

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1945

Cover by Pete Kuhlhoff

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*Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor.

LAMONT BUCHANAN, Associate Editor.



Welcome Home!

By CHARLES KING

“COME forth *Abrimanes* . . . come forth *Zamiel* . . . come forth *Sammael* . . . come forth *Belial* . . .”

On and on droned the emotionless voice that seemed to have been spawned from

some dank sepulchre. The invocation to the Dark Angel continued, punctuated only by the occasional sharp intakes of breath of the straining spectators.

“Come forth *Abaddon* . . . come forth *Apollyon* . . . come forth—” and someone

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

It takes more than a little time to shake off preciously preserved witch fancies and superstitions

screamed weakly as a dim, formless shape whisked over us for an instant, and was gone.

Another shape, and still another, fled noiselessly over our heads. The short moans that had escaped the assemblage at odd intervals now became more frequent . . . swelled into a gruesome counterpoint to the vocal mad melody of the Invocator.

Faster and faster slewed the shapes above us . . . sharper and sharper grew the uncontrolled crises about me . . . and then my flashlight sent its inquisitive beam along the floor. In that one instant I'd seen enough. My free hand crept toward the wall-switch above me and flicked it. Bathed in yellow light, the room revealed its occupants.

A tight, strained group that looked straight ahead with unseeing eyes. Almost tangible in its blanketing effect, the Terror of just a moment ago still clung heavily to them. Only the Invocator seemed unchained by the spell she'd invoked. Her eyes were fixed upon me . . . glaring with anger. So I spoke quickly:

"Show's over, folks . . . another phony exposed!"

With a screech the old hell-cat bounded across the floor. I caught her in time to keep her raking nails from exploring my face.

"Stop sitting around like fools! Take a look underneath that table!"

My sharp command seemed to release the others from their lethargy. As in a dream they arose and wandered loosely over to the table at which the squalling, old Invocator had been sitting.

"Well? What do you see?"

One shocked voice made answer: "Raised buttons on the floor—"

"Exactly," and here I had to tighten my grip on the furious old woman whose spittle was running down her cursing mouth, "Exactly! Those buttons controlled the movements of the shapes that so frightened you. They were suspended from wires. . . ."

"But . . . but . . ."

"I know You're wondering about the real, unmistakable terror that gripped you—that paralyzed you. You were sold a very solid bill of goods."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at it this way," I explained. "This old crone, I'm still holding, represents her-

self as a Witch; claims to have direct contact with those of the Nether World. For a fee she promises to prove same. Well, whether you like it or not, you are half-inclined to believe her—maybe because of the delicious terror involved . . . *Ouch!*"

I WIPED away the trickle of blood from the side of my cheek where the old she-devil had finally succeeded in sideswiping me. I thrust her away from me, threw her a few *lira notes*, and swept my friends out of the house. Later, in my own diggings, we dragged out some of the local *vino* and gave it a good play. I was at the window admiring the awesome grandeur of the brooding Alps when a voice recalled me to my duties as spook-buster.

"Carry on with your explanation, Jules. You were saying that we half-invited the old girl's atmosphere—and that we half-believed her before she started."

"Well, didn't you? Didn't the group of you *insist* on trotting over for a seance, even though I'd warned you that there are no such things as ghosts, succuba, wraiths, lemures or anything else that fake mediums batten on. . . ."

"But, Jules—"

"Let me finish. All of you know that I've been traipsing around the world for years exposing just such quackery as we sat through tonight. As a kid I got too damn many scares in the small Pennsylvania Dutch town where I was born. I spent too many sleepless nights, scared almost to death, because some old fool filled my ears with mystico nonsense. . . ."

"So you devoted yourself to the breaking down of all those who claim to *know* that such things exist. You've incessantly chased down rumors from Transylvania to Transjordanian . . . but we know all that—"

"Then why don't you see for yourself that people will never be free of mumbo-jumbo—and those crooks who exploit it—if you calmly and completely fall for as amateurish a setting of auto-suggestion and hocus-pocus as we all saw performed for us tonight?"

Hot? You're darn right I was hot. In my own way I'd made some sort of reputation in my capacity as witch-breaker, or anything else you want to call me. My monographs on the subject had been widely translated and

distributed. And now, in Italy where I'd gone to vacation with a few friends, I'd had to work just as hard to convince these supposedly intellectual people as those ancient die-hards, who still buried rinds, animal hearts, and other assorted garbage, under a full moon. Was all my work for nothing? Were people so perverse or stupid that they needed *individual* convincing? It was all very disappointing. . . .

