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Strange STORIES


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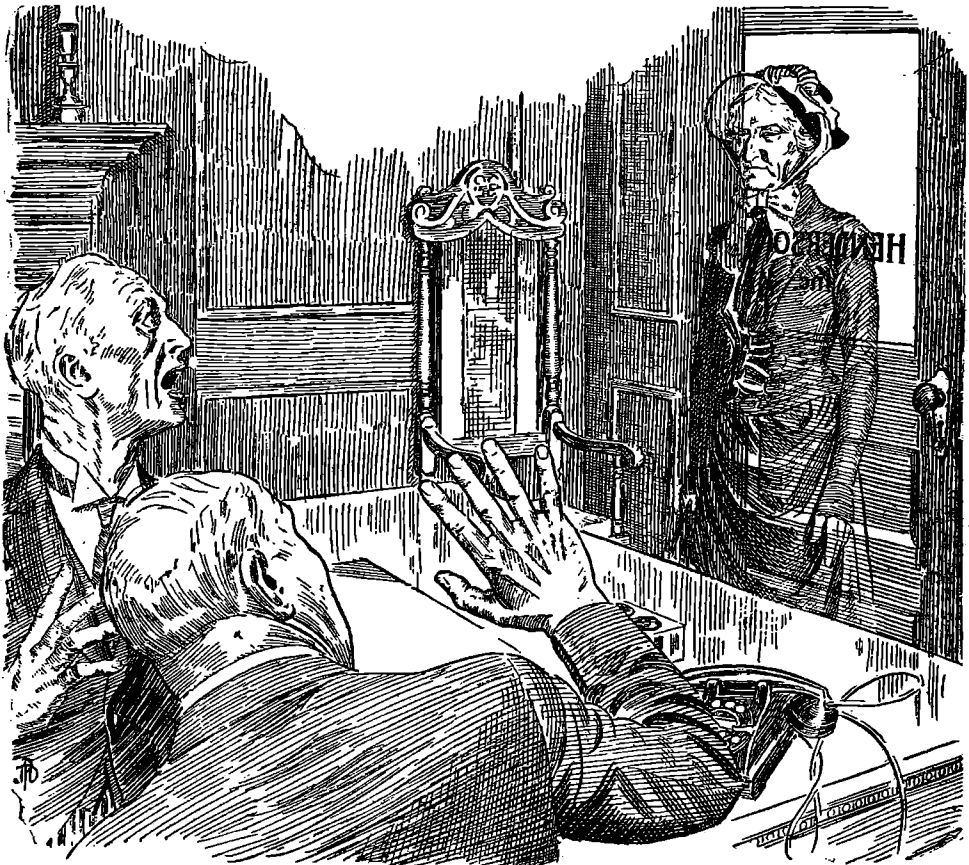
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After You, Mr. Henderson

AUGUST W. DERLETH

Author of "A Message for His Majesty," "Memoire for Lucas Payne," etc.



The reversed lettering showed distinctly through her

THE name in gold-leaf on the door was simply "Henderson, Inc." But there was history behind that simple title, fifty years of sterling business reputation. Even the suite of offices had that air of solidity and mellowed affluence which was the firm's only advertisement.

For the first thirty of those fifty years Enoch and Joshua Henderson

*Defy Not the Dead, for Forces
Stronger than Annihilation May
Keep them from Resting in Peace!*

guided the destiny of the brokerage business. For the past twenty, Latichia, daughter of Enoch, and Lucas and Eliot, sons of Joshua, had been in

control. Rather, Latichia had been in control, with Lucas and Joshua as lesser satellites. It had been this way until the past few days. But now Latichia, that spry and energetic little spinster of a senior partner, was critically ill.

Mr. Lucas Henderson, a pleasant smile on his lean features, entered the offices this morning at the unprecedented hour of nine o'clock. Although the opening of the exchange was still an hour away, he found his brother already there before him. Eliot, being fat and jovial, could smile more expansively than his tall and thin brother. He did so now.

"Well?" he asked in his cultured, well modulated voice.

"She is dying," informed Lucas, removing his hat and topcoat in the manner of one performing a sacred ritual.

"How long?" inquired Eliot gently.

"I think within an hour or so," Lucas said judiciously.

