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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Contents for March, 1932

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

[CONTINUED FROM PRECEDING PAGE]

The Answer of the Dead

By J. PAUL SUTER

The protecting arms of the dead man reached back from the grave to shield the woman he loved

MY FIRST memory of that night brings up the sound of running footsteps in the hall, and the face of my mother, wide-eyed and tearful, as she snapped on my wall-light.

I was only fourteen then, yet I seem to hear the anguish of her voice as sharply as on that summer night.

"Arthur!" she sobbed. "Come quick, my child, if you wish to see your father alive!"

Her arm was around me through the shadowy hall. The soft, comforting support of it, while my world was slipping away beneath me, is more vivid in memory than the sight of the livid, pain-racked face on the pillow.

My uncle—the famous doctor—stood by my father's bedside. His face was stern. I thought nothing of that—he was always stern. My mother and I were both afraid of him. He bent over the bed, hiding my father's face from me for an instant, then stood erect with an abrupt gesture.

"You are too late, Dora," he said.

My mother ran to the bed and threw her arms around the still figure. She sobbed inconsolably. Of course I cried, too. My uncle stood aloof for a little, looking at us both; then he laid a firm hand on her arm.

"You will have to control yourself," he chided. "This sort of thing won't bring him back. Come, Dora! Don't let yourself go!"

My mother straightened and faced him. She seemed very slender and girlish. Somehow, her sobs had ceased. Perhaps his harsh words had had their effect.

"You think I shall not see him again, Herbert?" she demanded, quietly.

"See him again? He is dead!"

"Dead?" She met his eyes, a strange high defiance in her face. "Yes . . . I know. But I shall see him again. Soon!"

He talked at length after that—words which even to me, a young boy, seemed queerly unsympathetic. But they did not remain in my mind as did the quiet yet solemn prediction my mother had made. Through the weeks which followed I was to remember that more and more distinctly.

For this was the beginning of what I think of now as the nightmare period of my boyhood. The crowds who came to look at my father's body were part of it. He, too, had been a doctor, equally distinguished with my uncle, but better liked. My mother's intense and silent grief was part of it. So was my uncle's self-contained suavity. I hated him.

The worst of it came after the funeral. I shiver yet at the memory of the men who were waiting when we returned from the grave. They took my mother away. I clung to her until old Mrs. Ross, the housekeeper, gently disengaged my hands. When I asked why they had taken my mother, she only sobbed. I was not to know until the first day of the trial.

On the evening of that day, with the trial continued until morning, I begged Mrs. Ross to tell me what it all meant.

"She stood at the very brink, her arms stretched over vacancy."

We were back in the upper hall of our big house—back without my mother.

Poor Mrs. Ross! Her own knowledge of the terrible thing that had come upon us was by no means exact. But it was enough. She had been a witness, on my mother's behalf, at the trial, and she was an intelligent woman, even though she was old and rather deaf.

"Your mother used to be a nurse, dearie," she said.

"Nurses help to make people well. They don't kill!" I retorted.

"Of course they don't, Arthur. Don't let no one tell you that they do. Not your mother, anyway—poor lamb! But, being a nurse as she is, she knows more than lots of folks. They say she gave your father disease germs with a"—she stumbled on the word—"a hypodermic."

"She didn't! Of course she didn't! Why should she?"

The old woman stroked my hair.

"Your father was a rich man, Arthur. He left everything to her. All her life she's to have it. Then when she dies the property is to go to you and Doctor Forbes."

Doctor Forbes was my uncle. I can not be sure—one can be sure of so few things after twenty years—but I think that at that moment the first germ of suspicion against him entered my boyish mind. Before the nightmare was over, that suspicion was to grow into hideous certainty. That instant, when the sun of late afternoon, reflecting from the ruined stone wall at the rear of our beautiful old house, cast long, glancing beams on the ceiling of the hall, and I stood with my arms around old Mrs. Ross—that moment,

long ago, may have been its first, faint beginning.

"Mrs. Ross!" I gasped. "Uncle doesn't think she did it? Uncle doesn't think so, does he?"

