Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XVIII NUMBER 1

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 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, $3.00 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 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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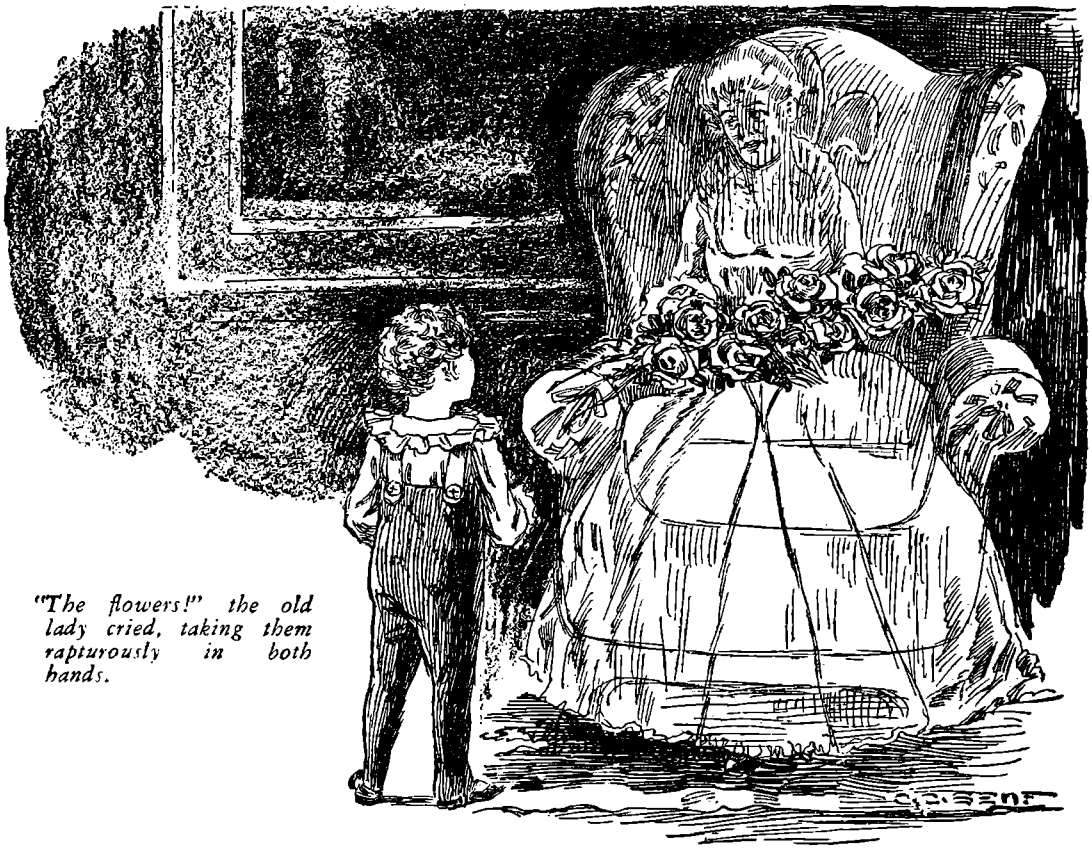

"The flowers!" the old lady cried, taking them rapturously in both hands.

OLD ROSES

By STELLA G. S. PERRY

A tender and touching tale of the Vieux Carré—a story of New Orleans

THE tiny, picturesque figure on the old box-steps looked like a boy. It wore bright blue trousers, high-belted, long and tight, held up by straps over the shoulders of a faded pink shirt and punctuated about the girdle by white buttons; but frills at cuffs and neck, a flat tie of white ribbon, diminutive hands and feet and a certain grace revealed a little girl.

Johnny's sun-colored curls were cut like a lad's; but her face was all feminine roguishness and she pursed her mouth with inborn coquetry. It was a pixy face and teasing, plainly telling that here was one accustomed to diplomacy toward her elders.

Johnny stood on the box-step before the old green-plank door with the trefoil cut in the top and the broken hinge. She was looking up and down the street, as if fearing arrest by her household authorities.

