

# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1949

Cover by Matt Fox

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D. McLWRAITH, Editor

# These Debts Are Yours

*Ten years is a long time or a very short time depending on how one looks at it.*

EX-CAPTAIN EVAN FROME entered Lincoln Highway with some misgivings. He was not accustomed to walking. Drivers, it seemed to him, now that he was temporarily afoot, tried to see how close they could miss the pedestrian. Sometimes they came too close and there was a funeral. Yesterday Frome had met a neighbor near a long red smear on the concrete; the neighbor explained the darkening smear. Evan Frome shivered a little. He had seen enough dead men to last him through eternity. He had never become accustomed to corpses.

"The car threw the old man fifty feet, clear across the highway," the neighbor said.

The neighbor seemed very familiar, he remembered, and there was a haunting ring in his voice.

Evan Frome stooped a little; not because he was old but because he had borne burdens; burdens like ordering troops out into the open to die in the name of good tactics. Burdens of the mind. He shook his head impatiently. He had become accustomed to those burdens. They must not continue to make him h u m p b a c k e d. Yesterday, though, when he came to Christ's Home, a different accustomedness which he did not understand came with him. He had never had amnesia or been in Christ's Home before in his life, unless he had come through in his car before the war at his usual seventy miles an hour. Yet all Pennsylvania, as well as Christ's Home, had been familiar. It made him feel uncomfortable and at peace, all at the same time. He had looked forward to Christ's Home since Peter Beltz, the best friend he had ever had, dying in his arms, made a holographic will, deeding him the snug house at the edge of the village.

"You're all the family I have," Pete had said, then grinned and died.

Cars slipped past him, speeding. They all

speeded. Monster trucks almost pushed him off his feet with the wind of their passing. Down the highway embankment to the left snowy ducks swam in a muddy creek. Sheep too fat for their hides, looking as if a pinprick would explode and deflate them, raised their sinudged heads to stare blankly at him. The sheep were familiar, too.

"It must be because Pete described the place so many times," he thought, "even the ducks and the sheep."

He followed the curves of the winding path on the shoulder, just off the concrete, without looking down, as if his feet knew the way. He looked right, across the Highway, and the towering, sprawling two-story house on the hill was an old acquaintance. He might have been born in the Dutch barn.

"*That I know is silly!*" he told himself. "If there is anything I *don't* have it's a Pennsylvania Dutch connection."

He fought down a shiver as he came to the first house beyond the meadow and the creek on the left. The houses were old, bright red with paint laid upon ancient out-size bricks, perched on rock-reveted embankments. He felt almost as if the houses, and the rock walls higher than his head were greeting him by name, asking him where he had been and when he had returned home. It was an eerie feeling.

He knew the building on the corner was a bank before he saw the words on the door. He knew when he rounded the corner that the post office would be across the side-road, and that the side-road would lead away east, down a gentle slope, through a corridor of weeping willows.

He looked, and it was so.

"Of course it's like that," he told himself. "I saw it yesterday!"

He knew he was going to have to accept, sooner or later, the fact that yesterday, when he saw the heart of Christ's Home for the

*By Arthur J. Burks*



first time, he had known it *then*. The knowledge had been tintured with many feelings; sadness, futility, anger, a little fear perhaps, for which he had no explanation.

He climbed the steps of the aged stone post office building almost as if he were running to sanctuary. The autumn chill in the air gave way to the stuffiness of too much steam heat. He looked at the row of windows marked "General Delivery," "Stamps and Registered Mail," "Money Orders and Parcel Post." They too, faded gold lettering, were accustomed. And half the men behind the windows looked as if they had been born gray of hair, stooped and shaky of hands, bespectacled, slow of movement. They had, he was quite sure, spent their lives behind those windows. They would have died anywhere else. The post office was the beating of their hearts.

ONE of the old men stared at him, mouth hanging open. Then he called quaveringly to someone else: "Ollie, Captain Frome is here. Evan Frome!"

Frome stepped to the largest window, leaned on his elbows, his head through the opening.

"Is that unusual?" he asked testily. "I was here yesterday without creating a furor."

"That was before we had the cleaning woman in, Captain," said the oldest, most stooped of the lot, whom he was sure must be the postmaster.

"And what, may I ask," he said, "has the cleaning woman to do with me?"

"It's just made us curious, Captain," said old David Vogel. "Maybe you know how it is in a small town where nothing much ever happens."

"No, I don't, but I've heard. Small towns live on gossip. But I came here to be at peace. I'm going to pay my way. I'm going to mind my own business. . . ."

"No man's business is entirely his own, even the most personal!" said old David sharply. "However, we won't tell this thing until and if you start the talk yourself."

"I'd answer with more confidence," said Frome, losing his hostility in the mild light gray eyes of the old Dutchman, "if I had some idea what you are talking about."

The old man turned, limped to a height of shelves behind the lock-boxes, took down a thick brown envelope. Frome shook his head. He wasn't expecting any official communications. He'd even made sure he would receive none for a month or two, by giving no one his address—no one, that is, save Harriet Hedr, who might be his wife one day, after he got things settled in his mind. Harriet would never send him a letter like this. Hers were always small, neat, scented. These old men would snort when they experienced Harriet's scent the first time.

"There is no question that your name is Evan Frome?" said David Vogel. "E-V-A N F-r-o-m-e? And you're a captain?"

"I gave you my name yesterday, told you I was expecting mail. Why should it seem strange to you that I should receive some?"

"Don't know about strangeness, captain," said David Vogel.