Eliot made a small sound of sympathy with his lips, but there was a certain air of sad satisfaction about him. Both brothers were too well bred, too polite, too cultured to be anything but gentlemen. Sad though it was, people had acquired the habit of dying eventually. There was little one could do about it.

However, the removal of the guiding hand of crusty old Latichia was not without its pleasant points. Latichia's views were not progressive. Her conservative morality and finely drawn opinions of ethics had proved irksome to her cousins.

Lucas discarded sympathy with his hat and coat and came at once to business.

"Continental Investment," he said briefly.

ELIOT looked at him appraisingly. Without the slightest sign of bewilderment.

"As I understand your plan, we are to dump our holdings. We sell enough to force the stock below our figure, and then buy back at the low price. We stand to make a cool million by the deal."

"As well," pointed out Lucas, "as

enjoying the excitement of bearing the market."

"Providing the government regulations don't interfere."

"Under the circumstances, they won't. Henderson, Incorporated, is an old and established concern. It has never gambled in stocks. We own outright most of the shares. You and I own fifty per cent together, Latichia owns forty per cent—which we inherit upon her death—and only ten per cent is privately distributed. So don't bother your head about that. We dump the stock, at the same time passing the word around that Henderson is selling. Unless I am sadly in error regarding the prestige of our name, Continental will hit the chutes. When it drops to, say, sixty or fifty, we will buy it back in."

Eliot pursed his lips. "To force such results, we'll have to sell short."

"On good security—Latichia's forty per cent."

"Latichia wouldn't like it," said Eliot, trying to be deliberate. "She would call it downright dishonest."

"So it is," agreed Lucas affably. "But Latichia is rapidly losing interest in sordid finance and mundane affairs. I've always wanted to have a flutter like this. Latichia, however, has always made it impossible. You needn't join me in this, Eliot, but I must have a free hand. There are six hundred thousand shares of Continental, three hundred thousand of which we directly control. With Latichia's two hundred thousand, we can't fail!"

"Of course I am with you, Lucas," endorsed Eliot. "Instruct our agent to start dumping as soon as trading opens. I'll pay my last respects to Latichia. Incidentally, I'll make sure you know what you're talking about."

Miss Latichia had always been an indomitable woman. The approach of death in no way lessened the sharpness of her manner. If Eliot expected her hawklike nose to have shrunk, her snapping black eyes to have dimmed, or her sharp voice to have lost any of its acid harshness, he was disappointed. The old lady even anticipated his carefully prepared words of sympathy.

"Don't feed me pap, Eliot," she said. "I've got under an hour to lie here alive, and I want to tell you just what I told Lucas."

YOUNG HENDERSON bowed deferentially and sat down.

"I know very well you'll be relieved to have the reins taken away, but I must give you a bit of parting advice before I die. I told Lucas before, and I will tell you now—if you know what you're about (though you never did) you'll liquidate the firm immediately.

"Despite your illusions, neither of you has sense enough to preserve the standing of Henderson, Incorporated. It's always been my principle that that standing must never decline. Our fathers made that name, and its reputation must not be stained. I should prefer to see control of our various major holdings pass to Princeton & Valisch.

"I want to caution you particularly about Continental Investment. As you know, this is a federal subsidiary, and should anything happen, to it, our government may be seriously embarrassed not only in this country but abroad. You will do me this last courtesy and give these matters your every consideration. You may be sure that I shall hold on as long as I can.

"That's all. You may go now, for it tires me a little to talk. Our firm's dealings will enable both you and Lucas to retire on a most comfortable and satisfactory income. Good-by, Eliot."

"Good-by, Letty," said Eliot. "I'm sorry."

"Nonsense," she said.

In the hall, Eliot met the doctor.

"I understand Miss Henderson has but an hour or so to live," he said confusedly. "She seemed quite animated just now. I had expected to find her considerably weaker than she is."

"That indicates nothing," said the doctor. "She is suffering from acute pulmonary oedema. She'll be dead within an hour. At the very most, two hours."

Eliot took out his watch and looked at it.

"Before trading begins," he mur-

mured, nodding his head in mournful satisfaction.

"Of course," put in the doctor hastily, "news of her death will be kept from the public until after the exchange closes."

"Yes, certainly," said Eliot.

When he came into the firm's offices, he was all but rubbing his hands.

"It's all right," he declared to Lucas. "She's dying. I saw the doctor."

