

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

TIME WILL TELL

by Aaron B. Larson

Published in *Classic Pulp Fiction Stories* #81

Tick, Tock

As soon as I heard those sounds I knew I was in trouble. Tick, Tock

The sound was coming from the darkened hall outside my study's doorway. Coming from the old Grandfather clock. The clock that hadn't run since before I was born.

Tick, Tock

I remembered the story. My father had been moving the clock into this house when someone had run into him. causing my father's hand to slip. The Grandfather clock had fallen, cracking the glass as well as wrecking the works.

Tick. Tock

My father, being the sort of man he was, went ahead and moved the clock into the house, into the spot he had picked for it. My father had never been the same after that day. Mother said that he had just kind of folded up, stopped working, died a few years later.

Tick, Tock

I still lived in that ancient house, my parents both dead, the big old house falling apart around me. Everything in disrepair, disrepute -- dissolving into disgrace. I had walked by that Grandfather clock, with the big crack crawling across its face and its dangling, broken guts, a million times in my life. I had never heard it make a sound.

Tick. Tock

My father had said his broken luck had come from the broken clock. Something had changed now though.

The clock was running. Focusing my eyes, peering through the darkness that enveloped that clock, I could see that the crack in the glass had disappeared. The clock was running and its broken face was mended. Something had changed

Tick, Tock

I felt the same, but the house felt different. More solid, more secure. The wallpaper was no longer in tatters, the rug no longer threadbare. I didn't feel drafts around my feet anymore, nor smell rot and mildew from piles of papers and books surrounding me. The house was the same house, yet a different house. It was as if my father's fall from fortune had never happened,

Tick, Tock---Thud!

A footstep. The sound of a footstep coming down the darkened hallway, coming toward my study, coming in rhythm to the infernal ticking of that once silent clock. No one should be in the house but me. The doors were locked, I should be alone.

Tick. Tock, Thud

Whoever it was, they were getting closer. Coming closer down the corridor. Coming closer to the solitary circle of lamp light that pooled around my chair. "Who's there?" -- I tried to yell it, but it came out a whisper.

Tick, Tock, Thud

The footsteps were coming closer. Whoever it was would be in my doorway at any moment. I tried again to yell, but this time nothing came out. I tried to get up out of my chair -- I'm not sure why. Perhaps to run? Perhaps to fight -- but I found I couldn't move. Couldn't move an arm, a leg ... a finger.

Tick, Tock, Thud!

The person was in the doorway now. Coming into my study, coming toward me. I couldn't see his face, it was still in the shadows. My heart, which had been pounding in my chest, seemed to drop through my feet

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

and leave me behind. The world had grown silent except for:

Tick, Tock, Thud

The man was in the light now, still coming toward my chair. Better dressed than I, smooth shaven, prosperous looking. Walked straight and tall with confidence that radiated off him like a man born to faith and fortune. Something was wrong alright. First the clock, and now this.

Tick, Tock, Thud

The man was me. As he sat down in his chair, in his study, in his house, I had a moment of realization. Something had changed in the past. Whether on purpose or by accident, by time traveler or demon. History had changed.

The clock had not fallen.

THE END

Copyright 2002 by Aaron B. Larson

The Throne of Cydonia

by Lee Clark Zumpe

Published in *Alien Worlds* #23

Brendan hastened down the long, dark corridor. The transport shaft buried twenty-five meters beneath the Martian surfam was usually well lit and teeming with activity. Tonight, shadows held sway here and threatened to devour even the dull gleam cast by emergency lamps.

Brendan's flashlight parted the seas of pitch within the pressurized tube, at least for the moment; but the gloom was only one of the obstacles confronting him. He wished he had brought a more effective form of protection against the cold air. The heating coils, like most of the lights, were almost all shut down during the leisure period. His cheap leather jacket proved a poor shield.

It took Brendan over an hour to reach the excavation site.

An assistant to the Director of Archeology on Mars, Brendan still trembled amidst the massive ruins of ancient Martian civilization. He compared the expeditionary company to the first British explorers stumbling through the tombs in Egypt; he likened himself to Howard Carter who unearthed the sixteen-step stone staircase that led to the treasure of King Tutankhamun. He shook with a giddy sensation of anticipation as the beam of his flashlight crawled across the enormous statues of long-dead Martian royalty and over towering columns encircled with glyphs.

Brendan shambled across the sandy floor of the vast cavern, his eyes waltzing over temples and edifices that had yet to be surveyed. In working hours, the underground grotto purred with the hum of machinery.

Workers often reverted to digging through the ruins with their bare hands, carefully brushing away sediment as they examined and cataloged each artifact. The chamber often thundered with the combined sounds of shovels breaking ground, chisels liberating old stones, and voices barking directions or celebrating new finds.

Tonight, the silence permitted nothing more than the faint echo of Brendan's footsteps throughout the sprawling cave complex.

As he approached the Royal Palace, Brendan bowed to a specific statue he had helped excavate in recent weeks. The gargantuan icon of a Martian deity disturbed many of his coworkers. Something about its composition, something about its uncanny features made more than a few of his colleagues uncharacteristically nervous. It towered above the squat temples that surrounded it, its swarthy black surface in sharp contrast to the burnt red brick buildings found throughout the city.

With its conspicuously humanoid characteristics, the statue might well have represented any god of the ancient Greeks or Romans. Only its over-sized and elongated head, and its long and delicate spidery fingers gave it an alien quality. Something in its expression, though, gave Brendan an intimation of omnipotence - its eyes had the eerie aspect of inducing a certain numbness on anyone who gazed at them for an extended time. More than once, Brendan had caught himself staring at the effigy imagining its voice whispering softly inside his head.

Inside the palace, Brendan quickly began his search. After months of work, he had managed to decipher a clay tablet which provided crucial information in his quest for the fabled throne room. Such a find would further ensure his name's addition to the list of famous archeologists.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

He worked his way along corridors inside the palace, descending several levels into the uncharted and labyrinthine lairs beneath the cavern. Only a few of the scouts had braved these far-flung passageways, and little evidence could be found of their preliminary investigations. A few workers had actually gotten lost down in this maze before his appointment to the expedition - or, at least that is what he had been told. In the early days of the excavation - before any real archeologists had been transported to the Martian colonies - two surveyors allegedly spent several days wandering through narrow channels deep in the Martian underground, hopelessly disoriented. They emerged from their ordeal shaken, fatigued, but physically intact.

Some, however, said they seemed different, somehow.

Brendan carefully measured each step, consulting his notes compiled from his translation of the Martian tablet. The passages twisted and turned through the Martian rook, intersecting corridors and branching off into spur trails. Some tunnels appeared to climb away from his route, perhaps leading to secreted apertures in unexplored temples; others appeared to descend even further into the planet, down into darker distant warrens long vacant and waiting to be rediscovered.

Since childhood, Brendan had waited for this moment.

Before the first manned expedition to Mars, before the first base had been constructed deep in the network of hardened lava tubes on the Thatsis plateau, Brendan had dreamed of walking through the lost cities of Mars. Though their existence had been detected back in the 20th Century, the extent of their complexity remained unknown until the colonization phase began - but, somehow, he always knew what lay hidden beneath the surface of the red planet.

He had visited this palace in his dreams as a child.

Brendan found himself paying less attention to his notes as he advanced through the maze. The corridors began to look strikingly familiar. Suddenly, he favored instinct over research.

Hours had elapsed since he had left the self-contained base camp. Certainly, by now, it would be evident that he was missing. The Director of Archeology would report his absence to the Colonial Guard. He would be readying a team to search the ruins for his fugitive assistant. This was not the first time Brendan had ignored directives and wandered into the city - in fact, he had found the clay tablet on one such excursion. The Director had reprimanded him on several occasions, had even threatened to send him back to earth...but, each time, Brendan managed to argue his way out of trouble by claiming his scholarly devotion bordered on obsession.

The Director usually scaled back his reprimands, usually shrugged off Brendan's roguish nature. As much as disobedience irked him, the Director allowed Brendala sporadic bursts of waywardness. He was, after all, responsible for almost every important discovery, made in the Cydonia complex.

The thin passage through which Brendan had been traveling abruptly opened up into an enormous hall, the shadowy boundaries of which seemed almost inestimable. His flashlight stabbed ineffectually at the dusky depths of the chamber, and he momentarily cowered at the very vastness of it all.

Hesitantly, he stepped into the throne room, eyes scanning the shadows hunting for glimpses of treasures or wonders or fabulous artifacts. He searched for anything that might turn his childhood dreams into reality, anything that would make tangible all of those haunting visions he had witnessed for so many years.

From some unseen quarter, light began to flow into the room.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

Brendan froze. His breath snagged in his chest, his eyes widened.

An almost supernatural radiance flooded the chamber, revealing colorful frescos and aisles of polished statues. A reflecting pool of glimmering water ran the length of the room; alongside it, sandstone pillars soared upwards to the brightly painted ceiling.

Brendan half-wondered, half-shuddered at the scenes depicted in the images painted across the walls and ceiling. Each scene, Brendan knew, represented some aspect of ancient Martian life; each picture recorded some period in their history, some event that had to be documented, some face fixat had to shine through the ages long after their civilization had ceased to exist.

Brendan recognized them.

