

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

SEPTEMBER, 1950

Cover by Bill Wayne

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

UNKNOWN LADY



NOW that I suspect the whole truth, I don't know what to tell Greg Leyden, and the suspicion occurs to me that perhaps the kindest thing I can do for him is keep my mouth shut. I know I'm responsible in a way for what has befallen him, for I was at least the innocent motivation of the whole thing. On the other hand, he has never been any

No one, absolutely no one, was to sit on the left-hand side of the love seat.

real friend of mine. As someone once immortally said, I never liked him and I always will.

You see, I write fantastic stories, stories

of free imagination, about ghosts and goblins and djinns and werewolves and other assorted horrors; and while I may be no beacon light in American Letters, my friends are always careful to say they like my stories, or to lie like gentlemen if they don't—some native shrewdness warning them that fiction writers are as hammy at heart as operatic divas.

But Greg Leyden was not of these.

On the only occasion that I was so misguided as to show him one of my published tales, he looked through it, tossed the magazine aside indifferently, and sneered:

"Do you really believe that stuff?"

I don't know why such a question should be so particularly enraging, but I invariably find it so.

"Certainly, I believe it!" I answered now, annoyed. "If I didn't believe in it at least while I was writing it, how do you think I could ever convince my readers, if any, that it really happened?"

His sneer deepened. "You must have a diseased imagination," he said.

I tightened my lips, and by the grace of God I managed to say nothing. For I have grown too old, and too wise, I hope, and certainly too indifferent by far to waste any more time futilely trying to justify myself to anyone.

But naturally Greg Leyden had not endeared himself to me.

As it happened, my friend, Ed Sharpe, was present when Greg Leyden offered this opinion of my imagination—and thus, by indirection, his low opinion also of me and my literary talents, if I may be permitted so to call them. Ed said nothing at the time, either—principally, as he told me afterward, because he was too busy marveling at and admiring my self-restraint.

But when Greg had left, Ed turned to me, shaking his head. "Did you get the irony, Al, of that 'diseased imagination' crack?"

I had, of course, and it had deepened my fury. I knew just what Ed meant.

You'll know what we're talking about when I tell you that Greg Leyden is one of those people who are congenitally incapable of believing that they are not right in the

very center of things. Just mention casually that you've been some place, or have done something, or have seen something, and Greg will pop right up with the information that oh, yes, he's been there, too, that he has seen or done the very same thing; only he has stayed longer, or seen more, or done better than you did, if you know what I mean.

These artless confidences of his are supposed to bowl us over with sheer surprise and subtly lessen the magnitude of our own accomplishments, but naturally we all know that he is lying. He has tripped himself up a hundred times. We've always let it go in the past, because it never seemed worthwhile baldly to call him a liar. But we all know that when it comes to topping our own stories he certainly has a very active imagination.

You might even call it a "diseased" imagination, as he had so churlishly called mine.

So much for Greg Leyden, for the present.

THE next thing that has befallen—the peculiar story of Greg Leyden is the apparently unrelated fact that Marie and I, at long last, had found a vacant house to rent.

Ever since we'd been married, Marie and I had been living with her parents. Now they're good scouts, and we're grateful to them for taking us in, and we love them dearly—or we would if we didn't see them too often. But the fact remains that they are old, and they disapprove of a surprising number of things, and they talk our ear off besides.

But we didn't leap to sign a lease on the vacant house, and neither would you have, in these times.

"There must be something wrong with the place," were Marie's first words, as we stood on the sidewalk regarding the vacant house.

The real estate man who had showed us the property had very considerably stepped aside for a space to give us a chance to talk things over.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I said,

scratching my head. I was really bothered. Something must have decayed in Denmark, but for the life of me I couldn't detect any odor. "I can't see what can be wrong with it, though. The plumbing works, the roof doesn't leak, the oil burner seems to be okay, and the place is spotlessly clean and doesn't even need redecorating."

It was a really handsome little white-painted ranch house of brick, with a du-bonnet-tiled bath and cabinet kitchen over which Marie had made moans ecstatically. The neighborhood was not only upper-middle-class, but convenient besides.