Through the tears on her old-fashioned, oval glasses, her eyes seemed oddly large to me. I wondered why she did not answer at once. At last, she did answer.

"Why, no, child. No, Arthur. Of course, your uncle doesn't think so. How could he think such a monstrous thing? Unless——"

She stopped, then suddenly blurted it out:

"Unless she did it in her sleep! There, child! I mustn't say another word. I've said too much now!"

She released herself from my forlorn clutch and hurried away. But her last words had brought something back to my mind. One night, months before, I had been restless and wakeful. Tossing in my bed, I had heard footsteps in the hall. I had rushed to the door.

My mother was in the hall. Bright moonlight streamed through the window at its farther end. As she walked in its clear radiance, I saw her distinctly—her hair blown back by some vagrant breeze, her eyes fixed, her hands stretched gropingly before her like a blind man walking.

She had seemed not to hear my frightened cry, but had walked past me as if I had not been there. I had seen her reach her room. The door had closed behind her.

If my mother roamed the house in her sleep—if she did not know even me—might she not, perhaps, do something—something dreadful—and not know it, either?

THE day came when I had my mother back. Juries are sometimes dense, but these men had shown intelligence. They had acquitted her.

But somehow, somewhere, I heard a whisper which tempered my triumph. There was the suspicion that would not down—the suggestion that perhaps she had given the fatal hypodermic in her sleep.

These things came obscurely to my boyish mind, and in the years since that time I have never cared to go into the records of the trial. It was enough to me then to have my mother once more.

Yet something in my uncle's attitude toward her made me vaguely uneasy. He was a harsh man. His eminence in the profession had come from sheer ability, not in the least from any personal liking for him on the part of his patients.

Why should he change now? Why should he begin to seem kindly and sympathetic toward my mother and me? I distrusted him.

One evening, I heard his deep tones behind the closed door of his study, and my mother's voice, replying. Something was wrong; I did not know what—but it was not her voice as I usually heard it. I opened the door.

My mother was seated in the operating-chair. Her head was thrown back. Her eyes were closed. Standing beside her, his gaze fixed on her face, his huge shoulders hunched forward, was my uncle. He had not heard me come in.

He spoke. My brain was too confused to catch his words, but I heard her obedient reply.

"Remember what you have done!" he continued, with heavy emphasis.

"I will remember!" she returned.

Her voice was pitiful—like that of a beaten, conquered thing. All my revulsion to the man at her side surged up into my soul. I seem still to hear the frightened tremolo of my own voice as I rushed past him and clasped my mother. "You mustn't remember!" I screamed, frantically. "You mustn't remember,

mother! He is trying to hurt you! I know it, mother—I know it!"

A powerful grip seized me. My uncle's huge, bearded face shut out the world. His dark eyes bored into mine. Yet he was smiling.

"What mustn't she remember?" he demanded.

"Anything!" I cried, defiantly. "She mustn't remember anything you want her to!"

"So that's it!" He looked down at me, thoughtfully. "Do you know that your mother is very ill, Arthur?"

I shook my head. As I gazed up at him, held firmly in his grip, his eyes seemed hard like agates, in spite of his smile. But what he had said worried me.

"She's not ill!" I contradicted.

There was no conviction in my voice, and he knew it.

"I fear you must let me be the judge of that. After all, my boy, I am a mental specialist. And your mother's illness is of the mind. Do you want to help her get well?"

There could be only one answer to such a question. I nodded.

"Then you must not interfere when I am treating her. Now, I tell you what we will do. We will go to the door—so. And into the hall—so. And you will never come into my study again unless I bid you."

The door shut. I was in the hall. I heard the bolt slip into place.

Then I realized that, through it all, my mother had not spoken to me. She had remained in the chair, motionless and silent.

What he had been doing—why he had done it—were to me all a blur of horrible mystery; too horrible for a boy of fourteen to understand. Yet it was all to become much worse.

WHETHER I deliberately managed to stay up later I can not be sure, but on several nights at intervals following that unforgettable scene in the study I met my mother wandering through the old house. I gave up trying to talk with her. She was walking in her sleep—I knew the meaning of those fixed eyes and groping hands. But once she herself spoke and I heard the words.