Their names echoed through the recesses of his mind. Some, perhaps, he had heard during his studies of known Martian society. Some, perhaps, he had read when translating their intricate language from clay tablets and columns and crypts.

Some names he had heard in his dreams.

Brendan felt himself pulled alongside the reflecting pool, drawn down the length of the stretched chamber. He walked briskly at first, still enraptured by the scale of this ancient Martian undertaking, still hypnotized by its beauty. Soon, he found himself running, racing toward the small dot on the far horizon. His breath came in short gasps, his heart pounded. He could see the throne of Cydonia in the distance, see it as clearly as he had seen it a hundred times in his childhood dreams.

Something in his genes had lured him to Mars. Something programmed into his distant ancestors, something he had always attributed to vivid imagination and academic curiosity, something had caused him to relocate to this planet and to seek assignment on this excavation and to disregard regulations and ethics and common sense.

Finally, Brendan scrambled up the marble steps and sat upon the throne of Cydonia.

The weird light that had flooded the room now pulsed with vigor. Whispers drifted through the maze of corridors, and shadows squirmed in remote burrows. Ripples spread across the reflecting pool.

Mars stirred with life.

Somewhere overhead, the Director of Archeology had entered the city, with a small band of searchers, intent on locating and apprehending Brendan. Approaching the palace, the Director chanced to gaze upon the eyes of the ebon statue.

Its eyes had changed. No longer the vacant, mysterious and hypnotic eyes of some gifted Martian sculptor's design, the deep cavities swarmed with inexplicable vibrancy. The Director felt the statue watching him, felt it perceiving everything about it, sensed its immediate and acute displeasure.

The Director stopped in his tracks, halting his companions, calling off the search without explanation. They fled, retracing their steps with a horror not one of them could explain.

Even farther overhead, on the surface of Mars, a sandstorm brewed ominously.

Brendan had finally come home.

Soon, he would be joined as the descendants of his race climbed from their deep havens. They would reclaim their city, and their planet, and then they would return to the neighboring planets and restore their empire. The age of hibernation had come to an end, and the prophecies would be fulfilled.

As he waited for his attendants, Brendan wandered down to the water's edge. In the surface, he saw himself. He did not know when he had transformed, but the metamorphosis did not surprise him. His long and delicate spider's fingers traced the dark contours of his elongated head.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

He smiled, as only Martians can smile, at his reflection in the pool.

THE END

Copyright 2002 by Lee Clark Zumpe

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

THE NIGHT HAWK

by Will Murray

Published in *Double Danger Tales* #50

There was only one roadhouse in Quinn City. The Red Shark actually lay outside the city limits, in that no man's land belonging to no defined town or municipality. Honest citizens did not patronize this low establishment. Only those who operated on the fringes of society came to scheme and converse.

And in the Red Shark, there was only one topic of conversation.

"*The Night Hawk!*"

"Ahhh, there ain't any such person," said a rowdy beer-soaked voice.

"Is to," chimed in another. "I saw it."

"It? Is it a man or machine?"

Silence hovered among the rafters. Feet shifted nervously in the sawdust-sprinkled floor. The Red Shark had been a lot of things in its time, including a long red tobacco-burning barn. The addition of a bar, picture window and garish roadside sign depicting a blood-colored man-eater rampant against a green sea was sufficient to transform it into a saloon of the seediest type.

"It's like this," said the first speaker, making his voice conspiratorial. "There's this guy all done up in black leather--"

Somewhere far from ear shot, a figure encased in what looked to be cracked black leather drew on ebony gloves. His smooth features resembled meat that had been charred dark.

"...wearing a mask and aviator goggles," he continued in low, urgent tones. "He drives this streamlined tank of a taxi."

"Taxi cab?"

"A big hulk of a machine. It says '*Night Hawk Cab Co.*' on the doors. Except--"

"Except what?"

"There ain't no Night Hawk Cab Company, see? It don't exist."

"You tell him, Blackie," a gruff voice proclaimed from the other side of the bar. "Tell the out-of-towner."

The being in black leather extracted a heavy revolver from his hip holster. He inserted the muzzle into a port that resembled an enormous antique keyhole. Triggering the weapon, he fired once. The report was muffled. A slablike door rolled open. He stepped in.

Back at the Red Shark, Blackie continued his narration. "I saw this taxi with my own eyes. Black and blue as a bruise, it was."

"Me, too," admitted the proprietor of the Red Shark from his station at the bar. His true name was unknown, but he answered to Buzz. There was a puckered puncture wound in his right cheek that suggested an icepick had been driven into the bone in the past.

"Keep jawin'. This is getting mighty interesting," said the out-of-towner. He exhaled slowly, adding blue smoke to the thick atmosphere. Under the drop lights, his hair gleamed like patent leather.

"I chased it one night," Blackie growled. "Understand? I was on its tail but lost it near the river. When I came to where the tracks led me, they disappeared into the water. But the water wasn't disturbed. No bubbles. Not a ripple. Nothin'."

"That's ain't anything," another boasted, tapping his chest with a thick thumb. "I traded shots with the Night Hawk himself."

"Go on," prompted the out-of-towner, smoothing a thin mustache of the big-city type. He had given his name as Maurice. He looked like an operator, but so far he was mostly talk.

"I'd just stuck up the filling station on the turnpike and was lamming with the cops hot on my heels what I came upon this...*thing*... in the road. Mistook it for a prowler car tryin' for a one-man roadblock. It even shone a lavender spotlight at me. But it wasn't no prowler car. This tall Frankenstein in black leather stepped out, and so did I. I saw that it had no face. Just a mass of black like a burnt shoulder of ham and

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

blank eyes that reflected the light like a hoot owl. I shot first. Instead of firing back, he grabbed at his heart. Then he fired."

"What happened?" asked Maurice, the out-of-towner, his brandy forgotten.

"He had me dead to rights. So help me God, I could swear I saw the bullets coming straight at my chest."

Every listener waited tensely, as if the man's survival was still in doubt.

"Damn bullets passed right through me just as mine passed through him." The speaker finished his beer with one convulsive gulp and shuddered head to toe. "It was a ghost, I tell you," he said thickly. "Nothing else could explain it."

"I believe in no ghosts," spat Maurice. "Not ones that drive gypsy cabs."

"It gets more interesting," the story-teller resumed. "I piled back behind the wheel with the cops still caterwaulin' after me. Drove right into that cab. Thought I'd ram it. Instead, I went clean through like it was made of fog. But it *looked* solid. I remember the front grille coming through my steerin' wheel and into my legs. But I felt nothin'." Another shudder rattled him. He took a fresh pull from his stein, seemingly unaware it was empty. "Still gives me the creeps to think about it."

Maurice surveyed the dim smoke-laden interior and the unshaven faces looking back. He grinned. "There are no ghosts. Not in this day and age."

"But there *is* a Night Hawk," Buzz the proprietor said solemnly as he polished a glass.

Not far away, the black leather clad being stepped behind the wheel of a low-slung black-and-blue machine. A powerful engine roared into life. Oversized headlights blazed. A long coffin-shaped hood decorated with a striking hawk nose ornament and gleaming supercharger coils surged forward....

"If there is a Night Hawk," resumed Maurice stubbornly. "He will cause me no particular grief."

"What makes you say that, feller?"

"I'm too smooth for the cops. And I'm always one step ahead of the G-Men. No cabby is going to take the wind out of my sails."

"Says you."

Maurice waved a hand in the general direction of Quinn City. "I hear crime is nearly non-existent in your fair city."

"There's crime," a voice piped up. "Hell, we account for most of it!"

The rafters of the Red Shark shook with raucous laughter. If there had been a true underworld attached to Quinn City, the Red Shark would be its headquarters. As matters stood, the establishment was frequented by stickup artists, second-story men, cheap grafters, and others of that ilk. Crime in Quinn City was not organized.

Maurice pushed his empty glass toward Buzz the proprietor and signaled for refill.

"A toast, gentleman," he proclaimed. "To Maurice Murais, the new king of crime in Quinn City!"

"Aw, go peddle your papers," a voice jeered.

Maurice Murais took a slow sip of brandy and murmured, "You will all be singing a different tune once I begin operating in earnest. And I will hold no grudge against any man who elects to become my confederate."

They all went back to their morose drinking.

Not twenty minutes later, a throbbing V-8 engine to be heard easing up to the Red Shark's broad front entrance. In the midnight darkness, a hulking midnight silhouette suggested one thing.

"Cops!" Blackie hissed.

Everyone tensed. Pistols came out. Some were thrown into corners after hasty wiping of fingerprints.

"Nobody's up to anything, right?" demanded Buzz. Heads shook. "Nobody pulled any job lately?" Sullen faces turn stony. "OK, I didn't expect you guys to cough that up."

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

The dark machine sat idling outside. Minutes ticked past.

"What do you suppose he wants?" wondered a man.

"Probably radioing in to headquarters," Blackie suggested thoughtfully.

Buzz sidled up to the grimy front window. "Hey! That ain't a prowler car!"

"No?"

"It says...it says Night Hawk Cab Company on the side."

"The Night Hawk himself!" a man breathed. "Mother of God."

Faces crowded to the dingy glass.

"I see him! He's at the wheel, face like a lump of coal."