Every gray haired clerk on the sprawling mail room was lined up behind the counter, looking at him. None of them smiled. They seemed to be waiting, like amiable gray crows.

"Do you mind, before I give you this letter, telling me how old you are?"

"I was born on Armistice Day, November 11, 1918!" he snapped. "That makes me thirty years old *today*. It's my birthday, postmaster. Now, do I get that letter or must I show you my marks and scars too?"

The old men looked down the line, back and forth, at one another.

"Remarkable!" said the old clerk.

"Not in Pennsylvania!" said David Vogel. "Well, here's your letter, captain, and you can understand why we have acted a little like idiots."

Evan Frome shrugged, his khaki shirt adhering even more closely to his broad shoulders, as he took the thick envelope, addressed in a faded, quavery kind of handwriting—he almost called it "spidery"—and read the address first.

Captain Evan Frome, United States Army,  
General Delivery,  
Christ's Home,  
Pennsylvania.

He knew he had never seen the handwriting, yet something inside him stirred, caused his hands to shake ever so little, for.

the handwriting was familiar, as familiar as his own. Yet for the life of him he could not remember where or when he had seen it, and the return address was a name he did not know at all—for all its accustomedness!

Joseph Toelle,  
General Delivery,  
Christ's Home,  
Pennsylvania.

It was, for a moment, almost as if a bell rang inside him. Then the thing was gone, utterly elusive. He knew quite well he had never known a Joseph Toelle.

"There must be some mistake," said Evan Frome, knowing even as he spoke that there wasn't. "I don't know any Joseph Toelle."

The old men exchanged glances again, not a smile among the five of them.

"It's not likely you'd know him, captain," said old David Vogel. "He died in '98. He used to be the postmaster here. The first one in this building, built in '83!"

Evan Frome sighed with relief.

"Then it must be clear there has been a mistake," he said. "This letter can't possibly be for me."

"We didn't think so either," said old David, "when the cleaning woman fished it from behind that bank of shelves," he turned and pointed, "that was installed over fifty years ago. Don't know what possessed her to clean behind 'em, or me to insist, unless. . . ."

"Well, unless what?" said Evan Frome

"Unless it was to get out your letter!"

"That's not likely, is it? Look, you five don't look to me like practical jokers. . . . no," as they expressed hurt, all five of them, at his tone and his doubt, "no, you probably never played a practical joke in your lives. . . ."

He broke off himself then. He had been staring at the thick envelope, staring at delivery instructions, of which he suddenly became conscious. The sender had written in that spidery script—there now seemed no other description of it—to the right of the return address:

"Hold until November 11, 1948, when called for!"

FROME jerked up his head, stared at the five old men. He fully expected them

to fade away, become strangers, *young* strangers. He fully expected the entire old stone post office to dissolve and the ceiling of the Base Hospital to appear above his head, to find Harriet Hedr, the nurse, bending anxiously over him to say: "Take it easy, Captain. It's all over, you know. You've just had a shock, but you must not give way to it!"

But the old men did not fade. The old post office remained, solid, stuffy with steam heat, as firm as Dutch Pennsylvania.

"When," he asked, "did Joseph Toelle die?" He hoped his voice did not sound as unreal as he felt, that they did not notice the beads of sweat on his forehead that were *not* squeezed out by the steam heat.

"September 13, 1898," said old David Vogel. "I took over from him. I've been here ever since."

"You've been around quite a while, haven't you?" said Captain Evan Frome. "Well, I'll be going. It's plain this letter can't be mine. It's just coincidence, is all. I'll see what it has to say, bring it back to you. Maybe I should open it here, at the desk?"

"Suit yourself," said David Vogel, "but it's your letter all right. Joseph Toelle never made a mistake in his life!"

Old Vogel said it as if he still hated the postmaster who had been dead over fifty years. It was strange, Frome thought, how long hate could endure. What else, he asked himself, hefting the bulky envelope, could endure for half a century?

He harked back to the accustomedness of Christ's Home, then refused to think about it. He had left such fleeting dreams at the hospital where he had left Harriet Hedr until he sent for her.

## CHAPTER II

### *Evidential*

BACK in the two-story, five room house that Pete Beltz had given him, Frome dropped the envelope on the table, rubbed his hands briskly, stared at himself in the full length mirror set in the parlor door. He looked okay, he decided, straightening up to take that burden-stoop out of his shoul-

ders. His hair was as sandy as always. Hair, he thought, was unconcerned about death. His weight was a little off, but Harriet had not allowed him to overeat in the hospital. A man could get very fat without exercise and she wouldn't marry a fat man. He weighed a hundred and eighty, had big bones on a big frame, so that it was just about right for his six feet of height.

He bent close to the mirror to look into his own eyes. They looked all right to him.

"Queer," the thought struck him, "that Pete should have given me this house. But then, if he was the last of his line, what could he have done with it?"

There was still something unreal about it, he thought, but not as strange as the letter. And he might as well get that mystery solved, right now. Peter Beltz had left his house well supplied with everything when he went away to war, including basement furnace, steam heat, a wealth of gadgets, and the ancient letter opener with which he now slit the yellow envelope—noting for the first time that it was yellow with time. The enclosure consisted of at least twenty pages of closely written foolscap. There was no salutation, but the first lines caught his attention:

"The house," it said, "is not a gift, but full payment of an old debt, so cease to marvel. It is not possible to read the name of the payer."

It was intriguing, even if it was rigamarole.

The next paragraph, however, was different.

"The name Harriet is easier, because it is more closely connected. Hedr appears to be the surname, odd though it is. You should send for her at once. She has a definite part in your task. We have built up this indebtedness together; our mistakes are shared!"

