

## THE HIGH-TENSION MAGAZINE

INSPIRED BY THE CBS RADIO AND TELEVISION PROGRAM SERIES SUSPENSE

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**Publisher: TOM FARRELL**

**Managing Editor: R. B. WILLIAMS**

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SUSPENSE Magazine is published quarterly by the Farrell Publishing Corporation at 260 East 32nd St. Chicago, Ill. Editorial and general offices at 420 Lexington Ave., New York 17, N. Y. Tom Farrell, president; Paul Thurlow, treasurer; Edwin J. Harrigan, secretary. Entry as second class matter applied for at also post office at Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office and in Canadian Trade Marks Office. Fall, 1951, edition. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Subscriptions \$1.00 a year, in the United States and its possessions and Canada. Not responsible for unsolicited material. Copyright 1951 by Farrell Publishing Corporation. Printed in U. S. A., Vol. 1, No. 3, Fall, 1951.

Only one thing to do with

a hungry husband. Feed

him. But to what?

## the THING

*"I was born hungry on a lean farm where from February to April the only food was salt pork and shriveled potatoes," writes Wright, from the more lush Pennsylvania acres where he now raises squabs, goats, apples, ornamental evergreens and occasional stories. His early experiences with undernourishment probably explain the delicate, knowing touch with which he treats of it in this masterpiece of brittle horror. Talk about blood-chilling!*

GRANDMA COTTEN was on her way to the springhouse to thaw out old Amos. All week long she had felt winter was over, ever since the later afternoon light had held more blue than purple in it. She was now certain, having seen fuzz on the buds of the pussywillows.

She had started at dawn, first setting the washboiler bubbling on the kitchen stove, then building a fire outside under the soap kettle, so there would be plenty of hot water to soak the frost out of him. She had made sure there was food left too, enough cornmeal and bacon to see them through to the June peas and the milk Betsy would give starting April when she calved.

Now Grandma felt quivery, anxious to see him, the elated way she had felt in those first years when he would come back whistling from his ship. To stop the trembling she pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, stepping over the places where the sun had melted through the snow, the brown spots that marked the months since that morning when she had put him away in the springhouse.

It hadn't been as lonely as she had expected, living back there in that one room of the squat farmhouse, parcelling out to herself the mouthfuls of mush and tea, the way in the early days every Vermont woman had to do, watching the scissors of

WALDO CARLTON WRIGHT

## *on the snow*

the hills clip the days shorter and shorter as the northeasterners came, creaking the pins of the old house.

Even when she lay awake in the darkness and ran her hand over the cold sheets where old Amos had lain so long beside her, she never doubted that he was merely asleep. All through those months nothing had broken her belief that this had been the way to keep him alive. That is, nothing but the one exception, the beast looking more than anything else like a hank of black wool dragged along the ground.

**T**HEIR trouble had started with her breaking her glasses last spring, the night before the late frost that nipped the apple blossoms and wilted the tobacco seedlings she and Amos had set out in the back field.

Resetting with plants from Montpelier had thrown them late getting in the potatoes. And when the tobacco was knee high, ready to strip, the hail did that for them, shredding the leaves into worthless ribbons, not

enough to make it worth while putting into the curing shed.

Then right after the hail the potatoes blighted and within three days the vines were twisted and brown. When Grandma dug them with the tined-fork, there was only a bushel, no bigger than walnuts.

Hallowe'en, Betsy dried up, a month ahead of time, cutting off their butter and milk for cooking. But somehow Amos didn't seem upset by any of this bad luck. He just went on reading his Bible at night and spending more and more time sitting staring into the fire.

He ate more too. It wasn't as if Grandma's father hadn't warned her about these New Hampshiremen, long before she married Amos.

"Men down that way are mostly seafarin' stock," he had said. "Appetites like draft horses. You'll never be able to right fill him up."

