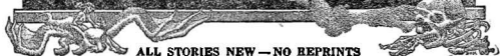


# Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

July, 1944

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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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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# Stranger in the Mirror

By GEORGE N. LAWS



Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

**H**ELLO, warden. Nice of you to come in. They asked me if I wanted a priest, but I told them I had no quarrel with God, just a few things to talk over with a fellow human

being. And I guess I'm still that, even if I'll only be a memory tomorrow.

Sit down here, and have some candy. Nice of you folks to let my girl bring it to me right along. Good, isn't it? Odd

*You who fear the terror of dreams, remember—there are some bideous terrors of living far greater!*

sort of flavor, but it grows on you. Have some more.

Do you mind if we leave the light out, here in the cell? That yellow light in the corridor is enough to see by, and it has a pleasant, quieting sort of effect on me. Reminds me of the soft lights you see in certain of the old masters. And since we have to keep our voices low, the light seems right for it.

Yes. I want to talk; I want to spill a lot of things that never came out at my trial. Tomorrow, I'll just be a few lines of type in the newspapers—"Thor Holderson, convicted of the murder of Jacob Bachman, went to his death in the electric chair at Walden Prison this morning at 5:55 a.m.," and so on. But before I go, I want at least one man to know the whole story.

Do you believe in occult matters, warden? Or do you believe only in powers that you, yourself, possess? This story may be a little—frightening. Of course, it's not fearsome to me, but then, I've been all through it, and I'm not easily scared. You'll remember a week ago, when Guido Caselletti got it? You know how everyone else in Death Row pulled the usual stereotyped demonstration—the eerie wailing, the muffled beating on the walls, when the lights went dim and the hum of the generators went up from out there past the little green door? Hell, warden, if you'll check up, you can find that I didn't blow my top. I *laughed*.

**S**EEMS strange, doesn't it, when Guido and his mother did their best to help me at my trial? Well, that's part of the story.

Funny how Guido went to the chair for killing his mother. And I don't mean peculiar, I mean funny. Laughable, I mean. To you, that seems callous, I'm sure, but you must remember, warden, I'm a product of Hell's Kitchen, and a convicted murderer to boot.

Have some more candy, warden. Very

delicious stuff. My girl made it. I guess I mentioned that.

Yes, we have few pleasures here in Death Row. But I can assure you, when Guido burned, I felt a happiness that was out of this world.

So you're no student of the occult? That means, of course, that you don't believe in anything you can't see, or can't explain, or have explained to you by the cut-and-dried rules by which you live.

Warden, do me one courtesy. Don't insult my integrity by concluding that I'm acting crazy in order to play for a last-minute reprieve. And please don't insult my intelligence by concluding that I really am crazy. I know it's too late for the governor to do anything, even if you phoned him now. And I'm as sane as you are.

**I** COULD be crazy, warden; believe me, I could be crazy, what I've seen in the past six months.

Warden, here in Death Row, I've thought a lot about the reality of the life we lead, and its dullness when you compare it with the tremendously more vital reality of the dreams we dream. Maybe it's a form of escapism, a sort of mystical sour grapes, but I firmly believe that the life my mind lives outside my body is a thousand times more intense and stirring than the dull and stupid life that the two of them—soul and body—live together.

Honestly, now, did you ever kiss a woman in real life that gave you the terrible, beautiful passion you've had from women in your dreams? Have you ever enjoyed one triumph in life that measured up to the nobility of your victories when you sleep? If more people thought of such matters, maybe they wouldn't make such a grim struggle of hanging on to life.

Of course, the terror of dreams is greater than the terrors of living—at least some say so. But you could, if you tried, imagine

some terrors that would make the hideous stuff of dreams seem pallid by comparison. I like to imagine such things, here in this rather oppressive lonesomeness that's the Death Row at Walden.

Suppose—just let your mind run on it a minute—suppose you looked in a mirror one day, and saw someone else. Just think about it. Simple thing—you pull yourself up to a mirror, expecting to see a familiar, if disappointing face, and it's someone else. Warden, that's a real soul-shaker, isn't it?

