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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Call in the Night

By CHANDLER H. WHIPPLE

Who was the grinning figure that sat in George Beldon's chair and calmly talked with the man who had come to murder him?

An eery tale of two racketeers

IT WON'T do any good to tell you this now, and I know I must have been kind of screwy that night, and maybe for a whole week before; but I've got to tell it, anyhow, just the way it happened to me. . . .

It was all dark in the room, and from right beside my bed the sound came, shrill and jangling, making me shake all over and setting the hairs of my head on end. It was my telephone ringing—after a minute I knew that—but that didn't calm me much. There's a way a phone has of ringing, out of darkness and night, that stops your heart and tightens every nerve you've got.

After a second I reached over and answered it. I didn't recognize the voice. It sounded hollow and hoarse, unnatural.

"You'd better clear out, Joe Clemens," the voice said. "Somebody just murdered George Beldon—and they'll blame it on you. . . ."

After that, the phone clicked off. I shouted into it, screamed into it—but the owner of that voice had hung up on me. I was shaking like a leaf and cold as ice.

Good God! They couldn't kill Beldon! If they got him — no matter who — I'd burn for it. Those records he had in his safe . . . no alibi I could think up would do me any good. . . . And the deal Beldon and I were working — it was going to leave me sitting pretty. It was going to fix me for life. Better than that, it would ruin Sam Howerton. It had to go through. But it couldn't if Beldon was dead.

Then, all at once, I thought I knew whose voice that had been on the phone. I was sure it was Sam Howerton's.

That last shock woke me up. . . .

WHEN I first came awake, I didn't know I'd been dreaming. I was sweating all over, and my breath was still choked up in my throat. I looked into the darkness of my bedroom; the thin shafts of moonlight were horrible, moving shapes. For a minute I didn't dare move; I lay there waiting—waiting as if I knew something was coming for me and would get me if I made a sound.

Then I got my senses back. I kind of sunk back on the pillow and drew a long breath. I laughed. The laugh sounded sort of hollow, but it did me good. I'd dreamed the whole thing, I knew now; it had been just another nightmare. I'd had a few of them already, that week, and it wasn't any wonder—not with as much at stake as I had right now. . . .

Still, I wasn't quite sure. . . . Hadn't I heard the telephone jingle, like it does right after you hang up, just as I came awake? Couldn't I still hear that voice in my ears?

Or maybe the phone had rung, even though I hadn't answered it. Maybe its ringing was what woke me up, and in a sort of backward fashion had caused the dream. Maybe it was even Beldon, calling me up about the traction deal, for some reason or other. I ought to find out.

I reached over and picked up the phone, half hoping there'd be someone

on at the other end of the wire, and at the same time afraid there would be. But if anyone had been trying to get me, they had given it up. The wire was singing, and right off Central started yelling at me. I hung up.

I lay there awhile, thinking about it. I felt shaky, again; and the words of that voice in the dream kept ringing in my ears: "You'd better clear out, Joe Clemens. Somebody just murdered George Beldon, and they'll blame it on you."

Supposing somebody had murdered Beldon? . . . Or supposing somebody was going to, tonight, and I had dreamed the thing as a warning? . . . I'm not superstitious, much, but you hear these stories about how a person gets a warning sometimes, in a dream, and it turns out to be straight—and when you wake up in the middle of the night, all clammy cold and with an eery voice still ringing in your ears, it's not hard to believe that such things happen.

I got up and turned on the light. I began to dress. I had to go over and see Beldon, anyhow. . . .

IT WAS a long way to be walking from my apartment-house to Beldon's, especially at three o'clock in the morning; but I didn't call a cab. I didn't go up to the next block and get my car out of the garage, either. It wasn't the time to do anything like that. Supposing something had happened to Beldon—I didn't want anybody identifying me next day as having gone to see him, or having even left my house. I walked.

I had plenty to think about during that walk. It wasn't that I had any kind feelings toward Beldon. I hated him. There was only one man I hated worse, and that was Sam Howerton; I'd hated him ever since we were kids together down at P. S. Fourteen, and he was the one that got the girl I wanted.

