

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 12, No. 1

JANUARY

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COVER PAINTING BY PAUL BLAISDELL

(*On the planet of a double star beyond the Horse Head Nebula, an alien spaceship*)

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Joseph W. Ferman, PUBLISHER

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*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 12, No. 1, Whole No. 68, JANUARY, 1957. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices: 527 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1897. Printed in U. S. A. © 1956 by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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*Every time I have read this story, in the course of its purchase and preparation, I have found new levels of meaning in it: and I'm wholly uncertain how it should be introduced. Let's just say that it is a ghostless Christmas story far more terrifying than anything ever written in the Christmas-Ghost tradition: that it's completely different in tone from anything else Mildred Clingerman has done: and that only she, with her warmth and love and understanding, could have created such chill horror.*

## The Wild Wood

by MILDRED CLINGERMAN

IT SEEMED TO MARGARET ABBOTT that her children, as they grew older, clung more and more jealously to the family Christmas traditions. Her casual suggestion that, just this once, they try something new in the way of a Christmas tree met with such teen-age scorn and genuine alarm that Margaret hastily abandoned the idea. She found it wryly amusing that the body of ritual she herself had built painstakingly through the years should now have achieved sacrosanctity. Once again, then, she would have to endure the secret malaise of shopping for the tree at Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters. She tried to comfort herself with the thought that one wretchedly disquieting hour every year was not too much to pay for her children's happiness. After all, the episode always came far

enough in advance of Christmas so that it never *quite* spoiled the great day for her.

Buying the tree at Cravolini's began the year Bonnie was four. Bruce had been only a toddler, fat and wriggling, and so difficult for Margaret to carry that Don had finally loaded Margaret with the packages and perched his son on his shoulder. Margaret remembered that night clearly. All day the Abbots had promised Bonnie that when evening came, when all the shop lights blazed inside the fairy-tale windows, the four of them would stroll the crowded streets, stopping or moving on at Bonnie's command. At some point along the way, the parents privately assured each other, Bonnie would grow tired and fretful but unwilling to relinquish the dazzling street and her moment of

power. That would be the time to allow her to choose the all-important tree, which must then, of course, be carried to their car in triumph with Bonnie as valiant, proud helper. Once she had been lured to the car it would be simple to hurry her homeward and to bed. The fragrant green mystery of the tree, sharing their long ride home, would insure her sleepiness and contentment.

As it turned out (why hadn't they foreseen it?), the child showed no sign of fatigue that evening other than her captious rejection of every Christmas tree pointed out to her. Margaret, whose feet and back ached with Bruce's weight, swallowed her impatience and shook out yet another small tree and twirled its dark bushiness before Bonnie's cool, measuring gaze.

"No," Bonnie said. "It's too little. Daddy, let's go that way." She pointed down one of the darker streets, leading to the area of pawnshops and narrow little cubbyholes that displayed cheap jewelry. These, in turn, verged on the ugly blocks that held credit clothiers, shoe repair shops, and empty, boarded-up buildings where refuse gathered ankle-deep in the entrance ways.

"I won't," Margaret said. "This is silly. What's the matter with this tree, Bonnie? It isn't so small. We certainly aren't going to wander off down there. I assure you, they

don't *have* Christmas trees on that street, do they, Don?"

Don Abbott shook his head, but he was smiling down at his daughter, allowing her to drag him to the street crossing.

*Like a damn, lumbering St. Bernard dog*, Margaret thought, *towed along by a simpering chee-ild*. She stared after her husband and child as if they were strangers. They were waiting for her at the corner, Don, with the uneasy, sheepish look of a man who knows his wife is angry but unlikely to make a scene. Bonnie was still tugging at his hand, flashing sweet, smug little smiles at her mother. Margaret dropped the unfurled tree with a furious, open-fingered gesture, shifted Bruce so that he rode on one hip, and joined them.

The traffic light changed and they all crossed together. Don slowed and turned a propitiating face to his wife. "You all right, hon? Here, you carry the packages and I'll take Bruce. If you want to, you could go sit in the car. Bonnie and I, we'll just check down this street a little way to make sure. . . . She says they've got some big trees someplace down here." He looked doubtfully down at his daughter then. "Are you sure, Bonnie? How do you know?"

"I saw them. Come on, Daddy."

