

# Weird Tales



SEPTEMBER, 1952

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

# SANTHA

by

E. Everett Evans

*Suddenly he remembered the words  
of call that would bring the spirit  
of the woods to him again.*



THE humming tires sang a new song as the big sedan was turned into the graveled sideroad leading to the old homestead. They awakened old echoes in the benumbed, deadened mind of young Jon Maryth, and he roused a bit.

"Will this be the joyous homecoming about which I've dreamed so many years?" his thoughts questioned, "or is life over for me, with no hope of joy left?"

He knew a slight sense of guilt at coming back, seeking, so quickly after the untimely death of his parents in that terrible train wreck from which he had so providentially escaped. But his *need* was so great . . . his *beliefs* as strong as ever.

"But it cannot be," he thought almost savagely, "that Lachesis is such a cosmic jester, to spin so sorry a tapestry for me. Those tangled threads must have a meeting again!"

The xylophone-rattle of the car crossing the plank flooring of the well-remembered little covered wooden bridge again roused Jon from his memories, and he sat up quickly to peer through the car window.

And there—there in the swiftly nearing

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Heading by Joseph Eberle

distance—was the great stand of timber—the Big Wood. There came a lightness, a sense of joy and complete happiness in his heart for a brief instant . . . then doubt forced it away.

*Would She* be there? It had been so long. But *She must* be! He knew it was a true memory, not a childish delusion as his parents insisted and which, since he refused to admit their claims, had led them to move to the distant city so he could forget as he grew older.

As though he ever would, or could, forget *Her!*

"It won't be long now, Honey," Mammy Martha's kindly old voice broke into his reflections, "but I still think it's wrong of you to come back here like this."

Jon Maryth grunted in annoyance even as Uncle Girard spoke sharply to his wife, beside him in the front seat. "You hush, now, Mammy. 'Member, we promised Mister Jon not to say anything 'gainst his wishing."

Sight of the big old New England farmhouse brought such rush of memories that Jon's frail body shook with emotion. For the moment he forgot even his purpose as pictures of the happy times with Dad and Mom here came welling into his mind, filling his eyes with tears. For he had loved them so much, and the ache of their passing was heavy on his heart. He knew, now, that they had acted in good faith and for what they thought his best interests in taking him away. Oh, if they could only have *believed!*

Much as he desired to go to *Her* at once, Maryth knew he was far too weak to make the attempt after this long automobile ride. He was thankful for Uncle Girard's strong arms that almost carried him up the broad, winding stairs to the well-remembered room, and helped him undress and get into the old four-poster bed.

While the two faithful old colored servitors scurried about unpacking and righting the long-unused house, Maryth lay quietly, his eyes seeking out the old curios and keepsakes in the room. A long hour dragged its slow seconds past him without **his moving**. He lapsed into that curious sort of trance that is neither waking nor sleeping, and memory dug back into his boyhood here on the farm.

One special day nudged itself into clearer picturization.

**I**T WAS one of those warm, lazy summer afternoons in the country when the whole world is taking a siesta. Only the little things, such as bees, ants, butterflies and small boys, were active.

Young Jon Maryth, in knickers and blouse, head bared to the tanning sun, idled through the clover field, on his way to the Big Wood, his favorite playing place. His bare feet *squirmed* in the dust of the field. Occasionally he broke off a sprig of fragrant clover between his first and big toes, bringing it up to his nose to smell, while standing balanced acrobatically on one leg.

There was a cool mustiness to the Big Wood that he loved. The leafy canopy of boughs kept out the burning sun, the still, mossy paths between the trees were all roads leading to romantic places.

He stopped at the slippery elm tree to cut off a piece of the savory inner bark which he chewed as he ambled along.

His mind drifted into the spinning of tales of high adventure in the Faroff Lands, as his feet slowly bore him towards the little, bubbling spring in a clearing he knew, near the center of the Wood. The water there, always cool and sweet, would taste so good on this hot summer day.

He was almost upon the spring when he saw *Her* sitting a little way from it, dabbling her naked feet in the little rivulet that carried the overflow away from the spring-pool.

Jon stopped short, then jumped behind a great spruce, his head cocked so he could peer out from behind his hiding place, to see without being seen. At first he could see only that it was a woman, dressed in some sort of a leaf-green robe, of some filmy material he did not know.