This business of Beldon had to do with Howerton, too. Beldon, you see, was my lawyer. He was my fixer, and a damned clever one. I had rigged up that traction deal, but he was the one that could put it through, right past the sanctimonious noses of the City Fathers. Why, the thing would make me rich, and never a comeback from the town—not with Beldon doing the fixing. Why, after that I could clean up and clear out of town and live off the fat of the land the rest of my days! That was what I aimed to do, too—take it easy and have no more worries like this one. . . .

Better than that even, though, was what it would do to Sam Howerton. It would ruin him. Sanctimonious fool that he was, he figured that the new lines would go through where they ought to go—and he'd sunk every cent he had in property out that way! So while I was cleaning up, at the same time I'd fix the one man I hated worst of all. It was worth a lifetime's work—and it hadn't taken but two months! . . .

Of course, I wouldn't really clean up as big as I figured. Beldon would see to that. He always did. Just as I thought I was in the money, and had paid him what he'd said would be his share, he always came up to me, quiet and smooth and leering-like, and said: "Well, Joe, just between friends, I could use, say, about ten thousand. . . ."

"Damn you!" I'd snarl; "didn't you get your cut? Didn't I give you all you asked?"

He'd spread his wide hands and wrinkle up his oily face, as if he was really mighty sorry. "But this deal," he'd say; "expenses have run so high. I simply can't make ends meet, Joe—I simply can't, just between friends. . . ."

"Friends!" I'd say. "Why, damn you, Beldon!" I'd be hot all over, and I'd sneak up to him with my hands twisting

and untwisting, thinking of how I could put those hands around his throat.

He'd laugh in my face. "You know, Joe," he'd say, "good friends as we are, sometimes I think you'd like to kill me. Yes, sir, sometimes I do. But it would go hard with you, Joe—it would go mighty hard with you. . . ." He'd smile, very soft, and, if we were in his apartment, point to his combination safe that had a time-lock on it, that nobody could open but him. "You see, Joe," he'd say then, "you've done a lot of things that I know about. I've got them all written down there, in black and white. If I were to die suddenly, the police would have to have a look at the papers in that safe. It would look bad for you, Joe—mighty bad. . . ." And then he'd laugh again, that high, horrible sort of laugh that he had.

He'd said something like that again, just the other day; then he'd added: "Well, Joe, sometimes I wonder—which one of us will get the other first?"

He'd laughed then, like it was a big joke—but it made me plenty nervous. Was he aiming to pull a fast one when the deal was finished—just when I was figuring to clear out of the whole mess?

It wasn't any wonder I'd been having nightmares lately. This deal had to go through; in spite of Beldon I'd clean up plenty, and it would finish Howerton; it had to work. Afterward, maybe, I could find a way to settle with Beldon for good. . . .

Hell, they couldn't kill Beldon now! Supposing they had, with those things in the safe! Supposing they were trying to, and that message had come as a kind of spiritual warning! I started walking faster. . . .

THERE was only once on that walk that I stopped short. I almost turned back then as a thought struck me. Sup-

posing the thing had really happened? Supposing Sam Howerton had killed Beldon, or had him killed, and then called me up, figuring I'd run over there, right into a trap?

But I laughed that off, shaky as I felt. Sam Howerton wouldn't ever kill anybody. He wouldn't even frame anybody. He was too much of a churchman for that. . . .

I didn't like it, though, walking over there. I never could figure why Beldon, with all the money he had salted down, kept on living over by the river in that dingy old brownstone. Here the streets are narrow and dark. Between the wharves and the El they don't worry much about street-lamps—and even the cops are pretty far apart. I guess they figure the place isn't any too safe for them. . . .

What with the dream I'd had and the thoughts I'd been thinking, I could imagine a lot of things, and all of them spooky. There might be a heist guy in most any one of those doorways. I was glad I'd stuck a rod in my topcoat pocket, and a blackjack too. I kept my hand on the rod all the time.

When I finally got to the doorway of the brownstone where Beldon lived, I guess I was actually trembling. Maybe, for that matter, I hadn't really stopped since I woke up with that voice ringing in my ears.

