

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1949

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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The Previous Incarnation

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

CONSTANCE EMERSON was agitated.

That's a simple declarative sentence to those of you who never knew her; but to others like myself, it's a statement as startling as if I were to tell you, in all earnest, that the Wrigley Building had just gone for a short stroll down Michigan Boulevard.

My astonishment couldn't have been more

complete when I opened my door at the ring of the bell on that stormy night, and found Constance on my doorstep, looking as if she'd just fallen off the end of a broom. Constance—who, I would have sworn, could have managed to look *soignée* even in the middle of a midnight fire at sea. Her disheveled appearance was partially explained when I saw that her car wasn't parked at the curb, and realized she must

Can a memory of former lives make this one intolerable?



Heading by Vincent Napoli

have walked the several intervening blocks between our homes. Constance—who barely managed to drift languidly from room to room in the sprawling mansion Lloyd had built for her!

Too bemused even to stutter a question, I drew her in and led her to a chair before the fireplace, where she could stretch her fragile, tall-heeled slippers to the blaze.

"I had to see you, Dave," she said, distraught. "You're Lloyd's best friend. You'll have to tell me what to do."

And she began to cry.

With difficulty, I kept my jaws firmly together, though my astonishment was mounting by the moment. With anyone else, I might have suspected marital discord. But a quarrel between Lloyd and Constance was unthinkable. Constance didn't quarrel.

A pale blonde of the madonna order, tall, cool, remote, she was lovely enough if you cared for the type, but I had never been able entirely to understand Lloyd's great love for her. She responded to his attentions and devotion with even less warmth than a child of great wealth might accord the gift of a penny lollipop. I would, myself, as readily become infatuated with a deep-freeze unit.

But now, out of the long friendship I'd borne Lloyd, I bent forward and said with as much sympathy as I could muster, "Tell me what the trouble is, Constance."

She dried her eyes, and smoothed her hair, and said with something of her old calm, "I believe the trouble must have started when he was struck by that hit-and-run car a week ago."

I said, "But the hospital released him the next morning, when the doctor said he'd suffered only a slight concussion. Do you mean he was more seriously injured than we thought?"

"I don't know what's the matter with him," Constance said. "And I don't care what Doctor Robertson's opinion was. Lloyd simply hasn't been the same since. He sits there looking blankly at me as if he'd never seen me before, and there's the strangest expression of concentration on his face all the time, as if he were trying his very best to remember something."

"Why not have Doctor Robertson look him over again?"

"I did suggest it, but Lloyd refuses to see him," Constance said. "And if I ask him any questions, he only grows irritable. As you know, I've always been a very reserved person, and I simply cannot continue to probe when my questions are so obviously unwelcome."

I attempted to soothe her. "It doesn't sound so very alarming to me, Constance. The concussion probably caused a mild form of amnesia."

"Mild?" Constance had a small smile for what she evidently considered an understatement. "Miss Greenbaum, his secretary, called me on the telephone from his office the other day to ask me if I were entirely satisfied with my husband's condition since the accident. She said he's displaying the most alarming apathy to his brokerage business, and things have reached a point now where she's beginning to fear his customers will soon notice."

At that, Constance must have seen that I was beginning to take her story more seriously. After all, Constance and his business had been Lloyd's life. If he were growing indifferent to both, there was surely something wrong.

She went on, "These last few evenings, Lloyd has stared at me blankly all through dinner. It's like living with a ghost." She shivered a very little. "And after dinner he has taken to locking himself in the library. And when occasionally I've grown alarmed at his silence in there, and knocked on the door, he suggests in the coldest voice imaginable that I please leave him undisturbed. He's locked in there now. It has played on my nerves to such an extent by now, that I simply couldn't stand another moment of it. That's why I've come to you."

I said, "Suppose I return with you? Perhaps he'll consent to see me. If it is amnesia, as it sounds to me, the face of his oldest friend might serve to recall his memory."

"If the face of his own wife—" Constance began. Then she shrugged. "Perhaps it would be best. Something must be done, and I can suggest nothing else."