That night, I rushed sobbing down the hall and ran squarely into Mrs. Ross's soothing arms.

"Did you hear her?" I sobbed. "She said——"

But the old woman clapped a kindly hand over my mouth.

"Don't repeat it, child. She doesn't know what she is saying. I have heard her more than once."

I was silent, but my mind was made up: I would talk to my mother, herself—in the daylight, when she was awake.

The opportunity came soon afterward, on a sunny day when we were walking together, she and I, in the garden back of the house. Old John, the gardener, was planting pansies along the foot of the ruined wall, patting the brown earth lovingly about their roots as if he had been putting children to bed. The wall was all that a fire had left of an ancient stone building, burned some years before my birth. Ivy-clad and built of solid masonry, it was a picturesque ruin. As an ornament to the garden, it justified my father's wisdom in leaving it there.

While my mother and I walked between the rows of red and pink peonies in the middle of the garden, my sharp young senses noted the busy life of insects at the base of the wall, and the calls of nesting birds higher among the ivy. Some of the nests were very high. The top of the old wall, at right angles to the rear of the house, ran nearly level with the eaves. It kept its altitude for a dozen

feet or so, then sloped downward toward the house by a series of irregular steps until it reached the level of our second story. I had been known to stride from the window at the rear of the upper hall to the lowest of these steps, and to climb thence to the ultimate dizzy height; but never with my mother's approval.

"I hope you haven't climbed the wall lately, Arthur?" she asked, as we walked together.

I shook my head.

"You must be very, very careful," she went on. "You are all I have now."

Abruptly I spoke what was on my mind.

"Mother!" I said. "After father died you said you were going to see him again soon. I heard you. Did you mean that—that you were going to die, too?"

"No, dear," she answered, gently.

I smiled up at her. That assurance had lifted a load from me. But I wished to know something more.

"Then you must have meant you were going to see him without dying. *Have* you seen him, mother?"

Her eyes filled with tears, and she shook her head.

"Not yet, Arthur."

"Then how did you know——"

"I just knew, dear. Let's not talk about it any more now."

But there was still something else. I had to know about this, too. My opportunities to talk with my mother alone were not many, now.

"Did father leave his money to you, mother?" I demanded.

"Why—yes, child."

"Then you are richer than Uncle Herbert?"

"Herbert used to have just as much as your father. Your grandfather divided his property between them. But your uncle lost practically everything in some unwise investments; so I fear he hasn't much except what comes from his practise." Her gray eyes twinkled. When they did that, she was like what my mother used to be before her tragedy came upon her. "You're asking some curious questions this morning, Arthur."

"Who owns the house?" I persisted.

"Why—I do, I suppose."

I stopped, and faced her squarely. We were well out of earshot of the gardener. The breeze whispered in the ivy, there was the fragrant smell of upturned earth and freshly mown grass, but my heart was filled with blind rage at the unreasonableness of things. My mother—who had never harmed any one—was in danger. I knew it. I determined that she should know, too.

"You own the house, mother! You're rich!" I clenched my fists by my sides. "Why do you let uncle do those things to you?"

"What things?"

"He puts you to sleep. You know he does!"

"It is part of the treatment for my nerves," she said, gently. "Don't forget, Arthur—your Uncle Herbert is a great nerve specialist."

"Does he tell you what to do in your sleep at night?" I demanded, hotly.

"Why, Arthur—I don't understand."

"He does!" I declared, bitterly. Hot tears flooded my eyes. My voice was breaking. But I was determined she should be told the horrid thing that I knew.

"He makes you walk about the house at night in your sleep. He makes you say that you killed father, and call for him to come back. Mrs. Ross and I have both heard you!"

For an instant she stood silent. Her face was like stone. Suddenly she buried it, with a little moan, in her hands.

"I did kill him!" she said, in a stifled voice. "I did! I did! I did!"

Before I could say a word to stop her, weighed down as I was with horror, she ran, sobbing and stumbling, to the house.

