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STIRRING SCIENCE STORIES

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DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, EDITOR

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MASQUERADE

by Kenneth Falconer

A grim tale about a man who was cursed, his wife, and the Presence that had horns and a tail. A story of the terror that dogged one who had seen too much.

A MAN CAN wake one morning to read in his tabloid that his father has been shot fleeing the scene of a bank robbery. In these times there is no guarantee against the unexpected striking one down harder than a thunderbolt and almost as quick. From the vast-spreading matrix of the ordinary there may fly into your face the grotesque, the shocking, ever the horrible.

Why did Leonard die?

Who were the Whelmers, silent partners in the most horrid nightmare that ever rose to walk the streets of New York?

Mac Leonard, who is now compressed into the small confines of a crematory urn, had always seemed to me to be one of the chosen of the Lord. In Columbia University where we both studied he was a shining campus light. I said *both studied*, but that is a misconception. Keeping the profligate's hours that he did, tumbling into bed dead drunk four nights out of the seven, Leonard could not possibly have studied in the ordinary sense.

Revolving the matter carefully I realize that Leonard could not possibly have done anything in the ordinary sense. He was a blinding flash of a man, the hardest liver, the most brilliant scholar, and the coolest head on the blocks-long campus was his. If we had gone to a smaller school he would have stood out like a beacon. He would probably, furthermore, have been thrown out like a bum for his vices and dissipations. As far as I was concerned, of course, they were his business. He drank and went with the Joe College set, but had no illusions about their capaci-

ties.

This was, you will remember, in the Flaming Youth era, when skirts were short and gin was aged in the porcelain for about five minutes. Mac drank with them, but he talked with men and the rest of the grinds on the school daily and the Journal of the Columbia Philosophical Society.

It comes back to me like a nightmare that was almost funny — the deadly seriousness of the kids. Mac himself had been almost completely taken in by Mr. James Branch Cabell, who had been fortunate enough to have one of his recent puerilities barred from the mails.

Perhaps the business of the mysterious Whelmers was all my fault, for one day I made it my business to catch Mac on the fly between classes. "Leonard," I yelled, overtaking him.

Looking at me with the glazed eyes of a hangover he said: "Hi. Going in for track, old son of the lamp?" He focussed on the book I was holding out to him. "What's that mouse-colored tome?"

"Take it. I want you to read it. My very own personally-annotated copy of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. It's about time you learned something in college."

"Very truly yours," he said, pocketing it and weaving off down the red brick walk. That, of course, wasn't the last of it. He came around that night — standing up his gin and jazz crowd—to chew the rag about Kant. He had actually read the book in six hours, and assimilated most of the meat.

"It is," he said, "quite a change

over from math and science to beat one's brow against a thing like this. Have I been neglecting the eternal verities in my pursuit of hard facts? Speak, O serpent of the thousand diamond scales."

Modestly I assured him that that had been the idea. And what did he think of Kant in the light of his scientific attainments?

"Stinking," said Mac briefly. "But—at least a googolplex advanced above Mr. Cabell. Imbued with that quasi-mystic hogwash I could do nought but agree with the simple-minded laddie that the world is what you make it and that the eternal verity is to get along with one's neighbors. Your friend Kant is all wet, but by no means as wet as that."

With that he wandered away. When I saw him next he had enrolled in several philosophy courses at the same time. In the Philosophical Society we pinned his ears back with ease whenever he tried to enter into debate, but that was only because he didn't quite know how to use the quaint language of the gentle science.

I've been rambling badly. The point that I wanted to bring out was that Mac Leonard was brilliant, as brilliant as they come in the current mortal mold. Also that he was a student of the physical sciences and the only philosophy they have, mathematics.

BY A KIND of miracle I survived the crash of 1929 with a young fortune in gold certificates. The miracle was an uncle who had burned his fingers in the crash



Illustration by Bok

of 1922 and warned me: "When you see the board rooms crowded with people who have no business there — laundrymen, grocers, taxi drivers—then *sell!*" Ignoring the optimistic fictions of Mr. Roger W. Babson, prophet of the stock exchange, now, I believe, candidate for the presidency on the Prohibition Party's ticket, I sold and came out on top. I didn't even trust to the safe deposit vaults the money I had made; it went into the fireproof,

burglarproof, earthquakeproof warrens of the Manhattan Storage and Warehouse Corporation. Quick-money imbeciles who had been stuck considered me a traitor not to have lost by the crash. For years I was as good as ostracised by former friends. That was all right with me—I was a scholar and intended to remain one while my capital lasted, which it did.