Think of it. You've seen the same face all your life. To be sure, time has altered it, but so subtly that it's hardly noticeable. As a child, you played with that image, laughed at it, made faces at it. As a young man, you checked it carefully for blemishes and for the first faint crawl of beard that proved your manhood, and scanned it anxiously when you went on your first dates with girls. And when you were grown up, occasionally you stared at it bitterly, realizing that in spite of yourself, the face and the man behind it were growing older. Sometimes, after a bad night, you've looked at it reluctantly, your nerves a-jangle, and the signs of exhaustion and dissipation have made it seem almost like a stranger's face. But at least, with all its faults, it was still *your* face.

But suppose, some day when you had such a hangover, and your nerves were practically on the outside of your skin, you faced up to a mirror and the image that looked back, and imitated your every move, was not you, but someone else?

Here, move just a little, so you can see my face. I want you to see that I'm as calm and quiet as my voice—that my eyes are steady, and my face placid. You *must not* believe I'm crazy. But warden, I looked in a mirror once, and Guido Caselotti looked back.

I knew Guido Caseletti and his mother all my life. He was a little older than I,

and wiser, and stronger. So I admired him. His mother, too. She was young, vital, beautiful. That alone was enough to make her unusual, in a poverty-ridden slum where most women are old at thirty, toothless hags at forty, and dead at fifty. My mother, thank God, died when she was thirty, and missed the worst of the life I knew.

AND it was Guido's mother who gave me the only taste of what a home might be. She went out working, to take care of herself and her son, like most other mothers where we lived. But where the other women came back haggard from their night's work chattering in office buildings, or their day's work in factory or laundry, Guido's mother came back—well, radiant—as though her life and vitality had somehow been renewed.

Their home was luxurious, sinfully luxurious, by our standards. There was food in greater abundance than most of us knew, and there was—knowledge. I have the fortune, or misfortune, to be better educated than most Hell's Kitchen boys, wouldn't you say? Well, I got my education from the books in Guido's home, and from Guido's mother. She was not only educated, she was intelligent.

I've seen her stop and pass a few words with an occasional professor from the big college a few blocks over, when they'd come venturing down to Hell's Kitchen to sit in the sunlit park that had more tradition than beauty to recommend it. And I've seen their faces actually troubled and puzzled after a few such passages, and Guido's mother, her head on one side, laughing at their amazement like a naughty child.

And once, when I was sick—she picked me up in the gutter, outside Jacob Bachman's drug store—she gave orders to Bachman with more authority and sureness than any young interne from City Hospital.

Snapped out a prescription in what must have been Latin, and old Jake filled it automatically, looking at her with respect and wonder. Oh, she was a smart woman, a tremendously brilliant, bold, beautiful woman.

Of course, you understand that my real intimacy with Guido only began this last year or so, but I was in and out of their house a thousand times as I grew up.

Guido was a queer one. He had the same inner strength, and the confidence that came from it, as his mother. It would have made him a leader in any of the gangs in our old Hell's Kitchen. You were in the cops in those days; you know what those gangs were like. To be a leader in such a gang meant money and power. But Guido didn't want to be a leader. He stayed aloof, usually having only one close friend, and their goings and comings were matters of great interest and speculation, simply because Guido, rather than the pals he had, commanded our attention.

He was a sort of idol to us younger kids, certainly to me, and you can imagine how proud I was when he suddenly picked me for his close friend. Pat Driscoll had been thick with Guido, and you remember the terrible, tragic thing that happened to him—how he was found, shot to pieces by the watchman in Hobart's warehouse, with the watchman dead, too. They claim the rest of the gang got away with a hundred thousand in furs—sables and mink and ermine. And Pat's death had been hard on Guido. I remember the tears in his great, dark eyes, and the strangeness in his face, as though he couldn't understand such things. Because, you see, Guido was never mixed up in any rough stuff. The cop on that beat had actually sat in Guido's mother's kitchen during the time the robbery was committed, with Guido asleep in a chair. Not that anyone suspected Guido anyhow; it was just routine to question him, since Pat and he had been so close.

And I loved being Guido's close friend,

for it brought me into his home even more, where I could see and talk to his mother.

Here, warden, have some more candy. Angela Caseletti—that's Guido's mother—used to make candy like this for me. My girl, who brings it here to Walden, is an Italian, too.

Angela used to sit and talk to me, there in that old kitchen, with the single yellow bulb, and the brown shadows playing in the corners, just like this cell is this minute.

"Oh, they were kind to me, Guido and his mother.

The things I went through in my boyhood there in Hell's Kitchen—well, you'll understand, because you were in the cops once, yourself, and you saw the rough side.

