

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 33

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Published monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter September 24, 1938, at the post office at New York, N. Y. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English Office: Charles Lavelle, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand, London W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Mommy

By MARY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

A very human story about a little girl in an orphanage, who was considered queer by the other children because she claimed that her dead mother visited her

“I WANT to adopt a child about seven years old,” Mrs. Ellison had explained to the matron a few hours before.

Now, standing in the big bare yard of the Acipco County Orphanage, she studied each of the smaller girls who scampered past her. There was a chubby dark-curved mite seesawing near the tall iron gate, Mrs. Ellison noted. A lovely cherub, she thought, who would make a wonderful little daughter for a childless widow like herself. Pumping madly in one of the swings was another, brown-eyed and laughing as she herself had been at that age.

So many motherless children, herded together like livestock and perforce treated almost as such—how was one to make the great decision that would change one's own life as well as the child's for ever after today?

“Good Heavens! I'm shopping for a daughter,” the tall gentle-eyed woman mused guiltily. “How inhuman! It . . . it should be the other way 'round, if only a child had vision enough to select.”

Her thought snapped off like a twig. Something was tugging at her skirt with timid insistence, and she peered down, startled to find a thin homely little girl looking up at her. The penetrating blue eyes were much too large for that sal-low sensitive face. Two mouse-colored

braids hung over narrow shoulders against the starched collar of her orphanage uniform, and the arm that reached up at Mrs. Ellison was match-thin and peppered with freckles like the face and neck.

I don't believe I've ever seen a more unattractive child, was the woman's first thought. But then the little girl smiled, and her face lighted slowly as a candle in a dark room. It was a sweet strange smile, full of wistfulness and yet the paradox of a quiet *knowledge*.

“Are you the lady my mommy sent for me?” her small voice piped. It was a timid voice, rather vague like the blue eyes, but oddly compelling for all that.

Mrs. Ellison knelt down, smiling. Her hands moved, smoothing the ratty braids. The child wouldn't look so homely with careful attention, her thoughts veered, while she murmured aloud:

“I don't know, sweetheart. Has your mommy gone to Heaven?”

The child regarded her gravely for a moment. Then she shook her head.

“No, ma'm. My mommy comes to see me any time I want her to. She talks to me every night, an'——”

At that instant the matron bustled up, starched and puffing, a tiny frown of annoyance creasing her smooth fore-

head at sight of the little girl with the kneeling woman.

"Mrs. Ellison, I'm so sorry I was delayed. . . . Run along to your play, Martha dear," she commanded briskly. "Matron wants to talk to the nice lady. Run away; that's a good girl."

The visitor rose, puzzled at her tone of impatience. But the thin-faced child hesitated only a second, during which her deep blue eyes searched for something in Mrs. Ellison's expression with a solemn intensity. Then she wheeled without a word and walked slowly away toward a group of children near by. At her approach, however, they promptly turned and left her standing there, leaning against the trunk of a giant white oak that dwarfed her small body.

MRS. ELLISON watched the by-play with a queer pang. "Who is that child?" she murmured. "There's . . . there's something different about her."

"Martha?" The matron's laugh of exasperation knifed into her mood. "I'm sure you wouldn't care to take on *that* responsibility! She's really our problem child. Doesn't get on with the other children and constantly breaks our petty rules here. Oh, I don't mean she's deliberately bad, but—"

"Just a misfit?" The tall brown-haired visitor nodded her sympathy. "Perhaps it's the mother's interference. I understand from little Martha that she visits her quite often, and that's always hard on a child's morale. A pity she couldn't just take her away from here and support her the best way she——"

Mrs. Ellison broke off, conscious that the matron was smiling at her quizzically.

"My dear," the orphanage head spread her hands, "that child has no

mother—she died over a year ago. Tuberculosis, I'm told, aggravated by night work in a cotton mill. I see I must explain our little Martha to you. . . .

"The poor baby had such a shock, she's never been able to adjust herself. Some minds, tortured beyond endurance, fall into amnesia as an escape. Others—like poor little Martha's—simply build up a dream-world in which they need not face the cruel truth. She has a positive fixation that her mother is beside her at all times. 'Why, I can see her in the night, can't you?' she'll say, time and again. Carries on long imaginary conversations in the ward after lights-out, so that the other children complain of her keeping them awake. They don't dislike her, but I think they're a bit afraid of her."

"Afraid?" Mrs. Ellison quirked an eyebrow at the absurdity. "Why on earth should anyone be afraid of that pitiful little mite?"

The matron fidgeted, then gave a nervous laugh. "Well"—she averted her gaze sheepishly—"well, it *is* odd. Some unexplainable things have happened since the child has been here at the Home with us.