"But why is it vacant in a housing shortage time like this?" Marie fretted. "And just look at the way that real estate man has been acting. So—so apprehensive, as if he's afraid we're going to ask him what's wrong with it."

He had given me that impression too. "Well, we *could* ask him," I said.

Marie had a sniff for such male obtuseness. "He'd only lie, or evade the question."

"On the other hand," I said, "if we go on living with your folks—"

"I know," Marie sighed. "Poor darlings! If I hear just once more how much better *they* managed things at our age, how much more sense *they* had, how much more quiet and refined *their* friends were—"

"And so forth and so on," I said.

THE upshot of it was that against our better judgment, we asked no question, but signed the lease and took the house. But both of us spent many a sleepless night before we moved in, and the dire predictions of my parents-in-law did nothing to ease our minds.

That first month we were in the place, we lived in a state of uneasy suspension, holding our breath. And then ecstasy took over completely, while we listened smugly to the envious exclamations of our friends. Nothing seemed to be wrong, after all. The house was well-nigh perfect, and we wondered at our earlier qualms.

"When I think of how we *worried!*" Marie kept saying at intervals. "How near we came to passing it up!"

"What dopes we were," I agreed.

"It was an act of Providence that we didn't listen to ourselves, that's what it was!"

Ah, well. It's nice that we had those few moments of self-congratulation. For you live and learn. Painfully.

It was Ed and Alice Sharpe who talked us into giving that ill-fated housewarming party.

Ed dearly loves to plan things, especially when he knows that somebody else is going to do all the work.

"Just ask a few of the choicer souls," he advised us. "We'll all bring our own drinks, and Alice here will bake a ham—"

"Oh, God, I knew it!" Alice said. "I always wind up baking a ham."

"—and all in all," Ed finished largely, "it will hardly cost you a dime."

As Marie says, Ed can sell anybody anything. He's a big, blond, urchin-faced six-footer, and a practical joker to boot.

But we manage to stand him most of the time.

"Just remember one thing," I told him sternly, "and warn everybody else. The furniture isn't paid for, and we'd like to keep it in one piece till it is."

So the party was on for a week from the coming Saturday night. And it was at the party that Ed had his brilliant idea for a joke on Greg Leyden—that joke which was to have its repercussion and such a strange sequel.

"We'll keep the party small," Marie said, making up the guest list. "After all, if we ask the whole gang, those hoodlums'll claw the walls down." She checked the list off on her fingers. "Let's see now. Besides ourselves and the Sharpes, we'll just have Carl and Edna Johnson, Jack and Pinky Ahern, Joe Benning and that redheaded model he runs around with—she's so dumb she lays me out—and oh, yes! Greg Leyden, and some girl for him."

"Ah, now, why Greg Leyden?" I groaned.

"Because we always ask him."

It was true enough. We always did seem to ask him, though none of us really liked him. I wondered about it for the first time,

and now that I came to think of it, it seemed simple enough. He'd just wormed his way insidiously into the crowd, though in the beginning he'd only been the acquaintance of a friend of one of the members, asked once to fill in in an emergency.

"Why shouldn't we ask Greg Leyden?" Marie wanted to know now.

"Well, nobody seems to like him. Besides," I stuck out my lower lip, "he says I have a diseased imagination."

"Too bad about you."

"And, anyway," I said, "he never has a girl. Most of them have sense enough not to go out with him more than once."

"Then we'll get one for him," Marie said, ending the argument. "We'll just wish that little job on Ed Sharpe, since the party was his big idea in the first place. High time he did some of the work."

So I called Ed on the phone and told him, and of course he hollered like a stuck pig.

"Why am I always the patsy?" he groaned. "I've found twenty-eleven dates for that character in the past, and he didn't like any one of them. Who does he think he is, anyway, Gable? Why don't you suck somebody else in, for a change?"

"Have done, rogue! Condolences, and all that, but Marie says it's mandatory. No date for Greg, no party."

"And I thought she was a friend of mine! Well, all right. Just this once more, though who I'm going to get—!"

I hung up on him.

The phone rang.

"I suppose we'll even have to haul her over there for him!" Ed's voice said bitterly.

He hung up on me.