I was there at their home the night of—the killing. Old Jake Bachman's killing, I mean, the one I was convicted for. I felt nervous, because the gang had been in some trouble with Bachman, and I was in on it. You see, I still ran with the gang, although Guido didn't. When he was away, now and then, I'd hang around at Bachman's with the gang. He didn't like it, naturally. Did you ever know an old drug-store man who liked a bunch of no-good loafers hanging around, stealing candy and cigarettes, keeping good customers scared away?

I don't know why it happened that I had trouble with Bachman. To give myself credit, I was the least tough of the bunch, and he and I had always been fairly friendly. But he'd threatened me that day, and I had a feeling—but you don't believe in the occult, warden, so you wouldn't believe in premonitions, of course.

More candy? Eat it all, once you get started it's hard to stop; I won't be needing any after tomorrow. Not funny, huh? Sorry, I guess that is a little morbid.

**W**ELL, anyhow, there we sat that night, and Guido's mother must have sensed my nervousness and my melancholy. She

was so attentive and so bent on helping me that she actually had no time for Guido. She made me some of this candy, and talked to me, soothingly, in that quiet voice of hers. Once, when Guido moved in the shadows, she actually ordered him out of the room.

We drank a little, a few glasses of sour, brackish Dago Red, and after awhile I felt sleepy. My nervousness was gone, and the let-down of the tension just folded me up. She understood. I remember she called me "poor boy," and led me into Guido's room. Stood there just like a mother, while I peeled down to my underwear, and after I was in bed, she tucked me in.

Warden, that was the worst night of my life. I woke up, very late. The room was so black it seemed thicker than air, and more oppressive. The sounds were all gone from the street down below. The gassy smell from the river came drifting in as it always does with the late mists, and it just simply *felt* late. And there in that dark I lay, with my heart pounding, feeling that something was terribly wrong, feeling torn to pieces, with a strangeness and a pull on my nerves and mind that was stranger and more terrible than anything I had ever felt in my life.

Somehow, I got up and stumbled to the light switch. My feet felt funny, and in the strangeness of Guido's room, I gashed my shins against a chair, but the pain, while intense, didn't feel like any pain I'd known before. And there was a separation of detail in the pain, as though the moment of its happening was hours long. I felt the flesh being opened, and the bite of the sharp wood on bone, and then the pain started, but with it and overlying it, I could even feel the little drops of blood well out and gather, and slide down the skin of my legs. And all this time, that dreadful feeling of strangeness was like a living panic in my mind.

Somehow, I got the light on, and seeing

the familiar planes and surfaces and shadows of Guido's room, that hard knot in my breast relaxed, and I lost a fraction of the animal fear that was lifting the hairs on my neck. Then I turned to the mirror.

Warden, *it was not I in that mirror; it was Guido.* Now wait, don't say it was imagination, the result of drunkenness, or bad light. The light in that room was as bright as the one the cops kept in my face the next day. The mirror was fine plate glass, because the Caseletti's had nothing but the best in their home. Guido, you will remember, was half a head taller than I am, bigger all over, and he was dark where I am fair. It was not a mistake. The man in the mirror was Guido.

Think it over, warden. You're sick and shaken and weighted with a fear that is sub-human. You wake in a strange room, turn on the light, and—the face in the mirror isn't yours.

They can talk about witches and werewolves and warlocks and vampires. They can load it up with the fancy writing of a Poe or a Stevenson. If you're reading it alone at night, with the proper accompaniments of wind and creaking shutters and rain, such things can give the imaginative quite a little thrill.

But if you want your mind to shrink into a tight, hard little ball, and go cringing into a skull-corner in a fear that's the same size and shape as death, just try the plain, everyday action of looking into a mirror, and seeing another person looking back at you. Would it hit you hard?

I tell you what it did to me. I fainted. Yes, fainted like a girl. I must have. Because when I came to, I was on the floor in Guido's room, still only half-conscious, and standing above me, talking to Guido's mother, was—*me*.

Yes, me, but nothing like the me I had always known. My clothes were bloody, there was a deep gash down the side of my face (I could see all this, through half-

closed eyes) and I was talking in a quick, nervous voice—*my* voice—to Guido's mother.

**B**UT that woman who talked to the person that was me, even while I lay there, she wasn't the Angela Caseletti I had known, the calm and beautiful woman who had talked to me so quietly and kindly.