"There's nothing human about that face. Look at the way it bulges around the mouth. I'm sliding out the back way."

"Me, too."

Feet scuffled. A spittoon fell over, spilling its ugly contents.

Maurice said, "I am not scared of any cabby wearing a fright-mask." He started for the front door. "I think I will ask him his business. Perhaps hire him for the evening."

"Go ahead," muttered Buzz. "Be our guest."

Abruptly, the lurking machine backed up, front wheels cutting sharply. Going into gear, it started circling toward the roadhouse entrance.

"What's he doing?" Blackie wondered.

"Driving up, it looks like."

Headlights swung around, dusty funnels of light. A lavender spotlight popped awake. The burning lights

fixed themselves on each staring face, creating stark shadows that moved and swayed amid the eerie lavender light.

A voice lifted in startled fear. "Hey! He's charging right at us! He's headed this way!"

The black taxi abruptly surged forward. Men dived for cover. Pistols came out of waistbands and shoulder holsters. Buzz, the proprietor reached for a shotgun.

Everyone steeled himself for the carnage of breaking glass and shattering timbers. No such sound came. The engine's throaty roar abruptly cut out. It was as if all sound had been swallowed.

Then, through the large plate glass, but not shattering it, intruded the long black coffinlike Night Hawk vehicle.

It entered like a ghost. Soundless, unstoppable, a juggernaut of impervious steel. Ghostly wheels rolled over sawdust, but did not disturb it. Headlights sprayed brilliance, blinding the unwary.

The uncanny vehicle slid to a silent halt. The driver's door opened. There was no discernable click of locking mechanism. And out from behind the wheel stepped the tall striking leather figure known only as the Night Hawk driver.

It walked with the steady tread and utter fearlessness of a state trooper approaching a motorist. Smoked-glass goggles looked about robotlike, coming to rest on one fearstruck man.

The boastful out-of-towner, Maurice Murais, self-styled future king of crime.

For a long moment, fearful eyes met unyielding glass and held. One man's nerve finally cracked.

Murais yanked out an Army Colt .45, aiming it at the approaching figure whose thick shapeless features resembled a leathery knot of cooked muscles.

"Get away! Don't you come near me you, you damn devil!" Murais screeched.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

The Night Hawk kept coming, his gloved hand hovering above the butt of his holstered pistol. He said nothing. He seemed to possess no lips with which to speak.

"I warned you!"

Five shots cracked out. They passed through the leather figure, through his vehicle, and shattered the plate glass window in a cascade of shivering shards of glass.

The Night Hawk stopped dead. His pistol came out. It was a queer oversized revolver, all saw. He lowered it at the cowering hoodlum.

Seven shots flared out, soundless as if fired from a silenced pistol. Fired at point-blank range, they could not miss. Murais convulsed, recoiled. He cried out, "Oh my God, I'm shot!" Then he collapsed onto the sawdust.

Taking a black card from a hidden pocket, the Night Hawk flipped it at the cowering gunman's feet. It fell with supernatural slowness, like a feather. As it neared the rough pine floor, it seemed to behave more normally, falling as it should. It made a soft click as it struck.

Without a word, the leathery apparition turned on its heel and stalked soundlessly back to his waiting vehicle. Claiming it, the driver backed out of the Red Shark, eerie in its utter quietude.

The patrons of the Red Shark roadhouse stood transfixed. All except its proprietor, Buzz. He stepped out into the night. Elevating his shotgun, he uncorked the contents of one barrel, then another.

Blasts of buckshot peppered walls and broke more glass. But not a mark appeared on the rear of the departing vehicle.

A moment later, the engine returned to life. Like a tiger of the night, the taxi roared off, its solitary tail light a red eye of receding rage.

"I'm taking a fadeout powder!" a man exploded.

A braver soul barked, "Not me. I want to see where he goes!"

"Are you nuts? That was a ghost. The only place he could go would be hell itself."

Still, a few hardy souls were determined to follow. There was a rush for the front door. In a matter seconds, three vehicles were tearing off in hot pursuit.

It was not hard to pick up the trail of the Night Hawk cab. It departed at a steady clip, yet gave all indication of unconcern about possible pursuit.

Three sporty sedans followed it into the rural stretch of highway. The rocking taxi took a dirt shortcut, cutting over to a turnpike.

"Looks like he's heading for---"

"My God. The old cemetery!"

The ancient cemetery was blocked by a wrought-iron fence that was padlocked shut. But the Night Hawk taxicab passed through the rusting bars like they were so much black smoke. The sound of its engine ceased just before that operation, but none of the pursuers noticed this interesting fact.

The trio of sedans screeched to jouncing halts at the impassible gates. Men piled out, guns drawn.

They watched transfixed, as a black-and-blue taxicab, modern as a DC-2 airplane, streaked through the cemetery--passing *through* the leaning headstones and charnel monuments as if it was real and they were not.

"I do not believe it!" a man croaked.

Near the gate, a pair of iron bars that had been pried apart sufficient to pass a man. As if possessed, all three squeezed through the space, intent upon following the phantom juggernaut that defied all natural law.

The first man through took aim, getting off a quick shot. The bullet struck a stone angel's wing, cracking it off. The broken wing dropped onto the roof of the fleeing cab. The taxi kept going. The wing landed in its rutted tracks. To all appearance, it had fallen *into* the moving vehicle, harming it not.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

The ghostly taxi veered sharply, headed for the brooding granite entry of a massive family tomb set into the side of a mossy hill.

The vehicle seemed intent upon collision. Then, when disaster appeared unavoidable, abruptly, impossibly, the Night Hawk taxi was swallowed by the sealed tomb!

All three men skidded to a halt. They stared at the big iron door set in the granite tomb. Above it was carved a single word, the name of the political dynasty that had given its name to the city: *QUINN*.

No sound came from that mossy tomb.

A thousand thoughts crowded their brains. This was something new, a thing never before reported upon the earth. A phenomenon unknown in their experience. A devil-ghost of black driving a modern, up-to-date taxi cab.

"I think," said one thickly, "I've seen about all I can stand."

"I'm with this guy," muttered a second, crossing himself.

"Yeah," the third echoed. "I don't believe in spooks, but that demon cabby will do until a real one shows up."

No one said a word as they reclaimed their sedans and headed back to the wrecked Red Shark.

There, patrons were removing the coat and shirt off Maurice Murais when they arrived.

"How many bullet holes in him?" wondered one of the arriving trio.

Buzz shook his thick head. "None. Not a scratch on him."

"Then why is he dead?"

"A heart attack. Look how blue his face is."

Maurice Murais lay blue as china, his staring eyes glassy in death. His sharp features retained the fear-frozen cast of a man who had looked upon hell and all its minions.

"My God, that damn ghost cabbie drilled him seven times and there ain't a mark or crease on him.

But he's as croaked as if he was riddled with Tommy-gun lead."

"A *demon* cabby...." the second man said.

"Firing ghost bullets from a ghost gun," echoed the third.

"A revolver that shoots seven slugs with no more noise than this dead guy in makin' when everyone knows you can't silence a revolver. Who ever heard of such a thing?"

"That's the way I see it, too," muttered Blackie.

"This ain't the first guy he done it to, either," said the proprietor of the Red Shark roadhouse. "Remember Red Murphy and his boys last year? Thought they could just blow in and run this town to suit them." Buzz looked down upon the dead blue face and wiped perspiration from his fat upper lip.

"Yeah," muttered Blackie. "And then this bird shows up and talks big, bringing all holy hell down on his head."

Eyes shifted about the rafters and dark corners as if looking for supernatural eavesdroppers.

"I think Quinn City is gettin' too hot for our kind," Buzz said at last. "What say, boys?"

Nobody said anything. Grimly, they lugged the body of Maurice Murais, who thought he could take over Quinn City with impunity, and buried it under the rough pine floorboards.

The Red Shark burned down that night. No insurance was ever collected. Its seedy patrons were seen no more in the vicinity of Quinn City. Nor were they missed.

But on certain nights, a black gloved hand would insert a strange seven-chambered revolver into a massive keyhole and fire one muffled shot. A door would yawn open and an unearthly engine would roar hungrily to life.

And out from the sealed ancestral tomb of the long-dead Quinn family roared an avenging ghost that no one knew, but few dared doubt existed.

The Night Hawk!

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

THE END?

Copyright 2002 by Will Murray

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

A Time To Run

By Shawn P. Madison

Published in *Alien Worlds* #22

Falco drove the small knife deep into his opponent's thin back and heard the thing squeal through the faceplate of his helmet. Twisting the serrated blade of the knife in deeper, he could see the gush of sticky amber liquid that the Twig used for blood running down the green sleeve of his suit.

He pushed the Twig off his knife with his left boot and took the thing's head off cleanly at the neck with one strong swipe. The Twig's helmeted head hit the dark purple soil of this planet and continued to chatter eerily in its language of clicks and hisses despite the lack of a body. The gangly limbs of the long torso continued to convulse upon the ground.

Damn the Conduit! He screamed at himself. His Expansion Team had been told that this dismal little planet was currently clear of all life by the IntelNet. Despite that, his ship had come in with sensors blind due to the proximity of this system to Twig controlled space. Within one kilometer of their Survey craft, his team of fifteen men and women had been ambushed by this larger group of Twigs. The tall, thin and ugly creatures had come at them from the top of a small rock outcropping, dropping in among them with impossibly thin legs and killing two of his team before the others knew what was happening. There must have been twenty to thirty of the disgusting plant-like creatures but his team fought back and hit them hard.

