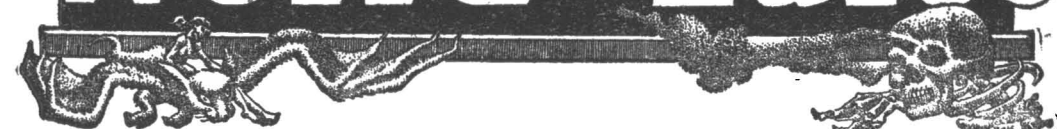


# Weird Tales



March, 1953

Cover by Virgil Finlay

**SLIME (A novelette)** . . . . . Joseph Payne Brennan 6  
*It was a shape of utter darkness, a black viscid pool of living ooze that flowed like a great filthy carpet...*

**DON QUIXOTE ON MARKET STREET (Verse)** . . . . Clark Ashton Smith 11

**THE TALKIE DOLLS** . . . . . Donald F. Vieweg 22  
*A wonderful game; a delicious game where dreams came true. But how to end it...?*

**CAVEAT EMPTOR** . . . . . L. Sprague de Camp & Fletcher Pratt 31  
*Is the fraud legitimate when one tries to defraud the devil?*

**NIGHT COURT** . . . . . Mary Elizabeth Counselman 36  
*"De Lawd give each of us a certain po'tion of time to use. And He don't aim for us to cut off de supply dat belong to somebody else."*

**IN CAMERA** . . . . . John Ward 47  
*I've spent so much of my life in the dark brooding land that is Africa that I won't go on record about what might have appeared on any film taken there.*

**THE RAFT** . . . . . Kirk Shaw 54  
*It was a fearsome curse, even to read about: a black soul in a white body was to corrupt even before the grave closed over it.*

**MRS. PENLEATH'S STRATAGEM** . . . . . T. W. Speight 61  
*... the whole floor had vanished into the wall save a space at his feet about three feet wide!*

**THE DREAM MERCHANT** . . . . . Harold Lawlor 73  
*Burn a candle; have a dream. The formula was clearly set forth.*

**WHO ARE WE? (Verse)** . . . . . Frances Rogers Lovell 77

**THE SUPREME WITCH** . . . . . Appleby Terrill 78  
*"... Sir, I have put the young witch away as your worship bid." But she was not, after all, the supreme witch.*

(Copyright 1926 by Popular Fiction Publishing Company)

**THE EYRIE** . . . . . 70

---

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.