Not that Amos hadn't turned out to be a good provider, once he had given up the sea, that is, and set his hand to farming their upland. He

could pitch two loads of hay to any Vermonter, having the chest and arm muscles of a seafaring man. But now he was seventy-eight, come spring, spending most of the daylight dozing by the fire. Not that it was so bad having him underfoot as his tarnation appetite, like her father had warned her.

It was Thanksgiving morning while she was laying the strips of bacon over the top of the pot of beans that she got the idea. Something about covering the beans made her recollect a tale her grandfather used to tell her. It had happened a hundred years ago in the next county, when this whole part of Vermont still belonged to New Hampshire and the Indians used to sweep down every fall, burning the barns and driving off the cattle.

Her grandfather had been just a young shaver one year the food ran low, but he could remember what they had done with the old folks—how they had built pine boxes and carted them out to the ledge.

She glanced over at Amos, feeling guilty at her thought. He was yawning, bending over to draw on his felt boots. It would keep him from suffering, she told herself, for he so loved to eat. Now it was dropping below zero at night, it wasn't a mite too soon. She would start it, tonight.

When he closed the door on his way to the barn to throw a bundle of fodder into Betsy's rack, Grandma knew there was no time to lose. She would need something to make him sleepy. The hard cider half frozen in the entry would mix well with

the beans. She spooned out a place in the pot and poured in a cupful.

By the time he was back, smelling of the stall, she had his last meal on the table, his plate piled high with beans, a spiced pearmain right on the rim and a mould of upturned red jelly at his elbow.

She dallied with her fork, watching him while he scooped up the beans, gulping them and smacking his lips.

"Martha, you're still the best cook in Vermont," he said, pushing back his plate and walking over to the mantel for his pipe. She watched him cram the bowl with dried leaf from a last year's hank she had brought down the day before from the loft.

Somehow that evening it seemed fitting he should read to her from the Book. When she had drawn her cane chair up to the fire and placed her knitting basket on her knee, she nodded when he looked at her, the way he always did, to see if she wanted him to read aloud.

He picked up the Book from the table by the window, where she kept her geraniums; and settling into the rocker, he carefully opened it at the red ribbon.

"Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat or what ye shall drink, nor yet for your body; what ye shall put on."

The words seemed to fit into what she had decided. He closed the Book, leaned back and stared into the fire. She stopped knitting, watching him. The words made it right and proper, the only way out.

Now the wind that had been making the pins of the old house creak died away and the old house seemed to be holding its breath, listening with her for the first sound that would show he was asleep, the first fluttering like the open stop on an old melodeon.

At the sound she knew she must hurry. She lit the lantern and set it on the window sill where it would shine on the porch and into the yard. She dropped to her knees and carefully pulled off his felt boots. Then she kicked off her house slippers and slid her feet into the boots. They smelled of the stall, hot and moist like manure. Then she rolled down his socks and unbuttoned his faded blue shirt.

Have to let the zero air get to him fast, she remembered, the way her grandfather had explained the pioneers did it to their old folks. The cold had to freeze them in a jiffy, turning them solid, like fish giggered through the ice.

Amos was still snoring, bolt upright in the rocker, his head back on the antimacassar, his mouth open, his breath fluttering his lips, making the ends of his gray mustache wave like feelers. She reached over, pulled the Book free of his hands and laid it back on the table. She slipped on her mittens, wrapped the shawl around her shoulders and tied a fascinator under her chin. She was ready.

Grasping the back of the rocker, she slid it over the bare planks, like a sled. At the door she wriggled the rungs over the sill to the porch and

so into the yard. The rocker sank into the snow and she had to pull hard to drag it across the yard, half-way to the springhouse where she knew the wind would strike hard and fast. It was already tugging at her fascinator, wriggling under her shawl, flapping at her woolen skirt.

"Rest here, Amos," she tried to say. But her teeth were chattering, the front of her legs burning from the cold. For a second she looked at him, sitting there in the light of the lantern, the seafaring man she had married, now more like a scarecrow left in a winter cornfield. Quickly, to bid him goodbye she stooped over and kissed him on the cheek.

