



## 10 STORY

# FANTASY

DONALD A. WOLHEIM, Editor

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# The Woodworker

*Something was carving stinging insects out of wood—and bringing them to life!*

By GENE A. DAVIDSON

**H**IS BOOTS tramped rhythmically on the snow, carrying him into the small grove of trees. His breath went out into the air in a frosted plume. He could feel the

tension in his neck as he tried to shield it in his coat collar from the icy, prying wind.

A few yards ahead, a small puff of fur appeared, then rocketed away from him in a zigzag path. He swung his small rifle up in a long easy mo-

tion. The report cracked brittlely in the cold air. He snapped open the bolt and watched the little silver cylinder that was the used cartridge leap out. The rifle automatically loaded a fresh round. He closed the bolt crisply. He walked forward in the direction the rabbit had been running.

Suddenly he stopped. *Did someone call me?* he wondered. He listened.

Other than the quiet hum of an occasional car over on the highway, there was no sound at all. He turned and looked back over the trail his boots had scuffed in the light snow. He half expected to see someone coming along it from far in the distance. Of course, there was no one there. He shrugged his shoulders, resettled his gun, and resumed his walk.

The idea that something had happened he should have heard did not leave him easily. He found himself still listening for something. His boots seemed to crunch too loudly on the snow. The naked trees standing tall around him seemed to echo and amplify every sound. For a moment the silence, the white blanket of snow stretching to the horizon, his loneliness with the stark black trees, took on a fearful quality. A cold gust of wind down his back caused him to shiver. Angry with himself, he moved on.

He had fired at the rabbit just as it had breasted a hillock a dozen yards away. He supposed he would find its tumbled little form just over the top of the small mound.

It was not there. The hollows the rabbit's running feet had made as they dipped into the snow climaxed in a small scuffed spot. That was where the rabbit should have been, but it was not there. A brief red stain on the snow assured him he had not missed the bounding target. The tracks did not reappear after a particularly long leap, a glance around revealed.

Although he could not imagine

how, the rabbit was definitely gone. He brushed the snow away from the ground where it was stained by the rabbit's blood. It was only an inch or so deep and as he had known, it could not have hid his game.

The rabbit must have made it to a hole someplace around here, he said to himself, and it was the only possible explanation.

As he turned to go, something caught his eye. It was an outgrowth on the root of a nearby tree, perhaps a tumor of some kind. It was roughly biscuit-shaped, about two and a half feet across.

*A wasps' nest?* the man asked himself. It was the paper-gray color of one. He decided to give it a closer look.

At that moment, something thumped him solidly in the back of the neck. Behind him he heard the beat of wings. He turned but the thing that had struck him was gone, having flown off among the trees.

"So you have a nest around here, do you, Mrs. Bird?" he said to himself. "And you don't want me to disturb it. All right then, I'll respect your wishes."

He moved out of the woods and back to the snowy stretches of the fields. He crossed a rabbit track and began to follow it.

That evening, when he was taking off his coat before the hot stove in his cabin, he found a startling thing. A thorn nearly four inches long had somehow stabbed through the fur and canvas collar of his jacket. He decided that if his scarf had not entangled its point, it would probably have pierced his throat.

THE MAN in the hunter's outfit stood looking down into the glass-topped counter. It contained several small-bore rifles, a target pistol, and a number of boxes of cartridges of various sizes. The bell on the door had rung when he entered, and he knew

that the proprietor would soon be out. The sound of footsteps came from beyond the door that opened to the back of the place.

A tall, middle-aged man in a red lumberjack shirt appeared in the door. He took a stubby pipe out of his mouth, located the right lens of his bifocals, and looked over his customer.

"Why, Tom Schiring," he said with pleased recognition. "What are you doing down here? Came down for a bit of rabbit hunting, eh, Tom?"

"You bet, Andy," the hunter said as they shook hands. "I've had this week in December reserved for five months. Prospective clients have been sent over to an attorney I used to share an office with. How's Mary?"

"Oh, fine, Tom. Say, she'll want you over for supper sometime before you go back."

"I'll be there, Andy. Give me a box of .22 long rifle cartridges, will you?" he said, laying several coins on the counter.