Evan Frome referred back to the envelope, studied it again. Harriet Hedr was twenty five; Joseph Toelle had been dead fifty years; they could not have shared mistakes. He thought of something else: Peter Beltz had never met Harriet; Harriet had never visited Christ's Home, Pennsylvania. Nobody at the post office could have known her name.

A queer sensation began at his coccyx and moved slowly up his spine. It was a sensa-

tion of chill, with no touch of fear in it. The chill moved as if reluctantly eager for whatever might come.

"Debts are owed which must be paid," went on the letter. "I have waited carefully until all the current debts were paid. Save that you owe Harriet Hedr the life you will devote to her all your debts to man and God outside Christ's Home have now been paid."

That chill moved a little further up his spine. The statement was true, though it could still be rigamarole. He didn't owe a cent to a soul in the world, and his religion did not trouble him. He was at least as good as average Christian. He owed nothing, had fourteen thousand dollars in a New York bank which he would transfer later to the local bank in Christ's Home. It was queer, he told himself, that this ancient letter should speak of his financial situation. It would mean little, however, if the letter did not refer to Harriet by name.

He read on.

"I have sixty seven days left to live," said the spidery script of Joseph Toelle, in which Frome thought he could actually hear the marked Pennsylvania Dutch accent. "It is not enough time to pay my obligations; but I do not worry greatly since I cannot help it and am therefore not meant to help it. However, in this world or the next, a man must pay his debts. So these debts are yours!"

"And just how do you make *that* out, if I may ask?" said Evan Frome aloud. His eyes jerked up to the phrase, "sixty-seven days left to live" and he thought, "I wonder if, at *that* moment, he knew how much time I had to live at *this* moment? If he did, of course it doesn't matter whether it's months or years—so long as I spend them with Harriet Hedr!"

"The complete list follows:" the ancient letter continued. "Some of my creditors will be dead; but all will have heirs. To some of them the relationship between the dead and the living will be much the same as yours and mine!"

"I trust," said Frome, bowing ironically to the empty sitting room, "that eventually you will tell me just what that relationship is, if I'm saddled with your debts."

Then he read on to find his question par-

tially answered: "What that relationship is you will know at the proper time!"

"I don't" said Evan Frome, "particularly like your Papa-spank attitude!"

There followed a list of seven names, after each of which there was an amount of money set down. Taking up a pencil was an automatic action with Evan Frome. He set down each figure on a pad on the desk, a pad which caused Frome a quirk of the lips. On it were the words "Waldorf Astoria Hotel"; Pete had always carried mementos away from hotels, though he had never mentioned the Waldorf Astoria and Frome wondered what page of his life the pad represented.

Frome totalled the figures.

"Three thousand one hundred eleven dollars," he said. "An insignificant sum. Joseph could add, too, for we agree exactly."

But the next line gave him pause.

"The interest is very low, but because of the lapse of time the total will be approximately fourteen thousand dollars."

HE PUT the manuscript aside while that odd chill crawled a bit higher on his spine. This thing was getting outside the bounds of coincidence, was becoming something other than rigamarole. It was in fact, quite impossible that in mid-summer, 1898, Joseph Toelle should look so deeply and accurately into Evan Frome's bank account in 1948.

"If he names the bank," decided Frome, "I'm going to telegraph Harriet to get here by the fastest plane. Matter of fact, I'm going to do that anyway!"

However, he was not afraid. There was something here decidedly unusual, but behind it there had to be an explanation. When he got it it would be something over which to chuckle.

"If I can still chuckle after these debts break me!" he told himself, something inside him saying that the debts *were* his and that he would pay them, to the last cent.

"It is not necessary," the letter went on, "to visit my grave, but it would, in the circumstances, be an unusual experience because, in this instance, you *know*!"

"Know *what*, Joseph?" snapped Evan Frome. "I know less than nothing!"

"Anna and I," the letter continued, "lie

side by side. No arrangement has been made to keep the grave cared for in perpetuity because there is no sense in that, as you know; but egotism suggested a marble headstone rather than sandstone, which weathers so easily, so you can see, and read, if the spirit moves you."

Evan Frome read for two solid hours, then, without looking up from the crabbed, spidery handwriting of Joseph Toelle, who had been nearly eighty when he wrote. Frome wondered why there had been no salutation, knew that the fact of its absence was some sort of an explanation in itself, but could not quite grasp the meaning. He had the feeling, every time he laughed or chuckled, that Joseph Toelle laughed or chuckled *with* him, or *at* him.

Somewhere in the letter Joseph Toelle felt obliged to provide Frome with some striking evidential. Toelle spoke of the Armistice in 1918, which did not come to pass until some months after the death of Frome's father in Flanders; Toelle spoke of both, and of Frome's birth on that historic date. He also spoke of the circumstance of Christ's Home post office staying open on that morning each year until 8:30. Much of Frome's Second World War experience was referred to with some accuracy in the body of Toelle's letter. Nothing, however, Frome noticed, that at least two people did not know: the late Peter Beltz and the current and eager Harriet Hedr.

That they had not known each other Evan Frome had regarded as unfortunate.

When he had done with the strange document Frome felt an almost irresistible urge to visit the cemetery where Toelle lay buried, beside "Anna," whoever she had been, doubtless Toelle's wife. Frome could see no reason why she was mentioned in the letter from yesterday, except to identify the headstone. No, that could scarcely have been the reason. Toelle doubtless had a reason, which would become apparent in due course.