"Probably she *did* see some," Don said. "Maybe last week when we drove through town. You

know, kids see things we don't notice. Lord, with traffic the way it is, who's got time to see anything? And besides, Margaret, you said she could pick the tree. You said it was time to start building traditions, so the kids would have . . . uh . . . security and all that. Seems to me the tree won't mean much to her if we make her take the one we choose. Anyway, that's the way I figure it."

Margaret moved close to him and took his arm, squeezing it to show both her forgiveness and apology. Don smiled down at her and Margaret's whole body warmed. For a long moment she allowed her eyes to challenge his with the increased moisture and blood-heat that he called "smoky," and which denoted for both of them her frank desire. He stared back at her with alerted male tension, and then consciously relaxed.

"Well, not right here and now," he said. "See me later."

Margaret, reassured, skipped a few steps. This delighted the children. The four of them were laughing, then, when they found themselves in front of the derelict store that housed Cravolini's Christmas Tree Headquarters.

Perhaps it was their gaiety, that first year, that made Cravolini's such a pleasant memory for Don and the children. For the first few minutes Margaret, too, had found the dim, barny place charming. It held a bewildering forest of up-

right trees, aisles and aisles of them, and the odor of fir and spruce and pine was a tingling pleasure to the senses. The floor was covered with damp sawdust, the stained old walls hung with holly wreaths and Della Robbia creations that showed real artistry. Bonnie had gone whooping off in the direction of the taller trees, disappearing from sight so quickly that Don had hurried after her, leaving Margaret standing just inside the door.

She found herself suddenly struggling with that queer and elusive conviction that "this has happened before." Not since her own childhood had she felt so strongly that she was capable of predicting in detail the events that would follow this moment. Already her flesh prickled with foreknowledge of the touch that would come . . . *now*.

She whirled to stare into the inky eyes of the man who stood beside her, his hand poised lightly on her bare forearm. Yes, he was part of the dream she'd returned to—the long, tormenting dream in which she cried out for wholeness, for decency, and love, only to have the trees close in on her, shutting away the light. "The trees, the trees . . ." Margaret murmured. The dream began to fade. She looked down across the packages she held at the dark hand that smoothed the golden hairs on her forearm. *I got those last summer when I swam so much.*

She straightened suddenly as the

dream ended, trying to shake off the langour that held her while a strange, ugly man stroked her arm. She managed to jerk away from him, spilling the packages at her feet. He knelt with her to pick them up, his head so close to hers that she smelled his dirty, oily hair. The odor of it conjured up for her (*again?*) the small, cramped room and the bed with the thin mattress that never kept out the cold. Onions were browning in olive oil there over the gas plate. The man standing at the window with his back turned . . . *He needed her; nobody else needed her in just that way. Besides, Mama had said to watch over Alberto. How could she leave him alone? But Mama was dead. . . . And how could Mama know all the bad things Alberto had taught her?*

"Margaret." Don's voice called her rather sharply out of the dream that had again enveloped her. Margaret's sigh was like a half-sob. She laughed up at her husband, and he helped her to her feet, and gathered up the packages. The strange man was introducing himself to Don. He was Mr. Cravolini, the proprietor. He had seen that the lady was very pale, ready to faint, perhaps. He'd stepped up to assist her, unfortunately frightening her, since his step had not been heard—due, doubtless, to the great depth of the sawdust on the floor. Don, she saw, was listening to the overtones of the apology. If Mr. Cravo-

lini's voice displayed the smallest hint of insolence and pride in the lies he was telling, then Don would grab him by the shirt front and shake him till he stopped lying and begged for mercy. Don did not believe in fighting. Often while he and Margaret lay warmly and happily in bed together Don spoke regretfully of his "wild-kid" days, glad that with maturity he need not prove on every street corner that he was not afraid to fight, glad to admit to Margaret that often he'd been scared, and always he'd been sick afterwards. Don approved of social lies, the kind that permitted people to live and work together without too much friction. So Mr. Cravolini had made a mistake. Finding Margaret alone, he'd made a pass. He knew better now. OK. Forget it. Thus Margaret read her husband's face and buried very deeply the sharp, small stab of disappointment. *A fight would have ended it, for good.* She frowned a little with the effort to understand her own chaotic thoughts, her vision of a door that had almost closed on a narrow, stifling room, but was now wedged open . . . waiting.