AND of course, as luck would have it, he and Alice showed up at the party that Saturday night with a bottle of Scotch and a baked ham, but no date for Greg. If they'd brought somebody, nothing would have happened.

And there'd be no story for me to tell.

Everybody else was there but Greg, when Ed and Alice came in alone.

Marie had a fit, in a refined sort of way, when she saw they'd brought no girl for Greg.

"Now, Ed, you promised!" she wailed. "I've already told Greg you have the most fascinating female in the world lined up for him."

Alice stuck up for her husband. "He tried, dear, really he did. He's been hanging on the phone all week, poor darling."

"Look at me!" Ed boomed. "I'm a wraith, my dear. Naught but a shadow of my former self."

"You're a pain in the neck, that's what you are," Marie said.

Alice said defensively, "It isn't his fault. As soon as he told the girls the date was with Greg, they all turned him down. Even Puff Madison said no, and you know Puff, *she'll* go out with anybody, just so long as he's white and under ninety. So you see? It was really hopeless."

"But what am I going to tell Greg?" Marie wailed again.

"His best friends won't tell him," Ed said.

"I can't understand it," said Elaine, Joe Benning's redheaded friend. "I think Greg Leyden is a *cute* little guy."

But no one paid any attention to her, for it's a well-known fact that Elaine's heart is nearly as soft as her brain.

Still, it's true enough that Greg is not a repulsive-looking fellow, and I hope I haven't given you the idea that he is. On the contrary, he's really good-looking. It's true that he's short, but he's well-proportioned for his size and has good features, with soft brown eyes like a spaniel's.

It's probably because of his eyes that we've never been able to blow him off. He makes those sarcastic comments of his, but if you try to retaliate, his eyes get that hurt, wounded look so that you feel as guilty as if you'd slapped a puppy or stepped on an insect.

"He means well," I said, in a large-hearted moment. Or maybe it was just the Scotch. "It's probably just that he feels insecure. He bolsters his own ego by attempting to tear down everybody else's."

"There you go!" Ed said. "What are you

defending him for? You and your diseased imagination!"

"For Pete's sake," I said. "Can't you forget that crack? It didn't really bother me any."

"Well, I didn't like it," Ed said. "I think you're a good writer!"

It was nice of him to say so. Of course he was slightly "high" by that time, but I warmed to him in spite of myself.

"Well, anyway," Marie said. "All this is neither here nor there. What are we going to tell Greg?"

Ed waved his highball carelessly. "Oh, tell him we did bring a girl for him. With his imagination, he'll have no trouble at all seeing her." He started to take a drink, then seemed to hear the echo of his own words. He lowered his glass to stare at us owlishly over its rim. "By golly!" he said. "Now there's an idea! Now wait a minute. Hold everything. Just let everybody please keep their shirt on a minute while I give this a little thought."

We all groaned, suspecting that Ed was off on another one of his practical jokes.

HE LOOKED around the room, his eyes gleaming impishly. "See that love-seat over there? That red one? Well, for the duration of the party, don't anybody dare to sit in the left-hand seat of it as you face it."

We all stared at it. "Why not?"

"Because Greg's girl is sitting there, that's why not."

Alice caught on first. "Now, Ed, don't be silly. Greg'll never swallow a yarn as ridiculous as that."

"Oh, won't he?" Ed scoffed. "Don't I know the guy? I tell you if we all act perfectly matter-of-fact about it, act as if the girl were really here and we really see her, Greg won't let himself be left out of things. Mark my words, he'll pretend that he sees her too. Isn't that the way he's always been in the past?"

He glared around at all of us, daring us to contradict him.

And of course we couldn't.

But I felt uncomfortable, just the same. I said, "Well, look. It's kind of a dirty

trick to play on the guy, seems to me. All of us ganging up on him this way, like a bunch of cruel little kids."

Marie looked doubtful too.

But they all shouted us down, even Elaine. Somehow, Ed's idea had captured their imagination. What harm could it do, they asked us? It would be fun. And even Greg, if he were any kind of a good Joe at all, would laugh himself at the absurdity of it once he caught on to what we'd been doing. It would certainly drive the lesson home as nothing else could. Who knows, it might even humanize the lad, make him a really acceptable member of the gang?

