

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XV

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 30, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States, \$8.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. 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.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 240 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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CREATION UNFORGIVABLE

by David H. Keller



"Once again came the whistling, piercing scream."

MY WIFE used to think that I took the writing game too seriously.

"There is no living with you or loving of you when you are at work on a story, and the longer the story, the longer the period of separation," she would say. I always answered her with a laugh and told her that was the penalty that she had to pay for marrying an artist.

For that was the way I looked at my writing. Prosaic enough it might seem to others to sit all day at a little low desk and pound the keys

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of a little old typewriter. Some of my friends told me that it was a poor way for a man of my ability to spend my time, but again I only answered with a laugh and told them that it made me happy.

All my life so far had been spent in comparative isolation in a little town. My outlook on life was apparently contracted, my opportunity for adventure slight. There were few persons to talk to, and, of those few, none who topped me intellectually. I should have been bitter, unhappy and misanthropic. My writing and

the far-away fields that it took me into were the panacea that made living a happy adventure, in spite of my surroundings.

I sold a story, and then another, and finally was able to buy a broken-down house and fifty acres of land, some miles from the center of the town. My first thought was to make the house livable for the wife. After that I hunted for some place to write. So far, I had been handicapped by the lack of suitable surroundings in which to pound the keys, composing what I hoped would be my masterpiece. Surely in fifty acres there should be some place where a man could find solitude, comfort and, mayhap, inspiration.

And without hunting for it I found it. A small one-room shack, the floor six by ten, the roof hardly six feet from the floor. It was some distance from the house, almost in the shadow of an overhanging ledge of rock and on the edge of a swamp. I went into that swamp once and found the mouth of a cave, but the mosquitoes were so bad that I determined to save further exploration till colder weather.

I was more handy with a typewriter than I was with a saw and hammer; so I put a carpenter to work. First, the roof had to be shingled, and then a new floor was imperative. Some windows supplied light and ventilation, while copper screens kept out the bugs. We put shelves on the walls, and I moved my books out there at the end of one week, and arranged them while a painter dabbled green paint all over the outside. At last I had a place for my desk and my typewriter.

It was a wonderful place to write. There was always light, but all through the day the sunlight was mellowed and softened and changed, either by the green of the trees or the black of the mountain. There was a stillness that was only made more intense by the singing birds

and weariless crickets. We liked it, the wife and I, while the baby cried for a whole day when she found that it was going to be a workshop for an author rather than a playroom for a little girl. The wife threatened picnic suppers and I had to arrange for a fireplace and a brass pipe to carry water from a spring up on the hill.

After all was ready, I walked to town and bought five hundred more sheets of paper at the local sell-all store. They handled magazines; "handled" is the right word, for I never heard of anyone's buying any except myself, and I bought only the occasional number with a story in it by myself. With these five hundred sheets of white paper, carbon, a machine and an ideal location, I was sure that I could do something worth while.

My wife insisted that I took the game too seriously, and it is true that while writing I lived the part. My characters were real people to me, right up to the last line, and even to the minute that I wrote "THE END" at the bottom of the page. Only then would they fade and lose, in some way, their definite personalities to me. Not just so many word-people, but actual living persons, induced, for a few hours, to come with me and lead the adventuresome life that I thought out for them.

I loved them all, the heroes, ladies fair but frail, villains, sorry, evil, but, withal, lovable. They were perhaps the children of my creative mind, though at times I felt differently about them. Back of me were my ancestors, two parents and four grandparents and eight great-grandparents. How many, twenty generations back? How many, fifty? Where and who were my ancestors one hundred thousand years ago and what were they doing and how did they live? Part of them was in me. They contributed to making the personality of the unknown author in the forgotten backwash of

a country town. Perhaps when I created, I only brought up from the subconscious, from the deep pit of forgotten memories, portions of the lives of these distant relatives, dead a thousand years or a hundred centuries ago.

When I thought that I was creating, was that all that I was doing? Simply shutting my eyes and telling about the things that I saw these ancestors do? What an interesting conception of creative authorship! And what a merry, happy-go-lucky, hearty family I had in those olden days!

As usual, my wife asked me what I was going to write about next.

"It makes no fiddler's difference to me," she exclaimed for the tenth time, "what you write about, so long as you sell it. What makes me nervous is for you to spend a week or ten days toiling on a story, and then have a dozen editors write you that it is beautiful stuff but that their readers would hardly understand it. Write anything you want to, so long as you write the stuff that the editors will buy, for winter is coming on, and it is going to be a long winter, and I am tired of eating oatmeal and cutting down my old clothes to make dresses for Susanne."