Falco whirled around to see the last of the Twigs go down at the hands of his Weapons Master, the head of the thing bouncing on to the hard packed soil soon after. The sounds of the head's incessant death chatter gave him the chills as he inspected the remnants of his team. Six people left including himself. "Filthy Conduit bureaucrats," he muttered under his breath and checked his suit for perforations. Bad Intel always sent him into a rage, especially when the consequences of faulty information cost him the lives of team-members and put his own life at risk. First chance he got he was going to make a little visit to Petersen at Conduit HQ

and the soulless swine wasn't going to be too happy about it either.

The light purple hue of dusk on this planet continued to settle as Falco and his remaining team-members gathered up weapons lost during the battle, both their own and those of Twig design. Only minutes had passed since the battle had been fought and won...if what they had survived could be counted as a victory. Now they would have to journey back undermanned and without the expertise of specialists whose job it was to assist in the safe piloting of their Survey craft. *Damn the Conduit, I'll kill every last one of them...*

"Let's get back to the ship," Falco muttered and turned back toward the way they had come.

"What about...them?" A voice sounded in his helmet.

Falco paused briefly, glanced back at the lifeless members of his crew who laid sprawled and bleeding against the purple moss-like grass of the small clearing and said, "Leave them. This place isn't safe for one more second."

"But..." the same voice began.

"Falco!" Another voice broke in and he saw his Weapons Master pointing in the direction they had been heading before the ambush.

Falco turned and felt his heart sink lower than it already was. Upon the horizon and moving very quickly must have been a full five squadrons of Twigs. Some of them in the sleek little vehicles they favored but there were hordes of them on foot lumbering forward with great sloping strides.

"Looks like we've overstayed our welcome..." a young voice rang in his helmet and Falco tended to agree. He took one last look at the rest of his team and knew immediately that opposing the oncoming forces would be suicide. His only hope for saving the lives of his crew now lay in the slim chance that their ship had not yet been discovered about a kilometer away. The Twigs seemed to be moving unbelievably fast for a force that size, eating up great distances of purple terrain as they advanced. Falco gulped once and turned to address his team-mates.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

"People, I believe that in this universe there is a place and a time for everything," he said and glanced back briefly toward the swiftly approaching Twigs. "Although it runs contrary to all I believe in, now is a time to run."

"Amen to that, skip," he heard as the small group moved out quickly in the direction of their ship.

Falco took a deep breath, felt instinctively for his weapons and felt his heart race as he realized just how fast the Twigs were coming. "Damn the Conduit..." he snarled and wished he could spit on to the foul soil of this world through the faceplate of his helmet. "I hate Twigs."

Falco ran.

THE END

Copyright 2002 by Shawn P. Madison

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

IN THE BLEAK MID-WINTER

by Kaspar Hauser

Published in *Double Danger Tales* #49

The Freedom Alliance dissolved in 1951. But one member still had a mission to perform. . .

Dr. Bartholomew Clymer looked up in some irritation when he heard the knock at the office door.

“Yes?” he snapped.

His receptionist, Miss Hollings, pushed the door open tentatively.

“I’m very sorry, Doctor. But there’s—there’s someone to see you—”

“Miss Hollings, I told you that I was *not* to be disturbed.”

“I know, sir, but—but I really think you need to speak with this—this gentleman.”

“Does he have an appointment?”

The question was rhetorical. Clymer knew his own schedule. He had set aside this evening specifically to work on his latest article for the *New England Journal of Forensic Medicine*.

“No—n, sir. He doesn’t.”

“Well, take his name, and I will try to call him back later, whoever he is.”

Miss Hollings started to turn—and then shrank back as a remarkable figure stepped forward to stand at the threshold of the doctor’s office.

The stranger was a tall, strongly built man, with jet-black hair and cold grey eyes. He was clad in ordinary civilian attire—a business suit, trench-coat, and hat.

But the man’s appearance was anything but ordinary.

Across his face, around his neck, over his hands, were inscribed hundreds of small purple marks—a seemingly endless repetition of the ancient

rune known to the Teutonic and Norse and Anglo-Saxon peoples as Thurs, Thurisaz—and Thorn. The man held a blackthorn staff in his left hand, and a long dagger hung from a sheath at his belt.

“I am Thorn,” he announced, his voice grave.

For a moment, Dr. Clymer was unable to speak.

He had recognized his visitor the moment he saw the man..

Thorn was something of a legend in New England. Operating from a base in Beacon City, Thorn investigated—and when necessary, combated—unusual threats to the peace and safety of the region. At times, he also served with the formidable organization known as the Freedom Alliance.

Dr. Clymer had never met Thorn before. He had no slightest idea why the rune-marked figure had come to Westland Hospital.

Dr. Clymer glanced at his receptionist. “Ah—that will be all, Miss Hollings.”

The young woman returned to her station in the outer lobby. Thorn shut the door behind her.

“Mr., ah, Thorn,” spoke Dr. Clymer. “What—what can I do for you?”

“I wish to speak with you, Doctor.”

“Well. Please, sit down.”

Thorn took a chair across the desk from Dr. Clymer.

“I wish to speak with you about one of your patients, Doctor,” elaborated Thorn.

Dr. Clymer stiffened. “Mr. Thorn—as you may know, this is a private hospital. I am obliged to respect the confidentiality of my patients. Unless you have come with some legal authority—”

The hospital administrator was aware that the Freedom Alliance had a close working relationship with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, although recent news reports suggested that the Freedom Alliance had disbanded.

But Thorn shook his head. “I am here on a personal matter, Doctor Clymer. Still—I feel certain

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

you will agree to speak with me.”

“And why is that?” the physician countered.

Casually, the man called Thorn drew the long-bladed dagger from its sheath. He smiled slightly.

“Because the alternative is unthinkable—for *you*, Doctor.”

“Are you threatening me, Mr. Thorn?” Clymer bristled.

For answer, Clymer’s visitor drew back his right arm—and then hurled the dagger! The blade spun, end over end, passing the doctor’s left ear by a matter of inches. The hilt struck the wall behind Clymer’s desk, and the knife rebounded, arcing high into the air—and then fell, hilt-foremost, into Thorn’s waiting hand.

Dr. Clymer was too shocked to speak.

“Consider yourself fortunate, Dr. Clymer,” Thorn said quietly, as he returned his weapon to its sheath, “that some of my colleagues—Archon or the Doll-Maker, for example—did not come here in my stead. They are far less forgiving of—intransigence.”

Thorn waited for Dr. Clymer to find his voice again.

“Well, what—what do you want?” the medical man asked finally.

“I told you already,” Thorn stated. “I wish to speak with you about one of your patients.”

Which patient?”

“A woman called Louise Banner.”

“Oh.”

“I see you are familiar with the name, Dr. Clymer.”

“Yes, of course. A peculiar case, to be sure, but I don’t see—”

Thorn laughed harshly. “Exactly, Dr. Clymer. You do *not* see. Fortunately—others do. Now, tell me about Miss Banner.”

For a moment, it appeared that Dr. Clymer was going to raise another objection—and then Thorn’s hand dropped to the hilt of his knife once more.

“Don’t,” the psychiatrist implored. “I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Thorn nodded. “I expected no less.”

“In 1943, a young woman named Louise Banner disappeared from her home in the Beacon City area. Mrs. Banner had no children—her husband, Norman Banner, was serving with the Army in North Africa. No one else lived at the house with her. When her sister discovered that Mrs. Banner was missing, the police were alerted, but Louise Banner was never found.

“Then—early last month, Louise Banner suddenly returned to her husband. He was still living in the same house. She appeared at the door one night, seemingly exhausted from some profound ordeal, delirious, nearly incoherent. Mr. Banner placed her under medical care—and, eventually, he had to bring her here for treatment.”

“And what is the nature of her—disorder?” Thorn wanted to know.

“She suffers from hallucinations—paranoid fantasies—self-destructive tendencies. She has to be watched constantly, to keep her from injuring herself, or the other patients.”

“Can she be cured?”

“It is too early to tell,” the doctor admitted. “I am still attempting to determine if her derangement derives from physiological causes, or is the result of psychological imbalances.”

“And have you been able to determine where she was—what she was doing—during all the years she was missing?”

“No.”

Thorn stood. “Take me to Mrs. Banner, Dr. Clymer.”

Reluctantly, the hospital chief rose. He led Thorn through the building, to a special wing on the upper floor.

A husky orderly stood at attention in front of a heavy door.

“We’re going in, Robert,” spoke Dr. Clymer.

Robert looked at Thorn in some apprehension.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

"Do you—do you want me to come with you, Dr. Clymer?"

"No, Robert. Please remain here."

Clymer inserted a key into the lock. "We keep our most dangerous cases here," he commented to Thorn.

They passed down the hallway on the far side, till they came to the last room on the left.

A small panel of glass in the door permitted observation of the patient within.

Thorn leaned forward.

A woman of striking appearance lay sprawled upon the bed inside the room. Despite her prone position, Thorn knew that she was tall, six feet in height, with a provocative figure. Her long, tangled hair was jet black.

