

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

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*A New Story by Julian Kilman,
Master of Weird Fiction*

THE WELL

JEREMIAH HUBBARD toiled with a team of horses in a piece of ground some distance down the road from his dwelling. When it neared five o'clock in the autumn afternoon, he unwound the lines from his waist, unhooked the traces and started home with his horses.

He was a heavy man, a bit under middle age, with a dish-shaped face and narrow-set eyes. He walked with vigor. One of the horses lagged a trifle, and he struck it savagely with a short whip.

They came presently to the Eldridge dwelling, abandoned and tumbled down, on the opposite side of the road. The farm was being worked on shares by a man named Simpson, who lived five miles away and drove a "tin Lizzie." An ancient oak tree, the tremendous circumference of its trunk marred by signs of decay, reared splendid gnarled branches skyward.

These branches shaded a disused well—a well that had been the first one in Nicholas County, having been dug in the early fifties by the pioneering Eldridge family. It went forty feet straight down into the residual soil characteristic of the *locale*, but, owing to improved drainage, it had become dry. Nothing remained of the old pump-house, save the crumbling circle of stonework around the mouth, to give evidence of its one-time majesty.

A child of eight ran from the rear of the premises. Hubbard frowned and stopped his team.

"You better keep away from there," he growled, "or you'll fall into the well."

The girl glanced at him impishly.

"You an' Missus Hubbard don't speak to each other, do you?"

Hubbard's face went black. His whip sprang out and caught the girl about the legs. She yelped and ran.

An eighth of a mile farther along the road Hubbard turned in and drove his team to a big barn. He fed his stock. It was after six when he entered the house. This was a structure that, by comparison with the gigantic barn in the rear, seemed pigmy-like.

A sallow, flat-chested woman, with a wisp of hair twisted into a knot, took

from Hubbard the two pails of milk he carried. She set them in the kitchen. The two exchanged no words.

Hubbard strode to the washstand, his boots thumping the floor, and performed his ablutions. He rumbled his hair and beard, using much soap and water and blowing stertorously. In the dining-room a girl of twelve sat with a book. As her father came in she glanced at him timorously.

He gave no heed to her as he slumped down into a chair standing before a desk. The desk was littered with papers, among which were typewritten sheets of the sort referred to as "pleadings"; there was a title-search much be-thumbed and black along the edges, where the "set-outs" had been scanned with obvious care.

The man adjusted a pair of antiquated spectacles to his dish-face. To do this he was compelled to pull the ends of the bows tight back over the ears as his nose afforded practically no bridge to support the glasses.

Presently he spoke to the girl:

"Tell your mother to bring on the supper."

The girl hastened out, and shortly thereafter the mother appeared carrying dishes. Food was disposed about the table in silence. The farmer ate gustily and in ten minutes finished his meal. Then he addressed his daughter, keeping his eyes averted from his wife. "Tell your mother," he said, "that I'll want breakfast at five o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Where you goin', Pa?" asked the girl.

"I'm goin' to drive to the county seat to see Lawyer Simmons."

Hubbard's gaze followed the girl as she helped clear the table.

"Look-a here," he said. "You been a-talkin' to that Harper child?"

"No," returned the daughter, with a trace of spirit. "But I jest saw her father over by the fence."

"What was he a-doin' there?"

"I didn't stay. I was afeard he'd catch me watchin' him."

Hubbard glowered and reached for his hat.

"I'll find out," he snarled.

Walking rapidly, he crossed a field of wheat stubble, keeping his eyes fixed sharply ahead. It was dusk, but presently, at the northern extremity of his premises, he made out the figure of a man.

"Hey, Harper!" he shouted. "You let that fence be."

He ran forward swiftly.

The men were now separated by two wire-strand fences that paralleled each other only three feet apart. These fences, matching one another for a distance of about two hundred yards—each farmer claiming title to the fence on the side farthest from his own—represented the basis of the litigation over the boundary claim that had gone on between them for four years.

