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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# What Waits in Darkness

By LORETTA BURROUGH

*A grim story of a woman's happiness that was menaced by a dreadful, recurrent dream*

WITH a thick, choking sob, Christy Tenniel woke in the silvery coolness of early morning. The pigeons that the Jones boys kept on the roof were airing their flute throats in the dawn as Roger lumbered out of sleep beside her, making startled sounds.

"What is it, Chris? What's the matter?" He circled her shaking body roughly with his soft, fat arm. "That damn dream?"

Its trembling bloody mists began to float away from her; their commonplace room came clear, with the picture of Roger's mother smiling dimly from the opposite wall.

"Again. I can't stand it much longer." Night after night, in the thickets of darkness, it waited for her. For months now she had fought sleep until she was haggard and thin.

He reached for a package of cigarettes on the bedside table. She could imagine the angry bewilderment in his eyes; he did not like his wife to be in any way abnormal. And she saw it as the match flared, lighting puckers of annoyance about his mouth.

"That nerve specialist didn't help much," he said. "'Some hidden fear, or hatred.' Expensive bunk, that's all. You've got no fears or hatreds." He snorted, and sucked on the cigarette so hard that bright red sparks flew.

Roger's talk was all very well, but Doctor Wilks had said softly, watching her from opaque brown eyes—"Do you love your husband, Mrs. Tenniel?"

She had answered, "Of course."

Then Wilks had frowned, glowering at his clean fingernails. "You must tell me the truth, not lie. Otherwise I can not help you."

She had stared dumbly at his desk, shining with wax, and then suddenly the words had pushed their burning way out of her. "No, I do not love him. I loved another man, my husband's best friend. He was killed in an accident, a week before he was to marry me."

Duncan, light-hearted, quick, warm, like the old song—"Duncan, Duncan, tender and true." She could have spared the lumbering dull Roger so much more easily. And then, two years after Duncan had died, she had married Roger, since he was always around, since she could talk of Duncan with him. A wrong sort of marriage, all wrong.

Doctor Wilks had thought so too. "Better for you to separate," he had suggested.

"But how could not loving Roger make me have this dream?" She had looked at Doctor Wilks' face with numb bewilderment in her own. "Why should I always dream"—she had repeated it again—"that I am standing in a drafty hall. There is a night-light burning in a little crystal bowl, and rain pouring down a black window-pane. I am in a night-dress—there is blood on my bare feet, down the side of my gown, and dripping from the end of a knife I hold in my right hand." She had stumbled

then, and hidden her eyes with her gloved fingers.

And if she separated from Roger, who would wake and hold her when she started up trembling and crying? Doctor Wilks believed she would no longer have the dream, if they were apart. But how did he know?

"Here, I've got an idea!" Roger had been smoking cigarettes furiously beside her, while she sat and shivered. "My vacation's coming next week. What say we go up to my aunt's place in Maine, where we had our honeymoon? She's not using it this year. She's bought new things, fixed it up nicely, and that sun and air'll cure you in a hurry."

"No, not there!" Every nerve in her body had shuddered at the suggestion. It had been such a dreadful honeymoon, with Roger never suspecting that it was a dead man she desired at her side.

"Why not?" Placidly, he squashed the cigarette. "It's quiet, but it'll be good just for that reason. Better than a noisy hotel. I'll phone Auntie tomorrow. *We will go there.*"

Impossible to turn as an avalanche when he had fastened to an idea—she knew that they would go.

"Cozy, huh?" Roger thumped down the bags and shook his big shoulders. He went about thumbing the light switches, and the little oblong room suddenly blinked back at them, as though surprised. The wife of a near-by farmer had cleaned it and left a fire laid; Roger stooped above the long logs and touched a match to kindling.

"My aunt's changed it a lot, hasn't she? Nifty. What say?" He looked at her.

"Very nice, Roger," she answered mechanically, spreading her palms to the warmth that began to trickle from the

fire. Even on the train she had dreamed, and wakened suffocating, in the coffin-like berth. "Shall we get the bags upstairs?"

