

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1949

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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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From the Vasty Deep

*From the deep comes
retribution
in many forms*

“YOU’RE sure he knows what to say, Abdullah?” said Alistair Brayton to the guide.

“Oh yes, sair.”

“It’s just a joke, a bit of fun; you understand what I mean?”

“Oh yes, sair, just a plaisanterie; I savvy.”

The big cafe-au-lait, pock-marked rascal grinned complaisantly. Brayton had already tipped him well and promised him more, and he wanted some quick money for the purpose of buying a new wife, the daughter of a friend of his, a pretty little creature aged thirteen. His present spouse was twenty-nine and already an old, unappetizing thing, as dehydrated as a dried locust.

“We’ll be out in about half an hour,” said Brayton.

This conversation had taken place outside the Royal Hotel, Biskra, just within the rim of the Sahara.

Brayton sauntered back into the salle à manger where he found Rex Beaumont finishing his breakfast.

“Have you eaten?” asked Beaumont.

“Yes, some time ago.”

“You were up early!”

“Yes, the sun blazes right into my room.”

Their tones were cordial and their mutual antipathy nearly perfectly concealed. That intensely reciprocated dislike was of long standing, perhaps sufficiently explained by



BY

H. RUSSELL WAKEFIELD

Heading by John Giunta

the fact that they were beyond any argument the two leading actors on the contemporary British stage. In fact Beaumont was probably the best mummer in the world, for he had starred in some very good pictures. Their rivalry was bitterly exacerbated by the ferocious partisanship of their respective cliques. Brayton was thirty-six and Beaumont thirty-nine, and those three cursed years plagued his soul. Forty was *such* a milestone, *millstone* almost to that cynosure of a myriad female eyes.

He was indeed a very handsome comely fellow, dark, slim, lithe and a beautiful mover on the stage. He possessed "classic" features, an intense, somewhat sinister expression, a powerful and dominating eye, mellifluous voice, and, above all that, he was a most accomplished and versatile craftsman. His Iago, both Richards, Antony, Volpone and Shotover were superb, and he was equally esteemed in modern comedy. But he had found a gray hair six months before; that very morning, in the light of the pitiless desert sun, he had spotted several thriving and minatory colonies, and dyeing was a stark reminder of death.

Brayton was a mighty charmer, too, big, blond, smiling, full of red blood coursing radiantly; equipped with a fine resonant baritone and a marvelous sense of character. He filled a stage and held the eye hypnotically. A superlative Macbeth, Othello, Undershaft, and both Caesars. He almost did the impossible with Falstaff, and, indeed, he never really failed; it was not in his character.

Their rivalry was inept and superfluous, for there was plenty of room for both and they clashed in no way, but there it was, and that is the way of things in that logically lawless profession.

Both were vain men, but Brayton's vanity found expression chiefly in praise of himself, Brayton's in dispraise of others. Beaumont was, however, deemed by his colleagues far the better character of the two, a generous and considerate employer, fair-minded, and with a sense of humor sufficiently developed to disinfect and restrain his little failings; and after all, no great actor is ever *quite* human, everyone agreed.

Brayton was generally rated a false bon-

homme, catty, uncertain-tempered, inclined to malice and tight in money matters. His nickname in the profession was "Billy Bennett" after a famous comedian whose self-composed description was "almost a gentleman." This judgment was probably a bit harsh and superficial. He was a medium, in a sense only another word for a great character actor—fundamentally a simple, rather impercipient, unanalytic man, with very little personality of his own, being perpetually "possessed" by the "souls" created by others; and, like most mediums, unscrupulous; amoral rather than bad. He did his stuff very well, and his irresistible smile got his fans vapouring with rapture. Neither was married, both preferring a frequent change of leading lady.

A last very important point, Beaumont was now "Sir Rex," having been knighted a few weeks before in the New Year Honours. Brayton had not yet recovered from that fearful right to the solar plexus.

THEIR meeting in Biskra was, of course, accidental; Beaumont, on holiday at Algiers, had decided to have a look at the desert before going home. Brayton had been yachting in the Mediterranean, got bored and seasick and flown down from the Riviera.

The night before they had arranged with the local Sand-Diviner to have their fortunes told by him at ten that morning. Both men were extremely superstitious. Most gamblers share this frailty as a badge of their tribe, and anyone who relies for fame and fortune on the fickle and callous mob—chiefly female mob—is a "plunger" indeed.

Brayton now reminded Beaumont of this date.

"Oh yes," he said, "I haven't forgotten. One of these days, perhaps, I shall cure myself of this puerile craving for the reassurance of magicians; they've had a lot of my money and habitually contradict each other."

"Well, come on," laughed Brayton, "and let us see what this professor of the mantic art has to tell us."