The odd spectacle of the twin fences had come to be one of the show places in the county. It had been photographed and shown in agricultural journals.

"I don't trust ye, Harper," announced Hubbard, breathing hard. "You got the inside track with Judge Bissell, an' the two of you are a-schemin' to beat me."

A laugh broke from the other.

"I'll beat you, all right," he said coolly. "But it won't be because Judge Bissell is unfair."

His manner enraged Hubbard, who rushed swiftly at the first fence and threw himself over. With equal celerity, he clambered over the second fence.

Startled at the sudden outburst of temper, Harper had drawn back. He held aloft a spade. Hubbard leaped at him. The spade descended.

Harper was slightly-built, however, and the force of the blow did not halt the infuriated man, now swinging at him with all his might. They clinched. Hubbard's fingers caught at the throat of the smaller man, and the two stumbled to the ground, Hubbard atop. The fall broke his grip. With his huge fists he began to hammer the body. He continued until it was limp.

Then, his rage suddenly appeased, he drew back and stared at the inert figure lying strangely quiet.

"So!" he gasped.

There came the sound of someone singing, the voice floating distinctly

through the night air. Hubbard recognized it for that of an itinerant Free Methodist minister, whose church in Ovid he and his family occasionally attended.

The song rolling forth, as the Man of God drove along the highway in his rig, was *Jesus, Lover of My Soul*.

FOR the moment Hubbard shielded his face with an arm as if to ward off an invisible thing.

Then, bending over the prostrate form, he ran his hand inside the clothing to test the action of the heart. He performed the act mechanically, because he knew he had killed his man.

He discovered the handbag. Evidently Harper was on his way to Ovid to catch the train to the county seat for the trial on the morrow. This meant that he would not be missed by his wife for at least twenty-four hours.

The murderer studied his next move. Where to secrete the body? A piece of wood lay back of him, but he was aware that it was constantly combed by squirrel hunters. He thought of the railroad. Why not an accident? Killed by the very train he was bound for?

He started to lug the body toward the track which passed half a mile to the north. Realizing, however, that for the time at hand the distance was too great, he let the body slide to the ground. Next he stole along the twin fences to the highway and peered both ways. No one seemed abroad.

He came back on the dead run, and in twenty minutes he had carried the body to the Eldridge premises and flung it down the ancient well.

When he returned he found his wife and daughter together in the parlor, where with the itinerant preacher, all three were kneeling on the floor in prayer. Hubbard unceremoniously nudged the clergyman.

"That'll do," he said.

The minister rose, his tall, lanky figure towering over Hubbard.

"Brother," he began, in an orotund voice, "come with the Lord—"

"Yes. I know," returned Hubbard, with a patience that surprised his wife. "But I've got something to talk over with my family." He paused. "Here," he added, feeling in his pocket and producing a small coin, "take this and go along."

When the preacher had left, Hubbard called to his daughter.

"Harper was gone when I got over to the fence."

"What kept you so long?"

"I walked over to the woods. There's a nest of coons. They're a-goin' to play

havoc with the corn." He smiled un-naturally. "Look-a here! If we can catch 'em, I'll give you the money their pelts bring."

Hubbard divined that his acting was poor. Both the girl and his wife were frankly regarding him.

"Well!" he shouted. "What's the matter with ye?"

"Oh, nuthin', Pa, nuthin'," whimpered the girl.

"Then go to bed, the two of ye."

Next morning Hubbard started for the county seat, a ten mile drive. He returned that evening and complained that the case had been adjourned because Harper had failed to appear in court.

The following day he went back to his field far down the road for more ploughing. Twice he was called to the roadside by passersby to discuss the disappearance of Harper.

One morning a week later, when he came along the road with his team, he discovered the Harper child on the Eldridge premises. She was sitting at the edge of the well.

With a suppressed oath, he dropped the lines and half-walked, half-ran, to where the little girl sat.

