

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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THE SIREN

A Storiette That Is "Different"

By TARLETON COLLIER

WITH AN ABRUPT jerk, Joe Wilson, from lying on a cot in the little tent, lifted himself on his elbow in an attitude of intent listening. There was no sound except the hum of a sleepy breeze through the pines, the sleeper's contralto of a mocking bird, and the purring undertone of rippling water.

"That's her!" he whispered. With an effort he sat erect, and again told himself: "That's her!"

All at once there came the crackle of voices without, the sound of thudding footsteps. Joe flung himself back on the cot and closed his eyes with furious energy as the flap of the tent was lifted and the engineer and the doctor peered within.

"He's asleep," said the engineer in a low voice.

"*Hm!*" said the doctor. He was a wizened little man with spectacles. Then he let the flap drop, and his voice came to Joe brusquely through the canvas. "Well, we'll come back. I want to talk to him. He's probably not very sick, but—by God, man, you've got to keep your men from the water around here, or you'll never finish your railroad!"

They were walking away as he spoke, and to Joe the voice seemed to fade.

"I tell you . . . polluted . . . fever . . ."

Then they were gone, the sound of them swallowed up in the ripple of the little creek over the rocks. With a start, Joe again was erect, his eyes furtive, glancing about the little canvas chamber. He tiptoed to the flap, and lifted it a bare inch, peering out upon the receding figures of the two men as they passed beneath a water-oak.

With no less caution he crept to the other end of the tent, and stepped through the flap into the open. For a moment he stood irresolute, his eyes closed, as if he were dizzy.

"Keep away from the water, you fool!" he whispered.

There was no other sound of life in the woods now; the breeze had died and the mocking bird was silent. Only the prattle of a nearby stream over its rocky bed . . .

With a stumbling, nervous stride that was almost a run, Joe Wilson went to-

ward the sound of the water, and at last he plunged through a thick clump of willows and stood stiff, half-crouching, at the top of a bank of damp green moss that sloped steeply to a little stream with pools like black wells, still and silent. Only the silver shallows between pools rippled with life.

At the foot of the bank was a shelf of rock, splotched green with moss, reaching into the stream barely an inch above the water. Upon it Joe's glance rested, as if held by a power outside himself. He drew back into the willows; his sunken eyes closed in his pale face; then, with a sudden spring, he was over the bank and perched upon the rock.

Something like a smile lighted his face, as if with the leap he had settled a troublesome matter. He sat down as easily and comfortably as he might, his legs doubled, his hands clasped about his knees; and stared intently into the black pool at his feet.

And then, between a closing and an opening of his eyes, a woman was there where he had looked for her.

There was no sense of suddenness about the apparition; only, when he closed his eyes against a dizziness, there was the water and nothing else; when he opened them, an instant later, she was standing in the midst of the pool, almost where he could touch her. And it was as if she had been there all the while.

The water reached a little above her ankles. Her legs were bare to the knees, clothed above that, and her body as well, in a soft clinging garment of white that seemed a part of her; white throat and arms were bare. Her face was alive with a pleasant smile; her eyes, of green and gray together, were alive and pleasant, too.

"You are late," she said. There was something of the stream's bright ripple in her voice.

Joe Wilson could only smile in answer; then his smile faded and his face was scornful and somewhat stubborn.

"Yes," he said, "and I came near not coming at all. I swore I wouldn't."

"But you came," she said, still smiling.

"Only to tell you that this is the last time."

Her smile, merrier now, was accompanied by a sound that might have been the gurgle of a little whirlpool in the rapids, or it might have been a low note of laughter.

"You didn't mean it, then, that you love me," she chided, coming nearer. It was not by a step that she moved, or by any perceptible effort. The space between them all at once was lessened, nothing else.

Joe had lost his careless air and posture. He was on his knees, a fury in his words.

"I didn't mean it? You can't say that. I have become less than a man, I love you so. You bring me here every day to do as you will, and I would die if I didn't come, I love you so. For you I have broken my word to my friends back there in camp. And I don't know who you are or *what* you are."

Again that gentle sound that might have been a sudden swirl of the water, or her laughter. Then she was nearer, and her pleasant eyes looked into his, mockery in them.

"You don't know who I am?" she asked softly. "And yet I am yours."

The stubborn lines in Joe's face vanished. A quick throb of blood choked into a gulp the word he would have spoken, and he stretched out his arms. She was suddenly beyond his reach.

"Yours," she said again, and that she laughed there was no doubt this time.

Joe's eyes were hungry. Joe leaned forward upon his stiffened arms, and stared at her like a wistful dog.

"I don't know who you are," he whispered. "I don't know who you are."

"I am whoever you want me to be," she said.

"I'll call you Sadie," he said.

"Sadie?" Her lids drooped, veiling her eyes, but their narrow glimmer was keenly alive.