From a position half inside the display case, the proprietor asked: "Where you been hunting?"

"Mostly on Grayfeller's farm. Haven't raised much of anything, though. Only got a crack at one jack-rabbit. That was up in that little wood just south of the highway."

"Better move south. There ain't much game up that way. In fact, you're the first fellow I ever heard of who's seen any rabbits in that wood. I think there must be a weasel in it."

"Last hunters went through there," he continued. "Oh, must be three years ago. City folks, you know."

The man behind the counter picked up the change automatically, set the waxy little cube containing cartridges in its place, and rang the cash register. Thomas Schiring had turned to go but he was stopped by the man who had resumed speaking:

"There's another odd thing I remember about that wood up on Gray-

feller's farm. About six years ago a traveling lumber outfit started to cut that stand of timber off, working from the highway back. Everything went all right for a while, then they hit trees with nails in them. And not just a nail every now and then either. There were so many nails in those trees you'd think they had started to grow iron knots. After breaking a couple of cross-cut saws, the lumber outfit gave up and moved out. The foreman sure gave old man Grayfeller hell before they left."

"You don't say," said Schiring. "How do you suppose the nails got there?"

"I wouldn't know, Tom," said the proprietor. "Say, do you remember what happened to Shorty Morris? You don't? Well, Shorty used to work for Grayfeller. He had a little place up in the barn where he slept. Had a cot there, a little stove, dresser and so on. Well, as I get the story, Shorty Morris ran out of stove wood one night. He got an axe and went out to chop some kindling, probably half crocked at the time, if I know Shorty.

"Well," he continued, "he didn't come back. When old man Grayfeller couldn't find Shorty the next day, he figured he passed out someplace and went to look for him. Sure enough, they found Shorty out cold, but it wasn't whiskey that had done it. It was a big limb. Shorty had been chopping a tree, when this big limb broke off above him and came down on his head. I've heard it must have weighed five hundred pounds. Lucky it didn't hit him square on."

"Shorty was chopping just a little way from where you got that rabbit," he concluded.

Before Schiring left the little hardware store, he made one more purchase. That was a bottle of cleaning fluid. During the conversation with his friend, he had decided he might need it. As he was leaving, the proprietor warned him not to get it too

close to a cigarette, because it was highly inflammable. Thomas Schiring thanked him and left with his purchases.

TWENTY minutes later, Schiring was striding across a field covered with snow and corn stubble. Directly ahead of him were the trees of the little copse on Grayfeller's farm, standing stark and silent against a backdrop of gray winter sky.

Even at that distance from the wood, he could sense the strangeness about it. He decided that was because he saw no ragged, noisy black crows in the upper branches of the trees.

"No crows, no rabbits, no nothing," he thought. "There's not one thing in that wood that might attract a hunter."

He intercepted the trail he had made into the clump of trees the day before. It had not snowed during the night, so his track was still fairly fresh. He entered the little grove.

About ten yards or so into it, the shallow gouge his boots had made in the snow disappeared completely. There was no tapering off. Here was his path, fresh and plain; a little way beyond, nothing but smooth white snow.

It did not matter very much. Schiring recognized his surroundings well enough to know which way he had gone the day before. He resumed his walk.

The feeling that had arisen in him yesterday was with him again. He felt that something was listening to him, listening so as not to miss the slightest squeak of snow under his boots, not the softest sigh of his exhaling breath. It was not a pleasant mood to be in.

To Schiring, the tall, black, skeletal trees, towering on all sides, seemed to take on a menacing quality. Automatically, he forced himself to look at the trees more carefully. A closer look at them and he would see

simply black, leafless limbs, not poised cyclopes standing very still, hoping they would not be seen. But that did not seem to help today. The wind was too still, the snow was too quiet, the trees were too tall and black for that to help today.

The feeling that there was trouble coming did not leave. Actually, he did not even wish it would. He felt he was beginning to understand the situation now, and in this case, knowledge did not lead to the removal of fear.

Suddenly he heard it. He had expected that sound to presage the beginning of the attack, and he was ready for it. The sound of wings came from behind him and to the left. He spun, bringing up his light rifle.