A man can be a recluse in the middle of New York; that much

I found out in ten years of study. It wasn't in any of the books I read; it was what I proved with my own quiet life. And at the end of many years I heard again from Mac Leonard — a scenic postal card marked Uvalde, Mexico. Characteristically laconic, the message was: "—and wife". That and his signature was supposed to be all I wanted to know about him and his fortunes since we had parted at commencement.

Hoping that he would not already be gone—who but a tourist would write on a scenic postal card?—I mailed a long letter giving my own story to date and demanding his.

His answer came very much later, three months or more, from Council Bluffs, Iowa:

"Dear Vulcan, (the nickname is in reference to my slight limp)

"So the plummy anaconda has found his forked tongue after these long years? I should be hurt at your neglect of me—failing to write when a simple matter like not knowing my address stood in your way. You're right—I was on my honeymoon in the vastly overrated country of Mexico. And she is a very nice girl, in a rowdy sort of way.

"I'm still playing with paper boxes and numbers. The chair of mathematics at one of our little high-schools out here is all mine, and very uncomfortable it is. Still, Civil Service is nothing to be sneezed at in these troubled times.

"My life seems to have slipped into a slap-happy routine of examination papers and recitations; the really heart-breaking part is that none of my excessively brilliant students get my jokes. Aside from that all is milk and honey. I live in a bungalow with my wife — seems damned strange to write that down; as though it never really happened!—and we are like a pair of larks in the springtime. Whenever quarrels come I demonstrate by the calculus of symbolic logic that she's wrong and I'm right, and that settles the matter. Theoretically, at least.

"Honestly, old dish towel, I'm *happy* — a truly representative specimen of that rarest work of God, the man who is contented with his lot in life. It may sound idiotic to you, but I hope I never change from what I am. If time stood still this very minute, I wouldn't have a kick coming in the world.

Mac"

Other letters followed that; there was an erratic quality to

his correspondence that made it completely delightful. I found in my mailbox or resting on my doorstep anything from postal cards to bundles of year-old exams in Geometry One, neatly rated with mean, average and modes. For three years it kept up; at one time we were waging half a dozen chess games simultaneously as well as a discussion of Hegelian dialectics. "One of these days" he kept carelessly promising, he would blow into the city to see me.

Then, abruptly, he did. And it wasn't as an honored guest but as a man fleeing from disgrace. Never a coward, not one now in the nastiest position that any man could face, he sent me a note giving the arrival-time of his bus. And he enclosed a bunch of clippings from the local press.

To say that I was shocked would be putting it mildly. He had been no angel in his college days, but a man grows out of that, especially when he marries. The clippings didn't make it any easier. With an obscene, missish reticence oddly combined with the suggestive vulgarity that is the specialty of the tabloid press, they told the sordid and familiar story of a male teacher in a co-ed school—you know what I mean. It happens.

I MET them at the terminal. He was the picture of a hunted man, eyes sunken and hair lank down his temples. He'd kept his shape; there wasn't a sign of the usual professorial pot-belly. But his mouth was very tight. His nose wrinkled as though he could still smell those headlines. Yes, they were so nasty they actually stank.

He mumbled a brief introduction, and I smiled wildly at his wife in acknowledgment. No self-respecting woman would —

They came to my apartment to get their luggage settled. They were traveling light. He explained, as we all three lit cigarettes, that he had left his bungalow in the hands of an agent, and that when the business died

down somebody would buy it furnished and ready for occupancy. "But," he added grimly, "that won't be for a long while."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked, with my damned morbid curiosity.

"You saw the papers. To correct a popular misconception, which our journals tended to foster, she was not fifteen but nineteen. Big and dumb. And despite their hinting, she was the only one. And anybody in the school could have told you that I wasn't her first boyfriend—as it were."

"I'm sorry, Mac. It's a lousy thing to happen. I know how it is—" That peculiar noise was me, making like I was broad-minded. But I still didn't see how anybody in his right mind would do a thing like that. I shot a glance at his wife, and luck would have it that she met my eyes squarely.

With the mid-West twang she said: "I can see that you're wondering what I think about the whole matter." I took a good look at her then, my first. She wasn't a very beautiful woman. Her face was the kind you call intelligent. She had a figure that, with cultivation could be glorious; as it was it was only superb. But I'm easy to please.

