dogarty? I can't see anything."

"It wasn't exactly a rash; it was a sort of mark—more like a bruise." She moved nearer, peering through thick spectacles. "Well, bless me, it's gone com-

pletely. It must have been a trick of light. My eyes are not what they were."

"But it hurt," put in Jasper.

"Well it doesn't hurt any more." Dr. Barnes gave him a playful pinch. "Tummy's a bit fat, but—all's well that ends well."

He might have added, "And all's bad that begins badly."

II

ON THE last Saturday of the Summer Term, Dr. Hodson, Headmaster of St. Ewold's School, made a habit of inviting the ten senior boys to a buffet supper at his home. From among these he would choose the prefects for the coming year, to supplant those who were leaving. And, being a wise man, he valued the opinion of his wife and daughters in making his selections.

Like soldiers on parade the boys had lined up outside the Headmaster's door, sleek and shiny as soap, shoe-polish and brilliantine could make them. Jasper, third in line of seniority, longed for (and fully expected) the honor of prefecture, with its privileges, comforts and potentialities of dominance. He had, perhaps, thought too little of its responsibilities.

On the stroke of eight, the senior boy knocked at the Head-

master's door. As he did so there was a choking sound, and he turned to see Dogarty staggering out of line, clutching feverishly at his collar and pulling at the neat knot of his tie.

"Fall out, Dogarty," hissed the senior boy.

The Mesdames Hodson were extremely polite in accepting Jasper's apologies for being late. But their eagle eyes had taken note of the unbuttoned collar, barely hidden by the crooked tie. Nor did his hair have that Guardsman "spit-and-polish" to which these critical ladies were accustomed on such near-formal occasions.

"I don't think so much of your Dogarty," said Mrs. Hodson, after the boys had bowed themselves politely out at ten o'clock.

"Not mine, my dear," said the Headmaster, with his famous, whimsical smile, "but St. Ewold's. A good scholar and a good athlete; handsome, but—"

"Handsome is as handsome does," put in the youngest and most tactless of the girls. "And Handsome didn't offer me any of that trifle; though he took two helpings himself."

"His eyes are too close together," said the eldest daughter, "and his mouth is too red for a boy's. Besides—if he can't tie his own tie properly, how can he make other boys do it? Jones mi-

told me he was a bully; and he's not a bit popular—"

Here the Headmaster held up his hand with his oft-repeated adjuration against telling tales either in or out of school. Then he added, "Well, I think Dogarty may go a long way—a very long way." But he did not say in which direction.

However, it came to pass that, despite his fine athletic record and a brilliant scholarship to Cambridge, Jasper Dogarty never had his name inscribed amongst those who had been prefects at St. Ewold's.

III

MAY Week at Cambridge, with examinations over and dreamy, sunny days punting along the Cam moonlit nights with their gay college dances . . . the announcement of optimistic engagements with Youth having a final, carefree fling before stepping out from the sheltered groves of Academe into the cold, withering realities of everyday life.

And to Jasper: these realities might well prove withering and cold. His grandmother's legacy—aided by his Scholarship—had barely seen him through Cambridge. A double first and the glamor surrounding a "rugger blue" are valuable in their way. But their value so often dies

with the shouting and the tumult of graduation, and they are no guarantees of a safe, remunerative job later on. Unless, of course, they have enabled one to find the right connections.

And here Jasper had been lucky, or perhaps clever. Though not generally popular, he had managed to secure the friendship of Douglas Mervyn, who had good-naturedly invited him to share his suite of rooms in Trumpington Street, and, more good-naturedly, had invited him to his home during the long vacations. Here Jasper had made good ground with Sir Montague Mervyn, the great industrialist, and also with his only daughter, Eunice. Jasper had managed to convince himself that he would have been genuinely in love with Eunice, even if her father had not been in a position to find a good job for any worthy young man he fancied, and, of course, an even better situation for a son-in-law. Jasper felt sure that Eunice, for all her Puritanical upbringing and her ice-clear, gray eyes, was not indifferent to him. For now that the too-red mouth with its petulant lower lip had been brought under control, his perfect physique and regular features were enough to cause a flutter in an even more sternly-disciplined heart than Eunice's.

He would have brought mat-

ters to a head that last Saturday afternoon in May Week, as they punted down to Byron's pool between the daisied banks of the Cam. But Eunice—wise girl—had brought along her Pekinese, Snap, who had a knack of creating some diversion whenever relations threatened to become too intimate. And Jasper was required to praise the cleverness of some canine antic, when he would willingly have drowned the little dog in those deep waters traditionally loved by Lord Byron.

BUT he would have his chance with Eunice that night at the Trinity Ball. Jasper had hired "tails" for the occasion, and their perfect fit had given him much satisfaction when he had tried them on that morning. Eunice could not fail to notice the figure he would cut in comparison with less favored undergraduates—including even her short, cheerfully-chubby brother, Douglas.