"Didn't I tell you to stay away from there!" he exploded.

The girl stared at him, but made no move, though her lips quivered. Hubbard glanced back to observe the road. Then he caught her arm.

"Go home!" he shouted.

He spun her roughly. She continued to stare at him as she retreated homeward.

All that morning Hubbard worked his horses hard. He realized that he was eager to go back by the Eldridge dwelling. Promptly at twelve o'clock, therefore, he tied his team and started up the road. A flash of relief came to him when he did not observe the little girl. It left him cold, however.

"Eatin' dinner," he mumbled.

He moved off, without looking into the well. Until four o'clock that afternoon he labored. On his way home he discovered the girl again seated by the well. She was bending over and acting queerly.

Hurrying his horses to the roadside, he looped the lines over one of the posts in the old "snake" fence. As he approached, he saw her toss a piece of stone down the hole.

Hubbard waited until he was sure of his voice.

"Come with me," he said.

Gripping the girl he started with her toward her home but a short distance away. When they arrived the front

door was ajar. A woman, with eyes red from weeping, looked at Hubbard in silence.

"Here!" he said gruffly. "This child ought to be kept to home. She'll fall into the well."

Mrs. Harper merely reached out her arms for her daughter. Hubbard remained standing awkwardly.

"Have you heard anything of Harper yet?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk to you," replied the woman.

Hubbard turned on his heel. Waiting for him by his horses, was the deputy sheriff. The two further discussed the disappearance.

"If you yourself wasn't so well known, Jeremiah," finally declared the official, "they'd sure be thinkin' you was in it some way."

"Why?" grunted the farmer, as he untied the lines.

"Well, everybody knows you an' Harper been lawin' it for years over that boundary line."

Hubbard achieved a laugh.

"I'll tell ye where Harper is. He's cleared out, that's what I think—deserted his family."

That night, and many following nights, Hubbard did not sleep. Some weeks later a tremendous electric storm broke in the night. One particularly heavy clap so startled the wakeful Hubbard that he leaped from his bed and dressed. In the pouring rain he started out.

Inevitably his steps took him toward the well. It was black, and he could not see at first. But another flash came, and he observed a strange thing:

The huge oak, standing at the side of the well, had been split in two by lightning, and one portion of the tree had fallen over the mouth of the hole.

NEXT MORNING Simpson, the man with the "tin Lizzie," stopped at Hubbard's place. He was a blunt-spoken, red-faced man whom Hubbard hated.

"That was a bad storm last night," he said. "The lightning struck the big oak tree by the well."

"What of it?" snapped Hubbard.

"There was a skeleton in the center of that tree," explained Simpson. "I was talking this morning with the sheriff over the telephone. He said seventy-five years ago a man was murdered in Ovid, and they never found his body. This skeleton must be his."

Hubbard cleared his throat sharply.

"What did you do with it?"

"The skull and one of the leg bones fell down into the well when I tried to gather them up. I want to borrow some rope so I can down in there."

For a bare second Hubbard was silent.

"What you ought to do," he said, gathering himself, "is to fill up that hole. It's dangerous."

"Yes. That's so. But I'm goin' to get that skull first. It'll be a good exhibit. I'm wonderin' whether we'll ever find Harper's skeleton."

"Wait a moment," said Hubbard huskily, starting for the barn. "I'll get some rope and help you."

The two returned to the Eldridge farm. They found there the dead man's child. She had perched herself on the fallen tree.

"Damn fool!" muttered Hubbard. "Her mother lettin' her play around here!"

A pulley was rigged over the branch and the rope inserted with a board for a rest.

"I'll go down," vouchsafed Hubbard.

Simpson looked his surprise as he assented.

It took Hubbard five minutes or so to retrieve the missing skeleton parts. He brought them up, the leg bone and the grinning skull. He was pale when he hauled himself over the edge.

"I'm a-goin' to fill up that hole myself," he said.