Don led her down one of the long aisles of trees to where Bonnie and Bruce were huddled beside their choice. Margaret scarcely glanced at the tree. Don was annoyed with her—half-convinced, as he always was, that Margaret had invited the pass. Not by any overt

signal on her part, but simply because she forgot to look busy and preoccupied.

"Don't go dawdling along in that wide-eyed dreamy way," he'd said so often. "I don't know what it is, but you've got that look—as if you'd say yes to a square meal or to a panhandler or to somebody's bed."

Bonnie was preening herself on the tree she'd chosen, chanting a maddening little refrain that Bruce would comprehend at any moment: "And Bru-cie did-unt he-ulp. . . ." Already Bruce recognized that the singsong words meant something scornful and destructive to his dignity. His face puckered, and he drew the three long breaths that preceded his best screaming.

Margaret hoisted him up into her arms, while Don and Bonnie hastily beat a retreat with the excuse that they must pay Mr. Cravolini for the tree. Bruce screamed his fury at a world that kept trying to confine him, limit him, or otherwise squeeze his outsize ego down to puny, civilized proportions. Margaret paced up and down the aisles with him, wondering why Don and Bonnie were taking so long.

Far back at the rear of the store building, where the lights were dimmest, Margaret caught sight of a display of handmade candles. Still joggling Bruce up and down as if she were churning butter, she paused to look them over. Four pale blue candles of varying lengths

rose gracefully from a flat base moulded to resemble a sheaf of laurel leaves. Very nice, and probably very expensive. Margaret turned away to find Mr. Cravolini standing immediately in front of her.

"Do you like those candles?" he asked softly.

"Where is my husband?" Margaret kept her eyes on Bruce's fine, blonde hair. *Don't let the door open any more. . . .*

"Your husband has gone to bring his car. He and your daughter. The tree is too large to carry so far. Why are you afraid?"

"I'm not afraid. . . ." She glanced fleetingly into the man's eyes, troubled again that her knowledge of his identity wavered just beyond reality. "Have we met before?" she asked.

"I almost saw you once," Cravolini said. "I was standing at a window. You were reflected in it, but when I turned around you were gone. There was nobody in the room but my sister . . . the stupid cow . . ." Cravolini spat into the sawdust. "That day I made a candle for you. Wait." He reached swiftly behind the stacked packing boxes that held the candles on display. He had placed it in her hand before she got a clear look at it. Sickeningly pink, loathsomely slick and hand-filling. It would have been cleaner, more honest, she thought, if it had been a frank reproduction of what it was intended

to suggest. She dropped it and ran awkwardly with the baby towards the lights at the entrance way. Don was just parking the car. She wrenched the door open and half fell into the front seat. Bonnie had rushed off with Don to bring out the tree. Margaret buried her face in Bruce's warm, sweet-smelling neck and nuzzled him till he laughed aloud. She never quite remembered afterwards the ride home that night. She must have been very quiet—in one of her "lost" moods, as Don called them. The next morning she was surprised to see that Bonnie had picked one of Cravolini's largest, finest trees, and to discover the tissue-wrapped pale blue candles he had given Bonnie as a special Christmas gift.

Every year after that Margaret promised herself that this year she'd stay at home on the tree-buying night. But something always forced her to go—some errand, a last bit of shopping, or Don's stern injunctions not to be silly, that he could not handle Bonnie, Bruce, *and* the biggest tree in town. Once there, she never managed to escape Cravolini's unctuous welcome. If she sat in the car, then he came out to speak to her. Much better go inside and stick close by Don and the children. But that never quite worked, either. Somehow the three of them eluded her; she might hear their delighted shouts two aisles

over, but when she hastened in their direction, she found only Cravolini waiting. She never eluded him. Sometimes on New Year's Day, when she heard so much about resolutions on radio and television, she thought that surely this year she'd tell Don at least some of the things Cravolini said to her—did to her—enough, anyway, to assure the Abbotts never going back there again. But she never did. It would be difficult to explain to Don why she'd waited so long to speak out about it. Why hadn't she told him that first night?

She could only shake her head in puzzlement and distaste for motivations that were tangled in a long, bad dream. And how could a woman of almost-forty explain and deeply explore a woman in her twenties? Even if they were the same woman, it was impossible.