Then turning she shuffled into the house, with the devils of the cold whistling after her. Indoors she swung the wooden bar in place over the door, blew out the lantern and throwing aside her wraps, put another chunk of wood on the fire.

As the eager flames leapt up, she huddled in her chair, shivering, not daring to look toward the window, listening to the flames crackle over the gray wood. Too much of the cold had gotten into her bones, the way it was crawling into Amos, draining the warmth from his bare feet, sliding an icy hand under his blue shirt, circling his heart, the relentless way the flame was turning the log into white crumbling ash. But I'll waken him in the spring, she thought.

Next morning a spot of sunshine stroked her hand, woke her up by its warmth, the way Amos used to stoop over and touch her arm. She

had fallen asleep in her chair, huddled over like a sack of grain all night. She twisted her neck to free it of needles, looking across the room at the table, half expecting to see him sitting there, watching her, smiling with his water-blue eyes. But the place where his chair sat was empty. The fire had gone out in the wood stove, the fireplace was black and the room was stark cold.

She hurried to the window. The jagged limbs of the pines sagged with their burden of white, the roof of the shed and springhouse were padded a foot high with cotton, and the sun shone on a hummock of white in the center of the yard.

She forced her swollen feet into the damp cold boots. She must hurry. Now the sun was up there wasn't a minute to lose.

She grabbed a willow broom from the porch and brushed wildly at the mound of snow, sending it billowing, leaving Amos sitting there upright and almost indignant at the way she had left him. But not the same way.

For his mustache was rigid with frost, his eyes were closed as if he had slept through the night, and except for his gray hair and mustache he looked like the young man she had married, the young seafaring New Hampshireman. The brown splotches on the backs of his hands were white. She pulled off her mittens to touch his cheek, now free of wrinkles. It felt cold and smooth as ice and she drew back, fearing her hand might stick to it, the way fingers will stick to a steel blade.

Inside, I must get him inside at

once, she thought. The sun was shining full in his face but he didn't move or open his eyes. She grabbed the uprights of the chair and slid it through the snow toward the springhouse.

She grabbed the latch of the springhouse door but it didn't budge. The bottom was locked in the ice. She ran to the woodshed, grabbed the hatchet from the nail and hacked at the frozen sill, pulling at the door until she forced it open.

She backed down the steps, pulling at the chair. It had stuck in the drift, but it suddenly gave way and half slid, half fell toward her. She tried to hold it back but the weight of the body pushed her aside, the chair tilted and Amos fell with a thud on the dirt floor of the springhouse beside the trough where she set crocks of milk.

At first, when she had caught her breath, she expected him to sit up and scold her for being so careless. But he didn't protest or even open his eyes. He just lay there half coiled up, like a sleeping groundhog, taking no thought for the morrow, what he should eat or what he should put on.

She pulled the chair to one side and grabbing a burlap sack from a hook, laid it over his head and shoulders, like a quilt. She looked around for another sack to cover his blue feet and vein-lined ankles sticking out below the overalls. But there wasn't anything else. At that she hurried out, slamming the door and driving the hatchet into the sill to make certain the door remained closed until spring.

In the months that followed in the old house she had never doubted that she could wake him up, except on nights when the wind beat sleet against the panes and the timbers of the old house creaked. But by morning her faith returned with the light and she felt he was safe. What mystified her was this something she could never identify, the hank of black wool dragged along the snow by a rope.

At first she blamed the whiteness of the snow and what it did every winter to her eyes. She knew she should have gone into Somerset last year to have her lenses replaced. But when without really looking up she caught flashes of black out of the corner of her eyes while she mixed the cornmeal or stirred the buckwheat batter at evening, she accepted it as something that was sharing her loneliness and she named the black object the beast, knowing that was what Amos would have called it, had he been there with her.