I rang the bell and waited. Beldon had the first floor of the house, and I expected it would be him that opened the door. I squinted through the glass, thinking I'd see him shuffling up to turn the knob; but it was all dark in there and I couldn't see a thing. He could have come around the stairs from the rear door that led to the kitchen, anyway, and I wouldn't have seen him; but now, I couldn't even have seen him if he had

come out the front door, right by the entrance.

I didn't even hear a sound. I rang again, hard. I waited a long time. Still nobody showed up, and no lights came on.

I began to get pretty scared. Supposing the whole thing had been true? Supposing Beldon was—

Quiet as I could, I turned the knob of the door.

It opened. I shoved it back a little farther.

Then, suddenly, I got all cold again. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up straight. Because all at once *I knew there was somebody behind that door!* . . .

At first I didn't see him or hear him; but I knew he was there, just as if it had been whispered to me—and I knew he was waiting for me. After that, I could hear his breathing—or at least I thought I could. It came short and sharp, anxious-like.

I had a bad minute. I was shaking all over. I felt like I was trapped—like the whole thing had been planned to get me here and trap me. But I calmed myself down finally. After all, I couldn't stop now; I couldn't turn and run. Because whatever else was true, I knew now that what I'd dreamed had really happened—that someone had killed George Beldon. And I knew that it was his murderer, just making a getaway, that stood behind that door.

I had to get him. I had to lay him out, so I'd have him for evidence. Otherwise, those things in Beldon's safe would make me burn. . . . I shifted my hand from gun to blackjack and brought it out. At close quarters it would work better. I moved the door farther back, this time fast. . . .

HE CAME for me, just as I went for him. He could see me, a little, and I couldn't see him at first, and that gave him some advantage; but at the same time he didn't figure I knew he was there—and that gave me some advantage. I used it.

I hit him hard, driving him back toward the wall. At the same time, my blackjack swished down toward his skull.

He must have hit the wall at the same time that the blackjack hit him. I heard a cracking noise. Yanking at the blackjack, I realized that it had kind of stuck between his head and the wall—but his head hit the wall just the same, and hard.

I hadn't figured to drive him back so hard. I stepped back, sort of startled. He slumped straight down to the floor. I knew then that I'd killed him.

I was scared for a minute. I'd never killed a man before. But I looked around and felt a little better. The thing hadn't taken any time, and we hadn't made much noise; it was still dark in the hall, and nobody'd ever be the wiser.

Besides, the thing that made me feel good all at once, kind of warm all over, was that for some reason I was certain right then that the man I'd killed, Beldon's murderer, was Sam Howerton. Somehow, he'd got up nerve enough to kill Beldon, thinking he could pin it on me—and I'd caught him red-handed! . . .

First off, I thought the best thing to do was to light out. If Beldon was dead and they found Howerton dead here right by his door, that ought to clear me all right. Then I got to thinking. . . . Those papers were still in the safe. I'd better go into Beldon's place, if I could, and see if there wasn't some way I could get my hands on them. Besides, maybe Beldon wasn't dead yet; maybe Howerton had thought he'd killed him, or hadn't even finished the job because I came and rang the bell. In that case, things would be fixed mighty

pretty for me. I might even bargain with Beldon for the papers, then finish killing him. . . . However it was, it would work out fine for me. . . .

I left the body right where it was. There was no time to find a place to hide it. Besides, if Beldon was dead, in a few minutes I'd want it. I'd drop it inside the door, right near him, and that would clear me. They couldn't hang anything on me then. . . .

I knocked on Beldon's door. There wasn't any answer. He's dead, all right, I thought; but I've got to go in anyway.

Then, for the first time, I noticed that there was a faint crack of light showing through the keyhole. Beldon must have been up when Howerton came. . . . I tried the door.

I was sort of startled when it opened. The front door wasn't always locked—but Beldon didn't usually figure to let anybody that wanted to walk right into his living-room—not without knowing their business.

Anyhow, I walked in. I blinked my eyes. The whole room was bright as day. And I started back.

