

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 408 Holliday Building, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 30, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1925, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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THE RED LILY

by John Lee Mahin Jr.



NOBODY in Birndale ever knew much about old Jim Creighton. Moreover, none of the inhabitants ever cared a great deal about knowing. "That was the way you felt about him," they said. Perhaps, when his stoop-shouldered figure, accompanied by that of his ten-year-old son, first appeared in the community and took possession of the ramshackle cottage on the outskirts of the town, some degree of interest had been aroused, but that was a long time ago, before the war even.

Like many other more remote sections of the country, Birndale had rather forgotten the war. After the passing of the final fervor, and the many pattings on the back with which the town had greeted the return of its khaki-clad representatives in the great struggle, the employers of Birndale had given "the boys" back their old jobs, and then promptly forgotten. "The war was a ghastly dream," came the words from Birndale's pulpits; "it should remain as such—a dream." So, as a child forgets a nightmare by creeping into the shelter of the parental bed, the inhabitants of Birndale dismissed the war with a convenient and philosophic shrug of their shoulders.

Thus everybody put the war from his mind—that is, everybody except old Jim Creighton.

There were twenty-nine names on Birndale's honor roll, which had been erected in the square at the center of the town. There was one gold star. It found its place beside the name "James Creighton, Jr."

The unveiling of the "tablet" (it was nothing more than a blue and white, gilt-edged, wooden structure, topped by a screaming eagle over the fitting emblem of an American shield in appropriate colors) was a momentous occasion. Speeches by the board of selectmen and a visiting colonel of the National Guard, acquired for the purpose, sang the praises of Birndale's heroes, and, with the echoes of the armistice bells still in its ears, the town rewelcomed "her boys." A holiday was declared; "the boys" paraded.

Of course, there was a solemn note to the affair. Old Jim Creighton, he who hitherto had scarcely been noticed, was called to the platform and publicly presented with the town's sympathies. "Poor old Jim—his boy didn't come back, you know." Women wept silently; men shook his hand grimly and told him he "ought

to be proud just the same." A black-leaved wreath was put at the base of the honor roll. Through it all, old Jim Creighton stood like a man in a trance; his slight frame seemed to have become more stooped than ever; the haggard expression about his eyes and the bitterness of his mouth sought to solve the bewildering change of attitude that was suddenly shown him.

They had never addressed him as "Good old Jim" before; it took him off his feet. They had never before referred to his son as anything but "Creighton's boy" or "that good-for-nothing young Jim Creighton." Oh, yes! He'd heard them. He remembered when the school board had come in protest against his not making Jim go to school; he was "held responsible" then. They had come out to the ramshackle cottage and warned him of the boy's "bad habits"; he had been frequenting the pool parlors and making undesirable companions of the rowdies in Hudson Falls, the neighboring mill town, they told him. They had classed them both as a "nuisance", he remembered, him and this boy they were now mourning with their praises, his boy, his Jim, red, big red. . . ."

And suddenly something snapped in old Jim Creighton's brain. All at once he commenced to shout in incoherent ravings; with a wild sweep of his arms he pushed his way from the platform and through the gathered crowd, laughing a fanatical, mocking laugh, terrible to hear. An eruption of obscenities, a tirade against their sympathy so strange to him, suddenly broke forth from his lips and denounced their hypocrisy, and terminated by telling them that "every damned one of them could go to hell!"

Thus passed the after-the-war fever in Birndale. The erection of the town's honor roll, which had been first announced by the committee as being

of "temporary form", gradually became to be considered as permanent. Plans for the granite tablet with the proposed bust of James Creighton, Jr., surmounting it, slowly dropped from discussion; the Birndale Honor Roll Committee, as though by a tacitly mutual agreement, ceased to convene. The germ of the rather pleasant sentiment of sorrow, by which the patriotism of the citizens and their feeling for the fitness of things had been wont to build a memorial for their single dead hero, had been rudely destroyed through the weird and volcanic display of fury exhibited by that hero's own father. Birndale could not understand it, that was all. Old Jim Creighton was termed "queer—through the boy's death, you know." It was much the easiest way.

Yes, the old man was queer all right. It was not long before people passing along the road that led past the tumbled-down cottage began to notice strange developments. Old Jim was building something, they said. Heavy sheets of plate glass, wooden frames, steel rods and piping littered the surrounding ground about his house, and two workmen (from Hudson Falls it became known) were seen daily about the Creighton place, working under the direction of old Jim. Birndale did not waste any time solving the new mystery. Somebody inquired of one of the workmen "just what was going on."