Her gorgeous olive skin was sallow, and mottled with crimson spots, the flush of a rage more violent than even a Hell's Kitchen boy had ever seen. The cords in her neck stood out as though she were carrying a great weight on her back, and her arms were curved up in such a frenzy that the tendons at the wrist looked like wires.

I was close to fainting again. If I had been so fully conscious that I could have grasped all this—*me*, standing there while I also lay half-conscious on the floor—*me*, talking to a sane woman turned suddenly into a nightmarish fury—I think I would have died. But every sense in me was so shaken that I could only lie there, unmoving, and almost unfeeling.

I remember her saying, in a voice that vibrated like the whip of electricity when you touch an open socket accidentally—"You fool, you didn't give him enough!"

Have some more candy, warden? Well, it's rather rich; it's easy to get enough.

And I remember *me*, laughing back at her, reckless and crazy—that *me* who stood there—and saying: "The old fool had more blood in him than a hog. It was beautiful, mother!"

Well, warden, you know how they found me at Guido's—passed out, with my clothes stiff with blood, and that gash on my cheek. They found skin tissue from my cheek under old Jake Bachman's fingernails. Not that they needed all that scientific horseplay to send me to the chair. After all, ten people had seen me shoot old

Jake down—ten people who had known me all my life.

And they saw me stuffing the money from his old money-can into my pockets.

Of course, you know they never found the money. Some said it was two thousand dollars.

Warden, that's very funny. It was more like twenty thousand, I found out later.

You'll remember how I went through the trial like an automaton? I couldn't remember—things. My mind would come whirling up to the edges of a dark dream, and then I guess it was the common-sense of instinctive caution that swept it back. My mind, automatically refusing to think about anything so dreadful.

You'll remember how I accepted a public defender, and went through the motions of pleading not guilty, and the farce of a trial. I couldn't think. Even when the judge finally called on me to stand up for sentence, my mind was numbed. I knew it had been a quick trial. I knew that, of all the people I knew, only Guido and Angela Caseletti had tried to help me.

But when that judge had finished his dirty little chore, and ended with the stereotyped, hypocritical invocation: "and may God have mercy on your soul!" I began to think. Because at that moment, Guido stretched his legs out straight, and then brought them back again, and his trousers hitched up above his socks. That's when I saw the black scabs of those two deep cuts across the shins. And I remembered that night, and how I had felt the pain of those cuts. And I remembered all that had happened.

I guess everyone still recalls that preposterous attempt I made to escape, and the almost unbelievable fact that I got away. That in itself made a bigger story than old Jake's murder, or—what will happen tomorrow.

And one reason I made the escape good was the fact that I came right back to

Hell's Kitchen, where no sane man would have gone, back to Guido and his mother. I kept my eyes away from that woman—I was afraid of the depths of knowledge in her eyes—but I asked them for help, and they gave me money to get to the coast.

**T**HE coast, hell! I was never more than a mile from them. And in two months, as soon as my beard had grown, I came back and rented the room above their kitchen. That's where I wanted to be. There were some things I needed to learn.

I knew their kitchen like the palm of my hand. I knew where they sat, and where they wouldn't look, and I bored a hole through the floor of my room, taking care to open just a pin-point in their ceiling so I could see all they did.

You don't believe in the occult, warden? Well, that's your privilege. But there are strange and unfathomable hiding places in the Italian spirit. And there are strange knowledges in those craggy Italian mountains where civilization began, so long ago.

I found out how Guido had entered my body, and I had been put into his.

You know how dreams are. How a *you* not of the body goes adventuring into lands that are strange and beautiful, with companions never seen in this life, but somehow more familiar than the people you touch and love and talk to? You know how, at such times, another world is easier to believe in than our own world. There is this *you*, then, which is obviously not of the body, but as real—perhaps even more real than your known self. Would you call it the soul? Whatever we call it, we know it exists.

The preachers say that the body is only a shell, to be laid aside some bright day, a machine that wears out, a suit of flesh that clothes the spirit.

And all that had happened to me was that Guido and his mother had arranged

it so that his spirit and mine had changed clothes—for the time it took to murder and rob Jacob Bachman.