"I'll teach that guy," Ed said, "to tell my pal, Al—good old Al!—that he has a diseased imagination!"

I still didn't like the idea, but they weren't paying any attention to me. They were all howling at various suggestions for names for the unknown lady. Hilarious cognomens were bruited back and forth. Ed was all for calling her Passion Flower Houlihan or Rose of the Rancho Epstein, but I brought a halt to this.

I said, "If you must do it at all, at least don't be too raw. If you get too far-fetched, he'll never swallow any of it, and the thing will fall flat. Give her a name that sounds believable."

"Well, you name her," Ed suggested.

"Oh, call her Mary—May—Mabel," I said indifferently. "Mabel—uh—Hess."

It came to me from nowhere. Really it did. I mean I'm positive it was not a name I'd seen some place, rising now from my subconscious.

Ed lifted his drink, and bowed to the empty love-seat. "Miss Mabel Hess. *Je vous salue!*"

The bell ringing cut through our laughter.

"Sh-h-h! Here he comes. No giggling now, mind!"

GREG came in with that elaborate ease and studied poise that people assume who aren't very sure of their welcome.

Everybody gravely said hello, and I pressed a drink into his hand, and he stood there looking around. He tried to make

his darting glances seem idle ones, but we all knew the reason for them.

Our living room isn't very large, and he could certainly sweep it with a glance. But he couldn't get a clear view of the love-seat and whoever might be sitting upon it for the Johnsons and Joe Benning and Elaine were standing before it in a group.

Greg was standing with Ed and me. His manner was ingratiating, as it always was until he felt sure that he was "in," whereupon he inevitably waxed sardonic and patronizing.

"Well, where is she?" he asked. "I thought you were getting a date for me?"

I still didn't want to go through with it, but Ed waved his glass vaguely. "Over there. On the love-seat. And listen, Greg, try to like this one and be nice to her. She's a darned sweet kid, and personally I think she's too good for you."

It was said with exactly the right, light casual air.

The Johnsons had drifted over in time to hear the last of this, and they nodded enthusiastically. "So pretty! And such a lovely shy manner!"

Ed was nudging me. I said unwillingly, "Yes. Marie and I liked her at once. The Madonna type, I guess you'd call her."

Greg looked around wildly. It really was kind of funny, at that. "But where? Where is she?" he asked, all agog.

Edna Johnson waved. "Over there—oh! Joe and Elaine are standing right in the way. Joe! Elaine! Come here a second, will you?" As they came toward us, leaving the love-seat in clear view, Edna went on, "There now! Didn't we tell you?"

We all hung breathless on his answer. He was staring at the love-seat, then at us, then back to the love-seat again:

Surely he'd never be taken in by so patent an absurdity?

We waited.

You could have heard a pin drop.

Greg breathed softly.

"Oh, I see," he said at last. "I see her now." He whistled under his breath. "Say, where have you been keeping her? When I think of some of the plug-uglies you guys have pawned off on me in the past!"

It was hard not to laugh. Elaine opened her mouth, and I'm sure she would have spoiled everything by giggling had not Joe Benning bent forward swiftly and planted an expert kiss on her painted lips, successfully distracting her little mind for the nonce.

Greg really had fallen for the absurd plot, just as Ed had said he would.

There was a moment's silence while we all stood there, very dead-pan, watching Greg staring bewitched at the empty love-seat. Then he turned to me impatiently.

"Well," he said, "'what are we waiting for? I haven't even met her yet. How's about a knock-down?"

There was nothing else for it, so gravely I led him over to the love-seat, while the eyes of the others, I knew, were boring into our backs, and they smothered laughter behind their hands.

"Miss Hess. Mabel," I said to the empty air, feeling like a fool. "This is Greg Leyden."

He was smiling. "Hello, Miss Hess."

There wasn't any answer, of course.

But he sat down on the right-hand seat, and went on smoothly, "How does it happen we've never met before? You've never been at any of the other parties the crowd has given."

And he seemed to be listening to an answer.

EITHER he was terribly dumb, or he was quicker-witted than I would have given him credit for being. I suspected the latter. Shutting my jaw with a snap, I went back to the others. The faces of all of them were solemn, but their eyes were dancing with suppressed mischief, as they watched Greg carrying on an animated conversation with empty space.