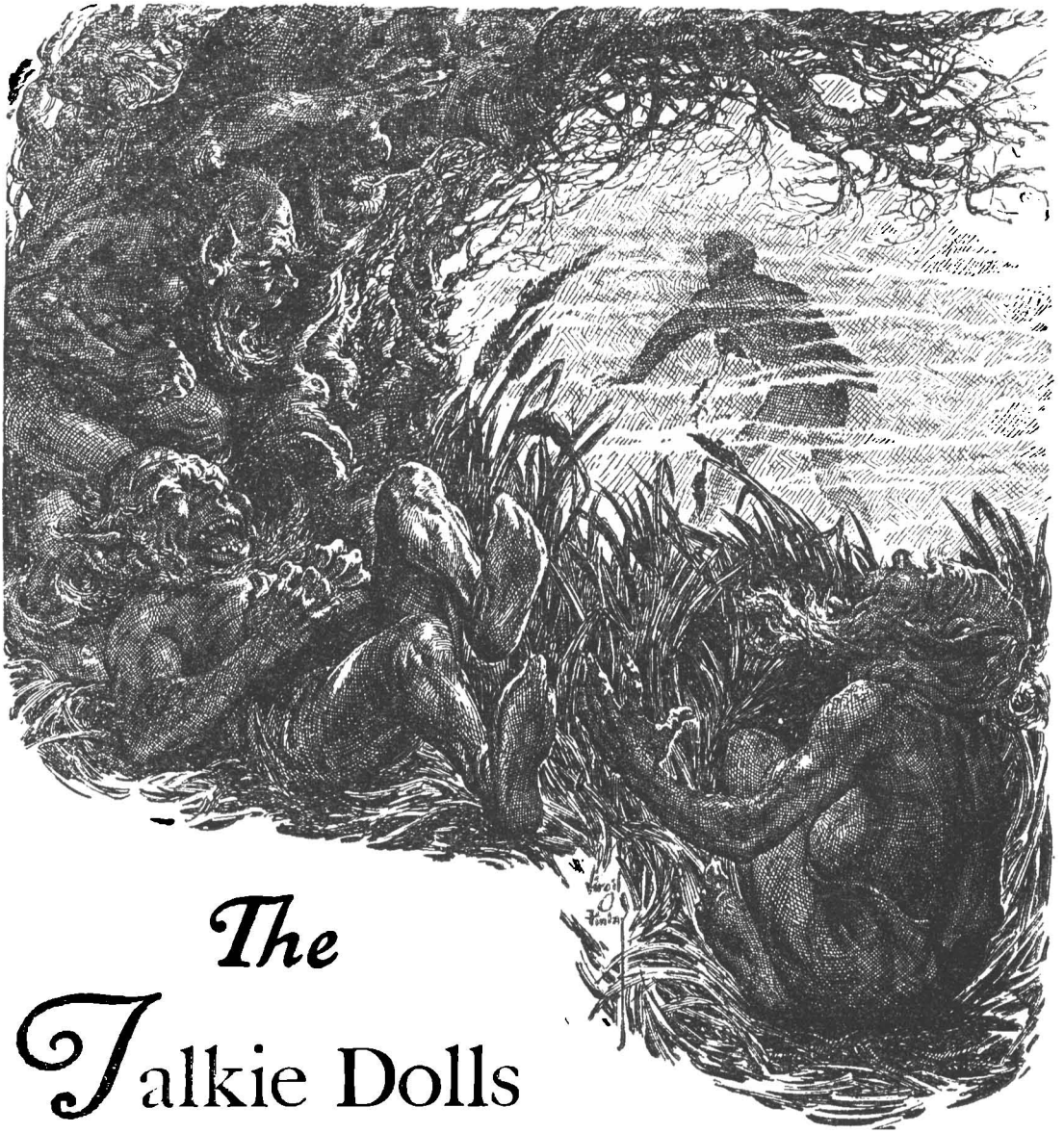
Copyright, 1953, by WEIRD TALES. Copyright in Great Britain.  
 Title registered in U. S. Patent Office.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

 178  
 Vol. 45, No. 1

D. McILWRAITH, Editor

... magic words were not needed; everything had been taken care of



# The Talkie Dolls

BY DONALD F. VIEWEG

I SHIVERED uneasily as I drove into the swirling mists rolling high like ocean waves as the headlights knifed into them. I knew I was lost now. I had my doubts before, but now—after hours of crawling through the snaking road and encountering the most dismal, eerie landscape I had ever seen—now I knew.

The map said Crocus Swamp. But where in Crocus Swamp was I? And what kind of a fool was I to take the shortcut? Salesman, phooey! Don't get me wrong; I like my selling job. But I don't like all the traveling necessary to being a salesman. Sometimes I don't like the things it forces me to do—like threatening old couples who have done nothing to me. That's company policy. First you politely remind them of due payment, then you become insistent and

finally you threaten court action. I wasn't built to threaten people. It bothered my sleep.

I was seriously thinking of giving the job up. And now, after being lost in this confounded swamp for over four hours, I was sure of giving it up—if I ever got back to civilization.

I drove on. Surely this winding dirt road led back to the highway. I was almost afraid to look to the left or right of the headlights. The giant willow trees on the shore hovered over the dank, still waters of the swamp like straggly-haired witches over a boiling cauldron in *Macbeth*. "Bubble, bubble. Toil and trouble." On the breath of the winds I heard the incantations.

The night noises made me nervous. What was it about a swamp at full moon that amplified harmless sounds into screeching, terrifying voices? Imagination helps, perhaps, but all I knew was I didn't like it. This place foretold of death. It smelled of rot and filth; the very air was heavy with it.

After countless miles of twisting road, the headlights of my car caught a small clearing. I breathed a sigh of relief. A clearing meant a house. Perhaps I could get directions.