ACCORDINGLY, I took my car from the garage, and together we drove over to the Emerson place. Though mine is but a modest bachelor establishment, just three short blocks away the homes of wealthier people turn their backs haughtily to the lake.

I drove between the granite gate posts, their wrought-iron gates standing permanently ajar, as I'd done so many times before, and pulled up under the dripping *porte-cochere*.

Constance and I entered the house, and at the door of the library she stood aside while I knocked. For a minute, I wondered if Lloyd would answer at all; but then the key turned in the lock and he opened the door.

"Oh, it's you, Dave. Hello. Come on in."

I think I'd been prepared for anything but this casual, ordinary greeting.

Constance murmured something about going to her room to change into dry things. There was a time when Lloyd would have clucked like a mother-hen to hear she'd been out in the rain, would have worried lest she had taken cold.

Now he merely nodded absently. I saw her bite her lip as she turned away, saw the significant glance she flashed at me.

When I entered the library, Lloyd shut and locked the door behind him. He's a big man with graying hair, and shrewd fans of wrinkles at the corners of his blue eyes. He's well into middle age, as I am myself, and some years older than Constance.

After hearing Constance's story, I was prepared to find him looking somewhat altered, for I hadn't seen him since the week before, when I'd called at the hospital, after hearing of the accident, to find out how he was. But, save that he seemed to have lost a little of his usual florid color, I could see no evidence that he had changed in any physical way. And if I'd expected to find his shrewd blue eyes clouded with the haze of a blurred memory, I couldn't have been more mistaken.

He mixed highballs for us, and we seated ourselves in chairs that were none too comfortable. The room was beautiful, yes; but it never failed to depress me. Constance had done it and it had the cold, bloodless per-

fection of everything that Constance touched.

Lloyd said casually, looking around as if he were seeing it for the first time, "What this room needs, right in the middle of the floor, is a big, brass spittoon."

I was so stunned that I nearly dropped my glass. I had never heard Lloyd utter anything that could be construed as even the most indirect criticism of Constance before. Truly he was altered.

Before I could say anything in answer to that, Lloyd looked at me shrewdly. "So Constance sent for you, eh?"

I put my glass on an end table, and leaned forward, forearms on knees.

"Lloyd," I said. "What's the matter? I've never seen Constance so disturbed. You know how self-contained she has always been. Her present state of mind, in a more volatile person, would approximate hysteria. You must be frightening her, nearly out of her wits."

He seemed genuinely surprised. "Why should Constance be frightened?"

"She says you regard her this past week as if you don't know her." I studied his face before adding casually, "Lloyd, I'm your oldest friend. You know you can tell me anything that's troubling you, and Constance need never know about it, if, for some reason, you desire secrecy. Are you having trouble remembering things since your accident? After all, amnesia is not uncommon—"

"Amnesia? Oh, is that the explanation you'd arrived at between yourselves?" He smiled faintly, and then the smile faded. He sat there, staring somberly into the depths of his highball glass. "No, I wouldn't call it amnesia. Quite the reverse, in fact. My memory is too good, nowadays."

A cryptic statement, but I let it pass. For I saw now, even more clearly, what Constance had meant. Lloyd apparently had forgotten me for the moment. There was a strange expression on his face, and in his eyes something that I can only describe as a *listening* look. As if the record of memory were playing a tune just too faintly for him to hear it, and he was striving desperately to bring it nearer.

"Lloyd!" I waited till I was sure I had

his undivided attention. I searched my memory for obscure incidents from the remote past in which we'd both participated. "Do you remember—?"

He remembered everything I suggested perfectly, and amplified them in such a way as to suggest to me unmistakably there could be nothing wrong with his memory. The nearer past he recalled with as little trouble.

He smiled grimly when I'd exhausted my tests.

"Still harping on the amnesia theory, eh?" he said.

I was defeated. Only one thing else occurred to me, and unbelievable as it was I voiced it. "If your memory hasn't failed, then your behavior of the past week, Lloyd, can mean only one thing. You just don't love Constance any more?"

"No, you're wrong about that." He shook his head. "I love Constance quite as much as I ever did." He paused then, and looked me directly in the eyes, before continuing with his amazing statement. "But I've come to realize that the love I feel for Constance is a very pallid emotion, indeed, compared to that I once bore for—Heptenartas!"