Ed said to me, "You're a terrible host. You haven't even offered Miss Hess a drink. I'll give her one—good old Mabel!"

We tried not to watch too obviously as he went over to the love-seat carrying an extra highball. I had visions of the drink slopping all over our unpaid-for crimson damask love-seat as he'd try to offer a drink to a little lady who wasn't there.

But he was back in a moment, shaking his head, still bearing the glass in his hand. He said, "Greg says that Mabel doesn't care for anything, thank you."

"Oh, he calls her Mabel already, huh?" snickered Pinky Ahern. "He's a fast worker, that boy!"

The whole thing had fallen terribly flat for me. I went out to the kitchen for more ice cubes. Marie and Alice were already there, carving the ham and arranging the salads. Ed came trailing out after me.

"Didn't I tell you?" he whispered gleefully.

Marie said, "It gives me the shivers the way he sits there talking—just as if somebody were really there."

"I knew he'd fall for it," Ed said.

I was tired of the whole business. I said wearily, "Don't be goofy, Ed. Anybody could see what has happened."

"Well, what has happened?"

"How can you be so dumb? Greg caught on to the joke right away, of course. He hasn't got a hole in his head. He's turned the tables on us nicely by dumping the joke right back in our laps."

Ed thought that over. If he'd been entirely sober, he would have seen it for himself long before this.

Marie said, "I wouldn't have thought Greg could be so convincing an actor."

And Alice agreed, "He's really good. You'd swear the most fascinating girl in the world was holding him enthralled."

I shrugged. "Well, let's get back to the living room. When we're all together again, he'll call it off and we can have a good laugh all around. I've got to hand it to him, though. He's really given us one in the eye, this time. The biters bit."

Ed looked crestfallen.

Alice said severely, "And I hope this will be a lesson to you. You and your silly practical jokes."

But when we went back into the living room, Greg was still deep in animated converse. His right elbow was resting on the back of the seat, his head supported by his propped hand. He was smiling and laughing and talking eighteen to the dozen, and seemed to be having a very good time for

himself, indeed. If I hadn't known what he was up to, it would have given me the willies, watching him smiling and nodding to himself, like some particularly mad inmate of Bedlam.

He didn't pay any of us the slightest attention. Apparently he was prepared to keep up the masquerade all night. And it was ruining the party.

Marie nudged me angrily. "For heaven's sake, go over there and tell him to cut it out. He doesn't know when to say when. The joke's on us, and it wasn't very funny to begin with—no more than any of Ed's so-called humorous ideas ever are. Go on, now! Before any more of the evening is spoiled."

I started obediently over to the love-seat and just as I reached it, Greg stood up. I thought he'd tired at last of his little game.

BUT I was wrong.

"Say, Al," he said, in a confidential tone. "Mabel is tired and wants to leave. I'm going with her. She says she only came because she was so lonesome, so hungry for the sound of voices and laughter." His spaniel eyes asked forgiveness for telling me this. "You won't mind, will you, if I take her away so early? We don't like to break up the party, but—"

I said, "Okay, Greg. You win. Cut it out. The joke's on us, and no harm done."

He looked at me blankly. "Joke?"

His persistence started to make me angry. Didn't he know when an anti-climax had been reached? I told him, I said, "Cut it out! You know as well as we do that there isn't any Mabel Hess!"

"Not any—?" He continued to look at me blankly. Then he turned to the side. Evidently his invisible companion had risen when he did, for he was looking at her face at eye level. Or, at least, he was trying to make me believe that he was. When he turned back to me again, the expression on his face was a peculiar mixture of sorrow and annoyance.

"Now, Al," he reproved me. "That wasn't a very nice thing for you to say. And right in front of Mabel, too. Look, you've made her cry!" The annoyance deepened to

anger, and he went on belligerently, "If you're trying to imply, Al, that Mabel is so insignificant, so colorless, so lacking in personality as to be entirely unnoticeable—well, you can't say that again without answering to me for it!"

It was ridiculous, but his anger was contagious. I had all I could do to restrain myself from swinging on him. What was he trying to put over on us, anyway?