She was slipping away to her secret play-place. None of the grown-up ones knew how she had found a way of swinging the green door back on its broken hinges, until an opening came just wide

enough for her to flash through, like a fish behind a leaf. There, without permission or interference, she played alone in the curve of the old stone steps between the green door and the inner wrought-iron gate it protected.

In a niche behind a broken stone were Johnny's treasures: dried peach-stones that she played jacks with, a precious sack of colored sand, a bottle of water in which two orange blossoms were decaying in the vain hope that she was manufacturing perfume; and there were limp paper dolls sketchily cut from old magazines.

It was a lair to be well guarded; Johnny was cautious. But just now the few people in this quiet street of the *Vieux Carré*—that historic old "square" in New Orleans—were all looking in the other direction.

Whether they were hanging over the balconies of wrought-iron lace, or grouped on the bluestone or red-brick pavements, all their interest was in the large house down the street, the Hotel de Madame Rénaud. All heads were turned toward it, like roosting sparrows turning one way in a wind.

They were looking at the doctor's car before the door of Madame Rénaud's courtyard.

"Eh! But today he comes too late! What can he do—now?" sighed old Miss C'leste Ledoux to her crony, Madame Grenelle. "The best doctor in New Orleans is powerless now. Eh? Is it not so? But, well, he had a long, strong life."

"And a good one! Some day for us all!"

"Look! Already they post the notices," some one pointed.

Renewed alertness raised and fixed each head, as with a photographer's clutch-piece. A man had begun to tack up on the telegraph poles the black-bordered, black-printed notices, with the name written in with strong ink—as is the ancient custom in the city—to tell the passers-by that Jean de Plaine Dionne was dead at ninety years.

Screened by this greater interest, little Johnny, feeling herself unobserved, carefully drew her hand from behind her back and regarded a bouquet of roses that she held concealed there.

It was a stiff, old-fashioned nosegay, scallop-edged with paper lace. The roses were slightly faded and the stems showed that they had spent a day in a vase of water.

Indeed, Johnny had stolen it from the vase on the three-legged table beside Grandpère's bed.

It was naughty to steal, of course. But her colored nurse, Mam' Bea, herself, had said that those roses ought to be changed; and surely there were other flowers enough in that room where Grandpère lay, so sound asleep that Johnny could not wake him, making horrid noises in his throat but seeming not to mind them himself. Poor Grandpère!

Johnny was glad he was better now. She had feared he was worse when, just after she had stolen the roses, everybody ran into Grandpère's room—Petite Maman and Daddy Toutou and Tante and Mam' Bea—and all of them had called out and cried so and said, "It is over!"

But just then she saw Grandpère himself, standing out there in the hall, and he smiled at her. So she knew everything was all right. He smiled at the stolen flowers, too. He had not in the least objected to her taking his bouquet. He looked at it and smiled.

Grandpère was always so good to her! Little Johnny was never afraid of him, even when she was naughty. Petite Maman was a little bit afraid of him

sometimes, and Tante, and even Daddy Toutou. But Little Johnny never! Mam' Bea often said with a sigh, "He make her still mo' spoiled. She do what she please wid dat Grandpère."

Therefore when Johnny had met him in the hall, she had fearlessly shown him the stolen roses, looking up at him with her wheedling air of contrition; and Grandpère had smiled.

It was a different smile, though—not her own special one; and he had looked at her as if he were going to ask her about something. It was just the way he had smiled on her two days ago when she had "told on" Doctor Fouret.

She had told on the doctor because she was angry with him for making Petite Maman cry in the hall. She had gone straight into the room where Daddy Toutou sat beside Grandpère, and protested indignantly, "Doctor Fouret is making Petite Maman cry! Out there in the hall."

Daddy Toutou had silenced Johnny quickly, with an anxious side-glance at Grandpère.

But Grandpère had answered her so gently and so slowly and so low—not a bit "click-click," as Grandpère usually spoke—"It is not Doctor Fouret who makes her cry. It is Another."