Before the dance they were invited to dine with the Dean of Trinity, and Douglas had assembled his party of men and maidens a little before eight. Eunice was there with Snap, who was to be left in charge of the landlady. In the adjoining bedroom Jasper was putting the finishing touches to his toilet. He was nervous and somewhat afraid.

He had learnt by now that nervous strain—especially in the evening—was apt to bring on that queer constriction of the throat, followed by a short emotional spasm when he was hardly responsible for his actions.

The College clock struck eight.

"We'll be late, and the Dean's a stickler for punctuality," said Douglas, moving towards the bedroom door.

His sister restrained him, laughingly. "Let's send little Snappy boy in to hurry him up." Eunice opened the door just wide enough for the Pekinese to enter.

There was a sound of playful yapping and then a howl of pain. The door was flung wide open and the dog hurtled across the room with Jasper's patent-leathered foot behind it.

"Damn that blasted dog! And damn, triple damn this cursed collar!"

Jasper stood in the doorway. In his hired "tails," he was fully dressed, except for the side of his butterfly collar which he had wrenched loose from the stud.

His eyes were wild and there was an ugly weal on his neck and throat. Oblivious of the ladies, he stood like the mad Hercules pouring his oaths out to heaven and hell.

Then there was a moment of

stunned silence, broken only by the whimpering of the dog.

Finally Douglas stammered, "Look here, old man, this won't —er do, you know—"

But Jasper did not listen. He had gone back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

He never saw Eunice Mervyn again.

IV

AT THIRTY-FOUR Jasper Dogarty could hardly be called a success. His latest job of selling on commission for a large Perfume Company barely paid for the single Bloomsbury room and the commonest necessities of life. It did not cover the rich foods, the pink gins and the double whiskies to which he had become increasingly addicted. But it had one advantage. It brought him into contact with rich — usually older — women who could supply many such little luxuries, and who were, if carefully handled, good for an occasional "present" which, if not in actual cash, could be translated into such beneath the three balls. But suddenly, it seemed, women had become more sensible, or less sensitive to Jasper's attractions. Invitations were falling off. He was even reduced to paying for his own drinks and dinner three nights in succession. His bathroom

mirror finally told him the reason. He was getting fat—yes, F-A-T, fat. There was even a suspicion of a double chin, and no doubt at all about his receding hair-line.

He must, he told himself, perpetrate the only dishonesty that he had not as yet tried with the opposite sex. He must get married—and fast.

Quickly, almost feverishly, he reviewed his list of matrimonial prospects.

A few weeks later he was the husband of Sophie Cain, a widow ten years his senior, who enjoyed comfortable ill-health, a more than comfortable income and a magnificent Mayfair flat.

Other appurtenances of wealth included an almost new Rolls Royce and a nearby doctor who, cheerfully and unashamedly, pandered to her hypochondria.

Such things were, however, mere baubles of a temporal nature. Sophie Cain, now Dogarty, had spiritual wealth, too—a sincere, if rather narrow, religious creed, and the services of a more devout, far narrower female companion—Miss Grace Goodman. In fact, this lady went so far as to assert that anything enjoyable must *ipso facto* be sinful.

Jasper's bathroom mirror had driven him to matrimony so precipitously that he had had no time to find out that he would

be obliged to take on not only the assets but also the liabilities of his beloved. Both her income and her capital were untouchable during her lifetime, and, though she consented to make a will largely in his favor, she insisted that Miss Goodman should continue to run the household and hold tight upon the purse-strings. And that lady, as may well be surmised, had declared war from the first moment that Jasper appeared in the bridegroom role. Indeed, after the ceremony, she showed her disapproving contempt of the hymeneal bonds by constantly referring to *Mrs. Cain's* car, *Mrs. Cain's* flat, and even to *Mrs. Cain's* husband. She ordered groceries for Mrs. Cain, and since the creed of both ladies forbade alcoholic beverages of any kind, no provisions along those lines were made for Mr. Dogarty.

Jasper, shorter of pocket money than ever, found what solace he could in flaunting the Rolls Royce before his former "customers," and in the convivial atmosphere of Dr. Belk's flat, which was immediately below his own. The latter, his wife's physician, was a cheerful old rascal, who soon showed that he was more than ready to enter with Jasper into a defensive alliance against Miss Grace Goodman.

"What your wife really needs is cheering up a bit," said Dr. Belk, as he and Jasper sipped their drinks one evening. "But old goody-goody Goodman is always reminding her of her mortality and scaring the living daylights out of her. Then poor Sophie gets fluttery and sends for me. I'm almost ashamed to go as often as I do." He apparently felt no shame about the size of his monthly bill.

"My wife isn't seriously ill, then?"

