

# Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XIV

NUMBER 6

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.

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# THE TICKING OF THE CLOCK

By A. & H. GREATRAIKES

IF JOHNSON'S mind had been at all imaginative or attuned to anything higher than brutal common sense, he would not have sat with his back to the open French window that night.

Johnson was a man with a good conceit of himself. He prided himself especially on his domestic accomplishments. He was a born cook and manager, he told his friends, and his hobby was to go down to a little bungalow of his in the country and "do" for himself, during the week-ends. Usually he had friends with him to whom he could show off his culinary art. But, sometimes, he liked to be alone.

He was a self-made man, was Johnson. His business, that of running up small flats and letting them to artisans (rent strictly in advance), brought him in a generous income, and it was his nature to boast of his smart modes of ejection if an unhappy tenant was not ready with his weekly payments.

This Saturday night he happened to be alone. His son, Tony, had said he might possibly turn up, but had not done so. Johnson had just finished a choice little meal, had cleared the table and settled himself in front of it, meaning to go into some accounts before he went to bed. He was feeling sleepy and particularly comfortable and too lazy to begin his work at once. He lighted his pipe

and sat contentedly fingering a fat pocketbook on the table before him.

The twilight was coming on apace, and Johnson was just making up his mind to light a lamp when he heard a slight noise behind him.

"That you, Tony?" he asked, slowly turning his head.

The next moment he felt something thick and dark thrown over his head and face, while a sickening, deadly essence permeated his every sense. He struggled madly and tried to rise; fell back and collapsed insensible into the wooden armchair.

When he regained consciousness, he was gagged and bound—strapped into his seat in a way it was impossible to ease. Before him, facing the full moon, the light from which streamed in at the window, stood a man.

Who was he?

Johnson thought he recognized the face, half covered as it was by cap and muffler. But when the other, with an impatient movement, flung aside these wrappings, he knew him at once. It was young Merril, the cinema musician, whom he had ejected from one of his flats in his own inimitable way.

But how changed he was! The open face was haggard now and cynical. His deep-set eyes looked derisive, his lips twitched and the trembling hands were clenched.

"Do you remember me, my

friend?" he began. "You can not answer, of course, but I see you do. And do you remember the night you turned us out, my sick wife and me—out into the frost and snow without a penny? You had forgotten it, perhaps, but did you think I would forget? Perhaps you did. You have done so many brutal deeds. But you were mistaken this once, my friend—mistaken—this—once!"

The pupils of Johnson's eyes had expanded, as he tried with all his strength to pull back from the face of the speaker as it approached nearer and nearer to his with the emphasis of the last words. For there was mania written on the pallid countenance and the lurid glare of the wild eyes was shown up vividly by the moonlight.

"That night's exposure killed my wife," Merrill went on hoarsely, standing up again. "She, my only friend, died as much by your hand as if you had actually shot her. Her delicate frame could not stand the roughing we had to go through. After three weeks of delirium, she died. It is for that—for that—that I have come to balance accounts."

Johnson's heart pounded in his chest. His eyes, the only means of expression left him, pleaded with his captor.

"Oh, I like the fear in your eyes, friend. They look so beseeching—like a rabbit, caught in a ferreting net. Yes, I could stand and watch them for hours! For I remember, you know, how my wife pleaded with you. And what you said, too—every word of it!—is branded on my very soul. . . . But the time is short and I must get about my business. I have come to make a little entertainment for you."

He turned toward the table.

"See! I am moving your things. Don't be alarmed. I shall not touch your money—your one god—but, if I did, it would not matter. You will

have no need for it again, my friend. For I have brought you a present—something far more interesting than money—quite a pretty little thing and such a simple device. . . .

"Look! I have made the table clear and now I sweep aside the cloth that I may arrange my little toy for you to see. It is a clock, you notice. Just a small American thing. With the hour hand, I am connecting this little piece of wire. You can not make it out? But you will when I explain. This wooden box, to which the wire is joined at the other end, contains a little apparatus worked by electricity, and this other wire, emerging from the side of it, is connected with that stop on the clock, just under the twelve.

"Now do you understand? Ah, I see, by your eyes, that you guess! When the short hand reaches the twelve, the circuit will be connected by the stop. The electric apparatus will be set in motion. The box, my friend, also contains a powerful explosive! . . . Yes, after 12 tonight, you will need no more money, for I have come to show you the same mercy that you showed my wife."

The man in the chair gave such a wild leap that it actually made a faint sound on the floor. His limbs, tied at every joint, were immovable.

Merrill chuckled—the gibbering chuckle of a maniac.

"I love to see you writhe, friend," he continued in a gloating tone, "I love to think of the commotion in that craven heart of yours. But look! The waiting is the worst part, after all, and it is 9 o'clock now. Already 9 o'clock, and you only have to wait till midnight. What is a wait of three hours to my three weeks of agony? . . .

"There! Now I have finished. There is no need of a light that you may see the time. The face of the clock is luminous. . . . It is the only light you will have—that and the

moon—a mere glow-worm fire to show you when the end is near. No one will come. I have taken care of that. So you will have these three last hours to yourself. . . . Good-bye, my dear friend, and in your last moments, think of my wife!"

Johnson's eyes were blood-shot and tense with fear: but, with a derisive nod, the other man turned away. He heard the click of the French window as it was carefully shut. He heard the crunch of feet on the gravel getting fainter and fainter. Then—but for the clock—utter silence.

*Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.*

**T**EN o'clock. The hands seemed to race over the dial as Johnson, with straining eyes, watched them go round. But there were still two hours. Surely someone would come to release him before that accursed clock reached midnight! There were neighbors not half a mile away. If he could only move one joint, he felt he could loose himself. If he could only call, surely someone would hear him! Could he move the chair? He tensed his body and tried. It would not move this way or that. It had been firmly tied to the table legs. An inarticulate sob rose to his throat. He could not utter it through the thick mass that was in his mouth. . . .

The shadows gathered darkly in the corners of the room. They were intensified by the moonlight, which

lay in a silvery patch across the parquet floor. The tremulous nose of a mouse showed itself for an instant under the edge of the fender.

*Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.*

A quarter to 11.

The mouse, emboldened by the continued stillness, came forward stealthily into the open, ran half-way toward the chair; then, overcome by its own temerity, turned and fled under cover again.

There was a faint tapping at the window. The bound man's heart gave a sudden leap of hope. It was only the ivy leaves, stirred by a rising night-breeze, that fretted against the window-pane.

*Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick.*

Five minutes to 12.

The form in the chair seemed to have shrunk into that of an old man. The sweat poured from the grayed forehead and fell in heavy drops on the cheeks. The eyes bulged from their sockets.

The mouse, fearing nothing now, boldly crossed from fender to chair, running over the left boot of the bound man as it made for the feast of crumbs beneath the table.

*Tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick. . . .*

The glassy eyes of the dead man gazed with fixed horror at the dial before them.

The clock stopped.

But the silence was still profound—for the box on the table was empty.