"Don't take it so hard, Jules. We believe you. Really, we do. It's just that . . ."

"Cut it," I grunted, "I'm tired of people telling me that it takes a little time to shake off preciously preserved fancies and superstitions. It's nothing more than romantic foolishness—kid stuff."

LATER . . . when I was alone . . . I was sorry for the tirade I'd subjected my friends to. After all, they were no worse than others. Gullible, always on the lookout for new thrills, ready to be intimidated and fleeced—but that was their business. What I needed was a vacation from the sorry business I'd selected as my life work. I toyed with the idea until I'd convinced myself. I hadn't been home since my Mother had died, some ten years before. So I cabled my Father.

The notion conceived, the plan was put into action. It took very little time to make my good-bys, pack my bags and board a steamer homeward. The trip was uneventful, most of my time being spent at the ship's bar where the bartender was properly congenial and silent by turn.

And then the slow, majestic passage, accompanied by hootings, whistles and bravely grunting tugs as we eased past the Statue of Liberty toward a Manhattan pier. By this time I was so eager for my long unseen Father and home town, that I stopped for just one quickie at the Hotel Pennsylvania bar and then made for the Pennsylvania Station itself just a few yards away.

All through the night my thoughts kept in rhythm with the clacking wheels. I was too excited to sleep. Yes, the nearer I got to the little Pennsylvania Dutch town that had been my home, the more I realized how I needed its slow pace, its drowsy quiet.

Hours of patience were rewarded by the coming of morning. I was too pent up to

eat . . . just made a quick toilet and waited. And then, and then at long last, the great chain of cars slid into my station. I tossed my bags onto the siding and vaulted after them.

I had sent a telegram ahead to my Father, but he wasn't at the station. I reflected that the years were catching up with him and he was probably still in bed. In that case, I thought, it would be better to eat at the local hotel and disturb the old man's repose as little as possible. It would also give me a welcome chance to look about the town and see if it had changed.

The walk to the single hotel the town boasted afforded me great happiness. I now knew my stay would be one of maundering peace . . . for everything was the same. There were the sleepy little stores, companionably slumbering with their proprietors through the years . . . there were the frugal and pious Amish and Mennonites bringing their farm wares to the Square. . . .

"GOOD morning to ye, stranger," placidly announced the wrinkled hotel clerk.

"Good morning to you, too—but I am not a stranger."

Wrinkles dissolved, coagulated and then made room for additional ones as the weighty problem was wrestled with. Then, "No . . . cannot say I recall ye. . . ."

"Shame on you," I scolded, "has Jules Swartz' son changed so much in ten years that his old friends no longer know him?"

It is nice to be remembered by acquaintances of the past . . . I confess it does pleasant things to the ego . . . but I was completely unprepared for what followed.

"You . . . you are *really* Jules Swartz' son?"

"That is what I have just told you."

"You haven't been home since your Mother died?"

"That is also true."

The old man was so intent on getting his words out that he practically stuttered them: "And . . . and didn't ye leave town at an early age?"

This was getting monotonous. I don't usually take to questions about my doings. But, I reflected, there was certainly no harm in answering the garrulous old man. It

would, possibly, give him some welcome gossip to retail during the day.

"Yes, I left home at an early age, coming back just once in a while for visits. . . ."

"And d'ye remember what your Mother died of?"

Now I was downright annoyed. So I determined to ruffle the feathers of this talkative old male hen. "You probably know that better than I do myself, my inquisitive host. I was in Mexico when I got the letter about her succumbing to heart failure. But, of course, if *you* know better. . . ."

My obvious sarcasm was just as obviously wasted. Taught me a good lesson, too. This was the last time I'd ever bandy words with hotel clerks grown moronic with age. His next words were the convincer:

"Maybe I do know better . . . maybe I do. . . ."

That was quite enough. Bags in hand, I swung out the front door and away before my homecoming could be soured by a loquacious old loon. The good, clean air reminded me that I was hungry and my eye caught a red-painted combination bar and lunchroom at the further corner. I'd never seen it before. Definitely an innovation in town.

It was clean enough inside, and I was soon wolfing down a generous platter of eggs and bacon. The coffee was surprisingly good and I said as much to the lone man running the place. He grinned.

"Glad somebody around here appreciates the stuff—most've them complain it's too strong."

"That's the way I like it."

"Me, too, stranger."

"I'm not exactly a stranger. That is, I was born in this town and I'm returning to visit my Father."

"That's nice. Who is he?"

"Jules Swartz. I've the same name. . . ."

