

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XIX

NUMBER 6

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, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4 London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unmailed 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.

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Under the Eaves

By HELEN M. REID

To and fro, to and fro in the shadows swung the form of the dead man—a five-minute story

THUMP—thump—thump. Spasmodically, above the wailing of the wind and the dismal battering of the rain against the windows, the ominous sound was repeated.

Thump—thump—thump.

Something was hitting against the side of the house—something heavy. Hannah rose uneasily and laid down her sewing. Susan would be coming for the dress in the morning, but she could not keep her mind on the stitches.

She thought resentfully of Judy. The ingrate! That was the thanks you got for twenty years of slaving. To be left alone with nothing to listen to but the wind and the rain and that hideous thumping.

For perhaps the twentieth time that night she pulled the shade back from one of the windows and stared out into the darkness. Thump—thump. The sound was close now, but beyond the window was an abyss of blackness in which she could see nothing. Shivering, she sat down once more in front of the grate, where a fire struggled fitfully against the fury of the storm without and the semi-darkness of the room within. In its wavering circle of light she sat erect and defiant, the flames outlining her sharp features and thin knot of graying hair.

It wasn't because she was getting old, she told herself sternly. A night like this would get on anybody's nerves. If Nate hadn't cleared out as he did— She frowned impatiently.

"Where'd they a been without me, I'd like to know," she muttered. "And now they don't care what becomes o' me. Neither one o' them."

Anyway, thank goodness, the thumping had stopped. But what was that? Someone knocking? Who on earth would be venturing out in such a storm? But the knocking was repeated.

Resolutely she threw the door open. A rush of rain and wind blurred her vision for an instant, and in that instant a man pushed past her, a tall man, thin and somewhat stooped, with straggling gray hair that hung dripping about his seamed face; for in spite of the roughness of the night he wore no hat.

Hannah turned to face him; then abruptly she slammed the door shut and locked it.

"So you've come back to the old woman, have you?" She confronted him scornfully. "Found out nobody else would put up with you, I suppose."

He made no reply but settled himself in his favorite chair by the grate.

"That's right," she went on bitingly. "Make yourself comfortable. How you've got nerve to come back after walking out on me like you did I don't know."

"Seems to me you told me to walk out." His words were pleasant but disturbingly sarcastic. She noticed that his usual docility of manner was entirely gone.

"Better get on some dry clothes," she snapped. "You'll catch your death of cold."

A faintly sarcastic smile was his only reply. He made no movement, and for once she was at a loss what to say. She felt baffled and confused.

"You told me to go," he repeated, "and I went. Why do you blame me?"

She felt her face growing hot at the quiet rebuff.

"Blame you?" she retorted. "I blame you for being a shiftless, good-for-nothing fool, that's what. Look at Clem Hanks. You don't find him dilly-dallying his time away, and what's the result? He makes more money in a day than you'll ever make in a month. And if there's anything more useless than a man that can't make a decent living, I don't know what it is."

"You convinced me of that."

Something in his voice made her look at him intently. "Nate," she said slowly, "you know I don't mean things half as bad as I say them. If I'd a thought you had spunk enough to get out I'd a never told you to and that's God's truth."

She pointed to the sewing that lay where she had left it. "If it wasn't for the work Susan Hanks gives me to do I don't know how I'd keep body and soul together. Now you're back, maybe——"

"Won't Judy help?"

She fidgeted under the gaze of his steady eyes. "That girl——" She checked herself.

"Well?"

"She left after you did."

"Because——"

"Because she turned against her own mother, that's why. Didn't I do everything for her with my own hands? and now she takes sides with you. I'm sure I don't know why."

"Maybe I *was* of some use," he suggested.

"Land knows I'm glad enough you came back. I don't know what's come over me, but what with you gone and Judy gone, this place is like a tomb."

Thump—thump—thump. There it was again!

"I wish you'd see what that is," she

said. "It gave me quite a turn when I was alone, but now you're here——"

The fire had burned low. Nate's chair seemed to have drawn back into the shadows.

"You won't mind, will you?" She was not in the habit of asking that question, but tonight seemed different.

Thump—thump—thump.

"Nate!"

A sudden flare from the dying fire illuminated the room. Nate's chair was empty!

"Nate! Nate!" she called wildly.

The wind shrieked around the house in a paroxysm of fury. The rain lashed against the windows. There was no other answer.

Thump—thump.

A cold trembling seized her. She ran to the window and threw it open. Thump—thump. The thing was almost close enough for her to touch. She reached out. Her hand closed on a sodden sleeve, a man's arm. She screamed. The next instant she had swayed and fallen.

When she opened her eyes she was stretched out in bed with Susan Hanks bending over her.

"Clem heard you scream and came and got me to look after you," she explained.

"Is he—dead?"

Susan looked away. "Yes," she said.

"Can't they do—something?" There was a note of pleading in Hannah's harsh voice. "He was in here," she said. "I was talkin' to him just before I found him—out there."

Susan left the room quickly. Hannah heard her speaking to someone in a low voice. Then the words of Clem's reply came to her distinctly.

"Better send for Judy," he said. "She is delirious. Nate was hanging from those eaves all evening. The doctor says he's been dead for hours."