I left the car in the road and half-stumbled toward the outline on the hill. Sharp, wide-bladed grasses tore at my trousers, as though warning me to stop, to turn back. More than once I paused to look behind me. Crushed sticks underfoot snapped in warning.

**I**T WAS too dark to see clearly, but I could make out an old fashioned log cabin huddled between two giant pines, their peaks whistling in the wind above. The cabin was almost crushed by gaunt roots of wisteria, gnarled and interwoven like a web. Two small windowboxes, unpainted, were fastened beneath the low windows.

I stepped on to a flagstone walk overrun with grass and budding flowers. My heels clicked as I walked. My breath came labored. My throat burned as I drew gasps of warm air into my lungs. The early mosquitoes and insects were having a picnic.

Why anyone in his right mind would live in such a place I'd never know.

I knocked on the old Dutch doors. Silence. I knocked again, this time harder. I saw a light flare up inside and heard a thin voice call out. I waited.

After a dozen more mosquitoes had needled my face and hands, the upper portion of the Dutch doors opened and I saw a little old man in nightcap and gown fresh out of Dickens. He was holding a kerosene lamp before him. He was as twisted and gnarled as the wisteria on his house.

He grinned at me and his round eyes reflected bright in the light. I stared at them. They were soft eyes, friendly, humorous. The little man made me smile in spite of my situation and the confounded mosquitoes.

"Forgive me for bothering you, old man," I said. "I took what I thought was a short cut and got lost. I wonder if you—"

The old man laughed, a pleasant, bell-like chuckle. He made me feel foolish. I couldn't help but join in.

"I know it's silly, but it's true. I've been driving for hours."

"Ye got lost. Hee Hee."

"I wanted directions. Would you—"

"Come in, my boy. Leave ye contraption at the post."

How could such tired eyes see my car? The lights were off and the car was a good hundred feet below into the night. "Thank you," I said.

He opened the door for me and I had to stoop to enter. The doorway was only four or five feet high. The old man lit two more lamps and I could really see him.

I had never seen a human being so old. He was ancient, dried and shriveled to the bone. His face was wrinkled into a perpetual smile and his eyes, I saw now, were still smiling.

"Sit ye down, young man. Please do." He turned. "Inex," he called in a soft, piping voice. "Come on out. Ye have company."

I looked at the doorway to what I thought was the bedroom. The old woman who entered was as ancient and emaciated by time as he. Her white hair was rolled in a tight bun on the top of her head. A few wisps straggled over her ears and down her neck. She wore a flannel nightgown buttoned up to her throat and walked with a bent stick

for a cane. She was badly stooped, like the old man, but if she straightened up, she wouldn't have been more than four feet tall. She glanced up at me and grinned welcome showing her toothless gums.

"Howdie ye do."

I stood up and bowed. Somehow she commanded that bow. For all her diminutive height, she moved with dignity. And yet she was no bigger than my four-year old daughter Shirley.

"Sit ye down," the old lady admonished, a scowl wrinkling her face. She hobbled over to the old man and waved her stick. "Ab, did ye ferget ye manners? Pour some mead for the young gent'l man."

"Don't bother," I said. "Please. I only want to get directions."

"Now, ye keep sitting. Ab, the mead."

I cautiously eased back into the tiny chair. I was afraid my weight would break it. None of the furniture was built for a two-hundred pound man.

The old man brought mugs and a bottle. It was green, but of a rough, hand-made variety, more like a potter's vase. Ab poured the thick liquid into the three mugs and the old lady nodded approval. She sat beside the old man and motioned to me to drink. It was sweet and syrupy. I had never had mead before, but this stuff was good. And it was strong. I drained the mug and placed it back on the table. The old lady hadn't touched hers, but the old man was loudly smacking his lips in obvious enjoyment.

"It be too late for me," the old lady said as she noticed my glance. "Ye said ye be lost?"

"Yes. I took this road because the map indicated it would save twenty miles. But I must have driven thirty already. Probably more. My wife will be worried. I'm a salesman, you see, and—"

"Ah. Ye have a wife?"

"Yes, and a four-year old daughter." I reached for my wallet. "Here's their pictures." I was proud of Peg and little Shirley. They were the best things I had ever done. Marrying Peg had changed my life. I became serious and worked hard and now we had a new car and little Shirley and almost eight-hundred in the bank toward our new

house. Yes, meeting Peg was the best thing that ever happened to me.