"We—ll, you know how it is with women her age." The doctor spread out his hands and shrugged. "I'm not saying she doesn't need medical attention now and then. There is a little cardiac trouble. Flittery, fluttery, you know. A car accident, too hot a bath, a shock, running for a bus might bring on a syncope. But so it might with any of us. And *we* get along without Miss Goodman to pamper us and preach death and desolation to us."

Dr. Belk lifted his glass. "A little of this—a little fun now and then—theatres, dinner-parties—they would work wonders for Sophie." He winked. "Come, fill up, my boy."

Of course Jasper realized the meaning of that wink was: "Get rid of Miss Goodman and there will be the more pickings for you and me."

BUT as he thought it over, he was not sure he wanted to get rid of Miss Goodman. The doctor had given him another idea, in which Miss Goodman might be quite useful . . . quite useful for a plan he had conceived . . . a plan which, gradually, through the ensuing days was growing . . . and now beginning to take final shape in his mind.

His chance came about some two weeks later when Mrs. Belk sent a polite note, asking Mr. and Mrs. Dogarty to cocktails and dinner the following Saturday.

"Do you good, dear," urged Jasper. "And the doctor wouldn't ask you if he didn't think you up to it. I've promised anyhow, but I'd hate to go and leave you all alone."

Saturday evening was proverbially Miss Goodman's night off—her only relaxation—the one period in which her argus-eyed vigilance over Sophie was abated. Every Saturday at seven she marched off on foot—scorning buses and tubes just as she scorned raincoats and umbrellas—to visit her brother in Maida Vale. It was a stern Duty; for her brother, once a missionary, had fallen from grace and needed all the spiritual succor and exhortation his sister had to offer.

Of course cocktails were out

of the question for Sophie. But Jasper could go an hour early and his wife would join the party for dinner.

Before leaving, Miss Goodman prepared a bath for her mistress (carefully testing it to body temperature), and laid out the least becoming of her evening gowns.

Jasper made a point of leaving the flat a few seconds before she did, and Miss Goodman saw him, as the lift bore her downwards, standing outside the door of the doctor's flat as if waiting for admittance. He waved her a cheerful good night, which was a mistake.

But as soon as the lift had passed, Jasper climbed the one flight of stairs to his flat and quietly let himself in. Then, noiselessly, he moved to the bedroom door and waited.

At length the faint sound of splashing told him that his wife was in her bath.

He put on his dressing-gown over his dinner jacket. Then slowly . . . silently . . . deliberately . . . he made for the half-opened bathroom door.

And slowly . . . silently . . . deliberately . . . he entered and did what he had to do.

It was as easy and quick for Jasper Dogarty as it had been for George Joseph Smith many years ago. There was no struggle as poor Sophie's head was sub-

merged beneath the water. Only a few splashes on the floor and a few splashes on his dressing-gown were left to tell the tale.

He ran some hot water into the bath, remembering the doctor's words that too hot a bath might well cause a syncope. It would be at least an hour and a quarter before he need feign anxiety as to his wife's non-appearance at the Belks' dinner table. After that he had planned to "discover" the "accident" himself. His alibi would be almost spite-proof, and his grief more than convincing. By the time Miss Goodman returned at about eleven o'clock, any awkward questions about the temperature of the water or the splashes on the bathroom floor, etc., would be unnecessary and out of place. Sophie's body would (with good luck) have been removed, and her death certificate, duly signed by the complacent Dr. Belk, might well be a *fait accompli*.

So far so good.

HE HUNG up his dressing-gown in its usual place, and walked down to the Belks' flat, where he was admitted at less than five minutes past seven.

He was in splendid form both with his hosts and their guests. Dr. Belk kept plying his glass, whispering, "Make hay while the sun's shining, eh my boy!"

"Talking about the sun's shining," put in Mrs. Belk, "just look at that! Why, who'd have thought!"

She had pulled aside the curtain to show a sudden torrential rain storm. There were rumblings of thunder and angry tongues of lightning. It was as though Nature herself was crying vengeance for the outrage which Jasper had just perpetrated against her.

The noise was deafening. But the banging at the door and the screeching of the bell were heard above the thunder.

Instinct told Jasper what it was. Even Grace Goodman's stout heart had quailed before those drenching floods of rain. She had returned home—too early.

He was conscious of her standing in the Belks' doorway, dripping wet, screaming, "Doctor, come quick, it's Mrs. Cain—she's dead—drowned in her bath!"

Jasper gulped down his own cocktail and another one that stood nearby. Then, moving like an automaton, he followed the doctor up to his own flat.

He was a little drunk.

Much later, so it seemed, he heard the doctor's voice, rich and fruity: "Bear up, old man. I'm afraid she's gone. I always told her that she might have an attack if her bath-water was too

hot. Just an accident. Too bad, too bad."

