

Weird Tales

January
1954

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COVER BY W. H. SILVEY

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D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*



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YOU SHOULD BE CAREFUL . . .

• • • what you bring into your house.

BY GARNETT RADCLIFFE

I RARELY address strangers, but I did the other day. It happened in Prout's second-hand furniture shop in the Denning Road. Near me a middle-aged woman and her friend were debating the purchase of a bed. Chancing to overhear one of them say, "You should be careful what you bring into your house," I was moved to turn to her, raise my hat as to one who has uttered words of great wis-

dom, and say, "Madam, how right you are!"

I know I was right. I don't mean in speaking to her like that of course, but in endorsing what she'd said. For her words had carried me back over quite a number of years to a thing that happened to me when I was a very young student just come to London to read law at the Rectory College.

Luckily, since I was young and

callow and unused to City ways, I had a friend who was reading medicine at the same College. He was a sandy-haired lad who hailed from the Highlands. His name was Jock Gillman, and as he shared my tastes for rugger and music we got on famously together.

Finance was our main difficulty. To help to make ends meet we shared a double bed-sitting room in a tall, dark house in the neighborhood of Euston. The furniture, so far as I can remember, consisted of two iron beds, a wardrobe, an old-fashioned washstand of the jug and basin variety and a couple of hard wooden chairs. The wall paper was peeling and discolored; the only lighting was a solitary gas jet; the floor-boards creaked and if you wanted hot water you had to fetch it for yourself from the bathroom three floors below.

All of which sounds rather depressing, but as a matter of fact Jock and I were perfectly content. We were working hard and playing hard, and when you are young and when mind and body are fully occupied, your material surroundings are of small account.

During our second term a minor accident happened, just how I can't remember. Jock heaved a football boot at me, or it may have been *vice versa*. That does not matter. What does matter is

that the boot missed its objective and broke the large, thick china basin decorated with roses which stood upon the washhand-stand beside the window.

Mrs. Deacon, she was our landlady and not a bad sort as London landladies of that period went, was justifiably annoyed. She said the basin had been part of a wedding gift from an aunt and would be impossible to replace. Then she changed the still unbroken jug for a cheap enamel one, and told us that if we wanted a basin we must buy one ourselves, or go dirty for all she cared!

Jock and I didn't argue the toss. For all its disadvantages the room was cheap and clean, and we'd no wish to be evicted. Bowing to the inevitable we united our thin purses and went to Corrie Street which is full of second-hand shops, all much humbler establishments than Prout's, in search of an enamel basin to match the jug.

IN THE smallest and dingiest of all the small and dingy second-hand shops in the street, we found just the thing we wanted. It was of medium size, the enamel was scarcely chipped and beneath the dust it was almost as clean as new. Obviously, its previous owner had been a careful person who had treated it with care. He had even scratched

his initials "S.P." very neatly in the center of the underneath part, and as a means of identification there was the number W.P./3087 stamped close to the initials.

"He didna mean anyone tae pinch his property," I remember Jock saying in his lilting Scots voice.

We took the basin back in triumph to our bed-sitting room and for a time it served us most satisfactorily. Indeed, being lighter and deeper it was an improvement on the predecessor so cherished by Mrs. Deacon. For at least three months nothing unusual happened, and that disposes me to wonder if ghosts need a certain period in which to acclimatize themselves to new surroundings. Or was the delay due to the fact that the cheerful, virile atmosphere in which Jock and I lived was not conducive to "manifestations"?

But the manifestations came all right in the end. The first thing was when one morning Jock accused me of sleep-walking.

"I never do," I said indignantly. "What's put the idea in your head?"

"I've hearrd ye an' I've seen ye," Jock said. "The ither nicht ye were at the washhand-stand latherin' yer honds lok the Lady Macbeth. Ah'm no kiddin'. There was enough licht frae the moon for me tae see your figure."

Nothing could persuade him

otherwise. When I asked why he hadn't woken me up he said he'd been told it was dangerous to wake sleep-walkers.