Suddenly he was not afraid any longer. He did not know exactly why. It had something to do with the way the pistol grip with its crisscross lines felt against his palm, but he was not sure what.

Time seemed to be going slowly, very slowly. A quarter of a second passed with the studied deliberation of the tolling of a run-down chime clock. He watched the black metal blade that was the foresight of his rifle traverse an arc that would intercept the flying thing.

Why he thought, *there's nothing to it*. He waited till the sights were nicely centered on the target, then squeezed the trigger. He saw the flying thing explode into a hundred splinters. He felt his hand swoop the bolt open and shut. He did not remember hearing the shot.

Again he heard the sound of wings, and caught a moving shadow out of the corner of his eye. It was only a few feet off the muzzle when the bullet hit it. Like the other, it erupted into fragments. He watched the little silvery tube of a used shell-casing glide out of his span of vision.

He watched another attacker come at him. When it was about ten yards

out, he sent it the way of the rest.

*Rabbits, he thought, are harder to hit.*

A minute passed, and the attack was not resumed. He waited, rifle ready, listening. No sound. Schiring guessed that they had had enough for the present. He wondered what he would do if a group of them attacked him en masse. Under those circumstances, he saw no way he could protect himself. And the mass attack, unfortunately, was what he decided he could expect next.

He went over to one of the things his bullets had destroyed and knelt to examine it. Most of it was in small brittle pieces like the shell of a broken walnut. The memory of the things as he had seen them in flight, coupled with an examination of the fragments in his hand, enabled him to find an organization in the pieces.

Here he decided, was a wing case. Here were several leg segments. Here was a head, mandibles still attached. . . .

The constituent parts of an insect, all right. But not of the stuff of an insect's horny carapace. The parts were made of wood. The things which had attacked him were large wooden beetles—exact copies of the real insect except for one thing. Out of the center of the head, like the horn of a unicorn, pointed a thornlike stinger of wood. The weapon was fully as long as the beetle's four-inch body. Cautiously, Schiring tested the point with his finger. It was sharp.

He weighed the fragments in his hand. They were very light and very thin, like wood shavings from a draw-knife. Light as was their construction, the small wings of the wooden beetles had been barely able to sustain their weight. The creatures flew with a wobbly, unstable pitch, and seemed about to fall to the ground at any moment. Clumsy they might be, but the needle-tipped stilettos they carried made them deadly.

He dropped the fragments of the thing. Taking an easy grip on his rifle, he proceeded cautiously in the direction he had gone the day before.

**A** FEW MINUTES later he topped the little rise over which his rabbit had disappeared yesterday. Below him, he saw the tree with the grayish outgrowth on its root. It completely caught up his curiosity.

Unlike the ground around, its top was not covered with snow. That should indicate, thought Schiring, a rapid oxidation rate. There was nothing particularly outstanding about it. Nothing outstanding, just the root of a tree. . . .

No, said Schiring to himself, it's more than that. It's not only the color of the thing that suggests a brain. There's something else about it, something incredibly subtle that betrays what it really is. It is aware of me. It thinks. It is wood, but somehow it thinks.

A plant turns toward the sun. A trace of consciousness. The hard jaws of a pitcher-plant slowly close to trap an inquisitive fly. A movement, simple, but successful. A trace of consciousness. A million years ago, a seed grew wings and soared on the wind. It came down on a bare patch of ground a hundred miles from where it started, sunk its roots, and grew. It had solved its problem, a need for a span of bare ground, by growing wings and flying. Other plants would solve their problems by growing horny shells that would let them lie quiescent for decades. Others would sprout long cilia-like extensions and roll before the wind. A problem solved. A trace of consciousness.

A living thing must have nourishment, that is basic. An organism is equipped to get the nourishment it needs. Also, it must have a means of self-protection. The power of his teeth and claws keeps a carnivore

alive. A symbiotic organism absorbs the substance of his host through a penetrable membrane, digests it with an enzyme. A plant has roots, and sugar-producing chlorophyll, and some have specialized protections, like burs, irritants, thorns or poisons. . . .