"My husband made a fool of himself, that's plain enough. If he learned his lesson as well as he teaches— it's *over*. Am I right, Len?"

"Right," he said dispiritedly.

"I'll make some coffee," I said, rising, beginning to walk across the floor. I felt, the way the lame do, her eyes on my twisted right foot. She had reached the kitchen door before I was well under way.

"Please let me," she said. "You men will want to talk."

"Thanks," I said, wondering angrily if she was going to be sickeningly sweet and sympathetic about my very minor disability. "Go right ahead." I sat down facing Mac. "Not many women would be that understanding," I said.

His answer nearly paralyzed

me. He leaped across the distance between us, his face desperate and contorted, whispering: "We're going to some hotel. I'll come back and see you tonight. Have to explain. You don't know—"

"Coffee!" gaily announced Mrs. Leonard, carrying in the tray.

I rose gallantly, and very much surprised. "How in Heaven's name did you make it so quickly?" I demanded.

"You don't think I made it with that fancy glass thing of yours, do you?" she laughed. "I have more sense than that."

"But you couldn't have had time to boil the water!"

"Silly—there was a pan of water seething. Oh!" Her hand flew to her mouth. "I hope there wasn't salt or anything in it!" I seemed to remember something about water boiling—perhaps I had meant to prepare a hot cloth for my ankle before going to meet the bus.

"And this," she said, pouring, "is Iowa pan coffee the way my grandmother made it in a covered wagon."

I got a mouthful of grounds and swallowed convulsively. "Those pioneers had courage," I said inanely.

WORKING on a learned monograph revealing factors in the sociology of the Bronx that Fordham University had not even touched, I was baffled by what I had written a few months later. It was done in the style peculiar to some textbooks and degree themes; that is, it was no style at all but an attempt to set down without emotion or effect certain facts in their natural order.

That was the effect which Mac's talk with me that night had. He had come about nine o'clock panting from the climb up the stairs and perspiring profusely. He wouldn't take anything to drink but water.

"It was partly drink that got me into trouble in Council Bluffs," he said. "I'm never going to touch it again." He looked

up at the indirect light from the ceiling and blinked. "Would you mind —?" he asked inarticulately. "Eyestrain —"

I turned off the big light and lit a table-lamp which spread a bright pool on the console, leaving the rest of the room obscured. "Now shoot," I said. "And I'm not making any promises about anything tonight. Not one way or another."

"Don't worry," he almost snarled. "I'm not after your damned money." As I started up angrily — and God knows I had a right to be angry — he buried his face in his hands. I sank back into my chair inexpressibly shocked to hear him weeping.

"Easy," I muttered. "No need to go on like that, Mac. What would Nicholas Butler say to hear a Columbia man crying?" The ridiculous joke didn't stop him; he sobbed like a child. No; sobbed like a man, from the diaphragm, where it hurts as if your ribs are being torn out one by one.

He looked up, his eyes streaming, and wiped his face. Returning the handkerchief to his breast pocket he said in a very steady voice: "It isn't the dreams that get you; it's when you know you're awake and they keep on coming."

"Yes?" I asked, leaning back. I thought he was delirious.

"Shut up. I'm telling you everything — don't you see? It's your fault anyway — waking me up when I was dreaming James Branch Cabell — showing me the way things happen."

"Go on," I said after a long pause. He didn't seem to hear me, for it was an equally long time before he made a curious choking sound and said:

"I think I have been in Hell for the past few years, old ink-blotter. But I recall a very special chapter of the book. Allow me to describe it. There is, first of all, a large, rocky cavern." He paused again and leaned back, speaking in a very faint, rasping voice, as though he could

not bear the sounds of the words he was saying.

"And there is very foolish talk going on. There are people in the cavern who think they are Satanists, or something like it. They have prepared fantastic things — a long table, various dyes and pigments. Very foolish. They are well-dressed people; it is true, as a rule, that the poor are on the side of God.

"One of the foolish, wealthy people is a woman. She finds it necessary to undress and begin to dance as the others clap their hands. Did I mention that there were fires lighting this cavern? She spins close by the fires, one by one, and makes it a point to burn herself badly in various places. Then, as she falls to the floor, another, a man, has reasons for doing, essentially, what she has done. But the man wears a chain about his neck which he does not remove, and from this chain hangs a small medallion. When the man is very badly burned another woman makes a fool of herself in the same manner, and after her a man.