Frome thrust the letter, which was as much a diary as a letter, though it was little of either, into a wall safe of which Peter Beltz had never spoken, which he had found standing open on taking possession of the house.

Frome slipped on his field jacket over his

khaki shirt. He wondered, as he let himself out of the house again, whether now that he owed all the money he had in the bank, he dared invest in a couple of suits of clothes! And who would buy the marriage license when Harriet arrived?

That reminded him. He stepped back inside, telephoned the telegram, went back into Lincoln Highway, turned left to the top of the hill that hid his house from the village of Christ's Home, looked both ways to see whether he had possibly risked his neck by crossing the road, then made a run for it.

THE road eastward from the store where he had picked up his supplies and arranged with the storekeeper to find a housekeeper, circled away to the right past a Mennonite church, to lose itself among tall bordering trees of which he should know the name because it seemed to be right on the tip of his tongue. He stepped out briskly on the sidewalk, heading eastward until he came to a dirt road leading up a steep hill to vanish beyond another row of tall trees as if the road climbed the trees from the far side. He crossed that road, went through a fence where somebody had failed to close the gate, felt the pebbles roll under his field shoes. From the right a huge chained dog barked at him.

Dogs seldom barked at Evan Frome and the fact that this one barked disturbed him a little. He wondered why. There was nothing strange about a dog barking. This one, however, sat on its tail, looked at Frome, then pointed his nose at the sky as if it were night, instead of broad day, before noon, and he were baying the moon. It was a sound that was unbelievably mournful. Frome paused at the yard gate and snapped his fingers at the huge animal.

"Here, Bud, let's be friends!"

The dog mourned again. A woman came hurriedly through a screen door and Frome started on because there was something vaguely familiar about her and he was becoming fed up with the familiar things and people in Christ's Home. But after he had taken a few steps he turned and spoke to the woman, who stood outside the door, fists on hips, looking after him.

"Does your hound always bay like that?" he asked.

"No, Captain Frome," said the woman, whose name he didn't know at all. "He only does that when a funeral cortege passes. That's why I came to see. I hadn't heard of any funeral, unless," she smiled in friendly fashion, "you're one!"

"No," he said, "no, I'm not. At least I don't *think* so. Maybe, though, if your hound could talk. . . ."

But she had turned and gone back into her house, her screen door slamming behind her. Evan Frome, oddly disturbed, fearful that the day's series of disturbances and improbabilities might be part of the shock which had kept him in the hospital so long, walked very thoughtfully on up the dirt road.

The cemetery was huge. Part of it was clearly quite old and well filled, while a newer portion held only scattered tombstones, monuments and markers. The burial ground was on a rounded knoll, thickly sown with a gray-green grass which grew to a height of over a foot; wind played over the grass, bending it, twisting it, so that its color changed from gray to green, from green to gray, and made the cemetery look as if the markers thrust up from the surface of some secluded tarn. Frome had seen many cemeteries, but none that looked as cheerful, even friendly, as this one.

He turned left into the older section, past a towering monument whose legend he did not then take time to read beyond the fact that it referred to a still older cemetery somewhere else. He followed a deeply rutted path through the center of the graveyard. To right and left the grass grew tall, so that some of the marble and sandstone markers—the latter much worn, so that he could scarcely read their inscriptions—were little more than just visible above the wind-swept tarn.

He turned right. He turned left after twenty paces or so. He turned right again, and stopped before a simple marble monument, the first he had noticed in the older section, noted the names and dates on it: The names of Joseph and Anna Toelle, with the dates of birth and death in each case. Anna, it was clear, was Joseph's wife. She



had died in 1890, eight years before her husband.

So far this day had been one of the strangest Evan Frome had ever spent, even when waking dreams and sleeping nightmares had been so difficult to reason away in the hospital.

**I**T CERTAINLY felt no less strange to stand there and look at the monument of Joseph Toelle and his wife and realize what seemed to be a fact was that Toelle had written a letter to Evan Frome, over twenty years before Evan Frome's birth and christening, to be delivered to that same Evan Frome on his thirtieth birthday.

Something one of the old men in the post office had said came back to him: "*It could happen in Pennsylvania!*"

He shook his head angrily. He didn't believe in hexerei or any thing like it. Some sort of a joke, obviously, was being played upon him. He couldn't imagine those old men in the post office being in on it, nor that Pete Beltz had anything to do with it. If Pete had started the ball rolling he must have foreseen his own death, which was just as queer a thing as what was happening to Evan Frome.

No, it was simpler than that. He'd wager that there were service comrades of his right here in Christ's Home, maybe even watching him somewhere this instant, who had cooked this up as a queer "welcome home" stunt. Since all his friends knew what he had gone through in the hospital it didn't seem likely that a *friend* would set such a chain of events in motion. Still, you couldn't tell about army gents. Some of them had peculiar senses of humor.

"Your names," he said softly to Joseph and Anna, "are being taken in vain. But I'll run it down so they'll have their fun, whoever is doing this."

He turned away, walked a dozen paces, halted, stood stockstill, with that cool feeling perceptible on his spine again, much higher now.

He was positive he had not asked, nor been told by anyone, the location either of the cemetery or of the graves of Joseph and Anna Toelle!

The desire rose in him, keeping pace with

that chill along his spine, to sneak past that woman's hound without attracting the animal's attention.

He didn't make it. The hound bayed and its chain rattled.