He turned from me to look at the others, and his eyes no longer resembled a spaniel's. They were flashing and sparkling with righteous wrath.

"What's the matter with all you people tonight, anyway!" he excoriated us. "Except for Ed offering her a drink, not one of you tonight has paid the slightest attention whatever to Mabel, for all you were so highly complimentary about her when I came in! And she's your guest, too! Well, I call it a pretty low-down, scurvy trick, and lousy treatment to hand out to a delicate girl like her, who never did anything to any of you! I'm completely fed up! And if I never see you characters again, it will be too soon!" His face was rigid with fury, and only softened when he said, "Come on, Mabel. Let's get out of here!"

And they—I mean *he*, for the love of Mike! was gone while the rest of us were still standing there, our mouths opening and shutting like freshly-landed fish.

IT WAS Elaine who created a diversion. She promptly went off into galloping hysterics before falling into a dead faint. We had a terrible time reviving her.

"Is she conscious?" Marie asked at last.

"As conscious as she ever gets," Joe reassured her.

We helped Elaine to her feet. And we had time then to think of Greg Leyden and his furious diatribe.

"Brother!" Ed whistled. "Did he lay on the lash! Did we ever get our ears pinned back, though!"

"You've got to hand it to him," Marie said. "I almost believed for a minute that Mabel Hess was there."

"Almost?" Elaine shivered. "I think she *was* there!"

Elaine is dumb, I grant you. And of course she was exaggerating. But, do you know, sometimes I wonder if she could have a sixth sense, by way of compensation?

Well, the whole thing left a bad taste in our mouths. The next morning Marie and I debated the advisability of apologizing to Greg. We hadn't cared for the idea to begin with, and we were thoroughly ashamed of ourselves for not putting a stop to it when it had been first proposed by Ed.

"For, of course," Marie pointed out, "Greg was just carrying the thing through to a logical conclusion by persisting in pretending that Mabel Hess was there with him. It gave him a good opportunity to tell us off, and ram that joke right down our silly throats to the bitter end."

I heartily agreed with her.

Twice during that ensuing week I telephoned Greg's apartment to tell him we were sorry about it all, but there wasn't any answer. And then, one afternoon towards the end of the week, I ran into him as I was coming down the post office steps with a rejected manuscript in my hand.

For a minute I was afraid Greg was going to pass me without speaking—and I would scarcely have blamed him—but he looked at me, hesitated for a minute as if he were going to go on, then stopped.

"Hello, Al," he said uncertainly.

I was just as uncomfortable as he was. "I've phoned you twice this week, but you were never in. Come on over and have a cup of coffee with me. There's something I'd like to tell you."

But as it happened, Greg did most of the talking once we were settled in a booth in the doughnut-and-coffee shop across the street.

While I was still searching for words with which to apologize, he said, "I want to tell you how sorry I am, Al, that I lost my temper at the party last Saturday night."

I squirmed with embarrassment. He was apologizing to me, after everything, which was certainly heaping on the coals of fire.

"Well, gee!" I said, "You were justified. We handed you a pretty raw deal."

He looked surprised. "Oh, I didn't care

for myself. And anyway, I'm not blaming you, Al."

And then he said it.

He said, "Mabel says it wasn't your fault."

I stared at him, goggle-eyed. Why in hell should he persist in pretending to believe in the Mabel Hess myth? Or was he pretending? For the first time, the suspicion crossed my mind that Greg Leyden might be crazy.

He must have put the wrong interpretation on my astonishment, for he smiled. "Oh, yes. Mabel likes you, you know. She says you really have a very kind heart."

"Does—does she?" I asked idiotically. But what answer *could* I make to such an outlandish statement?

"Oh, yes," Greg assured me. "And of course I'll always be grateful to you for bringing us together."

I swallowed. The walls of the shop were spinning around me, like a carousel gone mad. "You—you mean you still see her?"

He looked away. I could see the slow red creeping up his face and neck above his white collar. He hesitated a minute, then seemed to come to some sort of a decision. He turned to look at me frankly.

"Listen, Al. I wasn't going to tell you at first, for fear you'd misunderstand. But, after all, you're a writer. Broadminded, tolerant. The gay Bohemian type."