"*Oh!*"

HALFWAY to my mouth the coffee-cup suddenly halted. A few drops spilled onto the counter. Then, slowly, carefully, I set the cup down. That "Oh" had been too sharply accented; too full of provocative meaning. And I was getting more than a little weary of having people shy in a startled way at mention of my Father or myself.

"Tell me," and I was making my voice as

steady as possible, "just why everybody, so far, acts as if there were a bad smell around when I mentioned *Jules Swartz*."

He carefully wiped the counter with a damp rag before he spoke. It was easy to see that he was a type who thought long and hard before answering a question which might prove serious. He was marshalling his words.

Then:

"I haven't been in this town long, Str—uh—Mr. Swartz. Personally, I don't *know* anything."

"But you've heard, eh?"

"Yeah . . . I've heard."

"What?"

"Oh, you know how folks rattle along in a town like this. . . ."

"I ought to know. That was what originally made me run away. Pennsylvania Dutch and morbid mysticism seem to make a steady team. . . ."

"That's kind of what I mean, Mr. Swartz. With the job I got, and with people in and out of here all the time, I just can't help hearing things—picking things up."

"Tell me."

"Remember it ain't what *I* say. . . ."

Impatience clawed at me. "I know . . . I know . . . you're only repeating what you've heard. . . ."

"That's right."

I could have cheerfully throttled him. "Go on—"

And then it came.

"People keep disappearin'!"

"Really? You mean townspeople?"

"Nope. People passin' through. Salesmen, tourists and such. . . ."

"But what has that got to do with my Dad?"

"Well . . . there was your Mother too. . . ."

He jumped back, slamming himself against the wall back of the counter, as my hand curved toward him.

"Hey! I'm only repeatin' what you *wanted* me to tell you!"

I listened to the violent pumping of my heart; looked at my trembling hand. "Better set up a drink. No. Make it a couple—one for each of us."

Wordless, he splashed a couple of ryes into tumblers. We soundlessly toasted each

other and then threw the fiery stuff down fast.

"Let's kill another round!"

"I guess we better had, Mr. Swartz."

Soothed by the strong liquor I lit a cigarette, and was pleased to see that my hands were almost normal again. "Go on . . . I may as well hear all of it."

He looked at me carefully, and then, apparently reassured by what he saw, "Well, folks claim that your Mother didn't die of heart failure. . . ."

"What do they claim?"

"They say—uh—she knocked herself off!"

"Suicide?"

"Yeah."

"But . . . but why?"

"There was those people supposed to have disappeared—"

I gripped the counter edge until my fingers hurt badly. "Man! Stop torturing me! What about those people?"

"They say . . . I hear . . . those folks were last seen at *your house!*"

INSUFFERABLE beasts! Ignorant, vicious, scandal-mongering savages! The same tongues, pregnant with old-world fear and prejudice, that had driven me to leave the town, had slain my saintly Mother. Those tongues, with the precision of probing knives, had dug her grave and then plagued her into it. I had run away from it. She had stayed, fought her battle . . . and lost.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Swartz."

"They . . . my parents . . . were still taking in tourists, weren't they?"

"Yeah. People that couldn't find accommodations at the hotel used to go to your place. Seemed to be an agreement between the hotel and your folks."

There always had been. The good ground provides food, but money is always scarce to a small-town farmer. We'd taken in many boarders and transients in the past. The extra few dollars had always been more than welcome.

"But the hotel stopped sendin' people over some time ago."

I awoke from my perusal of the past. Those words meant we were now getting to the heart of the matter.

"You mean . . . after my Mother died?"

"No—before. It was soon after the hotel owner told your folks that it . . . it happened."

"How . . . how is my Father?"

He coughed slightly. "Haven't seen much of him, lately."

"You mean since my Mother . . ."

"Yeah."

That was why the broken-hearted old man hadn't met me at the station. He'd been too proud to run the cruel gauntlet of eyes and tongues that would inevitably follow him; and too kind to include my company in his and force me to share his sad sorrow. It had happened anyway. My informant's voice rode into my reverie again.

"I'm a sort of a Johnny-come-lately in this town, myself. Don't hold with the way people think. . . ."

It was easy to see that he was embarrassed. With true decency, he didn't want to intrude. I made it easier for him: "I certainly agree with you, my friend."

He brightened a little, at that. "What I mean is I always liked your people. Whenever they came in here for a bite to eat they were nice to me . . . polite . . . lots politer than the rest. . . ."

I nearly cried at that. In his honest, straight-forward way he wanted to help. I motioned him to continue.