"But, yes, Grandpère; it *is* Doctor Fouret——"

"Well, never mind. Come here, *mignonne.*" And Grandpère had looked a long time into her eyes, in that same pleading way, with that same different smile.

Johnny had felt so sure that he was begging her to do something for him that she said, "I will, Grandpère!" as if he had asked her to promise. They understood each other, these two. She had no idea what Grandpère wanted done; but she knew he would tell her in good time, when he got better; and then, whatever it was that he wanted, she would do it for her Grandpère.

Then Grandpère said to Daddy Toutou, "It is too late for *me* to do it. It has always been too late. But it seems somehow that my Little Johnny will help me —get a chance—try again. One last time. Who knows?"

Daddy Toutou had taken her away then and had whispered to the doctor in the hall, "His mind is wandering."

But Johnny had slipped away from them and run back to the door and called out firmly, "Oh, yes, Grandpère! I will. Whatever you wish, I will do it. Honor of a soldier!" in the formula of a game they played together.

Grandpère had smiled. He understood. He knew everything!

It would have been no use hiding these flowers from him, anyway, she thought now. She could hide things from the others, until there were "findings out" and tears and humiliating confessions; but never was any dreadful confessing necessary to Grandpère; for he always knew from the first, all the time.

Why, just think how he knew about this very green door and the closed house!

Just today, while they were all crying and sobbing so loud, there in his room, around the bed, she had met him in the hall and Grandpère had pointed to this green door, pointed through the staircase window. He knew her secret about it.

Johnny laughed. She had believed that nobody knew about it but Beauregard, her kitten. But Grandpère knew everything.

Still, he did not object; indeed she saw that he *wanted* her to go there with her roses.

So she had blown him a kiss and slipped out to her green door, hiding the stolen flowers behind her.

Now she pushed the green door open. There were those cool, broad, shady, hidden, delightful blue-gray stone steps.

Johnny had meant to play with her treasures in this corner, so remote and yet so safely near the outside world and its noises. But now that she was here, she did not want to play. Instead, on a sudden courageous impulse, she did what she had never dared do before.

She proceeded onward, up the blue-gray steps, and p u s h e d against the wrought-iron inner gate.

That gate creaked a little—and opened!

Beyond it, the steps went upward a few yards to the right, then turned sharply back and ascended again in the other direction.

Johnny, taking great strides, mounted, turned, mounted with them.

She found herself on the porch of the old house, in the open air. Now she was afraid that somebody in the street would see, would call to her.

But no one was looking. Besides, she was not in full view; the flowery wrought iron-lace balustrade with its broad porch rail reached taller than her head, and, as the old house was on the shady side of the street, the shadows were almost as blue as her blue trousers.

So far, safe. She dimpled. It was an adventure.

In the middle of the porch stood the door of the house, a big door of black wood, with blackened knobs that she did not know were silver. Something urged her to open it. She turned the knobs shyly, more boldly pushed at the door. It clicked a little, but nothing moved.

Johnny pouted. Was the enterprise so soon over? *Obé!* It was as well, perhaps; there might have been a scolding at the other end of it. Anyway, it was fine up there on the porch. The street looked different from this height; who would have thought there were so many potted plants on Madame Blair's gallery?

But look! They were tying something on the door of the Hotel de Madame Rénaud, where Johnny lived on the chief floor with Grandpère and Petite Maman and Daddy Toutou and the others. A long black thing. Perhaps she had best go back and see about that; she felt strong disapproval of whatever that black thing was that they were hanging there.

She had begun to descend the steps when a faint sound behind her caught her attention. The glass in one of the French windows leading on the gallery where she stood vibrated as she passed it; that window had lost a shutter and the glass reached to the floor. It sounded to Johnny as if it invited her. She returned to investigate.

The glass was too dirty to be seen through; but a lower pane was broken out and she stooped down and peeped through this opening.

