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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"I have been walking since then, aimlessly, trying to remember who and what I am."

# The Way Home

By PAUL FREDERICK STERN

*'An unusual weird story about a man who found himself walking down a city street at night, in the pouring rain, drenched to the skin, his memory gone, with blind terror seizing on every person he met*

**I**T IS still raining. Raining as though all the water of all the oceans had been sucked up into the heavens, and would all have to pour steadily down again before the rain stops.

It is not a stormy rain. There is no wind. Now and then distant lightning flares, but the flares are soft and no crack of thunder accompanies them. There is just the rain, pounding steadily down,

transilluminated now and then by the diffused sheets of lightning.

The rain is trying to tell me something as I sit here at two o'clock in the morning in this telegraph office. The way the drops sift against the broad plate-glass window, the way they trickle down the pane to converge near the bottom in many small rivers—they are trying to whisper something to me.

But I can't make out what it is.

I don't know what the message can be. In fact, I don't seem to know anything. About myself, I mean, and my place in the world.

All I know is that I, an unidentified human being, sit here scribbling on the backs of telegraph blanks in the black of early morning and try to learn something about myself.

Amnesia, I suppose. I've always rather doubted the statement that a man can completely lose his identity, due to illness, or accident, or overwork. But now I seem to be going through the same experience, and I am learning at first hand just how completely memory can leave a person.

As far as I can remember, I am only two hours old. And I wouldn't even know the time had I not chanced to see a clock in a barber-shop window at about the moment when I began to look around and observe—and remember.

Only two hours old, in actual consciousness!

It was raining two hours ago as it is now. I was on a country road, just passing a cluster of houses with a store and a barber shop among them. There was a sign at the side of the road. The sign said City Limits.

I don't know where I'd been, where I came from. Accident, illness, something, took my memory.

I'm inclined to think an accident is re-

sponsible, for I am bare-headed, and I was disheveled and dirty when I waked to memory.

Dirty? Good heavens! I was clogged with dirt, filthy with it! Not dirt, exactly, but earth. As though I'd been tossed from a wrecked car into a rain-soaked, newly plowed field.

Yet I don't remember driving or riding in any car. I remember nothing—save suddenly walking past the City Limits sign, bare-headed, with the rain gradually washing me clean.

I have been walking since then, aimlessly, trying to remember who and what I am.

The name, Justin Crowe, keeps swimming through my mind. I believe that is my name, though I am not sure. That, and my two hours in the rain, are all I know.

**T**HOSE two hours were rather nightmarish.

I kept walking because I thought that if I did my feet might automatically take me to wherever it is I live. But they didn't. At least, if they did, I was unable to recognize the address when I passed it.

During the walk I avoided as much as possible what few people I saw abroad in the rain so late at night. Without a hat in the steady downpour, with my clothes as soaked as if I'd fallen into the lake with them on, wandering aimlessly—I knew I'd attract a lot of attention.

But it seems to me I attracted more than I should have.

That policeman I passed shortly after getting into the city proper! I thought for a moment I was going to be arrested, there.

He saw me before I saw him, I guess. Anyhow, I looked up to see him standing

in the rays of a street light half a block ahead of me, watching me intently.

I started to cross the street. But that would have looked suspicious, of course. So, after a pause, I went on toward him.

How he stared at me! He kept his head lowered a little, with his eyes peering out from under the vizard of his slicker-protected uniform cap. When I kept my head down too, I could see him stoop a bit to try to look up more squarely at my face.

He didn't try to stop me, though I was sure I would feel his hand on my shoulder. But he looked at me till I was out of sight in the steady rain. I glanced back twice to see, and I know.

It was that way with the few others I passed in the rain-drenched darkness. Without exception they seemed very much excited by the sight of me. One woman screamed a little, and turned and ran from me. Two men, of the dozen or so I walked past, exclaimed something or other aloud, and hastily crossed the street.

I suppose they thought I was drunk. That would be the natural thought when you see a bare-headed man wandering with soaked garments in the pouring rain. But would a drunken man affect passers-by quite so much?