"I must tell you first that Martha's mother was a remarkable woman. Physically a wreck, and morally. . . . There was no father, you understand. A drunken sailor, most probably, as the woman seems to have been a cheap dance-hall hostess before her child was born in a charity hospital.

"But little Martha's birth seemed to bring out the best in her—a fierce maternal instinct. It happens often—rather proving, I think, the divinity in all mankind. Anyway, the mother changed her mode of living at once, got a job in the mill, and literally killed herself working for her child.

"She fought death with a stubborn will that prolonged her life by months, they tell me. But in the end her frail body gave way.

"At the last she called little Martha to her bedside and made the child some sort of crazy promise that she would *never leave her*, no matter what anyone said about death and the like. Her sick body was only a worn-out coat, she told the child, that her *real* 'mommy' was throwing away so that it could not hinder her any longer in taking care of her baby.

"A natural thing to say, of course, but disastrous in its effect on a child's impressionable mind. It developed a complex in Martha . . . so weirdly borne out by coincidence, however, that I . . . I sometimes catch myself wondering! Really, it's . . . it's uncanny!"

MRS. ELLISON laughed softly. She was a matter-of-fact woman, little given to fantasy. But, nettled by her skepticism, the matron gave details.

"You think I'm imagining things?" she bridled. "Listen! There was the time a certain actress wanted to adopt the child. I can't think why she chose homely little Martha—unless as a foil for her own beauty. But all was in order and Martha was being sent for, although she behaved badly and screamed all night that her 'mommy' hadn't sent this lady for her.

"With the woman's secretary waiting in our very antechamber for Martha to be dressed, we received a call from the actress's press agent saying the deal was off. It appears she was simply adopting Martha as a publicity stunt, to swing public opinion her way when a nasty scandal broke in which her name would be involved. *But that very morning she had fallen downstairs and fractured her nose!* In case the

plastic surgery wasn't successful, her agent informed me, the dear lady's contract might not be renewed and 'she couldn't support a child.' We read between the lines, of course, as the actress had millions salted away. . . .

"But there it stands. Martha was saved from such an adoption because *something* tripped that cold-blooded woman and temporarily marred her looks!"

Mrs. Ellison gave another soft laugh. "A timely coincidence," she murmured. "Poor little Martha!"

"Yes," the matron nodded wryly. "But it strengthened her belief that her 'mommy' was watching over her interests night and day! As for the other children here, they're as convinced as she is . . . especially since the time that circus came to town, and our amusement fund didn't stretch over the last ten of our enrollment.

"Martha was one of those who drew lots and lost. She was heartbroken, like the other nine losers. Then suddenly, as I was lining up those who could go, little Martha ran forward and tugged at my arm.

"'Matron! Matron!' she cried, her eyes shining with excitement. 'Mommy says I can go! Mommy says to take all the others, and she'll pay their way somehow, so I can go!'

"Of course, that outburst upset the other children and raised their hopes so, I hadn't the heart to leave them behind. I decided to borrow the difference from our food bill and juggle accounts later. A foolhardy impulse, but you'll understand how I felt.

"So off they went to the circus, every one of them. They were fairly dancing with anticipation waiting outside the big tent while I bought the tickets; but my conscience was beginning to prickle. Those ten extra tickets meant a scantier

diet for all of them well into the next month's budget, and I was sure the board would discover it and give me a severe reprimand.

"I stopped short right there, thinking it over and wishing heartily that I could spank little Martha. But at that moment I . . . I happened to glance down at the sawdust.

"There just under my foot was a small wad of paper money neatly folded around some silver change. My heart almost stopped, let me tell you, when I counted it—the exact amount, to a penny, for those ten tickets! I had the local paper advertise later for its loser, but no one claimed it. I've . . . I've often speculated on the many ways it could have got there."

Mrs. Ellison's smile had faded a trifle, but now it came back, full of gentle tolerance. "Perhaps some drunken person dropped it," she suggested. "Surely, my dear matron, there's nothing supernatural about losing money on a circus ground!"

"Humph! Oh. Well . . . maybe not." The plump orphanage head looked disgruntled but unconvinced. "There were other times," she pursued stoutly. "That time, for instance, when little Martha swallowed an open safety-pin, the way children will do if you don't watch them every minute!

"It was a terrible day last fall, when we had that ice storm, you remember. Wires were down, and we couldn't locate a doctor, with the poor little thing choking and crying, and that open pin jabbing into her throat with every move she'd make! I was frantic, and Miss Peebles, our resident nurse, was at her wit's end . . . when all of a sudden this interstate bus broke down, spang in front of the Home gate. . . ."