He pounded up before her, making the small house shake. "Same room we had—I told the woman in my letter. Looking out on the bay."

Wearily, she made the twin beds and set the new cottage furniture to rights. Down in the kitchen, with unusual good humor and a great clatter, Roger was getting supper ready. She unpacked the bags and hung their clothes in a closet that smelled of salt air and mice, then went to the window and looked out. Night was curving like a gentle hood over everything; stars shone, tiny candles in a great dark room. But nothing had seemed beautiful to her since Duncan died; it was a curiously empty world.

"Come and get it!" Roger called, and she walked out into the quiet, still hall. She stopped instantly, while her heart thudded in bad, false beats, and the air turned to lead within her lungs.

It was a narrow passage, paneled in ugly dark wood, with a big dormer-window at the end of it. Because of the dormer it had a queer effect of closing in; it was like a tunnel ending in the black panes sprinkled with starlight. On a small table to the side was a night-light in a crystal bowl, and beneath her feet a rough, thick carpet splotted with roses like pink blisters. She had seen it all many times. She stared a moment longer, and she felt as though the darkness outside the window were entering her brain. Then she ran down the stairs.

He was setting a little table in the living-room, with food they had bought in the village as they passed through.

"Roger!" she cried. "Roger!"

He stared at her, startled. "What's

the matter now?" he asked, with a peevish undertone to the words.

"Roger"—she slipped into a chair at the table; life was beginning to flow in her again—"we must leave here. Right away. That hall upstairs, the hall——"

He put a hand on her shoulder, shaking her a little. "Talk sense, Christy," he said irritably. "Why must we leave here? And what about the hall?"

With a spasmodic effort, she controlled herself. "Roger, that hall is the one I see in my dream. Always. I did not notice it when we carried up the bags, but I saw, just now. The one I see in my dream," she repeated. "The same dark panels, the same dormer-window, the same carpet on the floor."

"Is *that* all?" He sat down opposite her, picked a bit of pink ham from the plate and chewed the edge of it reflectively. "You'll go nuts if you don't watch out. It's nothing but a dream, and to let yourself get in such a stew about it——"

"But you see that of course we must leave here?" Leave the place where the dream's setting had become real. Leave it before—before what? In silence, she pleaded with the stubborn blue eyes across the table.

"Of course nothing." He wiped his greasy fingers on the edge of a napkin. "Pull up your chair and have a go at this. The ham's good."

"Roger!"

He laid a slice of meat on her plate, and heaped salad beside it, his thick mouth drawing close in determined lines. "If you think I've paid those walloping train fares for nothing, just to give in to a silly woman's whim! . . . We're here, and here to stay until my vacation's over."

He ate a forkful of potato with a look of deep relish.

"Roger——"

She stared at him; she felt cold and frightened.

QUERELY enough, although she expected it that night, although she went to bed with her mind darkly open to receive it, the dream did not come. And clear night after clear night dropped with its stars into day and never did she wake trembling, the sweat of fear freezing on her.

"You see," said Roger complacently, the evening before they were to leave; almost two weeks had slipped by, smooth, happy enough—"What did I tell you?" He was standing by the small table in the dining-room, sharpening a knife with quick, hard strokes of his hand, downward and upward. "All you needed was to get away from the city. Fresh air, exercise, sun, they cure anything. Look at this knife—isn't it a beaut? Going to take it home with me—Auntie'll never miss it."

"Where did you find it—let's see," she said absently, thinking: "Perhaps he's right. I was overwrought—I needed rest."

"In the attic." He turned toward her; the smooth gleaming blade came into view and the handsome carved handle. "It was all rusted, but it's a peach now. Good steel."

Her eyes straining at it, aching beneath the delicate skin of her lids; her breath rushed from her lungs in a gasp. Beneath her, knees went to boneless putty.

"Roger," she moaned, "I've seen that before."

She leaned against the wall for support, her stare still held to the long, curving line of metal; all the light in the room seemed to stream toward her from the shining steel.