NOW Lloyd and I have been bosom friends since we were ten years old. We went to school together. We spent vacations together. We've never lived farther than four blocks apart. Perhaps the only occasion in our whole lives that we'd been separated for longer than a week was at the time he and Constance went to Bermuda for their honeymoon. I thought I'd known him as well as I knew myself.

But now I gaped at him. "Who under the sun is Heptenartas?"

Instead of answering me immediately, he got up from his chair and went to the window, pulling back the pale chiffon curtains to stare out into the blackness of the rainy night.

When he let the curtains drop finally, and came back to sit opposite me again, he said, low, "Look, Dave. I don't want to tell you all this. You'll think I'm insane."

But my curiosity had been whetted razor-sharp by his mention of that odd name. I said, "You've told me too much to stop now. I can't promise to believe what you

tell me but at least I won't accuse you of being mad."

And certainly, as he sat there, one could look far to find a man who appeared more rational.

He freshened our drinks first before he said, "It goes back to the accident of a week ago. I'd suffered no permanent ill effects physically. A night in the hospital, and I left the next day feeling as well as I ever had. But I knew even then that I had changed. I'm not suffering from amnesia, as you and Constance seem to fear. On the contrary, my memory is better than it ever was. The only explanation I can give you, and that seems fairly reasonable even to myself, is that the blow on my head must have—shall we say, unblocked?—older channels of memory still. For I can not only remember the details of this life as clearly as ever, I'm also beginning to have hazy recollections of a former life, a previous incarnation!"

Remembering my promise to him, and determined to keep it at all cost that I might present no obstacle to his hesitant confidence, I'd steeled myself deliberately to betray no emotion at anything he might say.

I flatter myself I succeeded very well. No hint of surprise crossed my face, I'm sure. I repeated merely, "A previous incarnation?" as if he'd just made a most commonplace statement.

I think he was pleased at the way I took it, for he talked more eagerly now. "Yes, though the details are hazy in the extreme, save for one or two instances. But, you know, during this past week, I've spent more and more time by myself, striving my utmost to recall and recapture each fragment of memory. And it's growing clearer! Really, it is! I feel certain that with time I will recall every least detail of my life in my previous incarnation!"

I had to be careful. I said, "Do you care to tell me what you do remember? What period were you living in?"

HE WAS anxious to talk now. I think he'd wanted to talk of his amazing discovery to somebody, this week past. He'd despaired only of finding a sympathetic listener.

He said, "I'm still not sure of the exact period, but it must be several thousands of years ago. And I'm in a country that can only be the Egypt of that time."

Some shade of disappointment must have crossed my face then, and he must have seen it.

For he cried, "No, no, don't misunderstand me! This is no arm-chair tourist's dream of pyramids and sphinxes and waving palms beside the Nile. You know I've never been to Egypt in *this* life. Yet, even if I had been, I could not possibly recall these subtle indications of the country. I see my house and my shop very clearly. I even know what work I do. I'm a stonemason, and I use my strange tools skilfully, though there are no such tools today. At least, none that I have ever seen in *this* life."

"And Heptenartas?" I asked.

At the mention of that odd name, I can't begin to describe the transfiguration of his face. It glowed with an inner light, and the years visibly dropped away from it. He seemed a young man again.

He said softly, "Heptenartas? She's not my wife, but I love her! And with what a love! How could I possibly continue to believe that this emotion I feel for Constance is love, even though I know that it truly is, in this life? But it pales to invisibility beside this other, greater love for Heptenartas!"

He looked at me with shining eyes. "Do you wonder I want to know more? Do you wonder that I'll never rest until I know *all*? Do you wonder that I look at Constance now as if she were not there? She *is* not there! She's scarcely visible to these eyes that look ecstatically now upon Heptenartas! Ah, Dave! If you could but see her! The slanted, secret, provocative dark eyes. The skin like sun-ripened apricots! The scarlet mouth! The tiny waist to be spanned in less than the space of these two hands joined!"