When Cravolini's "opening announcement" card arrived each year, Margaret was jolted out of the peacefulness that inevitably built in her between Christmases. It was as if a torn and raw portion of her brain healed in the interim. *But the door was still invitingly wedged open, and every Christmas something tried to force her inside.* Margaret's spirit fought the assailant that seemed to accompany Mr. Cravolini (hovering there beyond the lights, flitting behind the trees), but the fighting left her weak and tired and without any words to

help her communicate her distress. *If only Don would see*, she thought. *If there were no need for words. It ought to be like that.* . . . At such times she accused herself of indulging in Bruce's outgrown baby fury, crying out against things as they are.

Every time she saw Cravolini the dream gained in reality and continuity. He was very friendly with the Abbotts now. They were among his "oldest customers," privileged to receive his heartiest greetings along with the beautiful candles and wreaths he gave the children. Margaret had hoped this year that she could convince Bonnie and Bruce to have a different kind of tree—something modern and a little startling, perhaps, like tumbleweeds sprayed pink and mounted on a tree-shaped form. Anything. But they laughed at her bad taste, and were as horrified as if she were trying to by-pass Christmas itself.

I wonder if I'll see *her* this year, Margaret thought. Alberto's sister. She knew so much about her now—that she was dumb, but that she had acute, morbidly sensitive hearing—that once she'd heard Cravolini murmuring his lust to Margaret, because that was the time the animal-grunting, laughing sounds had come from the back of the store, there where extra trees lay stacked against the wall. Her name was Angela, and she was very gross, very fat, very ugly. Un-

marriageable, Alberto said. Part of what Margaret knew of Angela came from Alberto's whispered confidences (unwanted, oh unasked for!), and the rest grew out of the dream that lived and walked with Margaret there in the crumbling building, beginning the moment she entered the door, ending only with Don's voice, calling her back to sanity and to another life.

There were self-revelatory moments in her life with Don when Margaret was able to admit to herself that the dream had power to call her back. She would like to know the ending. It was like a too-short book that left one hungry and dissatisfied. So this year she gave way to the children, to tradition, and went once again to Cravolini's.

Margaret was aware that she looked her best in the dull red velveteen suit. The double golden hoops at her ears tinkled a little when she walked and made her feel like an arrogant gypsy. She and Don had stopped at their favorite small bar for several drinks while the children finished their shopping.

Maybe it's the drinks, Margaret thought, and maybe it's the feeling that tonight, at last, I'll settle Mr. Cravolini, that makes me walk so jut-bosomed and proud. Don, already on his way with her to Cravolini's, had dropped into a department store with the mumbled excuse that always preceded his

gift-buying for Margaret. He had urged her to go on alone, reminding her that the children might be there waiting. For once, Margaret went fearlessly, almost eagerly.

The children were not waiting, but the woman was. *Angela*. Margaret knew her instantly, just as she'd known Alberto. Angela stared up and down at Margaret and did not bother to hide her amusement, or her knowledge of Margaret's many hot, protesting encounters with her brother. Margaret started to speak, but the woman only jerked her head meaningfully towards the back of the store. Margaret did not move. The dream was beginning. *Alberto is waiting, there beyond the stacked-high Christmas trees. See the soft, springy nest he has built for you with pine boughs.* Margaret stirred uneasily and began to move down the aisle, Angela beside her.

I must go to him. He needs me. Mama said to look after Alberto. That I would win for myself a crown in Heaven . . . Did she know how unnatural a brother Alberto is? Did she know how he learned the seven powers from the

old, forbidden books? And taught them to me? He shall have what he desires, and so shall I. Here, Alberto, comes the proud, silly spirit you've won . . . and listen, Don and the children are coming in the door.

Margaret found the soft, springy bed behind the stacked trees. Alberto was there, waiting. She heard Don call for her and struggled to answer, struggled desperately to rise to go to him. But she was so fat, so heavy, so ugly. . . . She heard the other woman's light, warm voice answering, heard her happy, foolish joking with the children, her mock-protestations, as always, at the enormous tree they picked. Margaret fought wildly and caught a last glimpse of the Abbotts, the four of them, and saw the dull, red suit the woman wore, heard the final, flirtatious tinkling of the golden earrings, and then they were gone.

*A whole year I must wait, Margaret thought, and maybe next year they won't come. She will see to that.*

"My sister, my love . . ." Alberto crooned at her ear.