"You're the son," he blurted red-faced, "maybe there's somethin' *you* can do. *Your* Mother's gone, but your Father has a right to live out his days in peace."

There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I shook his hand in mine. The sort of handshake that goes on between two men who would be shamed by spoken words of gratitude, and who must express themselves in silent fashion.

I certainly *could* do something. This was, after all, the job that I was used to doing . . . had been doing. I'd succeeded in laying macabre myths low all over the world; had convinced divers people, certainly as hard-headed and opinionated as lived in this town, of the intellectual futility of their basically banal beliefs. Yes . . . this was indeed *my* job; to help my Mother rest in peace, and my Father *live* in peace.

"Where is your telephone?"

He pointed to the enclosed booth in the

corner. I changed a couple of bills for a handful of silver. My call to New York went through rapidly and a few minutes was all I needed. There was delighted agreement on the other side. I hung up feeling ineffably better.

"Thanks again," I mentioned on my way out, "you've been very good to me; helped a great deal."

I DECIDED to walk out to my Father's place. It wasn't very far . . . and would also keep me from getting into any more cankerous conversation with the spectre-stricken villagers. Peace closed in upon me as I strode along. The grass along the winding dirt road smelled sweetly, and the great, gnarled trees dropped their heavy-laden branches as if in benediction. It wasn't long after that I pushed open the small gate that led to the home that I'd been born in, and my Father before me. My first feeling was one of misgiving. Clearly, the place was going to seed. That it was unattended was given mute evidence by wildly sprouting weeds, and corn that was dying upon the stalk. Dark depression threatened my new-found peace.

Outside the house, I forbore entering for a moment. I wanted to compose myself in spirit as well as in countenance. This was done . . . and I entered.

The creaking rocking-chair in the corner halted its steady motion.

"Welcome home, son."

I stood still for the space of a breath, then rushed forward. My cheeks were wet as my arms went around the old man. His body that had been so strong . . . so erect . . . now bent and thin; his voice . . . now so . . . weak . . . lonely . . .

"Father. You look grand!"

"Do I, son?" He smiled. A smile so sad that I threw my plan of slow attack to the winds.

"Don't you worry, Father. I heard enough in town, this morning, to know how you've been pilloried and wronged. And I'm going . . ."

"Please." His thin, blue-veined hand moved slowly in protest. "Please, son, I would rather forget."

"Don't worry. I'm not thinking of any nonsensical revenge. I'm only interested in

restoring your good name to the community that should be proud of having you one of them; and, incidentally, to forestall the future blighting of anyone's life through maliciousness and godless stupidity."

"No, my boy . . . you mustn't."

"But—"

An angry red streaked the old man's worn face. His fists clenched . . . unclenched. . . .

"I say you mustn't!"

Without conceit, the old man must have known of my reputation in my chosen field. Surely my Mother must have shown him the letters and newspaper clippings I'd sent to her. I would have liked to accede to his apparently earnest wish, but . . .

"It's too late, Father."

"Too late?"

"Yes. I've already telephoned friends of mine—a married couple—to come up here and help me disprove this nonsense."

His voice was so low that I could hardly catch them. "Too . . . late. . . ."

"But surely," I hurried on, "you must realize that it's not only for *your* good . . . there are countless others destined to be unfairly persecuted unless this thing is nipped short."

MY WORRY changed almost to joy as, for the first time, a peacefulness came into his face. Well, no. Not a peacefulness, precisely. Rather, a look of absolute relaxation. As if the tormenting burden had slipped off his thin shoulders.

"Are they good friends of your's?"

This was something that I could sink my teeth into: "Yes, Father, the very best. They are literary people, both well-known and respected writers. Their magazine articles are widely read, and if *they* write the truth about this place—a truth which I am going to unalterably establish—then good old common sense will, once and for all, take the place of haunted fear."

He looked at me a while, the effect of complete relaxation more and more apparent.

"Yes . . . it has to be."

I locked my arm in his. "Come. Let us explore the old place. It's been too long since I've seen it."

"Too long."

Mentally I cursed myself for staying away

so many years. Indeed, the saddening events of the morning proved, beyond doubt, that I had been away too long. It hadn't been right to let the old man forage for himself . . . stand alone before the slings and arrows. . . .

The rooms were the unmistakable stamp of not having been lived in. They had no welcoming warmth, gave off no aura save loneliness. I forced some brightness into my voice: "How about a peek into the attic, Father. What old keepsakes have you added since last time?"

"I'd rather we didn't go there, son."

Something stirred inside me. "Why?"

"Your Mother's things are up there. I . . . I don't . . ."