"Hanged if I kin figger out jest what the old gazabo thinks he's doin'," was the reply. "First he sez it's gonna be a greenhouse, quite natural like, an' then a funny look comes into his eye an' he mumbles around a bit. 'Redhouse,' he sez, 'red as blood.' Once he give Hank an' me quite a start, I'll tell the world. He sez kinda weird like, 'They're going to be red, red lilies, each one a dead man's soul.' Somethin' like that, anyways."

Then, as though imparting a new idea, the workman pointed to his head and added: "Between you an' me, buddy, I think the old goofer's nutty, but anyhow Hank an' me gets our pay reg'lar."

BIRNDALE was more mystified than ever, to say the least. The workman's story only served to whet their already insatiable curiosity to a greater desire for more complete knowledge. The old man was rapidly becoming an enigma to them. He showed himself in town only once a week now, when he walked into Lem Stokes' grocery to fill a large sack with provisions and carry them back to the ramshackle cottage. Lem said he never uttered a word during the transaction, only laid down a piece of paper on the counter with everything he wanted written out on it, paid over the money and left.

It was on one of these weekly expeditions into town that he was seen to enter the bank, and it was not long after he had left the cashier's wicket that Birndale was thoroughly acquainted with what had happened. Creighton had drawn out all his money! It was not a startling sum, according to the report from the bank—three or four thousand dollars—but it had closed his account. What was he going to do with it? Would a greenhouse cost that much? Nobody in Birndale knew just exactly how much a greenhouse would cost. If there were to be lilies, there would necessarily have to be bulbs, of course. It was suggested that the old man ought to be placed in an asylum—much the best thing, you know. Lilies, what an idiotic idea! Really, the old man was crazy. What did old Jim Creighton know about botany, anyhow? Red lilies, of all things! That meant grafting, expert care, experiments, and all that sort of thing. The board of health ought to do something.

But for some unexplainable reason nobody did anything toward investigating the sanity of old Jim Creighton's mind. Perhaps, a certain irresistible curiosity to await the result of his strange actions restrained them; perhaps it was a sense of pity—the old man seemed harmless enough. Nevertheless, there was something else.

People were afraid of him.

That was it; even though they would not admit their fear to one another, the whole town was afraid of him. He was not spoken of tolerantly as "old Jim Creighton" any more. Two years had evoked a sinister metamorphosis in him. Gradually it had become just "Creighton", uttered quickly, and accompanied by a furtive glance of the speaker to see if by any chance the old man was standing behind him. It was uncanny; it gave one the creeps. Some persons swore they had looked from their windows late at night and seen his stoop-shouldered figure shuffling past—shuffling, yet not making a sound. Their timidity was the object of many scoffings. What would the old simpleton be doing in town in the middle of the night? Yet those who laughed had found themselves glancing from their windows the next night, and one or two did not laugh when the subject was mentioned again. Evidently, Creighton's nocturnal prowlings were a little more than mere rumor.

Moreover, his face, the indefinable expression of fierceness, repelled any sort of eye-to-eye glance. His eyes had become like those of a ferret, cunning, quick and shiftily sly, sunk deep in their sockets and surrounded by weazened skin and sallow cheeks. His thin-lipped mouth sneered incessantly, portraying a continual hatred; and when he walked, his unshaven, gray-bearded chin seemed a pendulum for his ratlike head, swinging it from side to side like that of a caged animal.

Thus had old Jim Creighton evolved from his chrysalis of obscurity, from the former tolerance with which Birndale had always considered him, into a maniacal, sinister being that incited terror in the community. Children, instead of following him with tittering fascination and half-uttered taunts as had been their custom hitherto, now fled in the opposite direction when his approach became known. No longer were curs set upon him at the command of a youthful "sic 'em"; they slunk off with their tails between their legs, whining. Even if so ordered, it is doubtful if the dogs would have complied. Their animal sense told them they would encounter a superior ferociousness, a silent, more animalistic savageness than their canine anger could assimilate.

And this man, this sinisterly distorted figure of a man, was growing lilies, large, beautiful white lilies which one glimpsed through the long sheets of plate glass. For Creighton's greenhouse had been finished since the preceding autumn, and passers-by could discern through its panes, rendered almost opaque by the warm air circulating inside, the many rows of snow-white blossoms, opening up their petals to the rays of the spring sun. Among them was always Creighton, a hazy form, working, watering, digging and planting. Yet, as far as any one was able to discover, none of the blossoms had ever displayed the slightest shade of red.

Once Lem Stokes summoned his nerve when Creighton came into the grocery on one of his weekly visits. Lem always did possess a lot of nerve; he seemed about the only person in Birndale who was not actually wary of Creighton, probably because he was the only one that ever transacted any business with him.

"How're the lilies doing, Ji— er —Mr. Creighton?"