"My, they be a pretty brood," the old lady said. "And the little 'un a tow-head like yerself."

The old man looked at the photograph and pursed his lips. He nodded approval, then took his seat in the shadows.

"And what might ye be called by?" the old lady said.

"Called by? Oh—my name is Peter Bordon. That's Peg there," I said pointing to her picture. And the little one is Shirley."

"Ah, yes. A pretty brood." The old lady scowled at her husband who was dosing. "That one there be called Ab and I be Inex Talkie."

"Mr. and Mrs. Talkie," I repeated. I took her shriveled hand in mine. It felt like a feather. "I'm glad to meet you."

"And I. And sleepy Ab there."

AS WE talked, I began to grow drowsy. My eyelids seemed to be weighted by lead. I yawned. I shook my head. The old lady pushed another cup of mead into my hand and I drank it down. It was late, very late. Peg would be worried. I got up.

"Excuse me. I've got to get something from the car."

The old lady smiled and the old man snorted in his sleep. I stooped under the doorway and the warm air hit me like a fist. The bugs and mosquitoes attacked as I ran down the flagstone walk into the tall grass at the foot of the hill. Above the wind moaned feebly.

It was only a pretext, I had to get out of there; I was falling asleep. That mead was like a drug. But I had told Mrs. Talkie I had to get something from the car. What? A couple of pots and pans. I had plenty unsold. Besides, the old people were friendly and sociable. They certainly could use some new aluminum pans with copper bottoms. Probably never seen them before.

I found a good sauce pan and a ten-inch fryer in the trunk, then closed and locked it. The bugs were driving me crazy. I was wide awake now.

I ran through the knife-edge grass to the walk and hurried back into the little house. Mr. Talkie was awake and grinning. His

wife had something in her gnarled hands. She was stroking it.

"Here," I said. I placed the pans on the table. "These are for you. I appreciate your fine hospitality."

The old lady picked up the pans, looked at them, turned them over, rubbed her brittle fingers along the polished aluminum and smiled. She seemed pleased.

"That be a fine skillet," the old man said.

I smiled. It had pleased them and I felt good inside. Besides, the pans cost me only a buck or so wholesale. "I'm glad you like them," but now I must be going. Could you tell me which is the main road?"

The old man pointed. "Go down the road a piece. At the fork, take ye right. God be with ye, young 'un."

The old couple seemed reluctant to have me go. They were probably starved for company. I guessed I was the first person they had seen in months. But I had to get home to Peg. She'd be worried silly.

I took the old lady's hand in my own. It was white as chalk, the veins bulging and blue. She stood up.

"Ye been kind," she said, her eyes sharp and bright. "And we be glad for ye company. Ye skillet and pot we will use." She looked at the thing in her other hand. "We have something fer ye."

I shook my head. That wasn't necessary. But the old lady seemed so disappointed, I agreed. "Thank you," I said as she pushed her gift into my hand. It felt peculiar, almost alive. I looked at it in the wavering light of the kerosene lamps.

It was two puppets with strings, cross-bar and all. I had never seen such superior workmanship. The limbs were superbly formed. The joints at the knees and elbows were barely discernible. They looked like breathing miniature human beings.

"Shirley will love these," I said.

The old lady's manner darkened like a storm cloud. "No! No!" she cried shrilly. Her wizened face contorted almost hideously. "They be not for children! They be for you and Peeg. They be your fortune. Look at them."

I brought them closer to the lamp. One was male, the other, female. One had long

black hair—like Peg's, and the other had short, blonde hair like mine. And their faces! I stared, dumbfounded, at the old lady. How did she do it?

Then I saw my billfold on the table beside the smoking kerosene lamp and I knew. The photograph of Peg and myself was beside it. In the short time I had visited the car, the old lady had somehow molded Peg's and my resemblance on the faces of the dolls. The similarity was unnerving. Peg's delicate features were captured in putty and paste. Her doll was as lovely as she.