And her eyes, which turned toward the door even as he regarded her, were a glittering green.

"Open," Thorn commanded.

Dr. Clymer appeared to hesitate—and then quailed beneath the severity of Thorn's gaze.

The doctor inserted another key, pushed the door open.

"Wait here," instructed Thorn.

The rune-lord stepped across the threshold, and closed the door behind him.

The tall, green-eyed woman rose from her bed.

"You can dispense with the charade of madness," said Thorn. "I know who you are."

"Of course," she agreed. "But I did not think you would find me—so readily."

In actuality, it had been nearly two months since Thorn's last encounter with the woman, on the ill-reputed Hill of Cairns in New Hampshire.

"The Freedom Alliance was obliged to complete new arrangements for Bloodmask first," he stated. "Then the Scarlet Sigil and I pooled our powers. It was difficult at first—difficult, but ultimately, not impossible—to follow your psychic imprint."

"And now?" she asked.

"You already know the answer," he told her, as he drew the dagger from its sheath once more.

Long eons before, the blade had been bathed in the venom of Midgardsormr, the ancient serpent of destruction. Even gods could suffer at its touch. And the tall, green-eyed woman was no god, although she represented a force that was far more than human.

"You cannot destroy me," she declared calmly, as Thorn drew back his hand.

"No. But at the very least—I can inconvenience you for a time."

"Ten years—twenty years—even thirty years—what are these to me?" she asked him. "I *will* return."

"And when you do, I will find you once more," Thorn promised grimly.

He took another step forward—

And she sprang at him with sudden fury, her hands extended to rake at his face. But he sidestepped her attack with deceptive ease, and then struck her a blow to the head with his staff that threw her back against the wall.

"Have you forgotten what day this is?" Thorn taunted her, as she wiped blood from her mouth. The winter solstice—the supreme hour of darkness and cold, when my power is greatest!"

She sought to speak then, in a language that was old before the Earth was formed, but before she could complete two words, Thorn leapt forward, and he plunged his occult weapon deep beneath her breasts, wrenching it violently.

The woman gasped once, then slowly collapsed to the floor.

Thorn pulled the dagger free, wiped it clean on the dead woman's hospital gown.

He turned to stare at the door. He could see Dr. Clymer's horrified countenance at the small window.

Thorn walked to the door, opened it, and stepped out into the corridor.

Clymer backed away from him.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

“One of your staff members was inexpressibly careless,” Thorn stated. “Mrs. Banner gained access to a sharp object and committed suicide. Your report will reflect these facts.”

Clymer was unable to speak.

“Do you understand?” Thorn persisted. “Mrs. Banner committed suicide. You will certify the finding yourself.”

“But—you murdered her!” Clymer finally managed to gasp out.

“No. Mrs. Banner died eight years ago, when her body was possessed by a spirit-being called Uthva. Mrs. Banner’s soul was expelled from her body—and Uthva has impersonated her since then. She abandoned her nominal husband to pursue her own—goals.

“Last October, Uthva came into conflict with the members of the Freedom Alliance. In the aftermath of her failure, she returned to Norman Banner, and allowed herself to be placed under psychiatric care. Thus she hoped to hide from us.

“In time, when she was certain we could not find her, she would have escaped from Westland Hospital. But she underestimated our abilities.”

Thorn strode past the physician, then paused and turned his head.

“Remember, Dr. Clymer—Louise Banner committed suicide. If your report makes any assertion to the contrary—I *will return, and deal with you as I did with her.*”

Thorn reached the end of the corridor. He gestured with his staff, and the heavy door opened before him. He passed by the astonished attendant, and departed from the building.

Outside, a colorfully garbed figure swept down from the sky. The Scarlet Sigil, a tall, spare man clad in a black tunic and leggings, with a red cape and hood, had stationed himself outside the hospital, to intercept Uthva if she managed to elude or overcome Thorn.

“Well?” the Scarlet Sigil asked.

Thorn’s hand drifted to the handle of his dagger.

“Uthva will not trouble us again for some time,” he said.

“You are certain?”

“As certain as one can be, Spencer, when dealing with such arcane matters. Still, I think Uthva will have to spend many years of our time in the outer spheres before she can return to the Earth-plane and attempt another possession.”

“And then she will try to liberate Bloodmask once more,” suggested the magus.

Involuntarily, his eyes turned toward the eastern horizon, where the moon had begun to rise.

“Perhaps. But that is a problem for another day.”

“It’s cold,” Spencer Adams remarked, with seeming inconsequence. But he was accustomed to the near-tropical weather of Palmetto City, not the rigors of a New England winter.

The man called Thorn smiled. “Then let us return to my house in Beacon City, Spencer. You can warm yourself beside the fire. And I would like to show you something I discovered recently in the *Necropolitan Scrolls*. . . .”

THE END

Copyright 2001 by Kaspar Hauser

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

THE EDGE

by Carol MacAllister

Published in *Alien Worlds* #21

Brian stared at the lump under the bed sheet. "That's him?"

The nurse nodded. "He just lays there screaming, 'The edge. The edge.'"

"Does he ever quiet down?"

"When the sheet comes off. But, then sometimes that starts him screaming." She shrugged. "There's no pattern."

Brian glanced at the restraints strapped on Conner's ankles.

"There's something poking around in his head," she said.

"Sounds like a good one for Campbell Labs." Brian whispered, "No family? No responsible party?"

"Haven't located any. He's been here a while." The nurse sorted through Conner's medication. "You know, at first he wasn't like this. We thought he'd be lucky and get outta here."

"We'll talk later," Brian said. "Thanks for your help."

Next night, the nurse wheeled Conner to the transport waiting behind the facility. Brian slipped the nurse, \$500.00, then drove the van to Campbell Labs.

"So that's the patient," Lewis said. Anxious techs gathered. "Sure you want to through with this, Brian?" Lewis asked.

"No problem. I know how it works," Brian said. "If this procedure takes off, they'll be lined up at the door and we'll be rolling in dough."

Lewis glared at his watch. "Okay. In the morning. Be here at 8."

When Brian returned, he sat in the exchange chair. He looked over at Conner asleep on the experimental table. "Seems peaceful enough."

"He should be. We gave him a spinal block and Narcolast. You'll have an easy shot inside." Lewis laughed. "Go in and clean out the cobwebs. Not always sure how to time this whole thing, so work fast. When the meters show a change, we'll pull you out."

Fiber-optic cabling attached to both men's foreheads formed a synapse between the two. Erratic low range frequencies fluctuated until techs readjusted neurological systems to pulse in phase. Slowly the exchange re-balanced leaving minimal energy to sustain Conner in his stupor.

"Ready," Lewis said. "Close 'em."

An energized charge flashed through the cable from Brian into Conner who lay motionless. He eased into Conner's mind anxious to do some housekeeping. Movement slowed.

Brian woke lying on a bed of summer grass. "What the heck is so bad about this?" he mumbled. "What an escape. This guy should be What's that?"

A large section of blue sky flashed with an ominous glare. A thin ribbon-shaped cloud rolled towards Brian's resting-place.

He got up and ran.

The haze followed.

He darted in random directions to escape the white mist. "You must be the cobweb. Strange stuff."

The misty glare transformed into a thin fabric. It billowed over the grassy field and surged like a silky canopy.

Drained by the afternoon's intense heat, Brian refreshed under the airy enclosure. "What a great place." He rested back watching the covering rise, then fall in a rhythmic motion as if it were breathing. "There's got to be more to this. Where's the problem?" He readied to leave. He looked for an opening but the enclosure seemed endless.

It must have an edge.

The filmy substance moved just out of reach. Sameness confused Brian's direction. He stopped and listened for sounds.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

Perspiration beaded Brian's skin. He shivered in the moving air. He darted in circles. His search turned into a dread of claustrophobic constraint. His breathing turned shallow, irregular. Repressed childhood punishments of being locked in the closet stuffed in-between smothering clothes rekindled. "Out! Out!" he cried.

He controlled his fear. His shaking hands struggled to grasp the fabric. "Get over here!"

Monotonous flutter rippled.

Taut with anger, he made a powerful leap towards the covering. "I'll tear you open!" He fell empty-handed. He crouched low and sighted just above the top of the grass. Distant patches of sky teased through a wavering edge. He crawled feverishly.

Brian stuck his hand out from under the wispy fabric. The covering pushed against his face. "Nothing?" He brushed the fabric aside, then snapped back. Brian teetered on the edge of a bottomless chasm.

A collapsing canopy loomed overhead; an endless fall was his only escape. Brian fixed his gaze on the grass combing his fingers through its long blades, faster and faster.

He muttered disjointed remarks, then said, "I'll get you!"

He tore out huge clumps of grass. Baring his nails, he clawed savagely at the soil until he dug himself into a deep hole and hid from the covering. He looked up from the dirt floor and laughed, then scurried up and out and sat on its edge. He dangled his legs back inside. He sneaked a skyward glance. "I'm over here."

Suddenly, he dropped down into the hole and hid. He leaned against the surround of earthen wall. Large slick worms burrowed out and wriggled towards him. He studied their movements. He tapped their gooey heads. They tunneled away. His listless eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

He woke and panicked. The covering had fallen inside the hole. A small fold slipped lower, just above his head.

