

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 26

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 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. English office: Charles Lavelle, 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 WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Top of the World

By TARLETON COLLIER

*Would you like to be able to foresee the future?
Then read this tale*

IT HAPPENED in Miami, in Flagler Street. With the idea of asking somebody where he could find the transient bureau, Jones paused in front of one of those curio-souvenir shops with its glitter of gaudy wares fashioned from shells, its jewelry of coral, imitation jade, lapis lazuli; small bottles of orange blossom perfumery; horses, elephants, Scotties carved in bone; colored post-cards, ash-trays shaped like skulls, like dice, like cartoon characters; aquarium turtles with painted backs and all the other catch-penny plunder that is displayed for tourists. Next to the door sat a dark-haired girl, beside a cage in which sprawled striped reptiles and which bore a sign: "Baby Alligators, \$1—We Ship Anywhere." Jones asked the girl.

Without a sound or any other stir she fluttered olive fingers in a gesture that directed him to the interior of the shop, then continued to stare heavy-lidded past him into the bright sunlight of the street. Jones paused a moment, his face sharpened with irritation. His feet ached. He would have shuffled along the sidewalk, but some movement amid the clutter of the shop attracted him and he went inside.

An old man stood awaiting him behind a counter which held a row of grotesque masks carved in the fibrous husks of coconuts. He might have been himself one of the effigies conjured into life, so brown and wizened he appeared, his eyes as bright as the glistening counterfeits in the carven faces.

"Is there anything you want?" he inquired in a voice of deep music.

"I couldn't buy a stamp," said Jones. "I want to know where is the transient bureau."

The amazing voice seemed to melt in a chuckle, to savor a pleasant dissent. "Ah! That is no wish at all. Your real desire lies in your reason for wanting to know. Why?"

"I want something to eat," said Jones. "I'm hungry. I want a bed. I'm tired."

The unctious voice was broken by a kind of scornful laughter. "Is that all?"

"Ain't that enough?" asked Jones. "But since you ask me, I'd like to have two dollars to buy a ticket on Racketeer in the fifth race at Arlington Downs tomorrow."

The other's voice rose in a startling thunder. "What about your soul, man?"

"What about my belly?" asked Jones.

"You are a fool," said the curio merchant.

"If you wasn't so old," said Jones, "I'd smack you one."

"Ah!" The music dwindled in a sighing fall, as if by stratagem of softness to beguile an evil mood. "I may be your friend."

"I haven't got a friend," said Jones. "I don't want a friend."

The booming of the old man's voice may have been triumph, yet there was in it a vague bantering mockery. "Behold! The simple existence that should lead to contentment! Your wants are few,

you have no burdens because you love nobody."

"I love my kid," said Jones with an odd passion, "and don't you forget it. I'd die for him."

"Live for him," said the old man. He peered past Jones with a sort of blind look. "Go back to him. He needs you."

Jones laughed bitterly. "You're telling me? Well, tell me how I can go, old-timer. If the transient bureau——"

The little brown man leaned toward him with a quick eagerness. He raised a skinny finger. His voice was bated, and now a discord of excitement had entered to mar its melody. "I have something for you and your boy." He strained farther forward. His eyes were bright, and narrowed as by some shrewd intent. "Not our best, but sufficient for one with your simple requirements."

From the little finger of his left hand, the old man drew a ring of bronze. His hands were clammy, but there was strength of steel in their clutch upon Jones as he slipped the ring on the finger of the younger man. It was a strange thing, but the band which had come from his bony talon fitted snugly upon the stout hand of the other.

Jones looked at it with a sour eye, turning his hand. The ring was worn and grimy, with a sort of dim hieroglyph on its back. Not worth a cent.

"What's the gag?" asked Jones.

"It is yours now," said the old man with a deep sigh. He seemed to shrink, to lose life. "Its power is yours. Will it profit you to possess a sight of the future? You have it now—with that ring—one day ahead."

"Hooley," said Jones.

The old man smiled wearily. "Only one day. Tomorrow. But that is eternity. I have seen that I shall die tomorrow."

"Nuts," said Jones, and began pulling the ring from his finger.

The old man's gesture stopped him. "What do you want to know? It will be only what you ask to know. Not everything. Nor can you change anything."

Jones paused, seemed to droop expectantly. A blindish look came into his eyes. Then he gave a cry you could have heard from the street.

"God Almighty!" he said. "It's Rose Marie in the fifth race!"

He turned, lunging, toward the door; turned back so sharply that he staggered.

"Thanks, pal," he said, then was gone, trailed by the ghost of a chuckle.