She did not seem aware of him, was relaxed and carefree. There was a peculiar sound in the air which the boy soon identified as a trilling hum that he knew she was making. A lilting little song of pure joy, without words nor need of them. It made a happy little thrill run all through him.

Carefully he crept nearer, edging his way from tree-bole to stump to bush. Final-

ly he was not more than a dozen feet away. Ordinarily shy in front of strangers, he wanted desperately to see her face. He could not have told why. Women, as such, did not interest him, except his beautiful mother, and genial old Martha, his colored Mammy.

But he felt a strange, urgent desire to see this woman's face. He wished she would turn, yet was afraid that if she did she would see him and make him go away. He didn't know who she was or could be. He had never seen anyone here before, certainly not anyone dressed like that.

Why'd she wear such funny clothes, he wondered? But they were kinda pretty, he decided.

**T**HEN, suddenly she did turn her head, and he caught almost a full view of her. A gasp of surprise escaped him at the piquant beauty of that heart-shaped face with its little pointed chin, so different from any other he had ever seen.

At that gasp, slight though it was, she leaped to her feet in one graceful motion, stood poised as though ready for instant flight, glancing quickly all about. Almost at once she spotted him, stood looking at him, at first half-afraid, then puzzled, then with a friendly smile as she saw but a small, bare-legged, tousled-haired, astonished boy.

"Hello, Human," she said, and he wondered briefly at the wording.

"'Lo," he replied, sidling nearer. Then, after a long pause, he blurted, "you're pretty."

She smiled at the compliment, turned and sat down again with the most graceful ease he had ever seen. She beckoned. "Come, sit before me. The water is cool on one's feet."

When, as dusk was descending, he heard the distant clangor of the supper bell, he reluctantly rose. "I have to go now, Lady. Can I come and see you again, and'll you tell me more stories about those Old Ones?"

"Of course, Boy, I want you to come and see me often." Her hand caressed him with a curiously sensitive touch, from which he broke away to race back across the fields, bursting with his tremendous news.

At the table he spilled it out in a spate of words that came so swiftly his parents could

not at first even understand, and forced him to calm down a bit and talk slower.

Again he told about the wonderful Beautiful Lady he had met in the Big Wood, how kind She was, how thrilling the tales She told him.

He only half-noticed the puzzled glances Dad and Mom exchanged as he talked, but gradually their faces lightened. When he finished Dad threw back his head and laughed uproariously . . . and Jon knew a sudden sinking sensation. Why, Dad had *never* laughed at him before. He sank deep into his chair, the hand holding his fork hesitated, then laid it down again, the piece of roast untouched.

"You fell asleep by the spring, and dreamed it all, Son," Dad said, and Mom added, "It's from some old story you've read."

"But I wasn't asleep and I didn't dream it," he insisted. "I wasn't even up to the spring when I first saw Her, and She was too real and we did talk all afternoon," and again that hurt feeling when he saw they did not believe him.

Rather, they talked earnestly about the impossibility of such a happening, and after awhile, so plausible were their words, and so much did he trust them, there came the first tinges of doubt and he went to bed wondering if it might not, after all, have been a dream.

*To the young man now remembering, there seemed to be something he could not quite recall. It seemed to have to do with words, with important words he had forgotten. Nor could he wring further remembrance from his ill mind. . . . .*

But the next day, unwilling to disbelieve what he was so sure was truth, he hesitantly ventured back to the Big Wood again, and there at the spring he found Her once more, waiting for him to come, trembling with anxiety lest he fail Her.

Sitting by Her side beneath the great oak, he told Her of his parents' disbelief, of their mocking laughter.

"It is always the way, Boy," she said sadly but tenderly. "Only those with the Spirit of Youth within can ever see or know us." And when he did not understand, She turned the matter aside by beginning another tale of the Long Ago.

That night he again tried to persuade his parents about the realness of his Beautiful Lady, but they still would not believe, and at last Dad became angry with him for the first time he could remember, and sternly forbade him talking about it ever again.

But it is not in boy nature to keep silent, and he talked, over and over, and more and more he met with antagonism, harsh words and even whippings.