Brian drew himself into a ball. "Cobweb." Secretively, he slipped his hands under himself and clawed at the dirt floor. "Almost through." He dug hard until a thin layer of soil remained. "Ah," he said, testing the firmness with his fingers.

Cautiously, he stood up on the tenuous ground. With a powerful surge, he leaped up and grabbed hold of the covering. "Got you." He dropped back into the tunnel and broke through its bottom.

He tumbled in silent nothingness clutching the weightless fabric that streamed behind like a comet's long tail. "Did it!" He laughed. "Cleaned out the cobwebs."

Suddenly, the fabric tore from his hands and disappeared. Movement slowed and Brian came to rest on a soft cool surface. He lay on his back staring up into the blackness. "Another success," he said. "Come on Lewis. Let's go, buddy. Get me outta here."

Tremors rolled under Brian.

Suddenly, Conner's angry consciousness invaded Brian's resting-place. "Who are you?" Conner bellowed. "You're doing this to me?"

"Back off!" Brian hollered. "I just cleaned up this place."

Lewis' distant voice yelled, "Get him out. Conner's waking up."

A misty ribbon-shaped cloud moved towards Brian bringing pangs of claustrophobia. "It's back!"

Conner yelled, "Get it outta here. It's driving me nuts."

Brian tried to outrun the spreading mist. Confused by panic, he ran deeper into Conner's mind. The haze fell over Brian like a net. He tangled in its suffocating hold. He struggled to free himself.

Lab equipment spiked. Electrical pulses reversed direction. Conner consumed the surge of energy. Brian's essence seeped into the voids of Conner's wakefulness.

Conner woke clear-headed.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

Lewis and the techs scrambled to revive Brian. He slumped in the exchange chair. His breathing slowed.

Conner stood up. His body grew broader, taller. Lab techs backed away. He grabbed Brian from the chair and held him up towards the ceiling. Conner's raucous laughter cut through the room. He lowered Brian and pulled him tight against his chest. The two fused as one, lifted up and vanished before the stunned techs.

Slowly, a ribbon-shaped cloud drifted down from the ceiling. Techs raced from the white haze rolling through the lab. It followed them outside. Everyone scattered and hid. The mist shimmered as if annoyed. With a silver flash it shot skyward. It blend behind passing clouds.

THE END

Copyright 2001 by Carol MacAllister

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

HAWKMAN

by Gary Lovisi

Published in *Detective Mystery Stories* #24

They called him Hawkman, but his name was just Hawk. It was dangerous for him to enter the *Easy Lady* tavern, dangerous because of what he'd planned, but he took a deep breath and steeled his nerves and determination. He entered from the back door alley. Usually he used the front door, like almost everyone else, but this time things were different. This time Joe Mulligan was in the *Easy Lady* and Hawk was after him.

There was a jukebox off in the corner playing a Little Richard song. He could barely see it through all the smoke. It was one of those old Wurlitzer's and was all lit up sporting a cracked glass top loaded with empty beer bottles and shot glasses. *The Easy Lady* was crowded this time of the night, a good size crowd that held a representative assortment of the local losers. There were the usual pimps, hookers, skell gamblers, drug buyers, drug sellers, drunks of all types, and many others from the down-and-out world – as well as many of the people that helped them stay down-and-out, guys like Joe Mulligan.

Hawk could see the big Irishman at the end of the bar laughing and guzzling beer, as he was nuzzling a big-breasted blonde with a low-cut blouse. He was surrounded by a half-dozen drunken associates all evidently having a good time as they kept Mike the bartender busy. No sooner did Mike lay a full glass down on the bar than Mulligan and his guys and gals made sure that glass was empty.

Next to Mulligan sat his girl, Sue Atkins, a dolled-up chickie in a too-tight red dress, low-cut blouse, and hot-money attitude. She was drinking something long and tall and red as well, and was pretty tight herself. In front of her were five similar glasses, all empty. She was busy finishing number six.

Hawk noticed the other patrons of the *Easy Lady* also; all busy drinking, talking, laughing, and dancing to the music with varying degrees of competence. It was a general ruckus kind of place. He liked it well enough, but tonight he was here on business, not pleasure.

He saw Tom Riley and his hardhat buddies in one booth tanking up, while in another sat John and Cath Kilderman who owned the laundry across the street, in here more than in their own place. In another booth were Jake and his wife, Maria, who ran the corner deli, called *Jake's Place*. They were both silently slipping under the table. No one noticed. No one cared.

Hawk took in all this in one sharp glance, along with the form of Mulligan. Mulligan looked exactly like the guy he had seen kill Al Foster yesterday in the alley out back behind the *Easy Lady*. Now Mulligan was sitting and drinking with his buds as though he hadn't done anything and didn't have a care in the world. The cops needed a witness and Hawk would oblige them, but first, he had to be sure in his own mind. And he had to be sure in his own way.

Hawk relived it all now, how he'd been drinking in the tavern early yesterday afternoon, and how he'd had to excuse himself from the fellas at the bar to go and take a leak. How the bathroom in the back was closed because Elliot the plumber was trying to fix the damn toilet again like he did almost every other week, and how he'd told Hawk, "Go ahead out back if it's that urgent, Hawkman. Can't you see I'm busy here."

So Hawk opened the door that led out back and what he saw there sent shock and anger coursing through his alcohol-numb brain. For there was Al Foster, a buddy of his since childhood, talking with some big Irish palooka who suddenly pulled out a long blade and jabbed it into Al with a rapid and vicious one-two-three in the guts. Al never said a word as he slumped to the dirty alley floor dead. The killer disappeared almost immediately.

Events had occurred so fast Hawk had not been able to get a look at the man's face, but even without such evidence the killer's build and demeanor were enough to let Hawk know that the man he had seen kill Al had to be Joe Mulligan. And now Mulligan was here, at the end of the bar living it up with his skell buddies, and Al hardly cold in the grave. It made Hawk fume with rage and indignation at the injustice of it all and he knew that he had to do *something*. Which was just what he had come to the *Easy Lady* to do. Quietly, he moved forward into the center of the tavern, standing square in front of Mulligan.

He didn't do it subtle, that wasn't Hawk's way, he shouted right into the big Irishman's face with a

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

tongue that was as sharp as Mulligan's knife, "You're a no good murderer, Mulligan! I saw you kill Al, and I'll see you fry for it!"

Mulligan was taken by surprise by the suddenness and audacity of Hawk's appearance and words but he rebounded quickly enough, even though the knowledge that someone knew he was the killer put the cold hand of fear around the big Irishman's heart. His eyes bored down into Hawk, "You threatening me! You got a lotta nerve calling me a killer. I ain't never done nothing!"

"I'll see you fry for it, Mulligan! You just wait, before I'm through with you you'll wish you never heard of Al or me either. I know you think you got off with it scot-free. You think you're a smart guy, sitting here in the *Easy Lady* like nothing ever happened and you haven't a care in the world – well, I saw what happened out back. You're the killer! And I'm gonna talk!"

Mulligan did some fast thinking, as a crowd began to form around the two men. Hawk recognized some of Al's friends; the mood of the place was getting ugly as the anger began to build. Mulligan knew that he had to do something fast, Hawk had seen too much. It wasn't healthy for a guy in this town to see too much, and less healthy if he talked about what he had seen. Mulligan knew that he couldn't allow Hawk to leave the *Easy Lady* alive, and withdrew a piece from his pocket, pointing the weapon at Hawk.

"You couldn't let it be Hawkman! First you come in here and threaten me, and then you make all kinds of wild accusations. Lay off, or I'll send you right on down to hell with Al!"

"I saw you kill Al, Mulligan," Hawk said looking at the gun that was leveled at him. "So now you're going to kill me too? Just like you killed Al. Only you're gonna kill me in front of a bar full of people. Not smart, Mulligan. Think about that. Everyone here is a witness. I'm going to ask Mike to give me the house phone and I'm going to call the cops to come here and collect you for the murder of Al Foster."

Hawk nodded to Mike the barkeep and soon a phone was put up on the bartop and Hawk went over, lifted the receiver and began to dial.

"Get away from that phone!" Mulligan barked. "You ain't calling no cops!"

"No dice, killer!"

"I said, get away, or I'll blast you!" Mulligan threatened his voice a terrible thing to hear.

"With a bar full of witnesses? Go ahead, Mulligan, then you'll fry for sure!"

With an angry oath, Mulligan ran out of the *Easy Lady* and into the street where Hawk closely followed him.

"Get away from me!"

"Why? Otherwise you'll kill me, just like you killed Al?"

"You're damn right I will, Hawkman. Mess with me and you can be made to go down a lot easier than Al did!"

That was all it took.

Suddenly a horde of cops came out from their hiding places and grabbed Mulligan. They'd been waiting for the trap to spring all along.

"This is all a mistake..." Mulligan barked as he was quickly disarmed, frisked, cuffed and then dragged to a waiting prowl car.

"And you made the mistake, Mulligan." Hawk said, as Mulligan was lead away. "You don't really think I was stupid enough to confront you without having the cops here and ready, did you? They were here waiting for you to run sacred, waiting for you to spill the beans on Al's murder. You see, I know you killed Al, but I never got a good look at your face. Now I'm certain of it. So are the cops. You gave away your hand by running away and threatening me, then by admitting you killed Al. An honest joe would never have done that. You killed Al, Mulligan, and you're gonna fry for it! Al always said you were the type that would someday, and I guess old Al was right."