"I suppose she took the opportunity to tell you how incompetent we are," said Lucas.

"Oh, certainly," Eliot replied. "Fortunately, though, I have every confidence in our ability."

"My only regret is that Letty can't be here to see us clean up," Lucas declared. "She always had a poor opinion of our business acumen."

The brothers ceremoniously shook hands.

AT PRECISELY ten o'clock, the doleful old servant of Miss Latichia Henderson telephoned to advise that his mistress had just passed away.

At the same minute, a dozen brokers began to sell Continental Investment. At ten-five, the first break came when Continental wavered uncertainly and dropped to 98. At ten-thirty-five, Lucas Henderson let it be known that the firm of Henderson, Incorporated, was dumping Continental. The result was that the stock slumped at once to 78. By eleven o'clock, Continental had slipped further to 72, and by twelve-fifty it was down to 59.

The reports of the ticker were highly gratifying to the surviving partners.

"Will it go much lower?" wondered Eliot.

"I think not," said Lucas. "Buying is desultory, naturally. There must be close to five hundred thousand shares in the market now. I'll give orders to start buying promptly at two o'clock. There should be nearly the entire six hundred thousand shares available when we start buying."

"Which will make us about three hundred thousand short," observed Eliot.

"Correct," agreed Lucas coolly. "Letty's two hundred thousand shares

will make up two-thirds of the deficiency. No matter what might happen, we can safely figure on buying up the remaining hundred thousand in the open market."

Eliot smiled. "I think it might be safe for us to go out to lunch."

"I think it might," nodded Lucas pleasantly, arising and putting on his hat. He halted politely at the door of their private office.

"After you, Mr. Henderson," said the younger brother, bowing.

Immaculate in gloves, hats, with canes and sphinxlike faces, the brothers Henderson went to lunch. They showed only an academic interest in the shouting of newsboys about the upset in Continental Investment and the rumor of governmental concern. It was not quite two o'clock when a fellow member of the exchange came in, saw them, and stopped at their table.

"So here you are," he said. "Calmly eating, too. What the devil have you fellows been doing in Continental? I never saw anything drop like that and then go skyrocketing the same day."

"Skyrocketing?" echoed the brothers Henderson simultaneously. Lucas gaped at his watch.

"Yes," said the newcomer. "Don't pretend ignorance to me. It looks like you and that old termagant of a cousin of yours finally got together and 'rigged' the market."

For the first time in their lives, the brothers Henderson were discourteous. They left their companion, the waiter, and their check flat as they scurried out of the restaurant. They were back in their offices in three minutes.

On the ticker, Continental stood at 109½.

Cold sweat popping out all over him, Lucas grabbed the telephone and called his brokers. Had they bought at the beginning of the upturn? They had not. The explicit instructions had been to wait until two o'clock. Besides, Miss Latichia Henderson was on the floor personally supervising and directing Henderson purchases, so who were mere brokers to interfere?

"What?" yelled Lucas, forgetting

even his culture for the moment. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Miss Latichia Henderson is on the floor of the exchange right now," answered the broker angrily. "What kind of doublecross are you Hendersons trying to pull? We—"

LUCAS never heard the rest of the complaint. Pale as his own shirt front, he put down the instrument and turned to the trembling Eliot.

"Somebody's stark mad," he whispered. "Daggett said that—that Latichia is on the floor—*right now*—buying up every scrap of Continental."

For a ruddy-faced fat man, Eliot looked mighty green.

"But—but that's impossible!" he protested. "Letty is dead!"

"Unless Letty or her doctor or somebody has thrown us a bad curve," said Lucas, wiping his clammy forehead with a hand that trembled violently.

Eliot grabbed the phone, dialed the brokerage office.

"Buy Continental!" he shouted as soon as he heard Daggett's voice. "Buy! Tell 'em all to buy for Henderson!"

He replaced the transceiver, then grabbed it up again and dialed furiously. Lucas started out of the office at a run.

"I'm calling the doctor now," Eliot said. "Where are you going?"

"To the mortuary," Lucas flung over his shoulder.

The physician claimed Eliot's ear. "Certainly," he snorted in reply to the frenzied questioning. "Miss Latichia died at nine-fifty-five this morning. I was present, and I signed the death certificate. Of course I'm sure! What's the matter with you?"