In the sunlight that came from an opposite window, across the wide room inside, she saw a cabinet, an *étagère,* thick with dust on its carved ebony, its little shelves falling to pieces. Oh! What a hiding-place for her treasures! In an empty house! She could never resist it.

Johnny crept in, wriggled in, through the frame that had lost its pane. She had to take care not to crush Grandpère's flowers.

Then she gasped; stopped short.

Some one was calling. From upstairs.

The voice itself did not scare her, because it was sweet. Still she was frightened, for she knew herself guilty of trespass.

The voice upstairs repeated, "Who is there?" and then asked, "Is that *you,* Johnny?"

Oh, what a relief! Good chance! It was some one who knew her; some neighbor, perhaps, who would not scold.

"Yes'm. *Oui, madame.* It's Johnny," she answered, rather faintly.

A laugh like the sparkles in the skyrockets on New Year's Eve, floated up, then down.

"Don't be afraid," said the sweet voice tenderly. "Come, my dear! Have you the flowers for me?"

Oh-h! It was all right, then. The lady wanted the posy. Johnny was very willing to give the roses to a lady with that sweet voice. She was a friendly little person and glad to make her elders happy, for all their incomprehensible ways.

She climbed the inner staircase as quickly as she could—for the steps were high—wondering that this house, if occupied, should be so shut up and so bare within. But adult ways were beyond deciphering; always some mystery or other!

The upper room she now entered was not bare. It was very pretty. It opened with high windows on the street—their graying white shades were drawn and there were birds and garlands and butterflies painted on them—and with long windows on the back gallery over the courtyard, these flooded with sunlight and the smell of honeysuckle. The room was furnished with gilt chairs and pinky sofas under golden Cupids, and rosy hangings over lace, tied back with golden cords. There were plump and ruddy footstools. There were vases, with flowers painted on one side, and on the other, lovely bowing and curtseying gentlemen and ladies, all dressed in pink and blue and mauve, with ribbons and fluttering frills. Johnny could see both sides, because the vases were reflected in long, gold-bound mirrors that reached from floor to ceiling. The carpets were so flowery that it was like walking in a garden.

A sunny mist filled the room—as if Johnny were looking at it through a golden veil.

In the midst of all this beauty, like a little white moth in a rose, sat a small, white-haired, white-clad old lady, with eyes as young and blue as Johnny's own.

She pushed away the tapestry at which she had been working and rose eagerly.

Then she stepped back, plainly disappointed.

"Oh!" she said sadly. "I thought it was Johnny. Who are you, little boy?"

"It *is* Johnny. *I'm* Johnny. I'm not a little boy, though. I'm a girl. Grandpère's boy-girl. Grandpère likes them, when he can't have boys."

"Why do you come here?"

Johnny blushed, and made her eyes beg forgiveness. "'Cause I'm naughty. Just a little mischief." Then, seeing the sadness as of a hope deceived on the old lady's face, Johnny said winningly, "I've brought you the flowers."

Instantly the sorrow on that face changed to radiance.

"The flowers!" the old lady cried, taking them rapturously in both hands. "The flowers! *Whose* flowers? Whose?"

"We-ell, it's true they're not really mine. But it's all right. Grandpère saw me take them," Johnny began, but the old lady paid no attention to her; she was fumbling in the bouquet.

"There is no card," she said. "No note. No name. But they *must* be his at last. Is there no name, no note?" feeling among the blossoms with nervous fingers, turning a troubled face to the child. "Whose flowers, little girl? Whose roses are these? His name! Tell his name. Don't you know his name?"

"Grandpère's name? Of course I do," said Johnny laughing. "It's just like mine.

Yes'm, it is. *Oui, madame.* Sure enough. I'm named like'him, if I *am* a girl. He is Jean de Plaine Dionne. I'm Jeanne. Both two Johnnies, big and little!"

A sudden joy transfigured the lady. "Thank God!" she whispered. "Oh! Thank, thank God!"