THE END

Copyright 1999 by Gary Lovisi

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

THE MASTER

by Octavio Ramos Jr.

Published in *Classic Pulp Fiction Stories* #78

For as long as memory serves I have dwelled with man. At first I was pursued and hunted, either as game or as a sacred trophy won at the end of a long crusade. They came upon their mounts, covered with metal and sporting their wicked piercing sticks, but they were no match for me. With each successive form I embodied, I used all manner of violence against them: fire, ice, scales, the burning flesh, and even sortilege. They left their wealth and accouterments behind for my enjoyment, and for a time I even took the guise of a woman and partook of their flesh.

Do not misjudge me. I had grown bored. It is that simple. Indeed, I was simply bored.

Death to me had become commonplace. The gravy grew thick in my claws, the screams dampened my senses. Life, once so precious to me, became a commodity to trade or bestow upon the pitiful. So I took to the winds, leaving my island home, and at length came to a place where I was at last left in peace.

Oh, upon a long dark moon would come a maiden seeking council or an artist soliciting a pose for whatever media he or she was a master, but for the most part I was allowed to be at ease with myself. With this time my many wounds healed and even my magic returned. I grew fat with nourishment, at length growing so massive that the cavern's entrance became a silken prison.

Then one morning everything changed. A miracle appeared before me—a wondrous thing of beauty. And it was disguised as a man.

At dawn the world was glistening, and having wakened from a long slumber, I poked an eye out of the cave and gazed upon the ocean. These actions in and of themselves held no significance. What did matter was a solitary change in the environment.

In a barren, grass-laden field stood a man. He was

thin, almost gaunt, yet his frame was coated with rippling brawn. A pair of eyes squinted at the morning sun and long tresses of black hair hung as low as the bottom half of his back. He wore a peasant's shirt and pants but stood as proud as a king.

Then he moved.

Amber flesh glistened as muscles tore through the thick air. He launched an arm forward, his hand balled in a fist, the thumb tucked away. From here he withdrew, forcing the other arm to come into an arch, as though he parried a blow. At the same time, he raised a knee, and when he was done feigning a blocking maneuver, he thrust forward with his leg, the weight falling naturally to his remaining leg. The snapping motion sent insects scurrying through the grass.

I could not help it. I laughed. Or rather, I roared. My noise frightened the youth, and soon afterwards he was gone.

The scene had stirred emotions long ago suppressed. I wished to be once again among men. Harnessing my newly awakened magic and my fat reserves. I fashioned a silken cocoon about my body. Hours later I emerged as a human female.

The first village I came upon was fresh and exciting. Unlike the communities of my island home, this place held no feter or stink. Instead, traders bargained for silk, flowers, and food. Men and women bowed in greeting, at once acknowledging each other yet averting their gazes. No one screamed here; whispers ruled sound.

Still, there was danger here. I had not but walked one aisle, my thoughts intent on searching for new collectibles, when two men stood in my way.

"I say she will become my concubine for a handful of gold," said the first.

"I would not make such a boast. Once she has tasted my dragon, she will offer herself without measure."

They were filthy creatures, the two that stood before me. The first, tall and muscular, wore a

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

soldier's uniform. A helmet adorned a bloated crown and a beard covered a hardened face. He wore simple armor and carried two long swords.

The second was shorter and wore the clothes of a merchant. Under his clothing, concealed in clever folds, were several knives. This shrewdness made him all the more dangerous.

"You speak of dragons," I said after they had stopped their infernal chuckling and leering. "Have you ever laid eyes upon one?"

"We have slain our share," responded the soldier.

"Small ones, I gather."

"Perhaps you lack the strength or will to take upon yourself the task of subduing a larger beast," the merchant quipped. "Few can handle my dragon."

"Do not anger me, merchant. If I were not consumed by wantonness, I would slay you where you stand."

"Perhaps both of you should slay your dragons elsewhere."

Then a third man entered the scene. He stood beside me, his warmth sending tingles through suppressed scales. It was the young man I had watched earlier.

"Go away, boy," the soldier said, his hands falling onto his weapon.

"You dishonor the lady."

"You have been warned, child. She is ours." The merchant placed his hands on his belly.

"I warn you one last time. I am skilled with empty hands."

"A warrior," the soldier jeered. "I will show you the true hands of war."

My self-appointed protector struck first, his punch slamming into the merchant's jaw. At the last moment, however, the merchant stepped to one side, thus deflecting most of the blow.

Concurrently, he grabbed the young man's

outstretched forearm, clasped his wrist, and turned it clockwise.

My protector fell to the ground, his face covered with agony. The soldier laughed, grabbed him by his shirt, and lifted him off the ground. He then slammed his knee into the boy's gut several times. Growing bored, he discarded him like an empty bowl of rice.

"The war has given me hot blood," screamed the merchant.

"We shall sate ourselves with her," said the other.

"So, you take down a boy and feel you can contend with a dragon?"

"A dragon, she says."

"Enough talk, woman. Kneel and taste man!"

The soldier took one step.

My right arm went forth, seeking a path through his flesh. As my forearm turned upward, the open palm landed under his neck, my fingers crawling over his chin. To finish, I brought the fingers down, taking with them his eyes and nose. Bone cracked and flesh spurt lava.

I was not content.

My left arm came around, my hand's palm up and open. The side of my hand struck his neck, snapping bone and destroying what resided within. The soldier fell, never to get up again.

Then came the merchant. He had drawn forth two blades and was thrusting at me. I simply whipped my tail.

From where I stood, I sprung my right leg out and twirled my body around, forcing the leg to function as a tail. The blow destroyed the man's neck.

"Come," I said to the boy, who even now remained in a stupor. "Before others take notice."

"Who are you?" he mumbled.

"It does not matter. Come with me."

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

And he did.

For time on eternity I showed him the ways of my kind. He stood with me for ages, practicing the walking on the winds. He learned of magic and of healing.

I showed him the seen forms of the dragon. We began with how a dragon seeks a path, then moved on to how a dragon avoids projectiles, tears at the flesh, uses his wings to create acrimonious winds, whips his tail, stomps his feet, and heals mortal wounds.

He learned everything I had to offer, until there came a time when I could offer no more.

"You must leave me," I announced one cold night.

"But why? Master, I have learned so much, yet my cup is not full."

"If you seek the cup's contents, then you shall never be full. Instead, take the cup and fill it of your own accord."

"How do I begin?"

That is when I presented myself to the apprentice. I abandoned my disguise and brought forth the might and power of my kind. I stood on four limbs, shook massive wings, and extended my neck. I flashed bright scales and spewed forth flame.

Before he walked away, my apprentice dropped his head and kept his eyes focused on the earthen floor. "Master, I have seen your true guise. I have watched your movements in the winds. And yet I have never asked this, but I am compelled by emotion to do so now."

"Then ask, my little one."

"What is your name?"

I rose up, my wings spread and foreclaws tearing at the air. My massive head rolled out of my neck, at length coming face to face with that of my apprentice.

"I am Kung Fu," my voice trembled to disguise the sadness. "And now you shall have a new name."

"I am honored." The young man dropped to his knees.

"You will be called Shaolin. Take all that I have given, so that men such as you can learn."

"It shall be done."

"Never forsake your brothers. Remember always the tiger, the eagle, the mantis, the monkey. All have secrets as old as mine. Observe them and learn."

"I will remember."

And so it was that Shaolin began his journey down the path. As for me, I still live in the same cave, although at times I can be seen riding the winds with the ancestors of my first apprentice.

THE END

Copyright 2001 by Octavio Ramos Jr.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

NIGHT MISSION

by Sandra Tatara

Published in *Detective Mystery Stories* #32

The heavy garage door closed behind me with a thud, not that I actually heard it above my pounding heartbeat. My lungs burned. I fought to get my breathing under control. Alone in the darkness - in the stillness - listening for a sound that would tell me he had found me.

The engine made small pinging noises as it came to a final rest. A series of clicks sounded from somewhere in the dashboard. Noises never noticed before. In the darkened clock space, I could almost hear the seconds ticking away. A slight scraping noise against the back outside wall...the tree branch I had been meaning to trim. I hoped that's what it was. Breathing became easier and my heartbeat slowed to a less scary series of thumps.

I eased open the door, hit the trunk release switch, and slid from the car seat. My knees buckled as I tried to stand. Inhale...exhale. Better. Closed the door and lifted two grocery bags from the trunk. Without turning on the light, I inched along beside the car to the small service door at the side of the garage. My hand shook as I unlocked the door and stepped into the safety of my home.

Taking a deep breath, I checked the deadbolt lock. My Golden Retriever, Beggar, named for what he does best, sat in the shadows of the entrance foyer. In the faint curio cabinet light I could see a puzzled look on Beggar's face. He followed me to the kitchen, sat and watched me quickly put away the perishable foods, leaving the rest for later. Beggar sniffed once or twice at the items in the bags and slid to the floor in disappointment.