Beaumont put on his hat and followed him out of the hotel to where Abdullah was awaiting them. He salaamed in his oily, yet subtly disrespectful way. They had not far to go, the seer's pitch was only a

hundred yards down the road at the entrance to the little bazaar. As they proceeded, Abdullah kept up a repeated cry of "Imshi" as he shooed away the septic beggars, and precociously lewd small boys.

The Sandman was squatting down behind a porphyry bowl three-quarters filled with soiled sand. He was clad in a burnoose over a tiny, grimy pair of linen pants. He looked half as old as time and his face was the color and texture of a swan's paddle, a dark sallow gray etched with a web of tiny lines and wrinkles. He took no notice of them as they halted beside him, nor to some remark of Abdullah's, but continued apparently aimlessly, to stir the sand with a skinny, arid forefinger. This nonchalance was part of his "act," thought Brayton. Abdullah spoke to him again in Arabic and then asked Beaumont to step forward in front of the bowl. For about half a minute the old man went on scrabbling in the sand more slowly now, less aimlessly and seemingly in a more concentrated way. And then presently he mumbled a short sentence. Abdullah spoke to him interrogatively and he replied again.

He seemed out of temper.

"Well?" said Beaumont.

"It is not very good news, I fear," smiled Abdullah.

"Never mind, let's have it," said Beaumont uneasily and with a forced smile.

"He say-gentleman have not one year to go."

"To go! Go, where?" asked Beaumont sharply.

"He mean to go on living, I think," replied Abdullah smiling and giving Brayton a quick glance.

Beaumont flushed and gave a clipped, uneasy laugh. "That's nice of him," he said.

"Is that all he has to tell me?"

"That is all," replied Abdullah.

"Well, its your turn," said Beaumont to Brayton. He was obviously much disconcerted. He took off his hat and mopped his forehead.

Brayton moved forward and took his place before the bowl. Again the old man scrabbled in the sand for a while, and then looked up suddenly and for the first time. There was a look of extreme malevolence

in his vulture eyes. Then he spoke a very long sentence. Abdullah looked baffled and the two of them had a short tart colloquy. At length Abdullah shrugged his shoulders and said, "It is difficult to savvy what he say. He say you will meet other gentleman at a feast and then by the sea, and then Allah will be very good to you. I dunno what he mean. He say he finish now."

THE seance was over. Beaumont immediately excused himself and hurried away. Brayton handed Abdullah a roll of notes. "It was just a joke, of course," he said quickly. "I'll tell the other gentleman it was just a joke before he leaves."

Abdullah smiled, salaamed, gave some of the notes to the Sandman, who took them without a word.

"He is angry," said Abdullah, "he does not like doing such things. He believes he see *true* things in the sand."

"Well, tell him it was only a little joke," muttered Brayton, "and that I'll put it right." He walked away leaving them together.

He had, of course, by bribery and corruption deliberately queeted the prophetic pitch, moved by one of those sudden, malicious impulses which had contributed so much to his unpopularity. He had just wanted to give that conceited, over-rated person, Beaumont, a bit of a shock, a jolt. Well, he had done that, all right—quite obviously. Now he had better repair the damage. If he could have met him at once he would probably have done so, but he was not to be found till lunch-time, and by then Brayton had had time to think it over. When explained, it would look such a *very* poor joke, one requiring rather a lot of difficult explanation. He knew Beaumont would be furious and certainly spread the story when he got back to London. That would not do him any good. "Just typical of the blighter!" would be the general verdict. Whereas, if he kept his mouth shut, Beaumont would soon forget all about it, of course. No, he felt he just could not bring himself to confess and humiliate himself to such a spoilt, vain, over-rated person as "Sir Rex"; everyone knew how he had worked and wangled for that knighthood! His sense of guilt intensified his hate, so spreading

and thinning his good impulse till it was impotent. No, he would let it go!

There was a famous Parisian nerve specialist staying in the hotel, a man of formidable presence, patriarchal beard and piercing sardonic eye. Beaumont asked him to lunch at their table, not feeling in the mood for a "head-to-head" alone with Brayton. He was too full of that sombre oracle to keep it to himself, and presently told the Frenchman, in a failed-facetious way, what the Sandman had divined. The specialist was not deceived and set himself to undo what might well, he saw, be a serious mischief.

"Do not alarm yourself, Sir Rex," he said with a smile; "let me assure you the future *does not exist*, and precognition of all modes is pure fake, as you would put it, and a logical absurdity."

"Yet such foreseeing has a very long history," remarked Brayton, and then wished he hadn't. The Frenchman glanced at him in a cold appraising way. Brayton could not meet his eye.