Mrs. Ellison's eyes twinkled faintly. "And I suppose," she put in, teasingly,

"there was a doctor for little Martha on the bus?"

THE MATRON did not return her smile, but surreptitiously mopped off a dew of moisture that sprang to her upper lip at the memory.

"A doctor?" she replied grimly. "*There were eight* — coming home from the state medical convention! One was an ear, eye, nose and throat specialist. Of course, he had that safety-pin out in a jiffy.

"What was so queer, the bus driver said it was battery trouble, with his new battery and wiring just checked carefully at the last station! Oh, it *could* happen, yes. I grant you, it *could* happen."

Mrs. Ellison chuckled. The chuckle seemed to annoy the matron, and she burst out afresh.

"There are dozens of minor incidents like that," she declared. "Martha is eternally finding things the other children will pass a hundred times. Pennies in the grass. A half-package of gum. A broken toy fire-engine, once, that some child must have thrown over the Home fence in a temper. Ask Martha where she gets them, and she'll invariably answer: 'Mommy gave it to me,' with those big eyes of hers as innocent as a lamb's. If I scold her and tell her to say she found it, she'll just say: 'Oh, yes—but Mommy told me where it was.'

"All that has made a vast impression on the other children. That's why they're a bit in awe of her—because they believe she's hourly guarded and pampered by a . . . by a——"

The matron floundered, reddening. Mrs. Ellison lifted one eyebrow humorously at the plump house-mother; saw the flush deepen in her round cheeks.

"By a ghost?" she finished, gently

derisive. "My dear matron, I'm astonished that a sensible woman like yourself would permit such a silly notion to survive! Why, it's medieval!"

The orphanage head folded her lips primly. "Well," she said in a tone that defied argument, "I only say it's queer, and that's what it is! The children are afraid of Martha, and she's a problem I'm at a loss to solve. If only somebody would take her off my hands—somebody I wouldn't mind her going to, with the child's good at heart. But, there! Nobody wants the poor homely little thing, though she asks everybody who comes here if she's 'the lady her mommy sent' to adopt her. It's a crying shame—but who'd want a crazy child when there are so many normal ones to be had?"

She followed the visitor's gaze with a look of perplexity, and regarded the little girl sitting cross-legged on the ground, playing by herself while others scampered past in noisy groups.

But Mrs. Ellison was folding her gloves and putting them in her purse with the gesture of a knight drawing on his gauntlets of chain-mail. Then she faced the matron and announced:

"Who'd want her? I do! And just as soon as it can be arranged! That fixation has been nourished too long in the child's mind. But a home, some new toys and a little affection will make her forget that nonsense. So . . . if you'll just rush the formalities, I'd be ever so grateful."

The matron blinked at her, surprised for a moment, a tiny flicker of doubt burning behind her spectacles. Then she shrugged and sighed deeply.

"That I will!" was her promise. "I only hope you won't regret it, Mrs. Ellison. Frankly, I haven't been able to cope with the situation. It's . . . it's a strange case, and needs a lot of under-

standing. Don't be too impatient with the child."

"Nonsense!" The visitor squared her shoulders firmly. "Martha simply needs a mother." And she strode across the grounds toward the small figure playing alone under the oak tree with a handful of acorn cups.

The matron, watching her, shook her head doubtfully as Mrs. Ellison knelt beside the child. Then, with reluctance, she turned away, for there were some two hundred other orphans who demanded her daily attention.

LITTLE MARTHA looked up shyly, gravely questioning. Mrs. Ellison studied the vague sweet smile accorded her and gathered the child impulsively into her arms. But she was chagrined at the lack of response. Little Martha, not quite cold to her advance, was like a small bony doll in her embrace, neither affectionate nor defiant. One hand clutched an acorn cup with a tiny grass handle, but the other hung limp and did not steal about her neck as Mrs. Ellison had half expected. It was almost a challenge, she thought, and smiled at the absurdity.

"Martha dear," she whispered, "you are going home with me and be my little girl. I'll give you a pony and cart, and lots of dollies, and have your hair curled like that little girl over there. Would you like that?"

The blue eyes lighted, giving Martha's sallow face a certain quaint beauty for all its freckles and angularity.

"Oh, yes'm!" she breathed. "I . . . I would! But I'll have to ask Mommy first," she added shyly. "Tonight I guess maybe she'll tell me if you're the one."

"Now, now!" Mrs. Ellison laughed with an effort. "You must call *me* your

mommy, dear, because you'll be my own little girl tomorrow!"

"Yes'm," the grave child nodded obediently, "I'll call you Mother, if Mommy says it's all right. Oh, I . . . I do hope you're the one!"