Even then Lem wished he had held his tongue. He suddenly remembered that this was probably the first time Creighton had been spoken to in Birndale for almost two years. As though to retrieve his mistake, he added: "Any red ones yet?"

That sounded worse, Lem thought. He was a fool to have said a thing. He did not expect a reply. But he got one.

"Eh? What's that, Mr. Stokes?"

The voice was oily, craftily slow.

"What's that again, Mr. Stokes? Red ones?"

Creighton's eyes gleamed suddenly from under the bushy brows, a peculiar, gurgling chuckle in his throat. Lem described it afterward as the manner in which the devil might laugh.

"Red ones?" the slow words continued. "Oh, yes, they'll be red ones all right! Big red ones! And the biggest ones'll drip. Mr. Stokes—you'll see 'em, hear 'em drip—big red drops, Mr. Stokes."

And then he went out muttering: "Red, red—they'll be red, all right—red, big red. . . ."

IT was about this period when people began wondering just how Creighton managed to survive. Where was his income? The building of the greenhouse must have easily taken up the small capital which he had drawn from the bank, they argued, along with the bulbs, the special boxes and soil. They remembered he used to work on odd jobs around the town a long time ago, raking lawns, weeding gardens and that sort of thing, but he had stopped that. They knew no one employed him any more.

Then, one day, he was seen boarding a train at the station; it was a through express, too, a train that never stopped at Birndale except on special occasion, and that was only when somebody got off or on who was

either a railroad official or held a special permit from the authorities.

Birndale did not realize that this through express had been ordered to stop at its station for just one reason: to allow old Jim Creighton to get on board.

As he was not seen buying a ticket, no one knew his destination. It was only known that he did not return that day, nor the next, nor even the next. He was gone from Birndale for about a week. When he returned, he carried two large boxes—bulbs they were; the tufts of green stem, already sprouted, were protruding from one of the corners.

These trips by Creighton gradually increased in number, coming at long and irregular intervals. That year, in fact, he was away from Birndale four times, his absence at each period lasting about a week, his leaving always by boarding the through express, and his returning from each trip with a quantity of bulbs and other paraphernalia for his greenhouse. Once he returned wearing a new suit, an ill-fitting garment which augmented even more his stooped figure. Birndale saw but one solution for the mysterious journeys: they embodied a source of income for old Creighton. But how?

If they had taken the trouble of following him on one of these trips, they would have learned how. It would have been a shock to them, a revolting shock.

The train bore Creighton southward, along the banks of the long, broad river, rushing him toward the metropolis at its mouth. But the metropolis was not his destination, not before other things had been done. When about an hour's run from the great city, the train came to a pausing stop with a grinding of brakes, only long enough to allow a single passenger to get off. That passenger was always Creighton, and his leaving the train always occurred in the darkness of the early morning, but an hour or

so before dawn. There followed an automobile ride through silent streets, with no word spoken between the driver and the other occupant. The car finally passed through a heavily barred gate, which swung slowly open at its approach, and came to a standstill within high surrounding granite walls; a muffled word or two with uniformed men, the jangling of keys and the opening of more iron gates until a small room was reached—and then Creighton started to work. . . .

Creighton's work on these occasions never took up a great deal of time; in fact, it was only a matter of a few seconds. It merely consisted in his closing an electric circuit by pushing down the black handle of a copper switch which was on the wall of the small room. And just as Creighton pushed down that switch, dawn broke outside, dispelling the darkness of the night.

And the instant that Creighton's hand pressed the two copper bars to their resting place, a man died in an adjoining room—a human soul left its mortal body, sent on its unknown flight by the force of many thousands of volts. . . .

That was how old Jim Creighton earned money to buy his lily bulbs, to supply his greenhouse, and to sustain his weakened body. It is rather difficult to believe that he killed men to live, that the beautiful, white blossoms were reared and nourished because the hearts of sweating men ceased beating; but it was true. Through several centuries, the sharp ax wielded over the head on the block had evolved into the closing of a small electric switch by the hand of a stoop-shouldered old man with demon countenance. Well, somebody had to do it. Why not Creighton? Besides, he was paid for it, paid handsomely. A person ought to be paid well for taking another person's life, shouldn't he?

FOR five years old Jim Creighton closed copper switches at the break of dawn in that little room in the state penitentiary. For five years, whenever his hand was called, it grasped the black handle and sent the death-dealing voltage on its way. Many men, with heads shaved, arms and legs pinioned to the sides of the last chair they would ever occupy, sat in an agony of suspense, until Creighton's hand twisted their bodies into unconsciousness. The same morning invariably found the old executioner in the great city a little to the south, rummaging about the seed stores and the florists, asking questions, frequenting the library for botanical data. The warden had given him the usual amount—he must grow a red lily—they had all been so white—for five long years now. . . .

