

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 25

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2467 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, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' 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 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGLEY, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Woman in Gray

By WALKER G. EVERETT

*'A strange story of too many cocktails, and a weird
nemesis in gray*

BILL was at a dinner party at the Carters when the subject first came up—a dinner to which he would never have gone if he could have thought of a single plausible excuse. Sarah Carter had a girl visiting her from the East; her school roommate or something, Bill thought vaguely. Bill was her dinner partner. They were talking about some people she didn't like.

"And they told it all over town," she said, "that I was the girl that was caught in the roadhouse, and that I had a red wig on so nobody would know me. Oh, how I wish I could get even with them—the most hateful people! Haven't you any suggestions?"

Bill looked pensive. Many Martinis had set up a pleasant buzzing in his brain, and everything in life seemed very easy.

"You might tell everybody they have a crazy locked-up daughter nobody ever

sees, and that's why they don't like young girls."

"Too easy. They have *three* daughters, all crazy, only not locked up. That is, yet."

"In that case, I don't know," said Bill. "Why don't you just leave it to me?"

She looked at him. "What do you mean? Do you make little wax images and stick pins in them?"

Ah! there she had stolen a march on him—because that was just what he had been going to say. So he took a piece of celery, applied his mental spurs to himself and came out in an inspiration.

"Haven't I ever told you about **the** lady in gray?"

"No! Who is she?"

"Just a lady in gray."

"Well, where is she?"

"She's right here beside me now!"

"Where?"—startled.

"Oh," said Bill, confidentially, getting

into his stride, "you can't see her. I'm the only one that can see her, but she's right here by me all the time. I've known her for years."

"Goodness gracious!" exclaimed his partner. "Aren't you scared? Doesn't she haunt you?"

"Oh, no. She *likes* me. That's why she stays here.—Isn't it, Lady?" He turned and nodded to the imaginary figure beside him. "Of course, she's very modest, and goes out of the room when I'm undressed, but all the rest of the time she's here. Even her face is gray."

"Well," said the girl, making a violent effort to keep the conversation going, "doesn't she do anything at all?"

"Certainly. She gets after people I don't like."

"How terrible! Well, sic her on the Quarrys in Hartford, then. Tell her to do her worst."

"I will, right now.—Did you hear that, Lady? Hartford, Connecticut; Quarry's the name."

"The third house from the corner on the left," said the girl. "I don't want any mistake."

"She never makes a mistake," said Bill; "and now, I think dinner's over and we can get down to the serious part of the evening."

And that was the last Bill thought about it for two weeks, until Sarah Carter plowed across the room at a cocktail party, and said, "What's this about some Lady in Gray?"

"I don't know," said Bill. "What do you mean?"

"I had a letter from Elsa. She said to tell you your Lady in Gray did the work a little too well, and that you'd better be careful."

Bill looked thoughtful. "What else did she say?"

"Something about a family named

Quarry. That had an automobile accident, and all died—five, I think."

"What a coincidence!" said Bill. "And what a story!"

He lost no time in telling it around, of course. It was a good story, with enough of pleasant actual horror in it, but not too much, the Quarrys remaining mythical; so that it was worth a chill and a laugh any place.

Two weeks later he was at a dinner at Corinne Gorman's house—a fine, old-fashioned dinner with old-fashioned cocktails before, new-fashioned highballs after, and good old-fashioned screaming all the way through. Bill sat by Corinne; her short boyish hair was circled with a gold band, and she had on a red velvet dress. She turned to him and pointed to two empty seats.

"I could kill those people," said Corinne. "They're always hours late anyway, and finally they phone from Winnetka that they've broken down." She tamped out a nice long two and one-half inch cigarette butt until it was twisted and grub-like. "Why don't you sic your Lady in Gray on them for me?"

"I would, but I don't hate them. I don't want them to turn over like the Quarrys," Bill answered.

"How well do you know them?" asked Corinne.

"Not very well."

"Well, I can tell you some things. They've named their children 'Peggy Jean' and 'Michael Peter'; they have some name for their car; they go to the circus every year, and laugh and laugh and eat crackerjack and peanuts—that's the kind of people they are."

"Oh, well," said Bill, "I'd just as soon hate them myself. Sure, I'll send the Gray Lady after them—only they'd better look out."

That was the last they thought about

it until dinner was nearly over, and Corinne was called to the telephone. She came back white.

"It was they," she whispered. "Terrible accident; a taxi hit them. Don't tell anybody for a minute."

"Were they badly hurt?" Bill asked.

"Yes."

He wondered suddenly if he ought to say anything about the absurd conversation regarding the Gray Lady. He decided not. Two coincidences were just a little too much. He knew there was nothing in it—hadn't he made her up out of a clear sky, just to amuse a guest of Sarah Carter? But, just the same, he felt it would be a little smart-alecky to allude to it. However, Corinne soon saved him the trouble.