I learned how that was done. It was very simple. It's a matter of achieving a tranquility in another man, you can make the transfer of your soul into his fleshly envelope. It's quite simple—a drug that is little known but easy to get—undisturbed quiet, in a light that is neutral, not too bright—and the rhythmic drumming of quiet, monotonous talk. Not hypnotism, something simpler and greater.

I learned how it was done. Who else do you think killed Guido's mother? Guido? Don't be silly, warden, nodding your head in that odd fashion. Listen to me; you can still hear quite well, I know. Guido loved his mother. And besides, hadn't she made him rich, with no work on his part, and little or no danger?

Do you remember that Pat Driscoll was killed in Hobart's, while Guido slept at home? Yes, but a hundred thousand in furs had disappeared before Pat died. And I have seen Angela Caseletti wrapped in sables worth a fortune, strutting alone in her vanity, while I watched from that pin-hole in the ceiling of her kitchen.

Do you remember Banco Gordon? Do you remember how he cut old man Severance's throat, and took a double handful of diamonds out of his pocket? Those stones drifted back into the market, so cleverly that the cops never got close to what happened. But there was one giant star ruby that never showed up. I have seen that ruby on Angela Caseletti's finger.

There was a box, a common bread box, in their kitchen. In it was Jake Bachman's twenty thousand dollars, and ten times that much from other crimes that men died for, fighting off the cops, or here in the electric chair at Walden. Pat Driscoll had been Guido's friend, and so had Banco Gordon. So had Dave Wallis, and Ty Cardwin, and Toots Moscovitz, and Legs Arrigoni. You



remember them all, and how they died, some under the guns, and some here at Walden.

And what they died for, all of it, was in that bread box of Guido's mother's—a neat little fortune to keep them safe from harm. Now, the money's in another, safer place.

No, warden, Guido would never kill the mother he loved, and who had made him safe and comfortable and rich.

**B**UT still, he *was* seen sneaking out of the house early in the morning of the day she was found dead. Mrs. Moreni saw him slip out, and saw him drop something in the deep grass at the alley. And Mrs. Erickson saw him, wild-eyed and bloody, coming back upstairs. And after all, the axe they found in the grass had Guido's fingerprints all over it. I took care of all that.

And I took care that he was found, unconscious, beside her. Of course, he claimed no knowledge of it. Perhaps he had none. I'd given him plenty of the stuff. But there he was, and there she was, murdered. His dumb stare couldn't back up his claim of insanity. Matricide is a pretty ugly crime. Juries don't like it.

I knew that Angela would never let anyone but Guido get near enough to harm her. But remember, I knew her secret. I watched her make that candy. The drug's more palatable in candy, this particular kind of candy, with the odd taste. But it's acceptable in wine, and Guido liked wine. You take good claret, and the drug just gives it a brackish, puckery taste, like cheap Dago Red.

It was easy to get Guido to drink; I just slipped down and left an open bottle where he'd find it, one day when his mother had gone out. And the rest—the quiet, the light, the drumming of monotonous talk, they were easy.

I'll never forget how she walked right

up to me, so unsuspecting. She laid her hand on Guido's hair, and kissed the back of Guido's neck, and all the time, Guido lay in his room, in my body. "Dear," she called me; "dear," and "heart of my heart."

Then I turned, and she saw my eyes, and—the axe.

I gave myself up shortly after Guido was convicted and sentenced. Not just because I wanted to be here and see the lights go dim and hear the other dead-to-be howling in their cells. Naturally, I didn't want to miss that, but I had other reasons.

You see, I had now really committed a murder, and somehow, I felt like expiating it. I had been sentenced to burn for a murder Guido had committed. That wasn't good. Now, he had burned for a killing I had done. Somehow, it seemed like justice that I should die, too.

But the more I've thought about it, the less I like the idea. After all, I did the world a service in killing that woman. I'm as good a citizen as you are, warden, and maybe better, from what I've heard of you, and the various frame-ups you've gotten away with. It doesn't seem right for me to die, warden.

WALDEN, October—Thor Holderson, youthful gangster who was convicted of the brutal murder of Jacob Bachman six months ago, went to his death in the electric chair at Walden Prison at 6:02 this morning. Holderson, who had been stoical during his trial and confinement, broke down completely before his execution. Either in real or feigned frenzy, he struggled with guards until given a sedative, insisting that he was the warden of the penitentiary.

Warden James Golz, whose nerves have been shaken by the recent, unprecedented number of electrocutions, announced today that he plans to resign in the near future.