I daresay in this day and age such extravagant language sounds ridiculous. But I assure you that you would not have laughed had you been there to hear the vibrant timbre of his voice, to see the ecstatic light in his eyes as he sang his own *Song of Songs*, his unembarrassed, unin-

hibited tribute to the charms of the woman he loved!

I said nothing. What could I have said?

And at last, noting my lack of response, the elation left his face, and he seemed old again, and sad, and disappointed. As if he'd tried his best to reach me only to find that the way was blocked.

And he said, "I'm very tired, Dave. If you'll excuse me?"

No more passed between us.

I left the house without seeing Constance.

And I slept not at all that night.

I KNEW in the morning that Constance would be in to see me sometime during the course of the day. But, until I could marshal my thoughts, I determined to say nothing to her of what Lloyd had told me the night before.

I was not at all sure in my own mind that Lloyd was mad, or even on the verge of insanity, though I am willing to concede that his story had been preposterous. Yet, perhaps with that small superstitious segment of my mind that we all retain as our heritage from the Dark Ages, I found myself wanting, to believe in his sincerity, wanting to believe that his accident had caused him honestly to recover his memory of a former existence.

My mind, in other words, rejected his story; my emotions accepted it. Perhaps subconsciously I found his story convincing because he had seemed to care so little whether or not I did.

Constance did drop in that afternoon, but I gave an evasive answer to her anxious inquiries.

"I did notice a change in Lloyd," I admitted. "And he told me a story so fantastic that I shan't repeat it, for it would serve only to alarm you. But, Constance, I'm sure this is only a temporary aberration of his, and I shouldn't worry about it if I were you. It's my belief that he's suffering from shock, and let's just wait to see if Time will effect a cure, as I'm sure it will."

A woman's curiosity being what it is, this did not serve to check further questions, but when she saw that I adamantly refused to enlarge on what Lloyd had told me, she finally desisted. Cool, disapproval

was written on her face as she tendered me an invitation to dine with them one night in the following week.

It was a most uncomfortable dinner.

To begin with, Lloyd's self-absorption had grown by now to such an extent that he seemed completely oblivious of his surroundings. He left the burden of conversation, in the main, to Constance and myself, and he looked acutely unhappy.

And Constance?

Women are unfathomable. When she had been sure of his devotion, she seemed completely indifferent to it. But now that she had lost it, she strove in every way to woo him. She might as well have tried to excite to life a statue cast in bronze.

After dinner, Lloyd told Constance, "I have something to say to Dave, my dear, that would only bore you. So, if you don't mind—?"

She nodded unhappily and went alone into the drawing room while Lloyd and I closeted ourselves in the library.

I think he must have been waiting all through dinner for a chance to tell me, for he said at once, baldly, "Heptenartas is dead!"

Still determined to humor him, I murmured conventionally that I was sorry. He didn't appear to hear me. He sat there slumped despondently, and never have I seen grief so poignant on any human face.

Thinking to distract him, I asked, "Your memories have been growing clearer, then, since the last time I saw you?"

"Yes, they have," he admitted. "But, Dave, my first feeling of exhilaration has left me. And do you know why? Because I'm beginning to remember not only the joys but the cares and sorrows of my former life. And these added to those of my present life—do you see? My heart has been heavy. And now—now I'm beginning to get glimmerings of *other* incarnations!"

I didn't like the look in his eyes.

I said, "Lloyd, do you know what I would do, if I were you? Why don't you take a trip with Constance? See new scenes. Try to distract your mind. Forget this business of probing your memory."

If he had rejected my idea with violence, I should have felt that there was some hope

of winning him over. But he said, "No," with such abysmal indifference that I was afraid the project was hopeless.

Nevertheless, when I spoke to Constance alone before I left, I told her what I had in mind, and suggested that she wait a few days and then bring up the subject of travel herself, warning her, however, that I was sure he would oppose it.

You may judge for yourself, then, the extent of my surprise when Constance called me on the telephone on the next morning but one.

"I thought you said that Lloyd didn't want to go away?" she said.

"He didn't."

"We're leaving tomorrow morning on a leisurely motor trip to the Coast."