"Never mention that Gray Woman again," she said. "Never, never, never, never."

"Oh, that didn't have anything at all to do with it," said Bill. "You know that."

"Well, I do. But it's a little too strange, that's all—as if Santa Claus should suddenly come down the chimney."

"Or you'd find a baby in a cabbage."

"I think that would be a great improvement," said Corinne. "But this isn't any time to be funny. I'll tell them now, and start the shrieks."

So Bill's Lady in Gray story became even more famous. "It's the funniest thing," people said; "somebody ought to send it in to the *New Yorker*. And you know, Bill is such a scream about it—he's afraid to hate anybody, he says, for fear she'll get after them—and he's going to rent her to the Government in the next war."

But Bill didn't think he was funny. He thought this, while not exactly playing with fire, was at least in bad taste. He didn't think he was in very good

taste, anyway, for about this time he had a bad week; seven nights of drinking and running around town, cashing checks, all the time with a low wormish feeling of approaching reckoning under the talking, talking, talking of nightly parties to get over yesterday's hangover. And every day down at the office getting blearier, going to the water-cooler with the aspirin bottle in his hand and standing blindly in the window when the terrible eleven-thirty nausea swept over him in waves. But he didn't know what to do, because life didn't have much meaning, anyway, and he was having a better time than most people.

ONE warm night—it was the next Monday—he sat in his room, alone. The window was open, on blackness, soft and flecked with gold. The curtains were limp; his electric fan turned its flat face wearily from side to side, stirring up an ineffectual commotion in the air. A bell rang; he answered.

"Mr. Jacobson to see you."

"Tell him to come up."

What could he want, Jacobson from the office, whom he hardly knew, unctuous and self-righteous?

The door-bell buzzed.

"Come in. Good evening, good evening."

Jacobson came in and sat down. "Warm, isn't it?"

"Terribly."

"You probably wonder why I am here." Jacobson's mouse-like eyes took in the empty highball glass; the bowl of melted ice.

"Well," said Bill, "I do. Want a drink?"

"Thanks, no. Never touch it."

"Oh. O.K."

"What I wanted to see you about is this—Mr. Selfridge asked me to have a

little talk with you—a friendly chat, merely, between friends," he purred.

Bill looked at him. "What a smack!" he thought. "Yes?"

"It's about your work—a word to the wise, as it were."

"Oh. Have I been lying down on the job? Am I going to get the gate?"

"Oh, no, not that. But the first, perhaps, a trifle. A little too many parties—eh? And Mr. Selfridge thought that just a quiet tip from a friend——"

Bill was reminded of the smile of a snake. "I see," he said. "Thank you."

"Oh, not at all—not at all. It's a pleasure."

"I don't doubt it."

"Oh, I didn't mean that! Well, I'll be running along." Jacobson got up. "Nice little place you've got here."

"Yes," said Bill. "I like it." (How he hated the man! Why didn't he go?)

"Well, I'd better go. I've got a new Chevy downstairs, and I have to go so slow it'll take me a while. I live in the suburbs, you know."

"Oh, you do? You have? How do you like it?"

"It's a fine little bus. You can see it from the window."

"I'll look out. Good-night. See you tomorrow."

"Good-night." And Jacobson was gone.

"That ass and his Chevy," thought Bill. "I wish——"

He went to the window, looked out. Presently Jacobson came out, climbed into a little yellow car with a black patch on the top, started out, and drove straight into the side of a big truck that had swung around the corner, with a horrible ripping and glassy noise.

"Good God!" said Bill,

HE WAITED until he saw people, like sudden ants, flocking; then he came back, mixed himself a highball, and sat down on the couch. It had happened again. And just after being told all that about his job. Everything he did seemed to be wrong. And it was all his own fault. He gulped down his drink and made another, stronger. The light seemed so bright, and made the room look so empty, with only those two black holes of windows, that he turned them out, and sat in the single ray that came from the bathroom.

When the lights were out, the room changed; the black windows became, gradually, a soft warm blue, like a promise of day to come. It was the room that was dark. But Bill just sat there, tapping his foot to some radio music that drifted in. Then he spoke out loud, "God! I hate myself!"

Then the door opened, and in came the Lady in Gray. Now, it wasn't anyone dressed up to frighten him, or his sister come to call. It was the Lady in Gray, and Bill knew it. He looked at her steadily as she came nearer, quietly, delicately. He felt his brains run down the inside of his skull like melting drug-store ice; the room started to rock, and then to swirl faster and faster. Finally she was half-way across the floor. He threw his glass at her. It smashed against the opposite wall.

Bill stood up and whirled around—the whole room was swinging in a grayish haze. He turned to the window.

They found him next morning, on the second-floor fire escape—one of those horizontal ones, with a weight on the end. He had landed almost in the middle, and was doing a ghastly little teeter-totter.