There, right in the chair by the table where he always sat, was George Beldon—reading a book!

He was sitting there, fully dressed, and he was reading some sort of Greek history book. He was always reading some book like that. And the funny thing was, that he didn't seem a bit scared, nor even surprized, to see me coming in. He just looked up and smiled, with that leering smile of his. It was almost as if he had been expecting me. It gave me the kind of eery feeling, with chills up and down my back, like I had had after the dream. . . .

"Well, well," he said, "if here isn't my good friend Joe Clemens, come to pay me a nocturnal visit! *Very* nocturnal, I should say. It's mighty nice of you, Joe,

to come here to keep me company in the wee, lonely hours—and mighty glad I am to see you! And what can I do for you tonight, Joe?"

That's what he said; but glad as he pretended to be, he didn't get up to shake hands with me, or anything like that; he just sat there, smiling. Still, I didn't think there was anything funny about that; he never did get up to shake hands when I came into the room. I always thought he probably had a rod stuck somewhere in that chair, and stayed there ready to use it; but I guess maybe he didn't, after all. He knew he was safe from me, and he didn't need any rod. . . .

I guess I acted kind of nervous. "I—I just come over to talk to you," I said. "About—about nothing particular. . . ."

"Well, well," he came back, with that nasty grin of his, "so my old friend Joe has just come over to talk to me—about nothing in particular. Just come over for a friendly chat. . . . Well, Joe, draw up a chair, then, and we'll chat. . . ."

I DREW up the chair and sat down. There was something about his eyes that made me do it, though I didn't want to sit down. I wanted to get out of there, now, just as quick as I could.

I figured it all out, though, right away. For a minute I'd had a bad start. Maybe it wasn't Howerton out there in the hall. Maybe it was just somebody in the house that thought I was jumping *them*. But now I knew, just from Beldon's way of acting, that it must have been Howerton. He had come here, aiming to kill Beldon and blame it on me, and it hadn't worked. Beldon was ready for him, so he had sneaked away. And Beldon had figured the whole thing out, and looked on it as a big joke. He *would* look on it that way; I've never seen anybody that cared so little about his own hide. And in a way, it was kind of a joke between him and me;

he saw that, too, and for once, I thought, he wasn't just laughing *at* me; he was laughing *with* me, too. . . .

Seeing that, I felt a little better. I was pretty sure he wouldn't know I'd killed Howerton; and as long as I could keep him from knowing that, I was sitting okay. As soon as things worked right for it, I'd get out of here and stow away Howerton's body in a safe place, and I'd be in the clear again. Meanwhile, though, I had to watch myself, because I was pretty nervous.

We sat there facing each other for a little bit, and I couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, Beldon smiled a little broader. "Now, Joe," he said, "you're sure you didn't come on *unfriendly* business? Or you didn't come, say, on business which has to do with a mutual friend of ours?"

I thought quick that time. I was beginning to get my nerve back, in spite of the creepy way he was grinning at me.

"As far as I know, George," I came back—I'd never called him George before, so you can see I was getting my nerve up—"we've never had any *mutual* friends. I guess we run to different likes."

He chuckled then. He opened his mouth and chuckled out loud, and I could hear him chuckle. "Yes, sir, Joe, that is a fact!" he said. "We have few, if any, mutual friends! As the Greeks would have said . . ."

I didn't get what it was the Greeks would have said, because he said it in Greek—or maybe it was Latin, I don't know. I don't know what it was in what he said that made me feel all nervous and creepy again; but I did, all at once. Maybe it was his acting as if the whole thing was a big joke; because the more he acted that way, the less I thought it was a joke. I had just killed a man, and

now I began to think that maybe he was wise to me, after all.

He kept on talking, and I got more and more nervous; and I realized finally that all the time he was trying to make me feel that way. It wasn't a joke between us at all; he was trying to draw me out, make me spill the story so he'd have something more on me—something *final*, this time. . . .

He couldn't make me spill anything, though—even though he kept smiling, and talking, and asking me questions. But at the same time, I couldn't seem to get away from him. I wanted to, bad enough; but it was like he had me hypnotized.