"Yes, indeed," he replied, "and so have a myriad other childish superstitions. I have read your English philosopher, Dunne, for example. His *Time* is grossly spacial, his *Serial Selves*, the product of a radical psychological confusion, and his *evidence, pour rire*. Let me tell you all such stuff—prophetic dreams, palmistry, crystal-gazing, and this sand nonsense — is all part of the clever charlatan's stock-in-trade. I say *clever* because some of them are endowed with a peculiar faculty. Let me give an example of what I mean. I am very musical, but what is called absolute pitch, the immediate intuitive recognition of all the relationships of a note, is a profound mystery to me. Now these magicians have an equally strange power, called clairvoyance, which is really nothing but just an immediate, intuitive recognition, not of a *note*, but of a *man from his face and general deportment*. *Deportment* is not quite the word, but you will understand what I mean. By means of it they can make very good guesses as to a man's past, and even his future. In fact I myself have some small gift of this kind. It is a true faculty, but never results in more than a clever guess; there is nothing occult about

it whatsoever. No, be reassured, Sir Rex, I say with the utmost emphasis the *future does not exist*, and that is the only thing we can know about it. I must say I am surprised at that Sand-Fellow, he is usually more discreet in his humbug."

"He made a highly nebulous divination about me," said Brayton, "and ended up by saying 'And then Allah will be very good to you.' What did he mean by that?"

The Frenchman paused before replying and then said very stiffly, "I do not know, Mr. Brayton, the expression is not familiar to me. Forget all his nonsense, both of you!"

"He's lying, I think," said Brayton to himself. "Anyway Beaumont won't worry any more. That lets me out!"

But he was wrong. Beaumont remained depressed and full of foreboding. Why *hadn't* the Sand-Diviner been more discreet and pronounced the usual smooth things? Because he profoundly believed in the truth of his grim oracle and wished to warn his client. So Beaumont argued. He had always been physically robust enough, but his nervous system was innately fragile, and had been for some time flawed by over-work. He had a heavy programme ahead of him and had been worrying about the maze of detail involved in it during his holiday, which had consequently done him little good. He was in no-state to out-face any further strain on his psyche. So Brayton's "joke" had stabbed deep through an impaired organism, and one by nature highly vulnerable to such a thrust.

HIS first role to tackle was the Inquisitor in *Saint Joan* in which he was as good as any Englishman could hope to be. He started re-studying it, and found to his intense dismay that he could not memorize the great speech at the trial. He "fluffed" time after time and always at the same place. He cancelled the revival because he was hopeless. His doctor recommended six months' complete rest, "But what is the use of that," he thought to himself, "when I have less than eleven months at the best to live!" Still he listlessly took the holiday, a sea voyage round the world.

Unluckily he went alone save for one companion, John Barleycorn. That boon comrade and he became inseparable. "Why not," he

told himself, "if I am doomed!" Of course he got no better. In fact he threw himself overboard on the last night before the ship reached Southampton and though they searched for a while, they could not find his body.

When Brayton heard of it he felt very, very badly. Indeed he had been greatly troubled ever since Beaumont had broken down. He kept wanting to tell him it had been a joke, but he just could not. He could not say it to his face and he could not write it. He could go so far as getting writing-paper and shaking his fountain pen, but he could write nothing. He could look down at the paper and see in his mind's eye the letter coming into spectral being line by line, but he could not write it. This had been getting on his nerves. When Beaumont jumped overboard he shut himself up in his room to think. And he had begun to make a confidant of John Barleycorn, too. Of course he had not been responsible for Rex's over-work and break-down, but he knew that some people, if they knew about the "joke," would have called him a murderer and nothing less. It was very lucky no one *did* know—in a way. In another way he would have liked to have got it off his chest. Why had he ever done it? Because Rex's conceit had disgusted him and, yes, because he had got that *knight-hood*. Yes, *that* was it. *That* had done it. That's what he wanted to get off his chest and confess loudly and bravely. "It was a lousy trick, a silly, sudden, sodden notion. I was off-balance when I did it and I hadn't the guts to confess to Rex." But he could not face it. It would ruin him, his many enemies would see to that. "I wish to hell I'd never done it, though! It's done me no good and that's a certainty. Actually I miss Rex. I can see now the rivalry between us stimulated me. The bell has tolled for me, too. It was a rotten thing to do."

Whether this belated remorse was due to a sense of sin or a feeling of vague nervous discomfort is doubtful, but he can be given the benefit of it, and, perhaps, after all, the two emotions are pretty much the same.

Certainly it did not, as he had hoped, wear thinner. Rather it steadily intensified, for he was very superstitious, too. He could not get Rex out of his mind, especially as he be-

gan dreaming about him and, what was worse, always the same dream. He was standing on a beach gazing out to sea over some rocks. The sea was breaking lightly over the rocks and he was looking for something he knew he did not want to see. He stared hard, watching the lift of each small wave. Presently he saw something white rise on a crest, surge forward and disappear. There it was again, a bit nearer this time, and the next time and the next. And then whatever this was reached the rocks. He wanted to run away but he could not move. Then he saw it climb up on the rocks and come toward him and it was something like a naked man, only there was a difference. For instance where the face should have been, he presently could see was the big ochre shell of a crab, and he could see the claws moving, and that was the worst of all. Just then he always woke up. He had a pretty good idea what that thing was.