Still Jon managed to see Her almost daily, and had it not been for Her comforting love and sweetness, the boy felt he would die . . . or run away.

The coming of Winter and the deep snows made it impossible for him to go to the Big Wood to meet Her, and as the weeks sped by he ceased talking about Her, much to his parents' relief.

But never, for even an hour, did he forget.

Anxiously he waited for the snows to melt, and the first warm Saturday morning of Spring he ran at top speed back to the spring in the Big Wood, and there he found Her again, and their happy hours together resumed . . . while the hours at home grew more troubled.

ONE day there had been a stranger at the house, who had talked with Jon for hours, asking all sorts of silly questions.

Then, a week later, Jon Maryth was ordered into the car with his parents, and soon found himself on a train, and at last in the new home in the distant city where he was to live until this recent, sudden death of his parents released him to return to the beloved farm home.

But that distance had not made him forget, as his parents had hoped. The crushing blow of his forcible separation from his beloved Beautiful Lady—without even a chance to say goodbye or tell Her he was being taken away—made him sullen, brooding, his health undermined by the weakness and despair of his spirit. Now he was invalid, although he could get around to some extent if he did not exert himself too much.

Yes, Jon Maryth remembered that first meeting so well. Remembered, too, the countless others . . . and all they had meant to him. How She had. . . .

UNCLE GIRARD interrupted his day-dreaming just then, coming with a tray heaped with tempting viands Mamma Martha had prepared to tempt his never-too-good appetite.

As he picked at his food, the noise of the countryside symphony tuning up for its evening concert was borne through the open window on the gentle evening breeze. He heard once more with delight the violin-pizzicata of the crickets and cicadas, the strident oboe-tones of the tree-toads, the booming bassoon-notes of the bullfrogs in the little pond behind the big barn, the drumming rumble of ruffed grouse from the distant Wood.

Immediately after breakfast, in spite of protests from the loving two who did not think he was strong enough either for the long walk or the emotional excitement, he started out. Past the back of the house he went, past the creamery and the big barn, walking slowly but purposefully down the cow-lane towards the fields.

As he ambled through the sweet alfalfa, revelling in the sights and smells that brought boyhood closer every second, Jon Maryth considered that perhaps it was good to be alive after all; that perhaps there still was something to live for.

Especially since he would see Her in a few minutes.

At last he reached the edge of the Big Wood. How familiar it was. Ah, there was the path. Well, hiya, old Shagbark Hickory! Long time no see . . . hello, Walnut, have to come get some of your nuts this Fall . . . and my pretty twins, the Silver Poplars. Beautiful as ever, aren't you—and as proud of your beauty . . . good old Mister Slip'ry Elm; got to have a piece of your tasty bark.

Deeper, deeper into the cool loveliness of the well-remembered place, past all his old familiar tree friends, Jon Maryth went with quickening pace, an inner excitement seeming to bring back his youthful strength. And there, just ahead, he spied the little spring.

"Lady! Lady!" he shouted then. "It's Jon, come to see you again! Where are you, Lady! Are you glad to see your little Jon again?"

He was at the spring now, still calling, looking eagerly all about, expecting every

moment to see her come running down an aisle between the great trees. In his mind's eye he could see her again so plainly, each line of her slim, willowy figure . . . the long, flowing hair the color of young brown bark . . . the pansy-violet eyes with their lights of laughter and love of life and wisdom. It was so he had first seen Her, clad in flowing, leaf-green robes; it was so he had seen her almost daily for a year and a half, except during that winter.

"Lady! Beautiful Lady! Hurry! It's Jon!"

In his excitement he peered about, running now this way, now that, seeking her.

But she did not appear, nowhere could he see her.

Alarmed and worried now, he rushed through the Big Wood, calling aloud anxiously, seeking her in its remotest depths, yet every few moments running back into the clearing by the spring, to see if she had appeared there.

His legs failed him at last. He sank, panting, onto the mossy bank beneath the big oak by the spring. It couldn't be that she had moved away.

She *belonged* there, he knew. For he knew now what she was, why she fitted so naturally into this woodland scene.