He dropped the blade, snatched a glass of water from the table and held it to her

mouth. "What's the matter?" His heavy features sharpened with bewilderment.

She sipped the water, cold and flat, then pushed the glass away. "Oh, take me seriously," she begged, clasping one hand on his arm. "*That* knife—it is the one I see in my dream. Just like that, except——" Except that blood ran down the thin sharp steel, dripping from the tip to the floor, spreading in a small still pool on the patterned rose carpet.

She was aware as she watched him, terror freezing in her fingers, in her breast, that rain was beginning outside in the darkness; the first drops touched the panes like soft wet feathers.

"We must get away, now," she said, "tonight," and saw his eyes grow bright with anger. He took up the small whetstone and the knife; the blade made a weak, shrill sound, faster and faster as the speed of his strokes increased.

"We will not." His hard face concentrated on the whetting. "You little fool, to give a second thought to a dream!"

She was a wave beating against rock, and knew it. "Duncan would have listened to me. Duncan would have been patient, kind, not like you. . . ." She slipped into a chair and dropped her face into her cold hands. Where was Duncan? Gone beyond reach and touch, lost in a lightless world.

She heard her husband's footsteps coming dimly toward her; her eyes as she lifted her head rested again on the knife that he still held in his blunt fingers.

"I'm going to tell you something," he said sharply. A bleak malice shrilled a little in his words—he was angry. "You're still thinking of him, aren't you? Still loving him. I was only the second best. Duncan would have been the perfect lover, 'patient, kind,' not like me."

He sent the knife spinning across the table with a fling of his wrist. "I'll tell you what he said to me, a few days before he was killed."

She waited, her heart drained of everything but a trembling apprehension. He could not touch her memory of Duncan, he could not hurt it, could he?

"He said——" He leaned toward her, face blind with jealousy of a dead man. "He was very intimate with me, you know. He said that he wished to God he could get out of his engagement to you; he said he was tired of you."

She got up clumsily. She had forgotten the dream; she had forgotten everything but his words. But was it the truth? Often had Roger lied to her. But if it were *not* a lie? Always now, between her and Duncan, would be this dull veil of doubt. She stood there, beginning to see herself as a loving fool, discarded by Duncan. Within her skull, a sharp little pain flickered and went and came again.

Into the trembling, nervous silence of the room Roger's conciliating laugh plunged. "Let's forget it all," he said, "dreams—and Duncan. He's dead; it's done with. Now we'll eat, and then we'll go to bed early and get a good night's sleep. A good sleep," he said again.

**D**OWN the back window of the hall, the rain was pouring with a wild, gushing sound. Into the dark regions of unconsciousness the noise flooded, together with the buffeting screech of wind. Her eyes, although they had been staring dully before her for many minutes, began really to see; she raised her head and looked about her, with a strange heavy feeling of pain and suffering.

First she saw the window; it seemed

to move slightly under the press of rain streaming beyond it. "I have known all this before," she thought, and then her cold stupefied glare fell to the night-light, flickering a little in its small crystal bowl.

Within the house was a thick, petrified stillness that troubled her ears. "Where is Roger?" she wondered, touching her left hand to her head where it lingered upon the shooting ache beneath damp sweaty curls. Always in the night his hoarse, asthmatic breathing had been somewhere near her. "Where am I now?" she puzzled wearily.

Just under the fringe of blankness that veiled her mind was a dreadful meaning; it was like the wind about the house—now it came nearer with a leap, now it whirled away into the distance.

Something touched her bare foot, a soft, cool drop, and another. "The roof is leaking," she thought dully, and looked down at her naked ankle, her long white foot. Not quite white now, for on it were spreading little red circles, dripping from the knife she held clumsily in her hand.

She could feel the skin crawling on her skull, her mouth widened in silence, as her eyes crept to the knife. The blade no longer gleamed; it was slippery, wet—the bright red stain went on, past her wrist; down her night-dress, over her thigh, was a dark clinging splash.

She fell to her knees; she could hear the wind and the rain. Within her head was the breaking down of all thought. She was alone with the silent house. The dream come true.