It was horrible. I began to feel things closing in on me. There was Howerton's body out there in the hall—and it must be pretty near daylight already. There was those papers in the safe. And here I sat listening to Beldon talk, with the whole thing sounding queer and unnatural, and me not able to get away.

"Listen, George," I busted out finally, "those papers you got—I got to have them. George, you can have everything we make on that traction deal if you'll give me those papers."

He looked at me for a minute, and kind of smiled. "Why, Joe," he said, "aren't you being just a little bit rash? Are you *sure*—the entire proceeds of that deal?"

"The whole thing," I told him. "I'm sick of it. I want to clear out."

He leered at me. "Joe," he said, "I'd like to believe you—yes, sir, I would. But how would I know you'd give it all to me? How do I know you wouldn't get rid of me when you had the papers?"

"Listen," I said; "if I ever talked straight I'm doing it now. All I want is to get those papers and get out. I'll sign everything I got over to you and you can finish the traction deal yourself."

He shook his head. He seemed to kind of settle back in his chair. "It's too bad, Joe," he said. "It's really too bad. But you're too late. I can't help you now, Joe."

Something snapped in my head. I started toward him. "Too late!" I snarled. "Damn you, Beldon!"

He knew I was going to kill him, but he didn't move! He sat there, and he was smiling—actually smiling!

It was the most horrible smile I've ever seen. And his eyes—it seemed like they were afire—like hell was alive and burning in them. Looking at them, I began to shake all over. I stopped in my tracks.

He waited a second for me to calm down. "You might as well be going, Joe," he said then. "It won't do you any good to stay here. You might as well get away from the scene of your crime. But if I were you, Joe, *before I go I'd get rid of that bloody blackjack you're carrying in your hand!*"

I GUESS I screamed, then, as I pocketed the thing that I didn't know I was still carrying; but if I did, nobody could have heard me, because Beldon laughed at the same time. It wasn't a chuckle this time; it was that high, horrible laugh of his—only now it was even worse than before. It seemed like he was swallowing blood when he laughed.

I did scream, all right. And I put my hand over my eyes, because I couldn't stand it to look at him any more. He looked hideous. . . .

When I took my hand away, half a second later, I realized that daylight was seeping in through the drawn blinds. It was morning. And when I looked at Beldon's chair, he wasn't there! It was just like he had faded away with the coming of daylight.

For a second I stood there and couldn't

move. Then, suddenly, it all came to me. The old devil knew I'd killed Howerton, and he wanted to pin it on me. In that half-second he'd slipped past me—slipped past me and run out the door to call the cops.

I whirled and started after him. He'd closed the door, but I busted it open. I busted out into the hall, and the light streamed after me and onto the body of the man I'd killed an hour or more ago.

I stopped short then. There were funny whimpering noises sounding in my throat. I guess I was white as a ghost.

The body that lay there, staring up at me, was George Beldon's!

After a minute I knelt down. I was trying to tell myself that the first corpse must have come to and killed Beldon when he ran out on me; but it didn't hold. The body was already partly cold. He'd been dead since right after I came into the house. . . .

I guess I went kind of batty then. I couldn't seem to move. I just sat there, making those funny scared noises in my throat again.

That was the way the cops found me when they busted in a minute later.

It seems they'd been hanging around the place all evening, because Beldon had asked them to. They'd missed the killing, but after I went in they peeked in through the blinds and saw me in Beldon's apartment. I tried to tell them that that cleared me, if they'd seen me in there talking. They just laughed.

"Clears you, hell!" one of them said. "Not that, it don't. Not standin' in there for an hour, talkin' to an empty chair!"

I stopped talking, then; and I'm telling you this now because it don't make any difference anyhow, any longer. You don't have to believe me; but I was the one.

these things happened to and I guess I ought to know. You can't make me think that chair was empty; I saw him.

But like I said, it don't make any dif-

ference anyhow. They're going to burn me for killing Beldon, and there's no way I can get out of it.

Hell, I killed him, didn't I?