Relief surged through in gusty waves. "Then I'll go alone. Please believe me. I understand."

How the old man must have loved her. Alone in the attic, I looked about at the pictures, clothes, needlework . . . in fact, anything the house contained that was representative of my Mother was before me. And everything was clean, dusted, showing the loving attention of his hands that were tireless in their devotion. Only for himself he no longer cared. But all that would change. After my friends and myself had exploded the rotten bubble that hovered over this town I would stay with my Father, leave him no more. Together we would . . . and I shuddered from head to toe as a reedy scream tore through the house and into my heart.

I clattered into the hall and took the stairs several at a time in a wild descent to the floor below. But someone else had preceded me down those same stairs. He lay at the foot of them, on his stomach, but his neck so badly cracked and twisted that his sightless eyes stared right up into mine. My Father.

WITHIN an hour I had the body removed to the undertaker parlor. In no uncertain terms I let the gaping fools know that it was accidental death. It had been too easy to probe into their miserable minds and see the word "suicide" framed therein. So I spoke first, and then shouldered my way past the brutish, inquisitive faces into the open air.

Back I went, to the farm, to await the guests who could help no longer.

Wait! But they could! After the fervent protestations I'd made to my poor Father I'd be less than a man not to try to help the others I'd mentioned. Others, who were doomed to lives blighted by whispers unless I ripped out the roots of fecund unreason.

So I waited.

Steps coming up the porch warned me that my friends had arrived. As I rose to my feet I controlled my features, but, one look at theirs, told me they'd already been apprised of what happened. Wagging tongues . . . wagging tongues . . . ceaseless . . . remorseless. . . .

Lila drew my head down to her's and kissed me. Her calm, lovely voice soothed me, lulled me:

"We were told, Jules, by the man who taxied us up here."

Jim didn't say anything for the moment. He just gripped my hand, letting his feeling friendship run strong and true from him to me.

They were my friends. My best friends.

Later, we were sitting and smoking about the fire I'd stirred in the grate. None of us had felt very hungry, just managed to swallow a few mouthfuls. I'd told them the whole sorry story and, more and more, had revelled in the thought that Providence had blessed me with such wonderfully commiserate friendship.

"You're absolutely right, Jules," stated Lila, "we must go through with your plan."

Jim had also given his opinion in his slow, thoughtful way. "Lila is quite right, Jules. What you are going to do is fine in concept and tremendously thoughtful in regard to humanity. You're a good man."

How I warmed to them. "Just a couple of nights of sleeping here will be quite enough to turn the trick. And, speaking of sleeping, it's time you were off. You'll find your room upstairs. . . ."

"How about you, Jules?"

"I'll be along directly."

ALONE, I sat and brooded. Recalled events from my childhood; thought of my dear Mother and Father. The hours sped by silently and unnoticed. It was a casual look at my wrist-watch that told me how late it was. Midnight.

It was another casual look that broke the

back of the mystery . . . and logically explained what had transpired.

The hall-mirror was cobwebbed and unclean. I turned away and sat down before the fire again. Once again I let my thoughts range into the past. Now, however, events explained themselves with astonishing clarity.

My Mother *had* committed suicide. She, too, had found out and had been unable to survive her knowledge.

My Father? Well, I now understood—too well—why he'd asked if my friends were *good* friends. I understood why he'd parroted the words "too late" after me. Not once . . . but twice.

And why the old man had repeated "too long" after me. His meaning had been diametrically different from mine. He'd striven . . . you can't take it away from him . . . he'd striven to keep the secret from me. But I had forced him . . . forced him . . .

Then, when he saw that it was indeed "too late" and "too long," he'd relaxed and let his burden slide from him . . . to me.

Yes . . . he, too, had committed suicide. It was the only thing to do. He couldn't face me once I had found out the truth. This, also, I well understood.

Well, it was time, and I was being called, so I got up. I took another look at the grime-covered mirror, well aware of what it would tell me. My trained mind might reject it, but my eyes—and my *ego*—*couldn't!*

I looked down at my hands, the fingers of which had extended into serpentine length and which writhed and twisted with complete disregard for bone structure. I looked at the black tufts of hair that dotted them. I looked at my face . . . my face . . . which had become abnormally larger . . . which had become pitted with tiny round pools of excrescence . . . at the double rows of hooked teeth that pushed themselves a distance past my livid lips. . . .

I was hungry.

I stalked silently up the stairs, until I came to the closed door behind which my friends were sleeping. I didn't touch the knob. I knew I didn't have to. I effortlessly passed through the door, itself, and began enjoying my Father's heritage. . . .