One other theory has occurred to me. I don't like it a bit. But I am forced to consider it because of the way my presence appears to disturb people. That is, that I am some notorious bandit.

Am I, in my real, conscious life, some widely photographed public enemy? Is my face known, and feared, by all in the city? That would account for the excitement the mere sight of me has aroused in most of the people I've encountered. But—if that is true, wouldn't the patrolman have arrested me?

Certainly it is impossible for a man to be in a more miserable position than I.

I am cold.

The rain is not a particularly cold rain, nor is it the pelting, penetrating kind. Still, with no protection from it, I am cold. My fingers feel like numb sticks as I write.

I am literally soaked.

My clothes stream water in a pool on the tiled floor of the telegraph office as I sit here with the rain making a temporary wall of water on the glass between me and the chilly dawn. Soon I'll be out in it again. . . .

I am shelterless.

I don't know where I live, and I can't seek lodgings for the night because I have no money with me. In fact, I have nothing with me. Not one thing is in my pocket! Isn't that odd? Ill or well, with mind conscious or a blank, a man of forty or so, as I judge myself to be, should have *something* in his pockets. But in mine there is not one thing. Not a handkerchief, not a knife, not a coin or a key or a pencil.

I could try to beg enough for a bed, I suppose. But I shrink from the thought after the way people have acted at the sight of me. If I approached a person for a quarter, bare-headed, drenched, at this hour of the morning, that person might knock me down or run.

No, there seems nothing to do but keep on trying to find out who and what I am and where I live. Perhaps it will come in a flash at any moment.

This writing, in fact, is being done in the hope that I can identify myself.

Outside in the storm I paused before the big window of this all-night telegraph office. The sight of the piled telegraph blanks, and the pencils on their little chains, and the chairs and desks for writing, gave me the idea.

There is nothing like writing for recapturing a lost idea. Sit down com-

posedly, scrawl on paper anything that comes into your mind—and eventually you may trace your lost idea from the scraps.

That was my notion. So I came in here and seated myself and started to scribble. . . .

But I must say I have learned nothing so far. I still know only that two hours ago I was passing the City Limits sign, disheveled, dirty, bare-headed, with empty pockets. I still have no idea of my identity save that I think my name is Justin Crowe. . . .

**I** BELIEVE I'm going to have to get out of here pretty soon.

Since I entered, the girl and the man in charge of the place have kept looking at me suspiciously. Now they are standing together behind the breast-high counter a few feet from the line of desks where I sit. They are whispering to each other and looking at me.

I have kept my head down as I write, because the way the people on the streets acted at sight of me has persisted in my mind. The two behind the counter are trying to see my face more clearly. But for a little while longer I can probably stay here, filling one telegraph blank after another with my scrawls, trying to locate myself.

Fishing for memory! Catching at straws!

One straw is the rain, drumming on the deserted sidewalk outside, trickling in dreary rivulets down the plate-glass. I've heard that, and seen that, somewhere before. It has been recently, and it was during a crucial time in my life.

The rain! Trying to tell me something! But *what?*

The two at the counter are going to put an end to this. The girl, a slight, rather pretty blond, has cleared her

throat nervously. The man, a dark-haired youngster with black cloth guards on his sleeves, is peering at me more intently.

I am keeping my head stubbornly close to the paper I write on, so that all they can see is the top of my head. But I can't sit this way all night. . . .

"Would you like to send a telegram?"

The girl has just asked me that. And I see the man's hand moving a little at the counter as though he were reaching for a gun.

"Would you like to send a telegram, sir?"

Well, I must either pretend business in here, or get out. And I can't pretend business because there is no money in my pockets. I'll simply tell my predicament and ask to stay in here till dawn and the end of the rain. . . .

I *am* a notorious criminal! An escaped killer, or a nationally known bandit, or something of the kind! It is no longer possible to doubt it.

I have just lifted my head to stare at the two and speak to them. And they acted even more bewilderingly than those I passed on the dark streets.