## CHAPTER III

### *Dead End*

**T**HE order in which Joseph Toelle had set down the list of creditors seemed as good as any. The first was Adolphe Bruner, the debt four hundred dollars even. Evan Frome did not step onto the Lincoln Highway to visit the house of Adolphe Bruner. There was a path leading back through the privet hedge around the Beltz home, through the backyard of the Dahlings to Bruner's. Evan Frome walked briskly along that path. A bloodhound on a back porch raised a muzzle at him.

"If you bay, sister," he said to her, "I'll paste you one."

The bloodhound thumped a tail on the porch in acknowledgement, and did not bay. Frome went through the break in the Dahling hedge, entered a ramp leading up to a garage door, climbed a long flight of front steps to one of the oldest houses in Christ's Home. He raised and dropped the brass knocker. A young woman came to the door.

"Oh, Captain Frome!" she said. It was heartwarming how quickly village people knew the name of the newcomer; embarrassing, too, because he did not know hers.

"Miss Bruner?" he said.

"No, Miss Bruner is my great aunt. She isn't feeling well, but she is always glad to see visitors. You'll have to speak loudly and clearly to her; she's somewhat deaf. She's ninety-seven years old."

Frome stepped into a neat living room, took a solid, ancient chair the young woman indicated. He shook away the feeling of accustomedness. After all, so many old living rooms were alike; the one in which he had walked softly through childhood was much like this one.

The young woman ran upstairs. Frome watched her speeding ankles with appreciation. He wasn't too old still to be interested in well turned feminine legs. He felt a little

guilty, since by now Harriet must be flying to him.

A very stately old woman, straight and thin as a lath, with a wealth of snow-white hair piled on her head, perfectly coiffured, wearing a choker that must be worth thousands, came downstairs ahead of the young woman. Her ankles, Frome noticed, were as trim as those of her grand niece. She did not wear glasses, this old one, and her black eyes were as piercing as those of a hawk. When she stepped down to where she could see Evan Frome she paused and a thin hand went to her throat. Her mouth opened, but she did not speak until she stood before him, holding his hand.

"I am Captain Evan Frome, Miss Bruner," he said.

"Remarkable!" she replied. "For a moment I thought . . . but there, it's impossible, of course. I *must* be getting old."

"Nothing is impossible in Pennsylvania, Miss Bruner," said Evan Frome, "according to David Vogel, in Christ's Home post office. I think I must have reminded you of someone. Please tell me. It is most important to me."

She laughed lightly.

"I assure you, captain," she said, seating herself in a chair within arm's reach of his own, "that what came to my mind when I saw you could not possibly be important to you. Tell me why you have come to see an old woman?"

He scarcely knew how to begin. He did know that he had no intention of telling even this old woman about the Joseph Toelle letter.

"I came about an old debt, Miss Bruner," he said. "A debt owed to Heinrich Bruner. . . ."

"My brother," she interrupted, "has been dead forty-seven years! I doubt very much if you could have owed him anything. As a matter of fact he was careful, *most* careful, to allow nobody to owe him money!"

Was there a touch of bitterness in her voice? It was easy to imagine things.

"There were no exceptions?" insisted Evan Frome. "Did Joseph Toelle owe him something like four hundred dollars?"

The young woman was singing in the kitchen, as if to assure them she was not lis-

tening. Miss Bruner rose to her full height, so quickly that Frome had the illusion that she was seventeen or eighteen instead of practically at the century mark.

"And if he did, captain?" she said. "What then? How could that possibly interest you?"

Frome took a shot in the dark.

"Perhaps for a reason akin to the reason why you mistook me for someone else when you first saw me—that same Joseph Toelle, for instance!"

The shot missed. Her laughter was tinkling and girlish.

"This is nonsense," said Miss Bruner. "Joseph Toelle has been dead fifty years. His debts could not possibly interest. . . ."

"I came to pay them!" snapped Evan Frome, surprised to hear himself say so. "I did not come to spar with you verbally. I came to pay that four hundred dollars! If I don't tell you why, it simply gives you something to wonder about."

"Young man," said Miss Bruner, "if there were any conceivable reason why you should pay that debt, if such a debt existed, it ceased to exist long ago. Debts outlaw themselves in seven years."

"No!" said Frome. "We may think so, but that doesn't make it so, even if the law affirms it. This one is not outlawed."

The old spinster still stood.

"I don't understand this, Captain Frome," she said, "but I don't like it. It makes me feel as if I'm teetering on the edge of my own grave, and I'd like to live another ninety-seven years yet. Please go! I'll check papers left me by my brother. If there is any debt . . . but no, it's quite impossible."

"You'll telephone me if something shows up?" asked Frome. "With accumulated interest that four hundred dollars would total quite an interesting sum."

HE WENT outside, turned left down a shady macadam road, wondering just when three or four of his old friends, still in uniform like himself, would jump out at him from behind a tree or a privet hedge, and give him the old service horse laugh for his gullibility. Even so, the old postmaster, David Vogel, would have to be in on such a gag, and he just couldn't see the gray haired gentleman in the role.

He harked back to the lack of salutation on the foolscap manuscript purportedly written by Joseph Toelle. The lack still intrigued him. It suggested the possibility that some joker had found the old manuscript, actually left by Joseph Toelle, and had rigged up the envelope. No, he had been named in the body of the letter, as had Harriet Hedr, and some of his war service outlined. His buddies could have know of this—but not of his father's experiences, and death, in World War One.

He turned right and climbed another flight of steps, older even than those before the ancient Bruner home.

"I'll bet every last one of these old houses," he told himself, "vanishes after I visit it! Why not? This is Pennsylvania!"