For a long time she fondled the flowers, forgetting the child, did not seem to hear her as Johnny prattled on sociably. "Yes'm. I'm named after him. Daddy Toutou was named something else, although he was Grandpère's *real* little boy. But Daddy Toutou's poor *maman* died before she ever saw him and so he was named for her folks. But it was a great mistake, because they never noticed him at all. And then they died. I was *ordered* to be a boy, but Doctor Fouret got mixed up somehow and didn't bring a boy, though he'd promised to. And I was *nearly* an awful disappointment to Grandpère; only he liked me after all and wouldn't let them send me back. He kept me and let me be his boy-girl and named Johnny, like him. So that made it all right. Because there *has* to be a Johnny Dionne in this city, you know. There *must.* Oh! Look at the flowers! Look, look!"

She ran excitedly up to the pink rocker where the old lady sat holding the flowers. Little Johnny laughed with amazement and delight to see them brighten, freshen, revive themselves in the frail little hands. "They're all fresh again!" she cried out. "They were dying. How did you make them do that?"

"I can not see you very clearly," the old lady said apologetically, in a dreamy, puzzled way. "You must forgive. You do not seem entirely real to me. And yet I seem strangely to—yes, to love you. I can not understand it," she laughed that brilliant skyey laugh. "It is as if you were my fairy. I do not really believe in you, but I want you to be true, to belong to me. Even if I *am* only dreaming you, you seem—beneficent to me."

JOHNNY understood very little of all this; but it was grown-up talk and that was often vague. It did not matter.

She laughed and said, dimpling, "I'm real. I'm not a fairy a bit."

She sat on the floor at the old lady's feet. The old lady's nearness was comfortable. "I'd *like* to belong to you," said Johnny sincerely.

"It's waiting so long for the flowers that makes me stupid and blind," the old lady said, sighing. "If he could know how I've waited, and so long! He'd be astonished that I've stayed and waited; wouldn't he?"

"*Oui, madame.* Yes'm," said Johnny. "Reckon prob'ly he would." She was astonished herself. How had this lady known that the flowers were coming?

"We were both too proud," her hostess continued. "I was spoiled by having been so much sought after and pampered. And perhaps I did remember, though I thought I tried to ignore it, that I had left a home far richer than my husband's and that so many others had wanted me. I expected to be courted always, even after we were married. Ah, yes! And Johnny Dionne was proud, too, of all that he had accomplished, as he had good right to be. But he loved me dearly. I knew that all the time, Johnny, my dear. Indeed, I knew it. Oh, yes, child, little girl! But the little things, the small attentions so valuable to me, sometimes they seemed silly to him. Or not *silly.* Oh, no, never really that!" She shook her head. "He couldn't have *meant* they were silly. But when those great matters were weighing on his mind, you understand, as the approach of the War and Beauregard relying on him so—why,

then, my daily gift of flowers that seemed a service, a symbol to me, to him they became a trivial custom, wilfully imposed. I dare say he did not understand women —or flowers. Men do not understand what flowers can mean to women. Nor love them as we do."

"My Grandpère loves flowers," said Johnny. "Specially roses."

"Your Grandpère?" gropingly.

Johnny remembered that this old lady liked to hear people's full names. "Big Johnny de Plaine Dionne loves flowers," she amended. "Every day he brings them and puts them on his table. And when he was sick he made Tante get them for him and he put them right by his bed. Flowers every day! And when he puts them down he always says, 'For you, Fernande!' "

"Oh! Is it so? Is it true? Say it once more! I beseech you! But once more!"