His face blanched and his breath stopped at a horrid thought. Dead? Oh, *no!* It simply was not possible. Not his Beautiful Lady, so much alive that she seemed life itself! No, he must not—*he would not*—believe she, too, had thus been torn from him. And yet, when he examined it, he could see that the great oak was past its prime, that in many places it was rotted and with many dying branches.

Stupored, he turned and threw himself at full length, face down on the soft, sweet moss, crying his despair, his disappointment, his need of her.

Try to forget, the wind whispered in his ears and in his mind. But he could never forget the vastness of his loss. Not remember Mom's sweetness, her loving tenderness and her care; not remember Dad's flashing, scintillant mind, his usual good-humored steadiness; not remember his Beautiful Lady's entrancing face and vibrant form, the wonderful tales she had told him of people and events when the world was young; the many things about Nature she

had taught him with a clearness he had never been able to comprehend about the things he had merely studied in school?

Foolish wind, to counsel him thus.

A swift encroaching fog of blackness enveloped and blotted out his every sense.

JON MARYTH came back to full consciousness to discover himself lying in his own bed, with the late afternoon light showing through his window. "What th?" he muttered, and tried to raise up but found himself unable to do so. He wondered how long he had been sick this time, to get that weak.

He turned his head on the pillow, saw several half-emptied bottles of medicine on the little table nearby, that told their own story.

"Mammy!" he yelled, and was surprised how weak and small his voice was. But she must have been near and heard him even so, for in a moment she came bustling in, beaming.

"Oh, Mister Jon, it's so good to see you awake again and looking like you knew what was going on," she cried as she came to his side and stooped down to kiss him.

"How long have I been sick, Mammy?"

"'Bout eight days, Honey. Uncle Girard and the farm man found you out there in the woods, burning up with fever, late that night when you didn't come home. We was mighty scared for three, four days, but ol' Doc Fergerson he said he'd pull you through all right, and praise th' Lord, he shore did."

"Well, I'm still awfully weak, and mighty hungry. Could I have some broth . . . or something?"

She laughed happy assent, as she went to the door and hollered to Uncle Girard to "bring Mister Jon some of that soup!"

While he was sipping it, the two old servants watching him in fond joy, told him something of his illness, and that for a couple of days he was really out of his head.

"Can you remember what it was you wanted, Honey?" Mammy asked anxiously. "You seemed so almighty worried about something, or wanting somebody. You kept calling out 'Hello, Sanna,' or something like that, as though you . . ."

Jon had been digesting that, but now its

true import struck him all at once. His excitement raised both his body and his voice.

"Say that again, Mammy!" he shouted, eyes agleam with the beginning of understanding and remembrance. "Say what you just now said I said!"

"Why, Honey, I just said you kept calling for somebody by the name of Sanna; you kept yelling 'Hello, Sanna,' like you wanted 'em to come and help you."

"Of course," he said, mostly to himself, striking his forehead with the heel of his hand. "How stupid of me to forget. No wonder She didn't come when I called." He turned to them. "It wasn't 'Hello, Sanna' I was saying, Mammy. It was '*Aillau, Sa'antha*,' and that's what I was trying so hard to remember. Those are the words my Beautiful Lady taught me, by which to call her."

Ignoring their questions about this, he slowly raised himself to a full sitting position, then slid his feet out from under the covers and into his slippers, lying on the floor beside his bed. Slowly he rose and stood holding the bedpost for a moment while his head cleared. Then he reached for his robe.

"What you think you're doing, Honey?" Mammy asked, and Uncle Girard came forward as though to stop him.

He ignored them, however. When they would have restrained him, he first motioned them away, and then pushed angrily against them with unexpected strength. And was gone from the room.

Down the broad stairs he went, his purpose seeming to give him new vigor with each foot of progress made. Through the door and into the yard, shivering a bit, noting the sky was thickly overcast now, that there was the feel of rain in the air. He headed for the shed-garage, got into his car, backed it out, and headed it down the lane. He heard Uncle Girard call, saw him running forward, but neither answered nor waited.

**T**OO impatient to spend the time and energy opening it, he crashed through the gate leading into the alfalfa field, leaving splintered wreckage behind him. Out across the rough, uneven field he thundered, bumping and rocking so he could

hardly control the weaving of the big car. At the edge of the Big Wood he climbed out of the car without waiting to turn off the ignition.