This time he found an old man, Manfred Richter, who looked to be older than Miss Ilsa Bruner, but was a mere eighty, and quite blind. It gave Frome a turn to have the door open in his face and to look into milky eyes that plainly did not see him.

"Yes?" the voice was quavery. The old man was several inches over six feet tall, and stood proudly erect, looking out over Frome's head. "Who's here?"

"I am Captain Evan Frome, sir," Frome began. "I wish to see Mr. Manfred Richter."

"I'm Richter, young man," said the old one. "Your voice is quite familiar though I'm sure we haven't met. Come in, please. An old man likes visitors."

"I had thought Pennsylvania Dutch folks were wary of strangers," said Frome.

"I guess they are, young man. I used to be myself. But when you are old there is little reason to be wary of anything."

They sat. Frome thought the old man lived alone and wondered how he kept everything so neat and clean—until he saw a ghostly face at the swinging door which led into what had to be the kitchen, and thought again that these old houses and people must disappear into mist as soon as he had visited and gone.

"Tell me, sir," said Frome, "about the familiar sound of my voice. You said it sounded familiar."

"Yes, yes, I did, but it is out of the question, of course. Let us say no more about it."

There was definite anger in the old man's

voice, a tinge of spitefulness. Frome studied the sightless eyes, the apple red cheeks, the snowy silken hair.

"How much did Joseph Toelle owe you when he died?" Frome demanded. "You're thinking of him in some connection, aren't you? It makes you angry."

The old man began to shake. His mouth opened and a foamy fleck appeared at each corner. The shaking frightened Evan Frome. One never knew what a sudden shock would do to the old. Frome hurried to that swinging door, pushed it open.

"I'm afraid I upset Mr. Richter somehow," he said to the old woman in the kitchen. "Maybe you'd better come."

"Martha," said Richter, "look at this young man and tell me—who is he? He just asked me about that scoundrel Toelle. . . ."

The old man could not finish. Evan Frome suddenly had an unreasoning and unreasonable aversion to Manfred Richter. There was no sense in it. He felt that Toelle and Richter must have been bitter enemies for some reason and that somehow he had taken over the feud as well as the debt of Joseph Toelle. It was a queer feeling. He forced himself to help the old woman get the old man upstairs and into his bed, where he was still shaking when Frome left. Downstairs Frome explained his visit as much as he could.

"Business people don't discuss their business with strangers," she told him. "But I'll ask around, and look through Manfred's papers. If there is anything . . . well, I don't know why you should be told, though if there is any conceivable reason why you should pay, it is enough to bury Manfred, anyway."

"Two hundred and fifty dollars with eight percent interest compounded for over fifty years," said Frome. "Yes, the total would bury two or three people."

He wished he hadn't said that. It startled the old woman. He wished he hadn't said a number of things. He wished he hadn't come to Christ's Home. But no, he told himself when he was back out on the macadam road, he didn't wish anything of the sort. This odd series of improbable events was beginning to interest him to an unusual extent. Even if it turned out to be a hoax it

would still be something to talk about around a fire on a cold winter's night.

Ottokar Gettman was next.

Evan Frome turned into a path which led up through a field that appeared not to have been farmed for years. The path looked as if it had been burned into the ground rather than trodden. A queer feeling settled over him like a cloak when he lifted his eyes to the high knoll up which he climbed, to see the rock foundations of what must once have been a huge rambling farmhouse. It probably included a barn, also. The rocks were smoke-blackened. Frome wondered how many human beings and animals had perished in the fire which had taken the buildings. A man with a shotgun in the crook of his arm was poking about in the rubble. Frome was almost on him when the man heard him, whirled, shotgun swinging to firing position.

"Hey, take it easy!" said Frome. "I'm no pheasant. I'm Captain Evan Frome, ex-captain. I'm looking for Ottokar Gettman."

"You're ten years late," said the man with the shotgun. "If you'd come right after the fire you could have poked around with the rest of the neighbors, looking for his bones. Maybe I'll do. I'm Georg Gettman, his only surviving relative. This place came to me after the fire wiped out old Ottokar. Have you been here before, looking for the old man?"

"No, why?"

"Well, it just struck me as queer, is all. Ten years and nobody asks about my uncle. Then I come here to bag a pheasant on the land while making up my mind what to do with it, and you come along. It just seems queer we should happen to meet this particular day. What did you want of old Ottokar?"

FROME phrased it carefully. He mentioned Joseph Toelle without explaining his connection with the long dead postmaster—how *could* he explain it?—and spoke of an ancient debt. The younger man shook his head.

"Ottokar's papers all went in the fire," he said. "I'd be glad to collect on old debts, outlawed or not, but honestly I just don't know. Still, I could use the money. I'll check

around with my lawyer and let you know. Where do you live?"

"I own the Peter Beltz place, on Lincoln Highway."

"I know where it is. Pete and I were fairly well acquainted when we were kids and I sometimes visited old Ottokar. I live in New York City. I'm in the telephone book."

Evan Frome turned and went back down the path. Three complete misses for Joseph Toelle! If after disclaiming debts, the creditors of Joseph now showed up with claims, he would not believe old Joseph, or pay the debts, he decided. "These debts are yours!" indeed! He'd never chased such elusive debts in his life, nor heard of debtors who went around demanding the right to pay debts.

He returned to his own home, where he went over the Toelle letter again, with utmost care, to see whether he had missed anything. It seemed now that the prophecies therein, about his own activities in the Second World War, were wider of the mark than he had first believed. This thing was going to fizzle out, that was clear. What had promised to be his most unusual experience was turning out to be nothing of the kind.