Little Johnny obligingly said it once more, her hands clasped about her knees, her eyes wide, wondering why Grandpère's floral habit delighted this strange lady and so transfigured her. As she enjoyed making people happy, Johnny expatiated, "Yes, even when he was *so* sick——"

"No, no!" the lady interrupted. "It was *I* who was ill; not he. He could not know that I was going to be so very ill. He did not even know that our child was to come. I had meant to tell him that, that very day. But he bade me a brisk—almost a brusk—good-bye, *that* morning, without the flowers! Looking into my moist eyes, he said, 'I have not the time today, my dear. Do not be childish. Do not be—silly. I can not stop for flowers at a time like this.' Ah, me! I was foolish, young. I was leaving home, going away to visit cousins, that day, too; and that also he had forgotten in his excitement about the States. I was too proud, too hurt to remind him. How I wanted to wait here for the evening, for forgiveness, for good-byes! But I did not wait for his return. I went to my cousins. Then the War! You see, it kept me from getting back to our home. All those months. And it kept Johnny from coming to me. Then I was so ill and—*something* happened to me." She paused. "Ah, well! I came home for him after *all*. I have waited for him ever since. And now he has sent the roses at last. Thank God!"

"*I* brought them," Johnny ventured.

The bewildered look returned. "Why did *he* not bring them? Where is he, himself? How did you know about it, little child? Why are you the one to come to me from him?"

"My Gran—Big Johnny Dionne," said Johnny, thinking that she saw at last the grown-up reason in all this, "he said, 'Little Johnny will do it.' He said, 'It is too late for me, but Little Johnny will do everything for me.' And I *will* do it all for him, too. He made me promise. I reckon he just knew I come to this house and that you wanted the roses. He knows everything. And that's why he didn't scold when he saw I had them, but just pointed to this door," sagely. "He couldn't come bring them, I s'pose. So he meant for me to tote them to you for him. And I did it!"

"He has not come; but he remembers! I knew he would remember. And sends roses. Ah, my dear one! Perhaps he no longer thinks the little attentions, the tender thoughts and deeds, the small considerations, the acts of grace, are trivial, foolish, childish."

"My — Big Johnny Dionne," said Johnny, "I *think* that's what he's always talking about. To Daddy Toutou. He says the littlest, sweetest doings are——" She puckered her brow, a brow very like

that of the lady before her. "I forget. I forget what he says Fernande called them."

"Fernande? But I am Fernande."

"Um-*hum?* Are you? I didn't know it. Then what *was* it you told Gr—told Big Johnny Dionne that sweet little nice doings were? Oh, I remember now! Pressed roses. Sweet kind little doings are——"

"Like roses pressed in the pages of memory," said Fernande.

"Yes, ma'am! *Oui, madame!*" exultantly. "That's just what Grandpère said you said.—Didn't you, Grandpère? Here comes Grandpère, right now!"

Grandpère stood in the doorway.

HE SMILED glowingly at Little Johnny Dionne. Then he never saw her again.

"Fernande!" he cried running into the room. "I could not find you until you had my roses. Fernande, my love! You must forgive me, for I sent you the roses."

"And you must forgive me, too, Johnny, my darling. For I have waited for them."

His eyes and hands caressed her.

"But, *ma mie!*" Grandpère exclaimed in astonishment. "You are changed. Your hair is white. Can you be old? You, old? How can this be? You are beautiful always—but your hair has grown white. You *went* so young! And, now, are you old, like me?"

Then Fernande lifted up her face and the blessed brightness fell full upon little Johnny Dionne, as she said, looking into her husband's eyes, "And did you think I would *go,* still young, and let you grow old without me? Darling, I would not go all the way. I have been waiting here all the time, here in our home, for you!"

Grandpère kissed her hands. Fernande put one arm in his, holding her bouquet proudly in the other. She walked like a bride and said, "Come, now! We two must go—on. To grow young again, together."

They passed down the stairway.

Little Johnny followed them, taking the high steps carefully.

But when she reached the lower room, they were not there.

She wondered about this for a moment. But the ways of adults were all mysterious. It did not matter.

Little Johnny crawled through the frame of the broken window-pane, went down the stone steps, through the iron gate and wooden door, back into the street.

All the neighbors were standing, just as she had left them, looking toward the Hotel de Madame Rénaud.

Johnny looked, too. She saw some men carrying great armfuls of flowers in through the courtyard door.

And Johnny Dionne, the last of the name, said to herself, "I reckon that's why it all smells so lovely 'round here—like roses."