The girl has fainted. Fainted dead away! I heard her body thump on the floor behind the counter. And the man, with a thin, high scream, has fled. He ran toward the back of the place. I heard a rear door slam.

What in God's name am I? Public Enemy Number 1?

I could certainly loot this place, if I wished! They have turned it over to me utterly. If I am a notorious criminal, I should have a desire to loot it. But I haven't. . . .

However, a little money from their cash-drawer *would* come in handy. I could get a hotel room for the rest of the

night. Also, I will take more blanks and one of these pencils. I still have hopes that writing will ultimately turn the key of memory. . . .

The cash-drawer was locked. And I couldn't get it open. Shouldn't I have been able to break open a cash-drawer if I were a criminal?

Anyhow, I couldn't, and now I am out in the night again, sheltered from the rain in a store doorway. I am writing this against the glass panel of the door. I left the telegraph office hurriedly, afraid that the clerk would be back with the police at any moment.

I suppose arrest would be one solution of my immediate problem. In a jail I would at least have shelter for the night.

But if I am a sought-after criminal, I may get more than a night's shelter! I may get life imprisonment or the chair!

But this type of writing is doing nothing for me. It is not my intention to write of the present. I want to write of the past—what scraps I can remember—and try to place myself. However—I can't even remember scraps. What a hell I'm in!

That rain! Drumming down! Beating down! Striking in straight, windless lances, streaming over the glass of windows!

What is it trying to tell me? Where, recently, and under what significant circumstances, did I see rain streaming drearily over a window like that, and hear it drum in the hard streets? Did I have an automobile accident and skid in the rain, that it is so deeply impressed in my mind?

But I am forced to discard the accident theory entirely. As far as I can tell by feeling over myself with my miserable cold fingers, there isn't a bruise on me. I am quite thin, almost emaciated, but I am undeniably whole.

The rain . . . trying to tell me something. . . .

I AM going to have to move again. A watchman, with a raincoat glistening like burnished ebony, is coming along this row of stores trying each door in turn. He mustn't see me here, hatless, dripping. I'd be turned over to the police at once. Then—what? Relief from my homelessness for the night, and quick identification with the morning? Or a desperado's death in the chair?

If I only knew! But I can't even guess.

Another half-hour has passed. I seem to have been walking toward the outskirts of the city. (I wonder what city it is?) For the buildings now are lower, with more vacant lots between them. Behind me the rain-soaked sky is a faint bowl of light—the reflection of the many lights burning in a city even in the dawn hours. Before me is no light in the sky.

I have made no attempt to guide my steps. I have still let my feet alone, in the hope that they would follow some rut of habit buried from my conscious mind, and take me to where I belong. For the first time I have had a faint feeling that perhaps they were doing just that.

I have been walking a pretty straight path in the last half-hour—wandering in this easterly direction from the telegraph office with only a few digressions north or south. *Do* my legs know where they are taking me? Have I a home here in the suburbs? Will I recognize it if my feet, remembering more than my brain, take me to it?

During my walk I have passed no persons this time save two patrolmen. One of these stopped and stared after me as I tramped along in the drumming rain. The other came up as if to hail me, then let me go without a word after he'd got

within a few yards of me. Both acted oddly, but neither made any effort to arrest me. And wouldn't you think, if I were a wanted criminal, I would be taken to a cell at once?

It is very confusing. . . .

**I** AM in a restaurant now. Not an all-night one. The restaurant is dark and no one is in it but myself. I broke into it through the glass front door, risking arrest. I had to get in out of the maddeningly monotonous rain. I am so wet and cold and desperate.

Above all, I am cold. So cold!

I am writing on a table beside the front window now, on more of the purloined telegraph blanks, with a street lamp outside giving me a fair amount of light.

There is something of frenzy in my resolve to write till I force an unwilling clue to my identity out of my reluctant memory. I'm getting desperate now. I must unlock my mind—and do it soon. For a new factor has entered my maddening situation.

I'm getting sleepy. But it's not exactly sleepiness that recurrently locks my muscles and makes my eyes blank. It seems to be something deeper than mere drowsiness. It is almost as though I were drugged.