He decided to take his time about visiting the other four "creditors" of Joseph Toelle. A housekeeper had reported for work, an Amish woman who was the best cook and best bargainer Evan Frome had ever met. She was in her sixties and probably had never been pretty even in her 'teens, but what she didn't know about Pennsylvania Dutch food was not worth knowing.

Auburn-haired, efficient, athletic Harriet Hedr, who arrived two days later, fell in love with Hedvig at once.

"She makes it perfect, Evan," said Harriet. "We'll keep her until death do us part. What do we do first in this marvelous village? You know, Evan, I felt as if I were returning home after a long absence, the instant I reached Lancaster!"

"No, Harriet!" he said. "No! Whatever else, but not that? You've never been here before."

"No," she looked at him as she had often looked at him while the shock was wearing off in the hospital, questioningly. "What do we do first, darling?"

"Get married as fast as we can. I under-

stand that people hereabouts are opposed to couples living in sin!"

"I'm opposed to it myself," she retorted. That questioning look was still in her eyes, but Frome did not explain until they were safely married. Since neither had ever been in Christ's Home before, the Beltz house became automatically a honeymoon house. There was no reason to travel anywhere. Besides, both had traveled far too much; both were eager to settle down and stay put.

Frome told Harriet about the letter. She listened quietly. Then she took the letter and read it through herself, carefully. Frome left out some of the queer things about it—like going to the cemetery when he couldn't have known its location, visiting the first three Toelle creditors as if he had done it every day of his life. No, there was such a thing as too much.

TOGETHER the newlyweds checked on the four other creditors. They came up against a complete dead end. If Joseph Toelle ever owed any one of the seven, no slightest record of it remained. Even Manfred Richter, who became angry to palsy when he heard the name of Joseph Toelle, had nothing to report.

"So we're robbed of a weird story, darling," Frome told Harriet. "I was making too much of it, I guess. You know, I even worked out a theory about why Joseph Toelle didn't put any sort of salutation on that ancient manuscript."

"Yes, what was the reason?"

"It was a memorandum," said Frome, grinning uncertainly. "I've made lots of them, so I wouldn't forget administrative details. But I never addressed one to myself!"

Harriet gasped.

"You mean you think that Joseph Toelle, writing to you, believed he was actually writing to himself—and automatically left off the salutation for that reason?"

"No, no, I don't, but wouldn't it have made an interesting story? I got to thinking of all sorts of things, about being literally born again, and again. I could just see all the dead rising from all the cemeteries, starting in as babies again. . . ."

"I don't know," said Harriet thought-

fully, "whether people would like to know such a thing to be true. Many people at least say they wouldn't go through it again for anything."

"But every last one would jump at the chance if by some miracle it could be offered. However, we have nothing. It has simply petered out. Not even one of Joseph's creditors produced a dollar of the fourteen thousand I still, thank heaven, have in a New York bank!"

## CHAPTER IV

### *Whispers In the Years*

THERE was a sudden loud, prolonged knocking on the outer door. Visitors in Christ's Home, Frome had discovered, always made sure that people behind doors could hear when they knocked. The doors had to be sturdy to endure it.

Frome opened the door.

A slight, dried up man of perhaps fifty, who couldn't have weighed over a hundred and ten, bowed apologetically. Frome noted his brief case.

"I waited," said the slender man, "in consideration of your marriage, to give you a chance to more or less get settled down. I'm Christopher Berg, of Lancaster. I'm a lawyer. I've come," he said apologetically, bowing again as Harriet asked him in, took his hat and indicated the easy chair, "about the mortgage on this house."

Harriet and her husband exchanged glances.

"Mortgage?" said Frome stupidly. "Peter Beltz gave me this house. He said it was free and clear. At least I *think* he did."

"There has been an error," said Berg. "Most regrettable, of course. I imagine that Peter Beltz did not know of the mortgage. It seems incredible that such an obstacle to title should have been missed, but so it appears."

"Dollars to doughnuts," said Frome, "the mortgage runs to. . . ."

"Fourteen thousand dollars!" said Harriet.

"Oh, so you already know!" said Berg, relieved. "That makes it much easier, of course! It is difficult," he said, fidgeting, "to know just where to begin. It is also

embarrassing. And as a lawyer I should advise you that you could probably fight this claim successfully."

"Why not begin," suggested Evan Frome, "with Joseph Toelle, the late Joseph Tolle?"

"Of course," said Berg. "Yes, of course. For if you had not asked people about him and started a search of old records, I would probably not be here now. There are seven persons directly involved, besides Joseph Toelle and the grandfather of Peter Beltz, from whom you had this house. Of the seven persons, two only are living. But there are heirs."

"Once again," said Frome, "may I suggest you begin at the beginning."

"Well, it starts with Peter Beltz, the grandfather of young Peter Beltz, who gave you this house. I know he gave it to you because the will is a matter of record. Grandfather Beltz and Joseph Toelle were close friends all their lives. Grandfather Beltz helped Toelle secure appointment as postmaster of Christ's Home."

"All this is a little before *your* time, Counselor Berg?" said Frome.

"I am a third generation of Berg lawyers in Lancaster," said Berg. "My grandfather was a contemporary of Toelle and Beltz. I got the papers from among those belonging to my late grandfather. But to continue. Joseph Toelle got some idea—not the first nor even the last, so I have heard—for a revolutionary invention. He couldn't possibly promote it on his meager salary as a postmaster. But he was persuasive. . . ."

"So he induced friends to invest," said Frome.

"You are as certain of that as if you were there!" said Berg.