"Yes, there is a girl—"

Between two words she was close before him at the edge of the rock.

"I am yours," she said in a fierce, low voice. "What do you care for any girl? I am all woman, and you have me. What do you care for the world? You have me."

He felt her breath on his face. There was warmth and fragrance in it. Her

white beauty was greater than that of the dogwood blossoms showering there through the gloom under a sudden breeze; and a dizziness struck him, so that the trees swam before his eyes.

"I have you," he repeated thickly, rising to his feet.

"And the girl. . . . Sadie?" she asked.

"You are Sadie. Only you. I have forgotten. . . ." He put out his arms, but she was beyond his reach again, her eyes mysterious.

With outstretched arms, he begged her to return.

"I love you," he said.

For a full breath she looked at him gravely. Then, "We shall see," she said, plunging her hands into the stream. As she arose, her hands were cupped and brimming with water. She moved toward him, smiling.

Terror gathered in Joe's white face.

"Drink," she tempted him.

He whispered "No," and the refusal seemed to strengthen him, for when she said again, "Drink," he shouted it: "No!"

She dropped her hands, and the water went splashing back into the stream; and, smiling still, she came nearer until she was beside him upon the rock, her wet feet glistening silver upon its greenish-brown surface. Her eyes held fast his wide, frightened stare.

"Why?" she asked him, when she was so close that he was aware of the warmth and fragrance of her person.

He answered her steadily:

"I will not, that's why. I must not. I have told you I must not, every day that I have come here, and yet I have always drunk this water. It has made me less than a man. It has made me break my word and my own rules."

Once more her eyes were grave. "You must not?" she asked. Her voice might have been that of the purring shallows. There was no escaping her gaze, and before it his eyes wavered and shifted. His shoulders drooped.

"You will not?" the purring voice went on. "Not for me, and you say you love me? It is so little that I ask."

There was pain in his voice as he cried, "Don't. . . . Sadie! I have promised. . . . the rule. . . ."

It was she whose figure drooped now, and her face that was mournful. "But you have broken the rules before this for me," she murmured.

"I came today to say that I would no more."

"But it is so little I ask. And I—an—yours."

He pleaded: "Don't!"

With sudden abandon, she flung herself against him, and for the first time his arms closed about her. She yielded to his fierce embrace, her head against his breast.

"You do not love me," she whispered.

"Sadie. . . !" His arms tightened with his cry, and a red mist blinded him as he felt her warm, vital body closer against him.

She lifted her face and looked at him.

"You will?" she asked, smiling.

"No," he said, almost with a moan.

She kissed him. "To drink, only to drink," she said softly. "It is so little. I have given you myself. . . . isn't that something?"

With one arm she clung to him as tightly as he held her; the other arm was free, and with her hand she stroked his face. Her kisses were hot upon his lips. His eyes were closed, and he swayed with a dizziness that was mightier than any other he had known.

"Only to drink," she said. "Do you not care for me, and I have given you myself? What are those men in the camp to you, they and their rules? You will not drink. . . . yet I give you. . . . this. . . ."

Her lips met his in an eternity of giving and taking.

"No!" he said again, but his voice quivered and broke, with the plain message of surrender.

With a little cry, she knelt at the edge of the pool, her arms still about him so that he was forced to kneel with her. She plunged her hands into the water,

and lifted them to him with their silver freight.

With an eager, moaning sound, he drank the cool water; and as he did so the red mist before his eyes thickened, and his ears roared with the thunder of blood within. To drink became then his passion, and he cupped his own hands, filled them with water, and drank.

For a moment the mist cleared and the roaring ceased, and he saw that he was alone on the rock.

"Sadie!" he called.

The answering sound might have been only the prattle of the stream, or it might have been low laughter.

The thought came to him that perhaps she had fled to the bank, and with prodigious labor he clambered up the tiny slope. She was not there. He parted the soft-flowing curtain of the willows, and though the fronds were so light a bird might have flown through them, he gasped with the effort it cost him.

Staggering into the sunlight beyond the fringe of trees, he found that she was not there, either. He tried to run, but only stumbled, lifting himself painfully to stagger onward. Then the mist of his delirium closed upon him, and the blood at his ear drums pounded and a tumult came out of earth and sky to overwhelm him.

THE DOCTOR and engineer, going fishing, stumbled upon his crumpled form an hour later. The former, a wizened, spectacled little man, bent over him and studied him with eyes that seemed to see everything. He studied the young fellow's pulse, loosened his shirt, stared into the pupils of his eyes. At last he turned to the other, frowning, and said:

"Fever, and maybe that damn' typhoid. He's the sickest man I ever saw."

Then his voice rose with a flare of anger.

"Say, can't you keep these fools away from this water?" he asked. "There's death in it."