Whatever it is, I have an intuitive feeling that I won't be able to fight it off indefinitely. And I'm clutching to the hope that my scribbling will yet find a way out for me. Hence—I scribble, although every atom of me urges me to drop the worn pencil and give up the attempt.

Again, however, I note that I am futilely writing nothing but my present experiences. Not once has a word come through that lights up a bit of my past.

Just one contains some slight meaning that stirs my mind sluggishly.

Rain.

Rain, rain, rain. . . .

Thrumming in the streets like skeleton fingers on a mighty muted drum. Transilluminated by the infrequent, distant lightning. Crawling greasily down the window-glass. Softening the earth. . . .

*What is the rain trying to tell me?*

Who are you, Justin Crowe, Justin Crowe? . . .

I am so sleepy. And so cold. . . .

**I** HAVE been walking again. Walking through the drumming, somber rain.

I am far from the restaurant. Where? I don't know. But nearer still to the outskirts of the city. I am sitting on the running-board of a muddy touring-car in a small garage and repair shop, with a raw electric globe lighting the place—and a small, glassed-in office at one side.

A man sits at a scarred desk in the office, leaning back in a swivel chair with his feet up. He is asleep, with his mouth open. Evidently I saw that he was asleep and took the opportunity to get a few more minutes of shelter from the rain.

I say "evidently", for I have no recollection of coming into this small, unkempt-looking all-night place. My mind has been playing tricks again, this time in the present. I am beginning to forget, now, the things I have just done!

I remember feeling drowsy—almost drugged—back in the restaurant. I have a dim recollection of getting up from the table with my scribbled telegraph blanks tightly clutched in my stick-like fingers.

Then a blank, with only a few threads woven through it.

A few threads. Hazy pictures half held by memory. I heard a scream once, seeming to come from far away although I was sure it was from the lips of some-

one near at hand. I recall thinking several times that surely I was going in a remembered direction because my feet were carrying me ever more swiftly and surely. . . .

Where? Well, I still can't guess.

I also remember noting that the rain showed no signs of slackening. Its steady tattoo still sounds, in fact, as though never in the rest of time would it stop.

The rain. Crawling down the window-pane. Softening the earth. Softening the earth. . . .

Now where did that thought spring from? Why does the perfectly obvious and ordinary fact that a drenching rain softens earth seem to have such meaning for me? And what *is* the meaning?

The man in the little office has stirred in his chair. His mouth is no longer open. I think he is coming out of his doze.

No matter. Surely he will not deny me shelter. Surely he will let me spend the few remaining hours of night in here—let me lie in a corner while I give in to the terrific drowsiness that sweeps over me in waves.

I believe my legs have carried me back toward the same road out of the city by which I entered it. There is a house across the street that looks rather familiar. It is a bungalow, with a slate roof. Very familiar. . . .

Wait, now! Wait! Can it be . . . is it *my* house, by any chance? Is that why it seems familiar? . . .

No, I remember now. I passed it over three hours ago when I found myself entering the city limits with the dirt of some open field on my clothes. That is the only reason it strikes a faint note in my memory.

I came in by this street. I seem to be going out again by this street.

W. T.—5

The drowsiness. It is sweeping over me again. . . .

I am broad awake *now!*

**T**HE man in the office just woke up. He blinked at me through the glass of the office, took his feet down from the desk and started to get up. I could read his thought and his intention.

He thought I was a customer who had just driven in, and was coming to see what I wanted.

Then a most amazing expression came into his face. Sleep left it with a terrifying rapidity. His eyes went wide as he stared at me, and I saw his mouth open.

He shouted something, turned and ran.

But there was no way to run, behind him. There was nothing but the office wall. He bumped into it, turned, ran dazedly toward the door which opens just before me, then shouted again. He looked around for all the world like an animal mad with fear, running back and forth in insane little steps.

Then he picked up the chair, smashed through the big glass street window of the office, and leaped out.

Good God!

