

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XII

NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office 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. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. 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.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 460 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Three-Storyed House

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE three men paused for a moment in the glare of the street lamp. Two of them slowly and deliberately lit cigarettes; the third stared back along the street with a curiously defiant expression on his face.

"Oh, come, Johnson! If it's that three-storyed house that's bothering you, we'll go back and investigate it."

The man called Johnson shrugged his shoulders and turned. The three men walked silently on for a distance somewhat over a city block.

"Why is it, Johnson, that you can't ever pass a three-storyed house without a shudder of repugnance? It gets on a fellow's nerves after a bit; I'm getting so that I watch for every three-storyed house that I pass."

"If I've told you once, I've told you a dozen times, that the story's too utterly like a fairy-tale to repeat in public. It's humiliating to have you observe me like this, but it can't possibly be helped; it's in me, that's all. Can't you let it go at that?"

"I can't, Johnson. I'm ready to believe anything if it will explain your peculiar aversion to three-storyed houses. Come with me to my home——"

"If I told it at all it would be when walking; I could never sit still, I know."

"Anything, Johnson; but tell it."

A faint stillness had settled over the city. For about ten minutes no one said a word; four blocks had been traversed. Johnson began to speak in a subdued voice.

"When I first came to this city, seven years ago, I roomed and boarded in a three-storyed house out on the West Side. It was a queer old ramshackle building, and I remember that when I first saw it I did not consider that it might be inhabited. It was owned and controlled by an old lady, who dressed always in black silk, and wore an odd little frill cap on her white hair. It was the woman, not the house, that drew me. She had a curiously irresistible appeal; when you're alone in a strange city you notice such things.

"I roomed on the third floor. I tried to get a room on the second, but it appeared the second floor was leased for a lifetime, and more. I didn't say anything to the landlady about the second floor for a long time after; not until I was forced to speak about it.

"Both of you have roomed in houses like that at some time in your lives, I'll wager. And both of you know the natural curiosity that afflicts you—a curiosity to see what your fellow tenants are like. I met the tenants of the house one by one, but never once did the old lady offer to introduce me to the tenants of the second floor. This singular slip on her part annoyed me, but I had some satisfaction in knowing that no one else in the house had met the mysterious tenants.

"Life went on in the rooming-house as life goes on in all rooming-houses. I made friends with neighbors—very open people, who were

decidedly not in sympathy with back-fence gossip. They asked me one after another what I thought of my landlady, how I liked the house, and stereotyped questions in the same vein. But a young lady puzzled me one day. I had been standing with her before her home for all of half an hour, when suddenly she asked what I thought of the noisy tenants of my landlady's second floor. I admitted that they were noisy, and was forced to confess that I had not as yet met them. She smiled, and looked over at the second floor. I followed her gaze. Even from there the curtains on the windows looked curiously old.

"That question was asked me more than once after that, and I began to wonder what instigated it. And I began to redouble my efforts to catch sight of the tenants of the second floor. But to no avail; I neither saw them nor heard them leave their rooms. Neither of them ever appeared at table; there were at least two of them, as I could tell from the noise I had heard.

"I began to speak to my fellow roomers about the people on the second floor. They were as mystified as I, though not one of them allowed himself to be bothered by tenants they had not yet met. One of them suggested that perhaps they were acrobats, judging by the noise they made; another supposed that they were eccentrics of one type or another; yet another suggested that there might be no one in the rooms at all—maybe someone had committed suicide there, or a murder had been done there, or something to keep the landlady from renting the room. This last was, of course, a humorous remark, for all of us had been annoyed by the constant noise of the people below us.

"One night I woke from a sound sleep. A curious scratching sound, followed by a soft moaning, came to my ears. It seemed to come from the room immediately below mine. For

a while I listened; then abruptly I thought of the humorous suggestion made by the tenant some while ago, a suggestion that had been given a queer basis by the girl of my acquaintance across the street, the same girl who had drawn my attention to the noise of the tenants of the floor below. The scratching sound increased in intensity; suddenly it developed into a steady pounding. The moaning stopped at once: for a while everything was quiet. Then a shrill scream came from the room below, and again, silence. My neighbor in the next room got up and pounded on the floor to quiet them; I imitated his example. The scratching sound was resumed again after a half-hour, and the entire program was repeated. More than one of us on the third floor were robbed of sleep that night.

"The same thing happened on successive nights. More pranks developed, to the great annoyance of all the tenants. Complaints to the landlady did absolutely no good: she could do nothing, for they were life tenants. 'You have grounds for putting them out,' said I. 'It would be impossible to put them out,' she answered. 'They have been here so long.'

"At last one night the noise was too intolerable for expression. Sitting up in bed I began to wonder whether or not my key would fit into the lock of the room below me, from which most of the noise came. Pounding on the floor had brought no response, save possibly in increase of the outrageous disturbances. I began seriously to contemplate entering in on the tenants below and upbraiding them as they deserved. The scratching sound had been coupled with a violent pounding; the noise of sobbing was mingled with moans. There was a noise as of scuffling, as if a chair or two had been overturned.

"It was too much. I got up and slipped on my dressing-gown. I got

my key from my coat pocket and without hesitation went downstairs to their door. I pounded on the door and in a loud voice demanded instant silence. But the noise continued.

“There are some things, boys, that one never forgets; for instance, if your ordinary routine is changed, is interrupted, by something so far from your sphere in life, that your comprehension can not embrace it. From

that night on I could never tolerate three-storied houses.

“I put my key into the lock. I threw open the door. There was an abrupt cessation of all noise. But what I saw petrified me; I could not move.

“There was nothing—absolutely nothing—in that room! The light of a street lamp shone on countless layers of undisturbed dust!”