"Would you believe it if I told you that in all twenty-four people willingly subjected themselves to wide-spread first-degree burns? After hours of this folly they sat in a circle, still without their clothes and mumbled gibberish for twenty minutes or more.

"At that point they had conjured up Satan, theoretically. My guess is that they did nothing of the sort. The incarnation of Evil? No! He would not have let them live or praise him. Something they did conjure up. What it was I do not know, but this is what happened.

"There was, first of all, a noticeable diminution of the fire-light. Then appeared a definite blue glow at what would be the apex of the cone about whose basal circumference they were sitting. As that glow grew the fires went out. There was definitely a Presence there . . .

"I don't know what to call it. It was not Satan. There prob

ably is no Satan. But there was a Presence, and it had horns and a tail and great, shining teeth and lustful, shining eyes."

I STOOD up from my chair. "That's enough!" I yelled at him.

He looked at me and then, shockingly, suddenly, gave a low chuckle. "Quaint tale, isn't it? What's the matter?"

"You tell me!" I snapped. "What's on your mind?"

"Allow me to get on with the story. I'm afraid I was becoming hypnotized by my own rhetoric. And interrupt if you feel too weak to stand it." I flushed suddenly as I felt his eyes on my twisted foot. Where did the damned slander start that cripples are loose in the head?

"Go on," I growled.

"To be brief, direct and — crude — the women then proceed to caress this creature. And then —!

"There appears a man in that cavern who does not wear a pendant from his neck. He is no demonologist. He is, God knows, not wealthy. He is but a simple mathematician who made the horrid mistake of attempting to tie in his mathematics with occult philosophy."

Another very long pause. "Go on," I said.

"Don't get me wrong," said Mac. "Don't do that. I didn't know what I was doing. If I'd known I would have cut off my hand before I wrote the super-sonics equations. But it's so simple. All you need is a scale of tuning forks — then you modify them the right way and you find yourself in the nearest occult vortex. It's so simple! The clue is in several of Madame Blavatsky's Meditations. That old hag didn't know what she was writing, I suppose. You need money, millions, to get into the circle. I was an outsider.

"The Presence vanished, and I was cursed by those people — cursed while I was waking, sleeping, talking, walking, dancing, writing and reading. Then they

opened a door and threw me out."

"A door?" I asked. "In a cavern?"

He laughed like the closing of a lock. "The rocks," he said, "were papier mache. The cavern was the third floor ballroom of a hotel on 32nd Street."

"And so?" I asked.

"I wired back to Council Bluffs for bus fare. I was back there in two days with a tale of urgent business in New York."

"That's plenty, Leonard. Now you can get the Hell out of my house. Yes, even before you build up to the touch for the rare herbs that'll take the curse off you."

"Sorry," he said, rising. "I tried to let you know. It wasn't a touch. I remembered that you have a cousin, or had, the one you wrote that Bronx monograph on —"

"He's up the river. Dewey got him, with the rest of Murder Incorporated. Did you want a body-guard against the demons? Or do you want to become a policy banker?"

He had his hat on. From the door he said: "I wanted to have a murder done for me. But now I suppose I'll have to do it myself . . ."

I locked the door and went to bed, fuming like a tea-kettle. I'm from a short-lived clan; we break down early and live in the fear of death. That night I found myself with a hacking cough, which didn't add to my sense of well-being, for my father and sister had died of throat infections. You could accurately say that between Mac's turning out to be a chiseling phoney and my fears that in a week I'd be a dead man, I bordered on distraction. There was a heightening of the sensory powers — *all* the sensory powers. The darkest room was not dark enough for me, and the traffic below jerked me up in bed repressing shrieks of pain. It was as though I had been flayed alive, for the silk bedsheets I use for that very reason were like sack-

ing-cloth — 'or sandpaper.

How I managed to fall asleep I didn't know. Certainly the quality of my dreams was horrid enough to wake me up screaming.

I GOT disconnected scraps and images from Leonard's story of that night. I saw over again, in the most damnably vivid colors, the lie he had told of the ceremonial in the Hotel. Details he had omitted were plentifully supplied by my subconscious — revolting details. Cripples, I am told, are generally stewed of repression and fear.