And Mrs. Ellison left, feeling baffled and entirely unsure whether or not she had won that first match.

The ponderous amount of red tape was snipped through, true to the matron's promise. A few days later, with a late autumn sun gilding the yellow leaves a brighter gold, Mrs. Ellison again drove to the Acipco County Orphanage.

She had dismissed her chauffeur, bought a woolly Sealyham pup at a pet shop en route, as well as a lovely little blue silk dress, and set forth rather grimly. These, she thought, are my weapons. With these I will lay for ever the ghost of Martha's "mommy," and she'll haunt that lonely child no longer!

An hour later, they were whirling out of the orphanage driveway—a tall gentle-eyed woman at the steering-wheel and, close beside her, a little girl in a blue dress, ecstatically hugging her new puppy.

Threading her way through the afternoon traffic, Mrs. Ellison smiled and chatted merrily, but her heart seethed. Confound that selfish hysterical woman, dying on her hospital cot! She had left a mark on this wistful credulous baby that time could not erase!

For a moment, glancing sidewise at her adopted daughter, Martha's second mother hated that first one who stood between them like an invisible wall, in spite of everything she could do.

Or, did she? Eerily Mrs. Ellison felt an alien presence in that wide car seat—but not between her and the child. Rather, it seemed that *someone* . . .

something . . . was seated on the other side of little Martha, allied with her new mother, guarding the child on one side while she herself guarded the other.

The tall woman shook herself angrily. What utter rot! Was she, too, succumbing to the child's hallucination? She must exorcise that spirit now, or admit defeat by something that did not exist.

"Do you love your new mommy?" she coaxed, bending sidewise to hug little Martha with one arm.

The child snuggled closer. Wide blue eyes blazed up at her, aglow with happiness. "Oh, yes, Mother! You are really and truly my mother now, aren't you? So I'll tell you a secret," as the woman's face lighted with triumph. "Mommy told me last night that she picked you out for me a long, long time ago! An' she said——"

"Martha!" Mrs. Ellison drew back sharply as from an unexpected blow. "Stop talking like that!" she commanded shortly. "I want you to forget all that nonsense about your mother, Remember and love her always, of course. But your mommy went to Heaven over a year ago, and you must stop pretending that——"

A SCREAM from the child cut her short. Mrs. Ellison broke off, jerked her head around, and was transfixed with horror to see a huge and driverless gasoline truck hurtling down upon them from the long narrow hill they were slowly ascending.

The great red juggernaut was picking up speed. It careened from curb to curb like a drunken monster, making for their car with a blood-chilling accuracy, blunt-nosed and heavy as a locomotive.

Panic swept over Mrs. Ellison,

freezing her hands to the steering-wheel. A few more yards, and disaster would strike them head-on with a grinding crash. It seemed to the woman that she could hear that sickening sound already . . . and there was not an alley, not a convenient driveway for them to dart into. Only a low rock wall on one side, a sloping terrace on the other. And, as though realizing the futility of further motion, the car stalled dead in the path of the runaway truck.

“OH, DARLING—*jump!*” Mrs. Ellison screamed. Jump out and run! I . . . I can’t——”

But the child at her side had not even heard her. For one who faced death, she seemed strangely calm. Her sallow face had gone so pale that the freckles stood out darkly, and her grip on the new puppy tightened. But her lips moved softly in a half-prayer that was almost inaudible to the woman beside her.

“Mommy! Mom-my!” the whisper fairly screamed. “Make it stop, Mommy! *Please make it stop!*”

Mrs. Ellison tugged at the child, intent on pulling her out of the doomed car in a last wild chance at safety. But before she could wrench open the car

door . . . there was a metallic squeal of stripped gears.

Looking up, wild-eyed, she saw the onrushing truck hop sidewise awkwardly and come to a scraping halt against the curb — a scant five feet above them.

People came running then—frightened residents, and a policeman, and the white-faced truck-driver. They crowded about the truck, then rushed to the stalled car where Mrs. Ellison was slumped weakly at the wheel. Beside her sat a homely little girl whose strange quiet smile caused them to look at her and look again intently.

“Jeez, lady!” the truck-driver babbled an incoherent apology. “I sure thought I had her braked steady! Jeepers, if that packing-case on the seat hadn’t a-fell against the gear-shift and knocked her into reverse, you . . . you might a-been——”

Mrs. Ellison merely nodded in answer. She could not trust her voice. She could only stare in a dazed way at the truck, then shift her gaze queerly to the little girl seated beside her.

“Are . . . you quite all right, Martha dear?” she whispered after a moment. “Then, let’s you and I and . . . and Mommy go along home.”