THAT night I could not sleep. Something brooded over the house. Lying in my narrow bed I felt its presence, and when I threw down the covers at last and crept to the broad-silled, open window to look out at the moonlight, it seemed that the wind which blew on my face was charged with ominous whispering. A boy's fancy, no doubt; but to a boy such fancies are real.

I could see the distant end of the ruined wall in the rear garden, and the rustling ivy. A mist was rising from the ground. It curled over the wall, hid the ancient stones from sight one moment, the next untwisted again and revealed them to the moon, then once more covered their scarred surface with a gray blanket.

At length the swirling motion made me drowsy. I yawned and started back to bed; only to be awake and alert in an instant, before I had taken five steps.

I had heard my mother's voice.

It floated in to me through the open window, and, over and over, it was calling my name:

"Arthur! Arthur!"

There was nothing of fright in the call. I had heard her when she had thought I was in danger—for instance, when I had been clambering up the ruined wall—and her tone had been altogether different. She had been filled then with acute uneasiness on my behalf. Now she was calling lightly, almost gayly. I had no doubt she had gone out into the garden, and that for some reason she wished me to walk there with her.

By merely looking out of the window, I might have corrected that mistake. The truth would have been apparent in a flash. But I did not look out. I ran into the hall, instead, clad only in my thin nightrobe, and rushed to the broad staircase. If my mother was calling, I would go to her.

The stairs were at the front of the old house. My room was at the rear. I passed three other doors in the moon-diluted darkness, the first, that of Mrs. Ross, then my mother's, then my uncle's. Strange how the memory seems to ignore, yet retains! I could hardly have glanced at those doors, but I recall, with certainty, that the first I passed was shut, and that the other two were ajar. There was death itself in that fact. Yet how could I have known?

Another recollection comes to my mind —one that at a different time and place would have counted for nothing, but which that night was filled with deadly meaning: the door of my own room had slammed shut as I left, yet through the upper hall and down the stairs my light garment wrapped around me, blown by a steady wind. The wind followed me through the long lower hall, till I reached the garden door.

It was bolted. I pulled desperately at the stiff bolt, which was a little high for me to reach, and at last it yielded. With its loosening, the door swung open. The mist-laden breath of the garden met me.

I ran out, and down the steps. At once I found myself wading breast-high through a pool of fog, which flowed along the ground and hid the grass and the familiar flowers. To the left the rugged wall lifted itself clear in the moonlight, but my eyes were not for it. I scanned the rippling surface of the fog. She was not there.

"Mother!" I called.

When there was no reply, I ran to the corner of the house, where the side garden would be visible. The fog gulf was here, too. In the brief space since I had gazed from my bedroom window, it seemed to have flooded the earth.

"Arthur! I am coming, Arthur!"

She must be in the rear garden, after all! I rushed back. My bare feet blundered through a flower bed, but I hardly knew. There was something in her voice now that drove a chill to my heart—that brought back the dreadful moment, hours before, on the sunlit garden walk, when she had accused herself of——

I put the thought away from me. My mother was here. She wanted me. I must go to her. She had called me.

The moon, hidden for a moment behind filmy clouds, rode clear, and silvered the shimmering fog. The ancient wall was before me, as distinct in that reflected light as if bathed in sunshine. I stopped short, and stared at it. In the midst of my bewildered search it appeared to have something of menace in its grim outlines.

While I looked numbly, my mother's voice came again:

"Arthur! Arthur, dear! I am coming to you!"

I saw her.

Her white night-dress, against the silvery background of moonlight and fog, had cloaked her with invisibility. But I saw her now!

She was walking on the top of the wall.

She would take a step or two at a time. She would stop then, and seem to listen; her hand would go to her forehead—she was trying to see something in the moonlit night. Then she would venture another step, listen again, and call.

"I am coming, Arthur!" she said, once more.

SUDDENLY I understood. My father's name, too, had been Arthur. She was calling to the dead. Why had I not realized that?

Along with the cold horror which froze my brain was a keen knowledge of her danger. The top of the wall was narrow. In spots the stone had flaked away until only an inch or two of breadth remained. Even that scant surface was scarred and treacherous. Part of the thrill of my forbidden trips on the wall had been the zest of risking my life.