Jasper should have been grateful for the doctor's reassurance. But he sat staring in front of him, his head spinning.

A few minutes before eight o'clock, the police arrived, summoned by Miss Goodman, and again he heard her voice shrilling protestingly about the heat of the bath-water and the relatively excellent health of Mrs. Cain when she had left her.

And then Jasper was aware of a distant church clock striking eight, and a young-looking police officer was questioning him in a polite, B.B.C. voice:

"I know how you feel, Mr. Dogarty, but—"

But he did not know how Jasper felt. Only Jasper knew the feeling of that dreaded constriction round his throat—that choking sensation that had so often gripped him in moments of crisis. Instinctively his hand went up to loosen his tie and collar.

"That mark on your neck, Mr. Dogarty?" said the young officer, less polite now. "It looks freshly made—as though you'd been—er—struggling with someone."

And then Jasper, fuddled by cocktails and bewildered by Miss Goodman's accusatory screeching, made the mistake of his life—the mistake which was to cost him his life.

"Struggling! Oh no. She didn't struggle."

It was only one short sentence and the young detective knew, of course, that this little slip of Jasper's tongue could not be used in evidence, since no official warning had been given. But he also knew that, in a murder case, half the battle was won if one knew the identity of the murderer.

It hardly needed the malignance of Grace Goodman to point out the financial motive; the almost scalding heat of the bath-water; the wet dressing-gown, and the (now) palpably manufactured alibi.

It was only a matter of hours before Jasper Dogarty was held without bail, charged with the murder of his wife.

V

MR. JUSTICE HARRIMAN slumped into his arm-chair before the fire in his chambers at the Old Bailey. As usual when he felt certain of a prisoner's guilt, his summing-up had been far too long—and every possible point in favor of the accused had been emphasized *ad nauseam*. He was tired, and he knew the jury was tired too, as he had kept them late into the evening. That was why he had begged them to try and reach their verdict before midnight. For tomorrow was Sunday, and no one

wanted Regina v. Dogarty to stretch wearily into another week.

Thomas, the old servant, slipped in silently, removed the Judge's wig, and placed a discreet whiskey and soda on a table, convenient to his hand.

Thomas knew, partly by instinct and partly by the droop of the Judge's shoulders, that he would soon be faced with the duty that he dreaded most.

"I have an idea for your meal, my lud, he whispered. "A bit on the vulgar side, perhaps, but I'll use the best Crown silver cover, so as no one I pass in the passage will know what it is."

"Very well, Thomas." The Judge smiled mechanically.

He held out his hands before the flames. They were old, and they were very cold. This would make the thirty-fourth time that those tired old hands of his had signed away a life—sometimes young, and often potentially useful. He looked at them almost with awe.

Thirty-four—that must be just about the age of the unfortunate young man who had now faced him for four days from the Dock. Thirty-four—the same age that Gordon would have been if luck had been on his side during the Normandy landings.

He shook himself out of his reverie as Thomas came in with his supper. Whisking off the

silver cover, he announced, "Here you are, my lud. Fish and chips, and piping hot!"

He looked on, almost maternally, until Mr. Justice Harriman had consumed his plebeian repast down to the last chip.

At a few minutes before eight he was told the jury had agreed upon their verdict.

Back in the Court, his wrinkled old face was an expressionless mask, hiding the humane pity as he awaited the inevitable:

"Guilty . . ."

As the clock struck eight, he put his formal question to Jasper. Receiving no reply, he assumed the black cap and pronounced the awful words:

" . . . to be hanged by the neck until you be dead . . . and may the Lord have mercy on your soul."

But Jasper was unconscious of these dreadful formalities. He had heard the eight strokes of the clock, and now his hands were at his collar, tugging violently at his shirt and tie.

It was as if he already felt the noose tightening about his neck. .

VI

THE Governor of Her Majesty's Prison at Brixham liked, as a rule, to get these

things over early in the morning. They upset the other inmates and were bad for discipline. But Dogarty's Counsel, with unreasonable optimism, had hoped for the Home Secretary to act in this matter, and the Warden had promised him until 8 p.m. on the last day of the month.

But the Home Secretary had not acted. And so, just before eight, the Governor and his officers proceeded to Jasper's cell, where they cut off his shirt collar and pinioned his hands.

On the gallows, Jasper may have heard the first stroke of eight as they shrouded his head.

Then the trap was sprung.

In the shed below, the rope was loosened from Jasper's neck. The two official doctors, waiting for the last heartbeat, looked indifferently at the ugly, bluish-red marks about his throat—those same marks that had worried the loving eyes of his grandmother at eight o'clock many evenings ago. The same marks that had caught the critical eyes of the Hodson ladies, of Eunice Mervyn, and, recently, drawn the suspicious eyes of the young police officer who had arrested him.

They were the marks of his predestination.