"How did you ever manage to bring him around?"

"But I didn't!" she said. "The idea was his. He's terribly excited about going."

There was an explanation for his change of heart that I didn't learn about until later. Now I merely accepted it as further evidence of the erratic state of his mind.

AN AGED uncle of mine chose that time to die in another state, and I was forced to go there in connection with the settlement of legal matters attendant upon his death. I should have returned shortly had not the recurrence of an old malady hospitalized me there for some time. It was three months before I again returned to our suburban community on the lake front north of Chicago.

In the mail that had accumulated during my absence, I found a letter from Constance, post-marked Reno, Nevada, and dated several weeks before. Her writing style was as frigid as herself, and she said, in part:

"Lloyd has at last condescended to tell me the reason for his eccentric behavior in recent weeks. It appears that he is dedicated to a highly improbable belief that he retains clear memories of a life in a previous incarnation, or incarnations.

"He has spoken constantly of some woman whom he calls Heptenartas, and to whom he was apparently devoted in his former life. She had died, however, and the

recollection of this was the cause of his despondency on that last evening we all dined together. He thought all hope of happiness was gone from him forever. But later, he said, he saw the error of his reasoning. He had been born again, hadn't he? Why, then, shouldn't Heptenartas have been born again also into a new life?

"He became convinced that this was indeed so; that Heptenartas lived again in this present life, contemporaneous with his own; though of course under another name, and with no recollection of a former existence, just as he had lived until that lucky accident, as he referred to it, restored his memory.

"He determined at once to seek her up and down the land, and that was the reason for his sudden, excited interest in travel.

"I prefer to forbear, dear David, from making any comment on this extravagant story. Suffice it to say that the man is obviously deranged, and for myself life with him has become intolerable. I have established residence here in Reno, and shall institute divorce proceedings so soon as I may.

"Lloyd, I believe, has returned to Chicago."

And she was truly mine, Constance.

Naturally I lost no time in repairing at once to the Emerson residence. Lloyd was there alone, living without servants, and when he opened the door I found him shockingly altered. He had lost a great deal of weight. His face was haggard. His eyes were haunted. I couldn't be sure that he knew me.

"I've heard from Constance," I said.

"Constance?" he said, as if he had never even heard of her.

"Why not come back with me to my place, Lloyd," I said gently, "and we'll keep Bachelor Hall together for a while?"

He shook his head.

I tried another tack. "You've had no clue to the present whereabouts of Heptenartas?"

He didn't even brighten at the sound of her name. And, at that, I was really alarmed. He merely turned into the library, shutting and locking the door behind him. Nor

would he answer my repeated knocking on its panels; until at last I grew discouraged, and went away.

MANY times since then I've thought: Perhaps if I had persisted? If I had not grown discouraged so easily? But, in my heart, I know I'm only tormenting myself needlessly with such thoughts. I'm sure it doesn't really matter that I didn't stay, that if I had succeeded in rousing Lloyd momentarily from his depression it would have served only to delay for a time the final and inevitable result.

For sometime during that night after I left him, Lloyd went out to his garage, and locked the doors, and turned on the motor of his car. He was found there on the following morning, a suicide from carbon monoxide poisoning. And I had lost a friend.

Constance maintains to this day that Lloyd's strange deterioration was really insanity in one of its subtler manifestations.

I have never really liked Constance.

And I hope the woman Lloyd loves in his next incarnation—

But there! The pen trembles in my hand as I see with what calm acceptance I've written of Lloyd's *next* incarnation!

Have I believed his story? Was it really true?

Or am I, too, going mad?

Let me read again the letter Lloyd left me that night on which he died. The letter in which he wrote:

"I can no longer continue to live under the burden of thousands of years of grief. My memory of former lives has become appallingly clear, and, as in this life, the cares far outweigh the joys. I am forgetting even Heptenartas under this devastating weight of misfortunes and mental afflictions! Existence, for me, has become insupportable. I *cannot* live!"

It seemed a weak explanation for taking his life, I had thought at first. But consider if Lloyd's story *were* true. Let your imagination dwell upon it.

Ah, it is only *then* that the terror really enters!