Thomas Schiring began to make a circuit of the gray outgrowth on the root of the tree. Here, he believed, was a creature, basically plantlike in configuration, in which the trace of consciousness has risen to rationality. Here was a thing that might have power nearly equal to that of the human brain. How that seed had been brought to fruition, he did not know, but it had. As he walked, he sensed that the attention of the thing was upon him.

The facts fitted very well into place now. Five years ago a lumber outfit had been forced to stop cutting these trees because of nails in them. Another time, a hired man had been nearly killed while chopping firewood nearby. Game was never seen in this copse, and not even the omnipresent crow ventured here. Game attracted hunters, and hunters were not wanted. *Keep humans away*, that was the key to the pattern.

He remembered how he had found the long thorn close to his throat. *Keep humans away—at any cost.*

Schiring paused in his observation of the gray oval thing. For the most part, its surface had a fairly constant rough texture. One small spot on the surface was markedly different from the rest. In that place, the surface was rough and convoluted. Its appearance suggested an ill-healed rupture.

Schiring was puzzled. Automatically, he tried to figure out what could be the cause of this area. Part of the conversation back in the hardware store occurred to him. ". . . last hunters, three years ago. City folks, you know." City folks weren't too in-

terested in game. They probably just wanted to do a little shooting.

Suddenly, Schiring saw the similarity between the convoluted area and a scar, a ragged knotty cicatrice. The most likely thing, he guessed, was that the last hunters had used the gray thing for target practice.

He wondered, almost casually, if a wooden brain could go mad.

THOMAS SCHIRING found himself feeling sorry for the creature, in a way. He recognized intuitively that the creature had a right to exist and a right to protect itself against other organisms that were dangerous to it. Nevertheless, he saw that some day, circumstances would come together in such a way as to force the thing—the wooden *brain*—to kill a human. He had no doubt of that. A thorn of one of the wooden beetles, which the thing evidently controlled, had narrowly missed piercing his throat the day before. In the light of that danger to others of his race, he felt it was his duty to kill it.

It was an easy decision to make. Subconsciously he had watched events shaping up this way and had prepared for it.

His eyes rose to scan the trees above him. He wondered how many of the wooden beetles were hidden on those limbs, soon to attack him in a coordinated effort. He knew his rifle would be all but useless against any mass attack. He wondered how many of the insects the wooden brain had manufactured in its interior. He could sustain perhaps a dozen thrusts from the daggerlike weapons, he believed. Many more, and he would surely bleed to death. And he was afraid that there were many, many more than a dozen of the wooden insects.

*Kill the thing quickly*, a part of his consciousness urged.

At that moment, from a hundred different spots on the trees around

him, a clicking noise began. *Click-click-click*, like a hundred metronomes. *Click-click-click*, like a hundred sharply ticking clocks. *Click-click-click*. . . .

*They'll attack soon now*, thought Schiring. His hand came out of his pocket cupping the bottle of cleaning fluid he had bought back at the little store. He twisted the cap off. He tossed the bottle in a low arc at the wooden brain. The bottle struck the ground and rolled a few feet. It did not break, but it did drench the growth on the root of the tree with its pungent fluid.

*Click-click-click*. The noise of the wooden insects in the trees speeded up to a frenzied pace. *Click-click-click-click*.

Schiring snapped a flame into his cigarette lighter, then threw it at the wooden brain. With an explosive puff and a billow of yellow flame, the inflammable liquid ignited. The wooden brain was hidden from him by a curtain of fire.

With a clumsy, wobbly motion, a

wooden beetle flew down from one of the trees and lit right in front of him. It had something grasped in its legs. It pointed the thing at him, and began to make the clicking noises.

Its legs trembled violently, its mandibles opened and closed spasmodically. Everything in its mien seemed to indicate that it was in a state of something like hysteria.

After a minute or so, the beetle let loose of the thing it was holding. It rolled over on its back and made convulsive movements with its legs. Soon it stopped.

There was no sound but the whispering of the fire, the fiery fingers of which had by now gouged deep to the center of the outgrowth on the tree. The clicking noises from the beetles had stopped. They had died with their fashioner, the wooden brain.

Schiring picked up the thing that the beetle had held in its legs. It had evidently been carved out of a small wooden stick, about six inches long. It was an exact copy, in miniature, of Schiring's rifle.