I told her that I was going to write a tale of prehistoric days. I had thought of doing this for a long time, but always other plots thrust it back into obscurity for the time being. Now I recalled that I wanted to write a tale of the past ages. It would be so far past that no one could measure it with the yardstick of historic accuracy and say that I was not true to the facts as known to the dry and musty antiquarians. I wanted to go back to the caveman and the saber-toothed tiger. I wanted to go back to the mammoth and the painting of cave pictures. There was a story there, a tale that I had wanted to fasten on paper for a long time. Now I could do it.

TO ME it was an interesting story. I wrote ten pages the first day and told my wife the high spots of those ten pages as we spent a half hour on the gallery before going to our bedroom:

"The hero belongs to a race of supermen. They decided to move to the West, the land of the setting sun. Perhaps they wanted to follow the sun on account of the rapid advance of the ice-wall, the glacier in their own country. Their advance is through a strange country, and hardships of every kind make life an uncertain quantity. Not only are they fought by wild animals of a kind they have never seen before, but there are men, half man and half ape, who block their path and try to steal their women. The hero of the story is a young man who is the headman, because he is the bravest and strongest of them all. He is in love with a beautiful amazon in the tribe, who has said that she will not marry till she meets a man who is strong enough to conquer her in a wrestling match. The hero announces that he will endeavor to win this fight the next spring at the time of the yearly festival devoted to the sowing of the harvest and the mating of the unmarried in the tribe. Now, how is that for the beginning of a story of old times?"

My wife yawned.

"Fair," she commented, "but there is nothing original about it. It seems to me that I have read things like that before, and, from what you have told me, there is not a single thought in the whole ten pages that is new."

"You just wait till tomorrow," I answered as I went to sleep.

The next day I did fifteen pages. The hero killed a cave bear, had a hard fight with the chief of the apemen and brought back a horse as a present to his beloved amazon. She took it but made no promises as to

the future. Again I told my wife of the adventures of the invading tribe.

"I am beginning to warm up to these people that I am writing about," I said gravely. "I like them. Today, when the hero was in a fight with the ape-man, I should have let the half ape kill him. He was the better fighter, but I just could not bear to see the poor fellow torn limb from limb; I almost love him, he is so clever and manly; so, just when things seemed the darkest, he remembered a wrestling trick, tossed the ape-man over his back and down a thousand-foot precipice. How is 'hat? The heroine, the wrestling amazon, sees the fight and cries her approval. She joins him and binds up his wounds with some sacred herbs and leaves so that they heal in no time."

"I suppose," my wife asked, "that this amazon is very beautiful?"

"She certainly is. Of course, she is strong as can be, but her muscles are not bunched, and, just to look at her, you would think that she was a delicate young girl. She is a blond——"

"I might have known that!" cried my wife. "Oh, you men! Now, there is just one more woman in the world to keep you from dreaming about me."

"I don't have to dream about you," I whispered softly.

"That is nicely said, at any rate."

I WROTE all morning, and right after dinner of the next day I said that I was going immediately back to the writing shack. Just as I was leaving the house, my wife called me:

"I forgot to tell you. The Jones folks want us to go riding with them this afternoon, stay for supper and bridge, and we shall not be back till nearly midnight. Will you go?"

"I do not want to. I have a very special reason for not wanting to."

"But I think that we had better go."

"All right," I sighed and walked slowly back to the house, "I will go

with you, but I am very anxious to write another chapter or two of my story."

"Just why?"

"Oh! I will tell you later on. No use to now."

We went out with the Jones family in their automobile. They, like all other car owners, took us to a dozen places that we did not care to see, and the places that we wanted to see we passed at sixty miles an hour. However, they served a fine supper and they played a very stiff game of bridge. I played poorly that night. Somehow, my mind was not on the game.

We were driven back home at eleven in the Jones automobile. Instead of starting to undress at once, I asked the wife if she would care very much if I took a lantern, went out to the workshop and finished the chapter.

"I have been worried about those people all the time that I was playing cards," I explained, "and that is why I played so poorly. I can not remember the plays and the science of bridge when I am worrying about the people in my stories."

"Well, what is the matter with them now?" the wife asked, sleepily.

"Matter enough. That amazon went hunting in the forest and the ape-folks caught her. The hero heard her cries for help, and without waiting to gather his tribe he dashed off to rescue her. There was a fight, really a very wonderful fight. You would have been pleased to see the way that that chieftain tore those ape-men, but they were too many for him, and at the end they caught him—threw a rock at him and hit him on the head, and when he recovered consciousness he was tied, hand and foot, with grapevines, and the only pleasure that he had out of it was that he was close to the amazon, and she told him at last that she loved him and that, if they ever escaped and lived till the time of the spring festival, she would allow him to throw her in the wrestling match and be his woman

as a consequence. He is very much of a man, and, before I realized it, he was telling her that he was going to conquer her, whether she used her full strength or not, and then they quarreled. Think of that! Both of them captured by ape-men and bound so there was no hope of escape, and then quarreling instead of spending their last hours telling each other how much they were in love."

"Well," yawned my wife, "they are tied there and they will be there tomorrow morning when you start working again; so come to bed."