"They—They're very beautiful," I said almost whispering. "I don't know how you did it, but they're wonderful." I wanted to throw the puppets down; their striking similarity frightened me.

"They be yer fortune," old Mrs. Talkie repeated. "The Talkie Dolls never fail."

I didn't believe much in luck charms except in my St. Christopher medal around my neck, but I didn't want to hurt the old couples' feelings.

"And how might that come about?"

The old lady cackled to herself. "Ye will see. Show them to ye wife. Ye both will see. But do not give them to the little 'un. Heed me now." She cackled again, this time loud and echoing.

I thanked Mr. and Mrs. Talkie for their hospitality and directions and bade them goodbye. They bowed politely stiff from the waist and closed the door on me. The insects did not attack.

As I turned to go down the flagstone walk I thought I heard the most fiendish shrill cackling from inside the old cabin. I hurried to the car with the two puppets clutched tight in my hand. I laid them on the seat beside me and started the car. The lights sliced into the mists, outlining the dirt road ahead.

I drove about five-hundred feet, found the fork and was again on the main highway, none the worse for my experience. Only the trip-hammer beat of my heart belied that.

PEG leaned up on her elbow, her gown falling away to reveal the clean, white line of her throat. She looked so beautiful there. Her big brown eyes were wide and

bright and curious. She smiled in obvious relief when I kissed her. I sat on the bed and she took my hand in hers.

"What kept you so long, Pete?"

As I told her what happened, she listened with her full lips parted slightly in that expectant, appealing way I had always loved. She squealed in girlish delight when I showed her the two puppets.

"The old couple gave them to you? Why, these dolls must be very old. They're lovely."

I agreed with both her statements. "Look at their faces," I said.

Peg first picked up the male doll. (Just like a woman). She stroked its blonde hair and touched its slightly pug nose. "Why—It—It looks just like you!"

I handed her the second doll. "Look at this one."

Peg did, and her mouth widened in surprise. "It's me! But how—?"

"The old lady molded the features from the photograph while I was at the car. I don't know how she did it so fast."

Peg held the dolls in her hands. She looked from one to the other. She turned to me. "Do you think it's really true? I mean about these dolls bringing good fortune?"

"I don't feel any richer yet," I joked. I undressed, put on my pajamas and crawled into bed beside Peg. She gave the dolls a final look before placing them on the magazine she had been reading. She reached over and turned out the light.

Night filled the room. Far in the east dawn crept up over the rim of the world. The faint light caught Peg's delicate features, outlining them. Her full lips glistened.

I leaned on my elbow and kissed her cheek. "I've got my fortune beside me," I said.

Peg cuddled closer to me. "Good morning, darling," she said sleepily.

**I**T WAS funny, but I was wide awake. The night's adventures had stimulated my imagination so my thoughts tumbled like a dried weed in the wind. Could it be true? Was it possible that two inanimate dolls could bring our fortune? Faugh! The idea was ridiculous. I rolled over. The morning's gold caught the faces of the dolls on

the table beside the bed. They seemed to be laughing at me.

Shirley woke us a few hours later. Saturday. No school. Saturday, the gang of kids across the yard. Shirley wanted to go out and play.

Bleary-eyed, I ate breakfast across from Peg and Shirley. They both seemed to sparkle, but I felt like a limp rag. Too much thinking about the dolls and old Mr. and Mrs. Talkie. I was glad I had made my sales quota and didn't have to go out. I needed an afternoon nap.

The harsh jangle of the telephone startled me. Peg, followed closely by Shirley, ran to answer it. "What? No, you must have the wrong Bordons."

The high-pitched voice on the other end of the line seemed insistent.

"But I tell you we didn't take any chance on a house!"

"What is it, Peg?" I called to her.

"Oh, this man—Here Pete, you talk to him. He says we won a model home. He's crazy."

I picked up the phone and the voice confirmed Peg's statement: we did win a model home. The drawing occurred last night. Mr. and Mrs. Peter A. Bordon of 112 Cedar Avenue were the winners. That was Peg and I, but neither of us ever heard of the house or took a chance on the drawing.

Nevertheless, the voice went on, we won the house. Details would be forwarded later.