JONES strode along Flagler Street to the hive of Second Avenue. He knew a place to make a bet, but when he reached it, he stopped short outside and cursed as his hands clapped his empty pockets. He stood brooding at the corner while the lights changed many times, red and green, then darted heedlessly into a red light and kept walking. It was pitch-dark when he paused in a quiet street, blinked away his daze in the incandescence of a shop window and sidled into a doorway at the tap of footsteps. A man approached, immaculate in light trousers and belted sport coat.

"I've got to have two dollars," said Jones, stepping in front of him.

The man made a gesture of impatience. "Get out of——"

Jones smashed his fist upon the words and the man went down. His head struck the metal base of the plate glass and he fell in the inert loose sprawl of a dummy. For Jones, it was the matter of less than four seconds to lift his bill-fold.

Downtown, the book-maker was mildly sardonic on the point of Rose Marie, but took Jones' two dollars and gave him a ticket. There was still seven dollars in

the bill-fold, and Jones found a late barber shop and asked for the works. Afterward he ate, paid for a dollar room in a hotel, and sent a telegram to a town in West Virginia:

"Tell Grandma to get you ready for trip. Be good. Daddy."

Rose Marie paid \$109.60 at the track, but Jones collected only the bookie's fifteen-dollar limit. He left six dollars on a parlay in the next day's races, looked at the sport clothes in the windows along Flagler Street, bought a shirt and a three-dollar necktie.

When he collected the next day, he bought shoes and a pearl-gray hat; the day after, a suit of clothes.

The sky was blue and the crowds thickened day by day . . . Yale to beat Princeton . . . Fisherman's Luck at Tia Juana . . . Machine Gun at Pimlico . . . Alabama and fifteen points . . . The daily double . . . The right dog on the nose . . . U. S. Steel to buy . . . Nice over Ritchie . . .

THE boy came down early in December, and Jones, in splendor, met him and the grandmother at the station. Jones sobbed happily as the kid leaped into his arms.

"You little mutt! We're sitting pretty! On top of the world, pal!"

The six-year-old treble was ecstasy. "Daddy! I hardly knew you!"

"How do you like the old man's layout, you bozo? Look at the car! Wait till you see our shack!"

The ocean was green, with white lace as a fringe . . . October cotton for three-point rise . . . Sweetheart Mine at Epsom Downs . . . Guffey to beat Reed in Pennsylvania . . . Insull to be acquitted . . . Navy over Army . . . General Motors to sell . . . General Motors to buy . . . Londos five to one . . . Buy wheat . . . Notre Dame . . .

JONES swung the car southward from Coral Gables, swung across the canal into the twisting road to Tahiti Beach.

"You been here a month, bimbo. How'd you like to go to Monte Carlo?"

The kid squirmed cozily under his arm. "If you go too, daddy."

Jones laughed, deep-throated and content. On top of the world.

Sparkling, the bay came upon them around a bend.

"Tomorrow——" Jones began. He slowed the car. He leaned forward, seemed to peer, his thumb stroking the ring upon his little finger. Suddenly he screamed, jammed his foot upon the brake so sharply that the car quivered and the steering-wheel smashed into his chest.

"Daddy!"

"Bimbo! Kid!"

The mangroves moaned in the wind. The kid whimpered in fright and pain from Jones' savage clutch.

"Don't leave your old man, bimbo!"

"No, daddy. You hurt!"

The automobile careened, roaring, as Jones turned it around with a single wild sweep of the wheel. It rocked crazily as he drove it at eighty miles with one hand, the other holding the kid.

At the house in the oleanders he thrust the boy into the arms of the old woman, the grandmother.

"If you let him out of your sight—you let him in the street—I'll kill you!" he panted.

He dashed away in the car. Sunlight and shadows were blurs. Time was a blur. The gift shop in Flagler Street was gone, a fruit-juice booth was in its place. A woman there, edging nervously away from Jones, said she had heard the shop was closed when somebody died.

Jones wailed, then collapsed, sobbing.

"Died!" he babbled. "Died! I can't do nothing! I can't do nothing for my kid!"

Suddenly snarling, he tore the ring from his finger and flung it into the street. He shouted: "Damn you, devil!"

Lurching into his automobile, he fumbled for the handle of the door, to close it, and his hand struck the pocket in its side. His fingers jerked, stiffened, upon the harsh outlines of the object it contained.

"Bimbo!" he cried wildly.

The woman in the tropical fruit booth, who had been watching him, called out as he raised the pistol to his head, but above everything was the sound of the shot. In an instant people were running along the street to peer into the bright new car, that splendid car, at the limp huddle of the man who for a little while had been on top of the world, where no man may stay.