It was less than an hour when Lucas came back. His face was whitely scared and puzzled.

"She's in the embalming room, stiff as a poker," he announced. "This is a hoax," he added without conviction.

"A bad one then," answered Eliot. "Daggett couldn't buy a single share. He just called back. This will clean us out, Lucas."

"Hardly that bad," said Lucas. "We're coming into control of Letty's two hundred thousand shares. But we may lose that extra hundred thousand sold short."

They strode over and looked at the ticker. Continental stood firm at 160. There was a tap at the door, and Phineas Princeton, of Princeton and Valisch, walked in.

"GOOD afternoon, gentlemen," he said icily. "I took the liberty of walking right in."

"Good afternoon," answered the brothers Henderson glumly.

"I'm afraid I have some very bad news for you," said Phineas Princeton. "I tried to get hold of you on the telephone repeatedly this morning, but you were apparently too busy to reply, and most of the time I could not get through. I am creditably informed that you have sold six hundred thousand shares of Continental Investment this morning and early afternoon. A reprehensible dumping, gentlemen, particularly when you consider that three hundred thousand of these are shares you do not even own. In other words, you sold short some three hundred thousand shares at the deplorably average figure of seventy-four and a quarter."

"I fail to understand your connection, Mr. Princeton," said Lucas Henderson firmly. "Latichia's holdings will pretty well cover us."

Phineas Princeton smiled frigidly. "Miss Latichia telephoned us from her home, at one o'clock, to buy all of Continental. We have bought into absolute control. You are in our debt for something approximating two million dollars.

"As to your cousin's holdings, I am instructed to inform you that we held a private meeting at her home last night. Princeton and Valisch took over her two hundred thousand shares in accordance with her wish that we assume control of Henderson's principle holdings. At this moment Princeton and Valisch own five hundred and eight-seven thousand shares of Continental Investment. We shall expect your check to cover in the morning's mail. Good day."

The door closed behind him. For a long moment there was no sound in the room. Then Lucas raised his eyes and looked at his brother.

"We are wiped out, Mr. Henderson," he said gravely. "It is a bad dream."

"We are ruined, Mr. Henderson," corrected Eliot. "It is a nightmare."

A dry cackle of a well remembered laugh impinged on their eardrums. They looked toward the office door with simultaneous starts. There, between them and the door, the reversed lettering of "Henderson, Inc." showing distinctly through her, stood Miss Latichia Henderson.

Not as material as they had always seen her, nevertheless she seemed just as powerful and dominant. Sternly, she stood there, a slender little old figure in gray, a sort of misty gray, old-fashioned poke-bonnet cocked a little to one side, fingerless black gloves covering her veined hands.

"Latichia!" cried the brothers Henderson.

"What's left of me," she answered with a sniff of disapproval. She shook the ghostly umbrella she habitually carried. "You idiots tried to put one over on the name of Henderson—on me, didn't you? Fools! I warned you both this morning. Now you can't raise two million dollars, even by liquidating, can you?"

The culprits were too spellbound to answer. Frozen in horrified awe, they stood rooted, quaking. Miss Latichia cackled again.

"Just a pair of smirking and scraping nincompoops—as always," she said in her ghostly yet clearly distinct voice. "But the name of Henderson still remains untarnished by sharp dealings. There is only one way out for you, you polite hypocrites. Good-by. I'll see you later."

Before their straining eyes, the wrath of Miss Latichia floated rather than walked over to the nearest window. It drifted daintily out like a puff of cigar smoke in a draft.

For another long moment there was terrified, incredulous silence.

"Did—did you see her, Eliot?" whispered Lucas between dry lips.

(Concluded on page 112)

AFTER YOU, MR. HENDERSON

(Concluded from page 102)

"I saw through her—just as she saw through us," answered Eliot.

Lucas methodically straightened some papers on his desk. He made no attempt to explain away the visitation.

"I think Letty was right," he said thoughtfully. "It is time for the firm to be liquidated."

He walked over to the window through which the disembodied La-

tichia had drifted. Cautiously, he peered down.

Eliot came to his side.

"Seventeen stories," murmured Lucas, and slowly raised the window.

He solemnly offered his brother his place.

Eliot declined with a little bow that was the acme of courtesy.

"After you, Mr. Henderson," he said.