IT CAN be imagined that knowing he was going to have this dream, or being almost sure of it, made going to bed a daunting business for Brayton, because it filled him with a great horror, and he was sweating all over and feeling very sick when he woke up. It was not always as clear as has been described, and he had an idea that the more he'd drunk the less clear it was; so he naturally drank a lot just before turning out the light. And after a time he did not turn out the light at all.

Then there was another bother. He was rehearsing *Macbeth*, his best part, now ripe for revival. He had a great natural sympathy for Macbeth with his huge ambition and also his ghostly fears. If the end was the integration of a superior personality and the satisfaction of its potent, clamant rights, then any means were justified; and, again, such a great man was a natural focus round which the Fates—materialized and conflicting tendencies—should gather. He could call spirits from the Vasty Deep and they *would* come when he did call for them. Something like that. Now, however, he saw there was a good deal to be said for Duncan's point of view. Remorse partly and partly, perhaps, that very phrase, "the Vasty Deep" had something to do with it.

THE back parts of theatres during the throes of rehearsal of a big play like *Macbeth* are crowded, scurrying places; chaos to the uninitiated, but really that odd, motley section of humanity on the move about its business is a good example of organized division of labor. Brayton was, of course, quite at home in this come-and-go and could perfectly distinguish the wood from the trees, the combined effort from the atoms composing it.

Yet one of these "trees" began to worry him. Whether it was in a group of scene-shifters, or Scottish Noblemen, or the orchestra, or any grouped bodies contributing to the enterprise, an intruder was sometimes to be seen furtively lurking; very furtively; for the moment Brayton got him properly in his gaze, or rather just before he succeeded in doing so, he at once dissolved and disappeared, presently to reappear elsewhere. During one rehearsal he saw him for a second watching from the Royal Box. The curtains of the box were of light ochre silk and Brayton noticed a certain resemblance.

Of course his colleagues noticed something was the matter with Billy Bennett and whispered and wondered, but they had to confess he had never acted better. He was word perfect and never more moving and intense; the tortured Thane and he seemed absolutely one in spirit indomitably defying all the legions of Earth and Hell and Heaven.

For the first night he plugged himself with as much Scotch courage as he dared, and Dulcinea Delavere, the Lady Macbeth, turned up her nose when she accepted his bouquet and hoped for the best. It certainly was the best; he had never given such a terrific performance, in spite of, perhaps partly on account of, the fact that there was someone who had no business to be there, standing for a flash in the shadows behind the weird sisters, and then entering for a second with Duncan's retinue, and just visible out of the corner of his eye as he tried to seize the phantom dagger. But he was very near breaking-point in the banquet scene, for when he and his lady were surveying the assembled guests and the ghost of Banquo should have entered, it was not Banquo who

came in, but someone Brayton had seen terribly often coming towards him across the rocks.

"Which of you have done this?" he cried, and pretty well everyone in the audience felt a quick, damp fear break out on them at the way he spoke that mighty line. Dulcinea, who was watching his face as he spoke it, says she knows she will never forget it, but hopes very much she is wrong.

TO THE audience he seemed entranced and inspired in the true sense of the word, breathing in unearthly air. Indeed at the end of the act the famous critic, Charles Straker, who almost always treats plays and actors as cats treat mice, first lying in wait for them, then playing sadistically with them for a while, and finally driving his claws right home in them, declared loudly in the bar it was the greatest piece of acting he had ever seen and that he'd almost have paid for his seat to witness it. But it wasn't acting, something had snapped in Brayton's brain and he was only vaguely conscious of where he was or what he was doing. However, he carried through to the end, and the expression on his face during the last scene was almost more than the people in the stalls could bear.

When the curtain came down, there was someone waiting for him in the wings. He ran from the stage, floored his dresser with a brutal blow, flung off his motley and dashed from the theatre. He was last seen alive running into Trafalgar Square.

Some mornings later, a prawn fisherman, who was netting the rock pools off Ventnor in the Isle of Wight, came to one of these pools just surrendered by a savage ebbing tide. He peered hard for a moment, and then started to run back to the beach.

The doctor said Brayton had been dead for about three days. The other body, which was resting up against Brayton's, had been dead for very much longer. That body was never certainly identified.

The prawn fisherman said in the pub on the evening of the day he made his discovery: "One thing I'll swear; I'll never eat crab again! Pity, as I liked it more than most things. But not after that!"