I dropped the phone into its cradle. This was crazy. It was fantastic! I had never won anything before in my life and now I suddenly won a whole model home on a drawing with a ticket I had never purchased. I fell into the chair beside the phone. My head was spinning. Peg was laughing.

"It was a good joke, Sporty. Now call up your friend and tell him I'm wise."

"But it isn't a gag. I had nothing to do with it. Honest, Peg."

Now it was Peg's time to fall into a chair. She ran her slim hand over her brow. She shook her head. "Are—Are you sure?"

"Positive. I wouldn't lie about anything so serious."

Peg got up and walked about the room.

She seemed like she didn't know what to do. Finally she disappeared into the bedroom. Shirley went out to play.

"Pete!" Peg called shrilly. "Pete, come quick!"

I ran into the bedroom. Peg was standing beside the bed, her eyes wide and staring at the two dolls on the table.

"Pete. The dolls are lying on the magazine I was reading last night. Look at the picture they're on!"

I moved the puppets aside. They felt warm. My pulse quickened. The cover picture of the magazine was of the Kent County Model Home. Drawing for the house was last night's date. It was sponsored by the VFW, Kent County Division.

Peg gasped. "The dolls were resting on the picture of the house. We won the house. Oh, Pete, the old couple was right! The dolls *will* make our fortune!"

I couldn't believe it. There was too much coincidence there. It *had* to be coincidence. As though in the light winds outside, I heard the shrill cackle of two laughing voices. No, I wouldn't believe it!

I rummaged through my billfold. The stub had to be there. Somewhere, some time back, I must have purchased at least one ticket for the drawing. I must have.

Finally I found it tucked in with my personal papers. One ticket for the drawing. I couldn't remember when and where I had bought it, but it wasn't important. I had it.

I laughed, the knot of tension suddenly released in my stomach.

Peg was watching me.

"Here's your sudden good fortune," I said. I showed her the ticket stub.

She was visibly relieved and I must say I couldn't blame her. Again she studied the two puppets. She danced the male one that resembled me by its strings. I watched her curiously, my blood suddenly rushing through my veins. My head was spinning. I was panting for breath.

"Stop it, Peg! Stop it!"

Peg seemed indignant at the tone of my voice. She was puzzled. I didn't know why, but when she laid the male doll down, I felt better.

Oh, brother, was I getting sour. I needed a vacation. My imagination was turning full blast.

**P**RESENTLY Peg smiled in her warm way that made everything seem right. I grinned back, chagrined. I felt like a nut.

"Shall we try our luck," I said. "Let's find out once and for all. Now, Hon, what would you like most?"

Peg caught on to the game. She sat down and deliberated, her index finger to her mouth which was pleasantly pursed. "Well, now. I really don't know. I could do with a new model husband— Or maybe a secret lover like Gregory Peck. I know—" she said suddenly, giggling. "I'd like two big spruce trees in the yard a hammock's distance apart."

"Are you kidding? Where would spruce trees fit in this city background?"

Peg shrugged. "That's the problems of the dolls." She peeked through the parlor windows. "Nope. No trees yet."

"Maybe we're supposed to place the dolls on a picture like the house we won," I said. I flipped the pages of her *Better Homes and Gardens*. "Ah, here's two spruces."

Peg found the scissors and like two happy children we sat on the floor and cut out the trees. We didn't want the rest of the forest in our rented back yard. We placed the spruces a few inches apart, estimating proportionally what would be the correct distance for one hammock.

Peg brought the dolls from the table by the bed and dangled them over the two trees. "Shall I whisper the magic words?"

We laughed and she gently placed the dolls over the spruce trees. Nothing happened. Peg pulled herself to her feet.

"Well; enough of this. Put the dolls away. They're too lovely for Shirley to play with." She went into her kitchen.

From my position on the parlor floor I thought I heard a gurgle. Then I heard coughing followed by a scream which brought me instantly to my feet. I ran into the kitchen.

"Peg! Darling, what's wrong?"

She was as white as the dish towel in her

hands. She was trembling so she could barely stand. "L—Look out the window!"

I parted the curtains and knew I was crazy. Rising out of the solid cement walk on the front lawn were two huge spruce trees.

Peg whimpered behind me. She held on to my arm for support. "Are they really there?"