Then one day, a biting March wind driving a thick rain of sleet through the somberness of the late afternoon, the shrill screech of the locomotive's whistle sounded on the bend of track above Birndale. The through express rumbled to a stop before the station, and its accustomed passenger climbed into the end car.

As the train pounded on again, down the long gray breadth of river, the sleet hurled itself against the car windows with redoubled fury, voicing tattoo of small, ticking noises. The red plush seat on which Creighton was sitting was damp. A pungent odor of wet wood and steam permeated the car, arising from the leaky radiator that sputtered protestingly at one end. Creighton was the only occupant.

The mask of cold, glittering insanity that usually covered his shriveled features seemed unsettled. Something was wrong. The distorted brain throbbed in its attempt to fathom what was the matter with him. At times the troubled expression of a child grappling with something it does not understand invaded his

countenance, making it appear almost foolish in its mixed portrayal. The old man was breaking, although his cramped mind refused to let him see it. Creighton's wasted body, his diseased brain, were falling under an inevitable strain that was slowly eating its path, dragging him down.

A brakeman opened the door at the end of the car, allowing the rush of air to whisk up a crumpled newspaper from the floor and whirl it across Creighton's knees. With a muttered curse, he flung the paper from him. He had not looked at a newspaper since the day he saw his boy's name on the casualty list.

There was another reason why Creighton never read a newspaper, resulting from his journeys down the river valley to that "special stop." Somewhat contrary to the cruel cunning of his insanity, he entertained a morbid fear of seeing the printed name of any man he was going to put to death or of anyone whose lime-covered corpse he knew lay lifeless as the result of his pulling down that black-handled copper switch. Funny sentiments for an executioner, even a lunatic, weren't they?

Hours passed. They seemed minutes to Creighton. None of the other trips had ever troubled him before. It was not the voice of a conscience, long silenced; a maniac is never bothered with a conscience. It was more a vague feeling of impending disaster; his head pained frightfully, little throbbing stabs shooting through his temples. If he could only grow a red lily—that was the trouble! He must grow a red lily soon, or something would happen. He'd go insane if he didn't grow a red lily. He wouldn't go to the city this time, he decided. He'd go right back to his greenhouse. Perhaps they'd be red, dripping red, when he saw them again. A grimacing smirk, by which the old man portrayed a contented happiness at his decision, came over his features. Yes,

they'd be red this time; he was sure of it. Red!

The little room with the copper switch seemed smaller than usual. Creighton had difficulty in breathing; there was not enough air. His fingers trembled violently as they wrapped themselves around the black handle. There was extra current on; it crackled across the closing gap. He thought he heard some one cry out. . . .

THE events of the next night in Birndale have long been a matter of horrified discussion in the town. It was a horrible thing, you know, to hear Creighton's wild shouts and fanatical ravings, reverberating through the streets, cutting the darkness. They grew louder as the night wore on. Now and then he screamed, a high-pitched, blood-curdling yell, that set people shivering at their windows. The peculiar part of it was that no one saw him; they could only hear those fiendish cries, as he raved from one street to another. By their sound he seemed to be walking in a wide circumference, which gradually narrowed in radius, always toward the center of town.

A posse was routed from their beds to hunt him down and overpower him, but they could not find him. Follow as they would in the wake of his screams, he always eluded them. Nobody in Birndale slept that night. Children cowered terrified in the arms of equally frightened fathers and mothers. The screams grew in volume, echoing and re-echoing, until just be-

fore dawn, when they ceased with the muffled report of a shot.

They found him dead in the morning, stretched out beneath the weather-beaten honor roll in the center of the square, a small, shriveled, lifeless form, a bullet through his head, put there by the revolver which lay a little way from his gnarled hand. Tightly clutched in his other hand was the torn and crumpled section of a newspaper. When they pried it from the cold fingers, viselike in their grip of death, they read of the execution of a certain well-known criminal and murderer, that had taken place the preceding morning, a certain John "Knife" Dolan.

But the face in the picture above the headlines was not that of John "Knife" Dolan—they who lived in Birndale knew that—they remembered. The picture showed the unmistakable features of James Creighton, Jr.—young Jim Creighton, whose gold-starred name was on the tablet above them. Evidently he had not fallen in France. Perhaps, with memory gone from shell-shock, he had returned to find no employment—an old story, no employment but crime and murder. Perhaps he had drifted to the underworld as Birndale always said he would, naturally, and with a sane mind. Nobody ever knew.

But old Jim Creighton had grown a red lily.

It lay crushed under one weazened arm, and the crimson flow from the gray temple dripped down upon its petals, once the whiteness of virgin snow, but now dyed a deep red—a deep, dripping red.