"All right," retorted Simpson, handling the skull curiously. "Go to it."

Word traveled of the finding of the ancient skeleton, and the inhabitants began driving thither to see the sight. Simpson, a man of some ingenuity, had wired the bleached white bones together and suspended them from one of the branches of the fallen tree. The skeleton dangled and swung in the wind.

Hubbard, maddened by the delay and publicity, felt himself wearing away. He had become obsessed with conviction that if the hole were filled his mind would be at rest.

The nights of continued sleeplessness were ragging his nerves, and he was by this time unable to remain in bed. He would throw himself down, fully dressed, waiting until the others were asleep. Then he would steal out.

At first he had merely walked the roads, swinging his arms and mumbling. But as the night progressed his stride would quicken, and frequently he would take to running. He would run until his lungs were bursting and a slaver fed from his mouth. Late travelers began to catch glimpses of the fleeting figure, and the rumor grew that a ghost was haunting the locality of the well—that the skeleton walked.

Hubbard grew haggard. But he found himself unable to discontinue his nocturnal prowls, some of which took him miles, but all of which invariably wound up at one place—the well.

Here, fagged and exhausted, he would sit until the approach of dawn, staring at the swinging skeleton, mouthing incoherencies, praying, singing hymns beneath his breath, laughing. At the approach of dawn he would steal home.

At last, after interest in the skeleton has subsided and Simpson had consented to its removal, Hubbard loaded his wagon with stones and small boulders and started for the well. That first forenoon he made three trips, dumping each time a considerable quantity of stones.

Next morning he worked in an additional trip. He began to experience surcease. But, on the afternoon of the second day, when he made another trip, Simpson came over from his work in an adjoining field.

"I wanted to see you yesterday," he said, quizzically regarding Hubbard. "Mrs. Harper was here. She said her little girl was playin' around here and dropped a pair of andirons down the well."

"What of it?" Hubbard jerked out.

"You got to get 'em out."

"Why?"

"Because them andirons is relics."

"But you gave me permission to fill the hole."

"I was kiddin' you," laughed Simpson. "I'm only rentin' the farm. I ain't got nothin' to do with the house and yard."

Without a word Hubbard turned to his wagon. He got onto the seat and drove off. In an hour he came back with the same rope that had been used to recover the missing portions of the skeleton. Also, he brought with him a

farm laborer who did occasional work for him.

Simpson regarded Hubbard amusedly as the latter adjusted once more the pulley, arranged a bucket and then hitched his team to the end of the rope.

Patiently, bucketful by bucketful, the stones were elevated and dumped. Down below in the black interior, Hubbard labored for an hour. At six o'clock he had not found the andirons. Twice he had been compelled to come up for fresh air.

His last trip up left him so white-faced and weak that he was forced to go home.

That night he resorted to sleeping powders. But he lay and tossed, wide-eyed, through the dark hours. Sometime after midnight he got up. A light was still burning in his wife's room, and, tiptoeing down the hall, he paused at her door. In low voices the mother and daughter were conversing. To his heated imagination it seemed certain they were talking of Harper's disappearance.

Mumbling to himself he left the house. He ran down the lane to the highway and along this until he came to the Eldridge place. He determined not to stop, and succeeded in running by, like a frightened animal.

His gait accelerated. It was one best described as scurrying, as he ran crouched and low. He thought he saw some one approaching. This turned him. Back he fled with the speed of the wind.

Drawn by an irresistible force, he made straight for the Eldridge pathway. He came to the well, the entrance of which gaped at him. For a moment he stood, with eyes wide open, staring into the black depths.

Then, screaming, he plunged in head-first.

His cry, long-drawn and eerie, hung quivering on the night air.

In the Hubbard home, a quarter of a mile away, the mother and daughter heard it. The two listened with palpitating hearts. They caught one another's hands.

In a hoarse whisper the mother exclaimed:

"What's that?"