"Yes," I said, swallowing. "Sprouted right up through the cement. Brother, will Vincent raise hell."

"He'll kick us out, that's what," Peg wailed. "He won't let us grow two spruce trees in his yard, and right in the path."

It was hardly appropriate at the time, but we both sat down and laughed like fools. Imagine the face of the landlord when he saw two giant spruce trees blocking the walk of his house.

But it was true; the Talkie Dolls would bring our fortune. When we calmed down, we tried it again, only this time we placed the dolls on a tempting roast turkey in the recipe section of the book. We found the turkey a few minutes later in the oven. It was still hot.

**W**E GOT a best seller the same way, a jar of cream guaranteed to develop the feminine bust, although why Peg wanted that stuff I'll never know. I got that Benrus watch with the expansion bracelet I always wanted.

We were having a wonderful time with the dolls. Our parlor and kitchen were littered with the stuff.

We didn't care where it came from; all we knew was that the Talkie Dolls brought it almost immediately. We could have anything! We could do anything. It was wonderful!

Finally we tired of the tricks of the dolls. Even having your every wish granted could get fatiguing, I know! We put the dolls carefully away and prepared supper. Poor Shirley was starved.

"Why prepare supper?" Peg said. "Let's order it up." She turned the pages of another of her household books until she came to a mouth-watering picture in color of baked chops casserole. I went after the dolls.

Shirley watched wide-eyed in fascina-



tion. Her mouth was open and her pink tongue showed between her lips.

"Is it a game, Daddy?" she asked.

"Yes. A wonderful, delicious game," Peg sang out. She waltzed the Talkie Dolls around the room on their strings. I felt dizzy. Somewhere I heard soft, piping voices laughing.

"Come on, Peg," I called to her. "Hurry up."

Peg fell on the floor beside me. "Whew! I'm sick." She ran her hand over her smooth, white forehead. It was beaded with perspiration. But it wasn't very hot out.

I laid the dolls over the colored picture of the baked pork chop casserole and a few minutes later our supper was waiting on the stove. It was funny about the dolls. We never saw the thing we wanted materialize. It just appeared during an eye blink. Sometimes we were informed that we had such an item over the phone like the model home. Once we received a telegram confirming one week's vacation at an expensive resort—all expenses paid. It was an advertising gift from the management.

Again I wondered where the dolls got their gifts. If they stole them then Peg and I could be accused of theft. They certainly couldn't manufacture them out of nothing. Nothing equalled nothing, and we had real, substantial items filling our parlor and kitchen.

"Let me do it," Shirley begged.

Peg, suddenly aroused from silence, seized the dolls from my hands. "No! Don't you ever touch them, young lady. If you do you'll get a good lacing!"

I was surprised by her behavior. She wasn't like that. She noticed my stare and blushed.

"I—It's not what you think," she said, her voice husky in her throat. "I—I'm scared. Honest, Pete. This isn't natural. I was thinking: What—would—happen—if—the dolls were—rested on fire, or placed in the path of a speeding car? What would happen to us if someone accidentally placed them on a picture—of the ocean?"

I felt my breath involuntarily draw in to fill my lungs. I exhaled in a painful cough. "I hadn't thought of that," I said.

If the dolls were placed on a picture of

the ocean, they would bring the boiling ocean down upon us. We'd drown! I shuddered. The ways of possible instant death were terrifying.

"I—I guess maybe I better return them," I said. "Tomorrow. First we'll get all the things we always wanted."

"No, Pete," Peg said, her lower lip quivering. "I'm afraid. Something awful will happen. People don't get things free. They've got to pay. Somehow they've got to pay."

"Peg, No." I didn't like that kind of talk. "The dolls were given in good faith," I said. "They were a gift. I'll return them tomorrow, honest."

"I'm afraid," Peg said in a whisper. She hugged herself. "I'm cold. It isn't right, Pete. Please return them."

I moved over to comfort Peg. She was sobbing now and her beautiful face was very white. As I eased my hand about her trembling shoulders, I suddenly winced in pain. Peg, under my hand, stiffened and screamed.

"My leg! Pete, my leg! Stop it. Make it stop!"