But I had taken my risks awake and in the daytime. My mother walked by the uncertain light of the moon. And she was asleep. Some subtle quality in her voice made me sure of that.

I started to scream a frantic warning—and stopped myself. To wake her now might mean her death. The haze of the mind between sleeping and waking—a step aside—a slip—I was old enough to sense that danger. Yet even in my instant of hesitation, she cut down the short distance between herself and the sheer drop at the end of the wall.

I might get help—my uncle. But no. Too late for that. If I called him from where I stood, it might wake her. If I ran back into the house—but why consider that? There was no time—no time. I must reach her, myself.

The hall window in the second story was open. That was how she had reached the top of the wall. That was why the wind had followed me down the stairs. But I could not spare the precious seconds to go that way. I must climb.

Perhaps by the ivy—I flung into the thick growth and began to pull myself up.

First, I tried near the house. Though the vines there were not quite so closely matted as farther down, the climb was shorter. A third of the way up, something broke. I clutched, desperately. Another section tore loose, and I fell backward, into the pool of fog.

This was no time to pause for bruises. I bounced to my feet. The long climb was best, after all—the climb at the high end, where the ivy grew thickly. I swayed a little, pulling my wits together after the hard fall, and looked up at my mother.

She was near the end. As I looked, she

sobbed the one word, "Arthur!" and broke into a little, stumbling run, with outstretched hands and staring eyes.

"Mother!" I cried, in terror.

I could not possibly reach her in time. Another half-dozen steps, and she would be over the brink. I *had* to wake her.

I screamed to her over and over, putting all my desperate fear into the call. Still she ran on jerkily toward death, her hands extended, her clear, high voice calling!

And then I saw my uncle.

He stood at the window. He was quite calm. More than that—he was triumphant. How could I tell, with only the bright moonlight to show me his tall figure standing there? I can not say. But I knew. In my soul, I knew. I was certain, too, that he had been standing there all the while, waiting for the tragedy. I felt that, when he had thrown her into those strange sleeps, he had commanded this thing, over and over, until at last she was obeying him. He wanted her death!

I had perceived him with one swift glance, and—so strangely does the mind even of a boy work at the supreme moment—I had instantly dismissed the thought of appealing to him. My eyes turned again to my mother.

She stood at the very brink. Her arms were stretched over vacancy. She called my father's name again. Longing and love were in that call, and the moonlight showed me the happiness of her face.

The end was at hand; the moment when the fog-enshrouded stones far below would receive her. I shut my eyes and waited dumbly for the crash.

But, instead of that expected sound, I heard a cry.

It was not from her lips. It was my uncle.

I opened my eyes again. He stood at the window, gibbering and pointing. His voice rose to a scream of terror; a prolonged, inhuman cry of mortal fear. I looked where he pointed.

At first I saw only my mother. She was at the brink—the very brink. Yet she had not fallen. Then I saw something else. Another figure stood beside her on that narrow ledge, where there barely was room for one.

It was my father.

My breath came and went in shuddering sobs. I stared, with no power of movement except to follow the two figures with my eyes, as they slowly retraced the way she had come. She was still asleep; she trod with the soft yet sure footing of the sleep-walker. Sometimes her steps faltered, but her companion led her by the hand. She had called the dead. The dead had answered.

When they reached the open window, my uncle was not there. They passed through—she and the shadowy figure beside her. They were gone. Not till then did I break from the spell that had bound me, and race into the house.

I reached the broad staircase—and suddenly stopped. A terrific roar had reverberated through the hall.

There were hurrying footsteps; a scream. Mrs. Ross's voice, high and hysterical, was crying something over and over. At last I caught the words:

"The doctor! The doctor! He's shot himself!"

But it was to my mother's side that I ran. She was standing awake and very still, in the upper hall. As I caught her hand, she seemed to recognize me with a start, and threw her arms around me.

"He came, Arthur!" she whispered. "And now I know. I shall never think again that I . . . that I——"

She had no need to finish. I understood. And I knew, too, why the wretched man who lay dead in a near-by room had been unable to confront his brother's spirit.