Quite the most awful part was the Presence turning to me and stating, in a language of snarls and drooling grunts, the following message:

"A curse is no mouthing of words. That worries at a man, but does not kill. A curse is no juggling of hands. That worries at a man, but does not maim. A curse is no thinking of evil. That worries at a man but does not blind, tear, crush, char and slash. A curse is something you can see, hear, feel, hate, and love."

That was not the end of the dream, but it was near. After I — subconsciously doubling for Mac — had been thrown out of that ball room it ended and I awoke. My throat irritation was gone, which was good. That night I did not sleep any more, but read and re-read the clippings Mac had sent me. I wanted to look at his letters, but they were in no kind of order.

I saw the sun rise and made myself a breakfast of bacon and eggs. It was interrupted by a telegram slipped under my door. The yellow slip read: "Please phone me. Not a touch. Mac Leonard." The telegram was because I have no phone; if you want to hear my dulcet voice you have to coerce me into going down to the corner drug store to call you up.

Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I was still mad, half because of his ridiculous story, half because of his continuous rude

staring at my right foot. I long ago passed the point where I allowed people to indulge their curiosity at the cost of much personal anguish to me. I decided that I might as well.

I threw some clothes on and went down to the corner where a tubercular young clerk was dispensing a few early-morning cokes. "Hi," he said. "Nice day." Avoiding his conversational spray I got change and slid into the booth.

A woman's voice answered the phone in their room at a nearby hotel.

"Mrs. Leonard?" I asked. "I got a telegram from Mac — he wanted me to call him."

"He must have gone out," she said. "He wasn't here when I woke up. Must have gone for breakfast — wouldn't wait for me, the barbarian!"

I mumbled some inanity or other, wondering what I ought to do.

"Listen," she said, suddenly urgent. "This is the first chance I've had to talk to you, really. I'm just a dumb woman, so they tell me, but there are some things I want to know. That foot of yours — what's wrong with it?"

"I don't want to talk about it," I snarled. "Since you began it, it was run over sidewise by a car when I was about twenty. Is there anything else?"

"Yes. What do you do for a living?"

The damnable impudence of the woman! I didn't answer; just slammed the receiver down on the hook and stormed out.

Mac was waiting for me in my apartment. The landlady had let him in, she told me as I was going up.

"Now what's this?" I asked, as I found him nervously smoking on the edge of my bed.

"Sorry I broke in," he said. Damn him! His eyes were on my twisted foot again!

"What do you want? I was just talking with your wife."

"You might want to know why I did a damned foolish thing like trying to make a student. It was

because my wife wouldn't treat me like a husband. I was nearly crazy. I loved her so." His voice was thin and colorless.

"I don't care about your personal affairs, Mac. Get out of here."

He rose slowly and dangerously, and as he moved towards me I began to realize how big he was and how small I was. He grabbed me by the coat lapels; as he twisted them into a tight knot and lifted me so that my dragging foot cleared the ground he snarled: "You tell me what's wrong with your foot or I'll break your neck!"

"Car ran over it!" I gasped. I was shocked to find out that I was a physical coward; never before had I been subjected to an assault like this. I feared that man with the lunatic gleam in his eyes as I had never feared anything before.

"Car," he growled. "Now how do you make a living? Don't give me that 'retired capitalist' bull you tried in your letters. I've been looking you up and you haven't got a single bank-account anywhere. Where do you get your money from?"

A voice from my door sounded. "Put him down," it said. "He's no friend of mine. Maybe of yours." I fell in a heap and turned to see Leonard's wife. "The Whelmers," she said, "dis-

avowed him."

Mac turned away. "You know that I know!" he gasped, his face quite dead, dirty white. It was absolutely bloodless.

"I saw two of the Whelmers in the street. They know nothing of this." She gestured contemptuously at me. "That foot of his is no mark. Now, Mr. Leonard —" She advanced slowly on him, step by step.

He backed away, to before a window. "Only a few days ago," he gasped, "only a few days ago I put it all together. *I never knew your parents. You are the curse of the Whelmers.* And last night I — we — my God!" His eyes were dilated with terror.

"Last night," said the woman, "you were my husband and I was your wife."

With the beginning of a musical laugh she slumped, and bloated strangely, quietly, a bluish glare shining from her skin.

With the glare came a momentary paralysis of my limbs. I would have run rather than have seen what I had to see. I would have died rather than have seen that Presence that had horns and a tail and great, shining teeth and lustful, shining eyes.

Leonard took his dry dive through the window just a second before I fainted. When I awoke there was nobody at all in the room except myself and the friendly, curious police.