Am I an infamous murderer of little children? Have I been a Jack the Ripper, terrorizing this city, known to all in it? Have I a fiend's face, or a horribly disfiguring scar?

I must see myself! Among the other blankness that makes up that part of my brain which is called memory, there is a blank in the remembrance of what I look like. I may be some sort of horrible freak, normally hiding from public view, now wandering unaccustomedly abroad.

There should be a mirror in one of the cars parked in here, or over a washstand at the rear of the garage. I'll hunt one, if I can overcome this damned drowsiness which is again attacking me. . . .



**T**HE drowsiness, it appears, conquered me. Also the persistent affliction of my amnesia.

I am again in a far place, with no knowledge of how I got here. Again I have walked in my sleep—if the profound, drugged drowsiness into which I dropped can be called by the trivial name of sleep.

And again my legs automatically bore me away from the heart of the city.

I am in the doorway of the very barber shop in which I saw the clock hours ago—my first conscious memory. It was five minutes past midnight then. It is twenty minutes of four in the morning now.

It is still raining, raining, *raining!*

As on all other window-panes, the rain drops roll bleakly down the window of this barber shop. As on all other window-panes.

As on the window-pane of that place . . . that other place. . . .

*Where? And what happened to me there?*

I hardly dare even think it to myself, but it seems to me that memory is stirring at last. A faint stirring, as yet telling me nothing, but beginning to whisper, to hint.

Perhaps my dogged persistence in writing whatever I think, whenever I get the chance, is beginning to bear fruit. I shall continue it as long as my cold fingers can hold this pencil stub, and as long as my sheaf of blanks holds out. . . .

I am sure, now, that my body knows where it is supposed to go, even if my brain does not. Yes, my feet know the way home. I am sure that if I trust to them, as a sleepy rider trusts his horse to find the way in the night, I shall be all right.

I have a compelling impulse to keep on walking out into the rain, into the

blackness that comes before dawn—toward the open country.

That impulse fights with the increasingly frequent spells of drowsiness. Yet, *does* it fight with it? With my mind locked in blankness, I have come this far along a direction I instinctively feel is right. That would indicate that it does not matter whether I sleep or stay awake: I will still find my way home.

But I don't want to succumb to the drowsiness! Some dim alarm sounds in me when the drowsiness begins to descend. I feel that I *must not* give in to it! Why? I don't know. . . .

Once more I am writing only of present things. I don't want to do that. I want to write of the past. The past, and what happened to cause me to be wandering in the rain-beaten night, bare-headed, drenched, and numb with cold.

Rain, beating down. Trickling down a window-pane seen over white-enameled bars. . . .

*There!*

For an instant memory really cried out. But already the small voice is stilled. And the sleepiness descends. . . .

A quarter of four. Dawn will come soon, in spite of the black rain clouds blanketing the May sky. . . .

*Again!* Another stirring!

It is May! I know the month, at least! And my name—yes, it *must* be Justin Crowe!

Now three things have come to me. The month of the year, the conviction that my name is what I first thought it, and the tantalizing small remembrance of seeing, over white-enameled metal bars, a window-pane with rain trickling monotonously down it.

The imperious urge to walk on, farther from the city. . . . The overwhelming drowsiness. . . .

I can no longer resist. . . .

**I**T IS with wild excitement stirring under the thickening lethargy that chains me, that I write these words!

I am out of the city now. Far from the barber shop. The mud on my feet and legs shows that I have walked for some distance along an open road.

I am standing under a great tree, now, scrawling in the darkness, thinking on paper, with an occasional lightning flash to keep it from being entirely illegible. That is important. I must be able to read what I have written, in the morning, if my maddening amnesia still claims me.

But I am almost too stirred to write, for many faint glimmerings are coming back to me.

The rain-drenched window seen over the white-enameled bars! I am seeing more than that, now. I am seeing a man, near the bars, with a watch in his hand. A man—he is gray-haired, with a little goatee. . . .

I am stopped there, but it is the farthest I have yet gone. And in another direction I am progressing.

I know this great tree I'm standing under! I know this road!