"But you do not understand. These ape-men do not intend to kill them themselves. They will sacrifice them to their god. There is a cave animal, something like a dragon, and whenever the moon is full, the thing comes out of his cave. The ape-men tie slaves and prisoners to stakes in front of this cave, and in the brilliant light of the full moon this dragon comes out and eats the human sacrifice.

"When I came in to dinner, that was the situation that the hero and the amazon were in. They were tied to the stakes, waiting for the time to come when they would be torn limb from limb. It was to happen that night. I ought to have kept on writing and in some way rescued them from that terrible situation. I had no right to make them and then simply go off and play bridge and let them die—just like dogs or ape-men. To do that was a creation unforgivable. I wish you would let me go out and write just a few pages. I could make a terrible storm come or an eclipse that would make the night dark and frighten the ape-folks into the belief that these white strangers were gods."

"Oh! Let's go to bed. You take these things too seriously," insisted my wife.

"I can not help it," I whispered. "While I am writing the story, it seems in some way that the characters are alive."

But I went to bed. At least, I pre-

tended to go, but I simply waited till certain of the wife's slumbers, and then put on some old clothes, stole downstairs, lit a lantern, and started on the long walk to the little shack at the edge of the woods. I was about two-thirds of the way when I heard a howl, a cry unearthly and deadly in its threatening portent. And after that a woman's voice, terror-stricken—a woman facing horrible death, without hope or help, crying her anguish, because she could not control her longing to live—just one more day. She wanted to live to see the sun shine, to roam through the forest once again. She wanted to wrestle with this man and have the glorious satisfaction of knowing that he was going to conquer her and make her his woman. All these things she longed for, and now she knew the utter hopelessness of it, and in her despair she cried to the pitiless world. And in answer came a gibberish of laughter. The ape-folk were glorying in her despair. Their cup of happiness would be filled if only the man would cry and beg for mercy. And once again came the whistling, piercing scream.

I was angry at myself. What business had I to be playing bridge and let these children of my brain suffer thus? There was still time to rescue them. If only I could reach the typewriter in the next five minutes! I started to run. And now there was a trinity of noises beating in my ears, the snarl of the animal, no longer able to breathe freely on account of his flesh-filled mouth, his blood-choked nostrils; there were a few screams of beings torn apart, who, had they lived, might have been the progenitors of Athenian culture, the forefathers of the best families in Rome. And above and intermingled with these cries of final dying despair came the chuckling, hellish laughter of beings who never, for a million years, would be anything but apes.

I started to run.

"Wait, wait! I am coming! I am not going to let you die! Not that way! Not after I created you and made you possible lords of creation," I cried as I ran, sobbing, and in my despair I caught my toe against a root and fell, head against rock, senseless.

MORNING came. The wife awoke and missed me. Her first thought was that I had gone to the shack on the edge of the woods.

She found me unconscious, fifty yards from the shack. My head was bleeding from the cut on the rock. My clothes were torn, and here and there over my body were long deep scratches, a few of which cut through the skin to the muscles underneath. She was so occupied with me and my condition that she had no eyes for anything else. It took time to call a neighbor and send for a doctor, but at last I was in bed, all tended to and bandaged and very much alive. It seems that my wife spread the news that I had gone out to the shack and met a wildcat. There were cats in the woods; so, the story was credited.

It was two days before I was able to walk to the shack. I begged my wife to let me go alone. For her sake, I took a revolver, though I knew that it was not necessary. She wanted to go, but I just laughed at her fears. So, I walked to the shop where I manufactured stories and people.

The place looked worse than I had suspected. One side of the hut was smashed in as though hit by a terrific battering-ram. The roof sagged; its supports were broken. With the

greatest difficulty, I pried open the door and made my way inside. The typewriter was twisted, broken; its delicate steel fingers would never again write magically on white paper. The table was splintered into match-wood, and all of the manuscripts littered the floor in contorted confusion. The papers looked peculiar; even from a distance they had a peculiar smell. I picked one sheet up, and it stuck to my fingers.

I saw the whole truth then.

Those red blotches on the manuscript were blood blots!

There was an oil lamp that had, by some devilish twist of fate, remained unbroken when the antediluvian storm broke over my little world. I emptied the oil on the manuscript, threw a match into it and walked out into the sunlight of God's beautiful world. I started to walk to the house where my wife and baby were waiting for me.

Undecided, I turned, and walked, as though in a dream, to the edge of the swamp, and there I saw tracks in the mud, some as large as the pads of an elephant, and others man-shaped, but with the great toe far apart. Most of these man-footed marks ended at the base of great live oaks, but the large pads, that sank a foot into the ground till they could secure footing for the mass above them—those tracks went on through the woods and ended at the mouth of the cave.

I am never going to go into that cave.

And something else besides the mosquitoes is holding me back.