The rain was coming down hard now, and thunder and lightning were adding to the din. But Maryth did not heed them. He trotted as fast as his trembling legs would bear him, towards the little clearing and the spring, calling out constantly as he ran, "*Aillau! Aillau, Sa'antha!* It is young Jon coming back to you! *Aillau Sa'antha!*"

He was nearly at the spring now, stumbling in his weakness, yet his anxiety and purpose compelling him on. His eyes searched eagerly ahead in every direction, though his voice seemed hardly audible above the fury of the storm.

He fell face downward on the path, and when his tired and worn muscles proved unequal to the task of raising his body upright once more, crawled forward, painfully, on hands and knees, still calling into the night and storm, "*Aillau! Aillau, Sa'antha!*"

Suddenly he saw Her, saw his Sa'antha step out of—not from behind, but actually *out of*—the big oak under which they had sat so often.

He called again, and She came close to him, looking down. She gazed puzzledly a moment, then an awareness grew that this strange young man was in reality the same human boy she had known and loved years ago . . . for whom she still grieved. Sa'antha uttered a cry of joy, then had her arms about him, lifting him, supporting him, leading him under the shelter of the great oak where, miraculously it seemed to him, no rain was falling now. Gently she eased his tired, aching body onto the soft mossy bank, his head softly cradled against her.

"Sa'antha, my lovely, Beautiful Lady. It's been so long . . . and I've been so lonely."

She murmured soft words, alien words, but comforting to his heart, and bringing peace and contentment once more. More quietly, then, he told her how he had been taken by his parents to live in that distant city, without even the chance of coming to bid Her farewell and explain.

"I cried, too, when you suddenly stopped coming," Sa'antha said gently. "My poor old oak has nearly died, I've neglected it so, grieving for you."

He told her of his illness, his continual grieving for her. Brokenly he related the death of his parents, and of his resolve immediately afterwards to come seeking her. Of his day-dreams of remembrance of her, of his search, and how he had forgotten *the words of call*, of his illness when he could not find her and how his subconscious had remembered during his delirium.

"Can we not always be together now?" he begged. "It is only with you that I'll ever know true happiness and life. We can be, can't we?"

"I'd like that as much as you," she responded, and was silent, thoughtful for a long moment, while the storm raged about them. Then she nodded as though in decision and, rising to her feet, moved out into the storm-swept clearing.

Jon could hear her praying to the wind and the rain and the earth and the sky, asking that they two might be always together, that they need never part.

The young man staggered to his feet and moved out beside her. He joined his prayers to hers, with all his faith, with all his desire and need.

And then it happened. His sight gradually blurred, he could no longer see distinctly. There was a curious stiffening feeling about his body. He glanced downward and saw a tender sprig of green bud starting from one of his fingers, then another and another. The bud swelled and burst, showing fine, young leaves of green.

The rain was falling harder now, and as it fell he could feel it washing away his clothing, washing away his mortality.

Dimly, he heard a shout from the distance, and he raised his fast-dimming eyes to see a figure he guessed must be Uncle Girard, running toward the spring. The old man had followed in spite of the storm. Jon felt a moment of sorrowful compunction for the grief his passing would bring, but knew that this was best.

Sa'antha was still praying, her voice no longer audible in his ears . . . yet he heard it still inside his mind, with his rapidly changing senses—heard and now understood her words. Maryth could perceive that the earth, the rain, the wind and the sky were listening, were sympathetic, were assisting.

The earth piled about his feet, and he could feel rootlets groping from his trembling flesh into the cool sweetness of the friendly soil.

His arms were now upraised, bark-covered, budding branches, his height increasing rapidly, his human senses subtly dissolving into newer, more ethereal forms.

The wind blew about them. The two oaks touched in the raining wind. The last vestige of Jon Maryth's mortality dissolved and rained in droplets to the warm earth, even as Uncle Girard, running still, slipped and started to fall, but caught himself against the new young tree.

The oak seemed to writhe. Girard stared at him, at the tree, then looked away, crying to the raining wilderness, "Mister Jon!"

Running again, he vanished away, while the rain fell steadily upon the trees and their leaves rustled quietly, one against the other, as Sa'antha entered her new home.