The road goes to a summer colony called Gray's Lake. This big tree marks the half-way spot between Gray's Lake and the city. The lake is less than two miles ahead, down this straight road, past Rosehill Cemetery and an abandoned church. . . .

The name of the cemetery, the clear memory of the abandoned church—aren't these things sure proof that my memory is really returning?

I believe I know where I have been heading for. Gray's Lake. The summer colony there. I must have a cottage on the shore, toward which I have mechanically been traveling since leaving the telegraph office.

But I'm so drowsy! Can I get as far as the lake without dropping in my tracks? I must. Drenched and chilled as I am, the continued exposure might prove fatal.

Home! I'm on my way home now! I know it! I must reach there, and in the morning, with the aid of my scrawling and the familiar things around me, I'll be able to place myself and my station in life.

But this horrible sleepiness. \* \* \*

**T**HE rain is slackening at last. And its slow stopping, like its previous thrumming beat, is trying to tell me something.

The rain—stopping. Something happened that other time, with its stopping. I must do something now, with its cessation. Something. . . . What?

Drowsy. . . . Rain stopping. . . .

I am sluggishly awake again. Awake—and once more in a black sea of despair and confusion. For my feet, and the compelling drive I thought to be so true, have betrayed me.

I am no longer on the road leading to the lake. I am in a graveyard. Rosehill Cemetery, of course. There is no other along here.

It is so dark that I can barely see the headstones, save when the distant lightning flares. And my eyes are so heavy with the mysterious sleepiness that I see the few remaining blanks I am still stubbornly scribbling on as only vague square blotches. God knows if I'll ever be able to read the scrawl.

And God knows if the reading will do any good, after all. I am afraid at the moment that it won't. For I have been betrayed by the subconscious senses I counted on to hasten me home.

Why am I in here, instead of hurrying, a dazed sleepwalker, to the lake?

The drowsiness! I suppose that is the answer. I hope it is. I hope my legs automatically turned me in here, instead of following their former path, because my body has at last rebelled and simply will have the exhausted slumber so long denied it. I would rather believe that than believe my feet do not know the road after all. For if I don't live at the lake, God knows where I live, and I am lost again. . . .

Only for a few minutes at a time can I stay awake now.

I have been asleep again, and have moved a little farther. But I have not moved out of the cemetery. I am still in that. I am farther from the gate, that is all.

The headstone at my elbow is very white and new-looking. Or perhaps it is white marble, and the drenching rain has washed it to give it that fresh look. . . .

No, it is new. The earth in front of it has no grass on it. It is a new grave.

I must stop this recording of the *present*. The *past!* That is the goal.

The past. Rain crawling down a window. Rain stopping. Something that happened when the rain stopped, as it is stopping now. Something I must do now, as it ceases.

A window seen over white-enameled bars. A gray-haired man with a goatee, looking at a watch. Voices. . . .

*The past stirs. . . .*

Voices!

"How long will it be, doctor?"

*Some woman said that. Some woman dear to me!*

The lips of the gray-haired man move. ". . . matter of minutes. . . ."

The voices fade. But no matter. The past is stirring at last. If only my terrific drowsiness will recede for a moment.

New earth before this new headstone. New earth softened by the diminishing rain. Earth scattered and disrupted as though upheaved by a force from underneath. Odd. . . .

*But the voices break through again!*

I *must* record this for the morrow:

"The rain is stopping. It will be over in a few minutes."

The man speaks, snapping shut his watch. "So will his life."

Now what does that mean? Rain stopping . . . something happening with the stopping of the rain . . . something I must do now as the rain stops. . . .

My legs are impelling me toward the broken earth of the new grave. They have betrayed me. My whole struggle has been a failure. I am not going home after all.

I am so drowsy . . . so cold. . . .

THE above message, scrawled in pencil on sodden telegraph blanks, was found on the morning of May tenth by the watchman at Rosehill Cemetery. It was found beside a new headstone with the epitaph: Justin B. Crowe, born March fourth 1895, died May seventh 1935.