My eyes were blurred by my own tears, but I saw Shirley. She had the dolls by their strings, jumping them up and down and swinging them around. I cried out in panic.

"Stop it, Shirley. For God's sake, stop it!"

Shirley looked at me. Her gentle eyes filled with tears which rolled down her cheeks. "I was only dancin' them, Daddy," she said.

She dropped the Talkie Dolls to the floor and ran to her mother who was still moaning. "I didn't mean nothin', Mommie."

Even though Peg was in great pain, she forced herself to smile and comfort the child. She rubbed her bruised and swollen leg. Her nylon stockings were ripped and blood smeared at the knee. "Please take the dolls back," she begged. "Please, Pete. They're evil! Return them to their owners."

**S**HE was right; that was the only sensible thing I could do. The evil in the dolls destroyed the good. As soon as I was sure Peg's leg was properly treated and Shirley was safely in bed, I gently eased the two

puppets on the front seat of my car and left for the rot and filth of Crocus Swamp.

The day's full sun was round and red in the west. Blue-gray shadows crawled across the highway as I drove. I thought of the day's events: Could such weird occurrences really have happened? I glanced at my new Benrus watch on my wrist. It sparkled in the dim light of the dash and the hands told the correct time. This was real; I saw it; I felt its warmth against my skin. It was ticking.

I TURNED off the main road into the back route to Crocus Swamp. The foul air of the place filled my nostrils, making me sneeze repeatedly. The fork in the road was a short distance in. I drove on.

In the gray of dusk I saw the clearing ahead just as I had remembered it. The two huge pines were at the top of the hill. I strained to see ahead in the dim light, but there was no cabin!

No cabin? There had to be a cabin! I jammed on the brakes and pulled up the emergency. I ran from the car. The full moon leered like a face above. I called out and stumbled through the clutching grasses up the hill. Where was the overgrown flagstone walk?

It was gone. Everything was gone. I stood between the two humming pines and gazed forlornly at the blood purple sky. "No. No," I cried. "This is wrong. This is all wrong!"

"What ya' looking for, stranger?"

I spun around. He was a farmer, an old, bent scarecrow of a man in faded blue denim with a fishpole over his shoulder.

"I saw ya' runnin' around. Ya' lose somethin'?"

"W—Where's the old cabin that was here?" I asked him.

"Old cabin?" The farmer scratched his head. He shifted his fishing pole over to his other shoulder. "There ain't ever been a cabin here, mister."

He was lying. Of course there was a

cabin! "It was covered with old wisteria roots," I said. "It had double doors. Two old people lived in it. I saw it just last night."

The farmer smiled, embarrassed. "Well, I been livin' in Crocus Swamp over fifty years an' I ain't never seen a cabin. Not in this place anyways. Nobody ever built here. Can't. It's for the little folk."

"T—the little folk?" I said.

"Now, I ain't never seen them. Grampa said when he tried to build here his house kept cavin' in. Finally had to move back a piece. Some folks 'round here say they seen the little folk on dark, lonely nights. I ain't. They say the little folks are full of fun. Always playin' jokes on strangers. That's who you must of seen.

"Well, hope ya' find ya' cabin, but I doubt it." The old farmer hefted his pole higher on his shoulder and walked into the shadows and was gone.

Crazy old man. I turned and ran down the hill. The grass ripped at my skin, tiny razors drawing blood. I tripped and rolled and cried out and swallowed bugs and mosquitoes. I beat the moist earth with my fists.

He was just making that up. Crazy old fool. Of course he was. Little folk, always playing jokes. "No!" I screamed bitterly into the night. "No! No!"

But I knew it *was* so. And it was a wonderful joke they played on Peg and me. But why us? Why? A wonderful joke. Oh, a superb joke!

I have the Talkie Dolls and I can't get rid of them. I can't hide them. I can't destroy them or they'll destroy us. What can I tell Peg? What can I do? I have the dolls! I have the Talkie Dolls!

From out of the twin pines swaying atop the hill I heard a voice laughing. I looked up and saw no one. A second, ancient, brittle voice joined it. And the night winds rose and carried the two piping, demonic voices of the little ones out over the coiling mists and rot of Crocus Swamp.