When she waited at the window, evenings, while the shadows from the pines turned the snow deep purple, it never seemed to come. And then just when she had forgotten about it, there it would be, slipping out of the woods, along the hummock this side of the pines, dipping out of sight where the meadow fell away toward the creek.

If she stood fascinated, waiting until it disappeared, that would be the last glimpse that evening. But if she turned away, she saw something make a quick dash along the edge of the shed, as if somehow it sought

shelter with her for the night.

She always fed Betsy while it was still light, not wanting to meet up with the beast, face to face, have it come dashing around the edge of the barn, running through her legs, upsetting her in the snow.

By January she had come to feel it was her own doubt, slipping into her mind to plague her, being there and yet not a part of her life, as if it were glimpses of Amos, shoveling a path, carrying in wood from the shed, or dragging hay from the rick for Betsy. Then the dusk was too deep to make out his figure but only to show something shapeless moving out there, the way the Thing moved when she wasn't expecting it.

But now the day for the reawakening had come. Now that she had the water boiling in the washboiler in the kitchen and outdoors in the soap kettle, now that the sun was shining full on the springhouse ahead of her and water dripping from icicles over the door, the months that had passed seemed part of a dream hidden under the surface of her mind. That at last she should be about to see Amos again, talk to him, was like holding a letter unopened in the pocket of her apron the way she used to do while he was still at sea.

It was joy held back, but contained inside, surely there, the way he was safe asleep inside the springhouse.

She smiled, thinking of watching his cheeks turn pink, seeing the first flicker of movement come into his face, then watching his eyes open and seeing her, watching his happiness unfold with hers.

Now that she was near the door, her throat ached in eagerness to say his name and when she stooped over to pull the hatchet from the sill, her hand was trembling so that she had to try twice before the hatchet budged.

When the hatchet came away, the door swung open and she hurried inside. It was dark but she could hear the water gurgling in the basin where she kept the crocks of milk. She smelt the mustiness of the old beams and then looking down, the back of her neck suddenly felt numb and his name froze on her lips. For on the floor where Amos had fallen, where she had covered him with the burlap sack, there lay a bundle of rags.

Her eyes raced over the dark room, seeking him, feeling he must be playing a joke on her, hiding. He had to be here. Her eyes came back to the pile of rags, fumbling over a sleeve of the faded shirt and a leg of the torn overalls.

With a bang the door swung shut and the latch clicked. And in the sudden darkness, Grandma felt her fingers closing tighter around the handle of the hatchet, for mixed with the mustiness of the beams was a new odor that stung her nostrils, the odor of something wild and bitter.

Then along the wall, beyond the bundle of rags, she saw an oval of light, under the stones, where a hole had been dug. And in the hole, she made out an animal, lying there watching her.

Its lower lids hung flabby from the red eyes, the way Amos's eyes had looked that last evening while he was

staring into the fire. Its jaws sagged away from yellow teeth and its black body was stretched out, crouching in the hole, ready to spring.

It was the beast. It was the animal that had cheated her. It had stolen Amos while she had thought he was safe inside the stone house. This was the beast that plagued her dreams. On the very day when she had planned to thaw out Amos, it had turned her hopes into a nightmare.

Now she could see that its tongue was blood red and that its long claws were flexing, eager to leap at her throat.

Deep inside her, fierce anger welled and surged, holding back her sobs, stopped her trembling. She tightened her grip on the hatchet. She had shared her winter with this beast, letting it go its way undisturbed and it had used her need for companionship to rob her.

Grandma struck out, furiously, wildly, lunging at its head, half expecting it to fling itself at her.

But even as she struck, she saw it close its eyes and turn its head, the way Amos had coiled on his side on the floor that morning. The blade cut in dully, the way an ax sinks into a frozen pumpkin, not cutting as much as breaking it apart.

The beast didn't shriek or flail about, but gave a long sigh, like air escaping from a dry pump, as though it were quite dead before she struck it. Only then did she realize that from then on she would be quite alone and the sobs she had been holding back rose above the gurgling of the water in the basin.