"I've a yen to invent things myself," said Frome, smiling at Harriet Frome. "But go on. I could probably help a lot with this, up to a certain point. The bank wouldn't loan Toelle three thousand one hundred eleven dollars, without proper security. So he set out to get it from friends like Bruner, Gettman, Richter, and four other friends. Just how it gets to Grandfather Beltz I don't see—unless he went on each of the seven notes that totalled the amount I have just mentioned?"

"Exactly so!" said Berg, his brows lifted.

"The total you mention is correct. Joseph Toelle persuaded those seven people to invest with him. Beltz went on his notes, which the bank refused to accept because Beltz's only security was this house in which we are sitting—built by that same Grandfather Beltz! The house was already mortgaged, and Beltz was struggling to pay it off. Just the same, he paid the interest on all those notes until he had paid off his own first mortgage. Then . . ."

"Then," said Frome, "he took back the notes and gave those seven people a joint first mortgage on this house! But how did Peter Beltz, the grandson, remain in ignorance of it?"

"That is where you might escape this mortgage," said Berg, "but you might also lose the house which, I assure you, is worth considerably more than fourteen thousand dollars, probably twice as much, perhaps even more. I think the seven creditors must have got together at some time, after the death of Joseph Toelle, and declared a moratorium on interest payments on this mortgage. They all knew that Joseph Toelle left nothing from which anything could be recovered. . . ."

"Wrong!" said Frome. "He left a letter. The Toelles, I gather, pay their debts."

"Letter?" repeated Berg. "I know of no letter."

Evan Frome grinned at Harriet, who grinned back. Both were enjoying themselves immensely. It was grand to be in love, and know something nobody else could possibly know. Frome wondered just what Berg would think, do, and say, if he were to show him the Joseph Toelle letter. He knew that queer stories were already going the rounds and decided to let well enough alone.

"The mortgage," said Berg, "was filed and gradually forgotten. There may have been quarrels about it, among the mortgagees, but no record remains of them. Nor would we have found the mortgage now, if you had not asked strange questions, Captain Frome. Now, the question is, what is to be done about it? The mortgage now clouds the title to this house, unless you accept it as just—together with accumulated interest."

"Do the two living creditors," asked

Frome, "and the heirs of the five dead ones, wish me to pay the interest and leave the mortgage face at three thousand one hundred eleven dollars, or accept the mortgage at its present total principal and interest of fourteen thousand dollars? I can do either one. I'd prefer, temporarily, to pay interest on the fourteen thousand dollars. What's the interest rate?"

"Two percent higher than is now legal," said Berg ruefully. "It will amount to eight hundred and forty dollars a year."

"I'll pay the first year, now, by check, and let the principal ride for the time being!"

"The creditors will be glad to have the money," said Berg, rising. "I'll see that all details are taken care of, and include my fee. . . ."

"Let me point out, sir," said Frome, "that I have not retained you. Take it out of this check. You're retained by the creditors, remember?"

WHEN the little man had bowed himself out, Frome and Harriet looked at each other. Frome was excited. He couldn't help it. Happy, also, to have some money left.

Frome began to laugh. Harriet sat down beside him. They went into each other's arms.

"Nobody," said Harriet, "ever loved as we do."

"Of course not," said Frome.

"So you might as well let me know why you laugh to discover you owe fourteen thousand dollars!"

"I was just thinking. What if people knew about past lives, if any, and were able to check back on them? I was wondering how I would feel if I could follow my bone trail back through the ages, from grave to grave, from ocean bed to ashes, to fossils. If I am Joseph Toelle, I am probably the only man who ever stood in the flesh and looked at his own grave, filled with his *past!*"

"Why don't we go have a look now?" said Harriet. "I don't hold much with all that this seems to imply, but I'd like to take a look at Joseph's grave."

Frome hopped to his feet. As he did so he hoped that the telephone would ring. There was something he wanted to try, but

Harriet must not know what it was, or even suspect. But as the two slipped into their coats, his mind worked at top speed.

"You run on ahead, dearest," said Frome. "I want to get a fresh handkerchief and a package of cigarettes. I'll catch you before you've gone very far."

He waited with bated breath, as he hurried to the stairs, for her to ask the simple and obvious question: "Which direction?" But she did not ask it. She said: "Okay, darling, but I'm a fast walker, remember?"

Harriet went out, closed the door. Frome gave her a few seconds, then went to the window, looked out. Harriet turned left on Lincoln Highway, stopped at the first intersection, looked carefully right and left, hurried into the road that led away east. Frome waited until she vanished around the corner of the old house beside the road. Then, without either a fresh handkerchief or a package of cigarettes, he started out.

Harriet seemed to be in a terrific hurry. She didn't look back. It was almost as if she were running away. She didn't pause on the steep pebbled dirt road that led up the slant to the cemetery. If anything, she walked faster when the chained dog bayed mournfully.

Frome hurried after his best beloved.

But she did not look back, nor did he overtake her until she stopped. She was still standing, a rapt expression on her face, looking down at the Toelle headstone.

He put his arm around her.

"Just who," he said softly, "told you how to get here? I didn't!"

"Obviously no one needed to tell me, darling." She turned and looked at him. Both looked back at the old headstone showing that Anna Toelle had died in 1890, Joseph Toelle in 1898. Then the two newlyweds looked at each other, deeply into each other's eyes.

"Well, at last we *know!*" said Harriet.

"Yes, we do," said Frome. "But just *what*, for certain?"

"That the profound love of Anna and Joseph lasted! I hope they had many happy lives together! But *please*, Evan, no inventions!"