"Besides, I was a wee bit scairt," he confessed. "You looked a bit uncanny so ah juist kept ma heid beneath the cloths."

After a period of perhaps a week he repeated his accusation. This time we really quarrelled. I told him that if the sleep-walking I didn't do disturbed him so much he had better find someone else to live with, and he retorted he'd a good mind to do so, for he couldn't afford to lose his sleep with the December exams coming on. We spoke in heat, but I don't think either of us had any real intention of parting.

A few nights later, happening to come home before Jock, I surprised a stranger in our room. I didn't realize his presence until I'd struck a match to light the gas jet. Then I saw him quite plainly. There was nothing alarming in his appearance. He was a small, foreign-looking clean-shaven man, wearing side-whiskers and a high white collar. When he saw me gaping at him, for I was too taken back to speak, he gave me a shy smile and walked quickly out of the door which I had left open into the darkness of the passage beyond. And by the time I'd col-

lected myself enough to follow him with the intention of asking what he had been doing in our room he had disappeared.

We didn't take the incident very seriously. Nothing had been stolen and nothing had been disturbed. The obvious explanation was that the stranger had been another of Mrs. Deacon's lodgers—she had about a dozen who were always coming and going—who had gone by mistake into the wrong room. When I'd found him there he had been too embarrassed to offer an explanation.

"Or he may have been a foreigner," I remember saying. "Anyway he didn't look in the least like a burglar."

More weeks passed. Were the powers of darkness slowly concentrating upon our bed-sitting-room? If so, I was quite unaware. I'm not so sure about Jock. He was irritable and had shadows under his eyes as if he

was not sleeping well. Perhaps, being a Highlander and therefore "fey," he was more susceptible to the supernatural than I was.

AND then, not long before Christmas, there came the night I will not forget if I live to be a hundred.

Every detail is still fresh in my memory. It was a Saturday night. We had been to a concert at the Gratton Hall and had walked back through the foggy street. When we entered our room we both exclaimed about its coldness. One of us had left the window open and swirls of fog had crept in to hang about the place like shadows.

There was no fire, so bed seemed the warmest place. We undressed very quickly and threw our top coats on the counterpanes as reinforcements against the chill. I was the first in, leaving Jock to extinguish the gas.



"Nicht-nicht, lad," he said as usual.

I fell asleep at once, but it wasn't as sound a sleep as I usually enjoy. Strange, sad dreams visited my pillow like vampires that came and went.

I think it must have been about two in the morning that I almost but not quite woke up. In the strange no-man's land dividing sleep from consciousness I seemed to be aware of something happening in the room. People moved about and spoke in muted voices. There was a splashing sound as of water being poured into a basin. Then someone seemed to wash his hands with immense care. When that sound ceased there was a cautious creaking of floor boards suggestive of someone walking across the room on tip-toe, and then a moment of utter horror—listening to a sound—like a pair of hands drumming against the door . . .

After that I suppose I slept properly. When I woke it was broad daylight. I heard church bells and remembered with pleasure that it was Sunday morning. There was no need for hurry, and it was Jock's turn to fetch the hot water.

Jock didn't. His bed was empty and the dishevelled clothes were lying on the floor. When I looked round I saw him in his

pajamas apparently leaning against the door. He had put a pillow slip over his head so that he looked like a member of the Klu Klux Klan.

At first I thought he was playing some idiotic trick. It took me a little time to realize that he had hanged himself from a hook, using the cord of his trunk for the purpose.

The verdict was mental breakdown due to overwork; and a police witness commented on the expert fashion in which he had tied the noose and adjusted the knot in exactly the right place.

But I say you should be careful what you bring into your house. I say that because a few months after the tragedy I happened to find in an old number of Clayton's magazine an article about a famous hangman who worked at the old Warren street prison until it was given up in 1861, when the prison equipment was sold at public auction.

Solomon Posmansky was the name of that hangman. According to the article he was a very polite, quiet little man. He called the condemned his clients and spoke of executions as "appointments." And before and after every "appointment" he used to wash his hands most scrupulously. When I read that I knew what — and who — we had brought into our room.