I choked on my coffee. Where do people get these ideas? I thanked God that Marie wasn't there to hear him.

"The truth of the matter is—" Greg went on, his blush growing even deeper, "Well, Mabel is living with me."

He must have gone crazy! He might even become violent!

Again he misinterpreted my expression.

"No, no, no!" he said. "Nothing like that! Of course it's strictly platonic!" He looked at me reproachfully. "You know Mabel. How could you possibly think anything else?"

I'd humor him. I'd get away as quickly as I could.

I asked, "How did it happen?"

His eyes grew soft. He certainly had changed in the week since I had seen him

last. For the first time, I found myself almost liking him.

He said proudly, "She *asked* me if she could. When we drove away from your party, and I offered to take her home, she said she had nowhere to go. Gee, Al! She was so fragile and wistful and kind of—oh, I don't know, pitiful! I couldn't say no. You see that, don't you? I—I didn't even *want* to say no. I'd fallen in love with her at sight."

He dreamed there a minute before he went on, low. "Of course, I thought there'd be a lot of talk about it, and I really didn't care, though I've always been pretty conventional, I guess. Even a stuffed-shirt, smug in my rectitude. But, you know, it's a funny thing.

"There's two old maids who live across the hall from me, and I thought their tongues would be wagging at both ends, once they saw Mabel and me entering and leaving my apartment together. But they *have* seen us, and they don't seem to think anything of it! I thought they'd cut me dead, but they always say hello, and smile."

He fidgeted with a fork, frowning. "Of course, it's true they ignore Mabel completely. They look right through her. It's almost as if they can't see her."

I wet my lips. "But—Mabel? Have you just accepted her? A homeless girl? Haven't you even asked her any questions about herself?"

Greg smiled shyly. "In the beginning, I did. But she was always—evasive. She won't tell me anything about herself. I kidded her about it. I called her my Lady of Mystery. But now I never ask any more. It seemed to make her so sad. I don't even want to know—whatever there is to know. Everything is so beautiful, just as it is. I wouldn't run the risk of spoiling it."

Now, *I'm* not crazy. I know how all this sounds. But you should have been there! You should have heard him! He wasn't insane, as I'd feared. I'd take a bet on it. He wasn't even drunk. *He*, at least, believed sincerely in the existence of Mabel Hess.

I couldn't take any more. I got up groggily. I mumbled something, and left

him abruptly. I knew he was staring after me, surprised, even upset by my sudden leave-taking.

But, take it from me, he was certainly not so upset as I was!

I WANTED to go home and lie down in a darkened room with a wet rag on my forehead. I wanted to hide in a closet. I wanted to get blind-drunk. I wanted to do anything but think about Greg Leyden.

I don't know what I wanted.

I certainly didn't expect what I got, though.

For when I reached home, my nerves fluttering like a flag in the wind, Marie was sitting on the very edge of a chair in the living room, staring expectantly at the door, waiting for me to come through it. She still had her hat on, and an early edition of the evening paper was folded on her lap.

"Well," she said grimly, when she saw me. "I hope you're satisfied now! We're moving out of here in the morning!"

I couldn't cope with a wife in that mood, not after what I'd just been through.

I said wearily, "What's eating you now?"

"Don't take that tone with me!" she said. She threw the paper indignantly across to me. "That's what's eating me! Read it!"

I regarded the printed page with a jaundiced eye, mumbled aloud, "STEEL MARKET DRIFTS LOWER—"

"No, no, no!" cried Marie impatiently. "Not that, idiot! The little paragraph buried way down at the bottom of the first column!"

I read aloud again, after I'd found what she meant. "The will of Miss Mabel Hess, who committed suicide last September by inhaling gas in the kitchen of her home at 1122 Pleasant Parkway, has been admitted to probate."

I read it again.

"Mabel Hess, 1122 Pleasant Parkway," I said. I looked at Marie. "Say, that's *this* house!"

Someone seemed to be trailing fingers dipped in ice-water up and down my spine.

I can't tell Greg. He'd say I have a diseased imagination.

But I can't help wondering who—or *what*—is sharing his apartment!