I hurried down the hall to the bedroom. In the glow of the nightlight, I fumbled to unlock the desk drawer, loaded my revolver, and placed it on the nightstand. Still in the dark, I crouched next to the window and pulled open the curtain just a bit. For several minutes I watched the street until I was convinced he had given up trying to find me. Taking no chances of alerting him by turning on the lamp, I pulled off my jeans and T-top in the dark. I retrieved

the nightshirt that I'd thrown on the bed when my little night mission began, slipped it over my head, and crawled into bed. Beggar yawned and circled before settling next to me on the floor.

* * *

My husband, Roger, was out of town on a business trip and I usually don't sleep well when he's gone. Beggar, as mentioned - and loveable though he may be - isn't great in the defense department. That's one of the reasons Roger got me the Colt Revolver... to feel safe when he was gone. I took a gun safety class and became comfortable with it...for a while, and then locked it in its padded carrying case inside my desk drawer. Bullets were kept hidden behind all the paraphernalia in the bathroom closet. Some protection.

I'd gone to bed about 11:00, tossed and turned, couldn't sleep. Thought I would be able to, being so tired after cleaning the house in preparation for Saturday. Roger would be home tomorrow, Friday. Our newly married daughter, Cassie, her husband Todd, and our son, Ryan would all be over on Saturday for dinner. As I curled up in bed and watched the illuminated green numbers on the clock tick away the night, the thought occurred to me I might as well get up and... And what? The only thing left to do was grocery shop. The grocery store is open twenty-four hours. I suppose there must be people who shop at night. I truly never wondered about who or why.

It suddenly seemed like a good idea - shop while it would certainly be less crowded and get it out of the way. What if I get there and find there are lots of people who shop at night? An intriguing thought.

I jumped out of bed, tugged on jeans and a T-shirt, grabbed my purse, and hurried out to the garage leaving a slightly bewildered dog sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor with a frown on his face.

No, there wasn't a crowd of people in the grocery store - only a few employees, a young man with purple spiked hair, a nose ring and crosses hanging from both ears, and...me. What do guys with purple hair and nose rings shop for at one o'clock in the morning? I tried to be discreet as I peaked into his cart: three liter bottles of Pepsi, Twinkies, Hostess Cupcakes, bar-b-que potato chips, beer. And resting on top was a bouquet of flowers in shiny cellophane

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

wrapping. Ah! Must have a girlfriend. Wonder what color hair she has.

It's kind of nice shopping all alone. No screaming kids pushing carts into my heels. Whoops! Better be careful. Starting to sound like one of the "get off my lawn" crabby old ladies. If it weren't for Purple Hair, I might feel like a celebrity and the store stayed open just for me to shop without being hounded by my admiring public. Better finish this shopping and get some sleep for your feeble mind.

By the time I scratched off the last item on my list and wheeled my cart into the checkout lane, Purple Hair had left.

The cashier snapped her gum and slid my groceries through the scanner without glancing up. Her hair looked like she'd just gotten up from a nap. Guess you don't have to worry about how your hair looks for this shift.

"This is the first time I've shopped at night. Is it always this empty?" My voice seemed to echo in the quiet store.

"Yep, most of the time." She blew a big pink bubble with her gum, popped it, and grinned. "Though sometimes it gets real busy, maybe three, four people at a time."

I nodded and slid my credit card through the machine.

"Paper or plastic?" she inquired.

"Paper, please."

While I signed my name to the credit slip, she packed my groceries.

Bubble Gum returned my card, my receipt, and said, "Have a good evening now, honey."

"Thanks. You too."

I quickly tucked the two grocery bags in my trunk, feeling suddenly alone and vulnerable in the night. As I pulled from the parking lot, a shadow moved against the back wall near the dumpster. A quick glance showed a hunched figure rummaging through the trash. I shivered and pulled onto the street, anxious to get home.

Can't recall ever noticing how still it was at night. Not just quiet, but still. A crispness had seized the air, and I fumbled with the heat control. I turned onto Burnham Avenue where it runs through the forest preserves and past God-Only-Knows-What's-Buried-There Lake. I don't even know if it's actually a lake or

just a swamp - or if it has a name - but that's my name for it. In the steamy summertime, the water has a strange sheen and an indescribable stench. It's amazing to see someone fishing there during the day. Who would ever want to eat any fish that came out of that lake? I always tell Roger that's where the Mob dumps bodies. He says I watch too much TV and read too many detective novels.

I rarely encounter many cars on this road and its one of the reasons its so enjoyable. More often than not, I see deer and people riding horses, though at this hour I didn't expect either. So it startled me to see someone - at almost two a.m. - parked off on the gravel shoulder next to the lake.

Lit only by a full moon, a dark colored Ford Explorer snuggled in the shadows. My headlights flashed against the vehicle as I made the turn. A tall burly man jerked in apparent surprise at the intrusion. Dressed all in dark clothing with a baseball cap covering a mop of shaggy hair, he struggled to lift something out of his SUV. His head snapped around at my approaching lights. Just as quickly, he turned his face away and shoved his body against whatever it was he struggled with.

As I completed my turn and drove by, I saw a large dark bundle tied with rope. The man appeared agitated, spun around as if looking for other traffic. I drove past and picked up speed.

My remarks to Roger about bodies in the lake flashed into my mind. Too many mystery movies, huh? I drove on, glancing in my rearview mirror. Suddenly feeling like the female PI's in my favorite novels, I hung a right, found the first driveway, and turned around. Grabbing the notepad and pen from my visor, I headed back toward the lake with my window partially down, listening to the night. A bullfrog croaked just before the sounds of crunching gravel and a splash cut through the stillness. Slowing as I approached the parked Explorer to let my lights rest on the license plates, I jotted down the number. In a slithering wisp of fog that crept past my car, I didn't see the stalking figure as he approached. Just in time, I heard the heavy footfalls in the gravel and hit the power window switch as he lunged toward my door. The moonlight showed me angry eyes, broad shoulders and arms like tree trunks.

My pulse raced in an adrenalin rush. I dropped the

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

notepad, hit the gas, and spun back onto the road. In my mirror I saw him hesitate briefly before running toward his car. I pressed harder on the accelerator trying to put as much distance between us. Only seconds elapsed before the huge Explorer spit its high beams through my back window.

Fighting against the rising panic in my throat, I tugged my seat belt tighter, and floored the gas pedal. He fell back slightly before hitting the gas. The bright lights sped toward me with terrifying speed. My god, he's going to ram my car. My smaller vehicle maneuvered better than the bulky Ford. I made a quick right turn into my subdivision. The pavement was slippery in the misty night air and he slid as he took a curve too fast. Hoping he didn't know the area as well as I did, I zigzagged through the sleeping community with one eye on the mirror. Brakes squealed as he slowed to match my turns.

His headlights hadn't been visible for the last three turns; giving me hope that I'd lost him somewhere on the several cul-de-sacs and a dead end street I'd led him past.

I drove on, through the maize-like streets, inching closer to home. Passed my house once and circled the block. No headlights in any direction. On the next pass I killed my lights and spun into my driveway, punching the garage door opener as I turned.

* * *

I snuggled under the comforter. Beside me Beggar snored in peaceful bliss. My feet felt like ice-cubes and every once in a while my heart missed a beat and then made up for it with extra beats seconds later. Hope I didn't survive that run-in only to die of a heart attack in my own bed. I wondered if Sharon McCone or Kinsey Millhone in my mystery novels suffered these attacks of nerves. Might be a good idea to switch to romance novels for a while; give my imagination a rest.

I tired to coax myself into a deep sleep, but my conscience poked its way around my brain cells. Aren't you going to do something? Call someone? A man probably dumped a body in that lake. You can't pretend it didn't happen. I argued with the voice. What if he got MY license number; saw my face? I could be the next addition in the lake. The struggle

continued until exhaustion claimed me and I fell into a restless sleep.

Morning nudged me awake with streaming sunlight through the window and Beggar's cold nose against my arm. On the mornings that I could sleep late, and late for me was seven o'clock, I loved to roll over to my right side and enjoy the burning sunshine flooding through the window. Wondered about the danger from the magnified rays through the glass and if I needed a sun block. But it was worth the risk for the sensual pleasure of the warmth against my skin.

I opened one eye, glanced at the clock. Seven fifty-six. In the light of day, the sight of the revolver on the nightstand and my suspicions seemed melodramatic. I pushed the switch on my radio and listened to the last lines of a song my brain couldn't place. The station tone announced the hour and the news report began.

Words suddenly pushed aside my fog. "And the parents of a twenty-year U of I college student just home for summer break still cling to the hope the their daughter will be found unharmed..." I listened to the description of the girl who had been reported missing by her friends after she'd called to report car trouble. Arriving to find the car door open, her purse on the front seat, and their friend nowhere around, they called her parents. It had been two days without a word.

I lay in bed, unable to find any warmth beneath the fluffy comforter. The dichotomy of my night's adventure and the serene morning sunshine churned in my gut.

In the bathroom, I splashed cold water on my face and searched the eyes in the mirror. What if...? He was probably only dumping garbage. But, what if?

I dried my face, sat on the edge of the bed, and dialed the police department.

THE END

Copyright 2001 by Sandra Tatara

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

FOWL PLAY

by Jean Hooper

Published in *Classic Pulp Fiction Stories* #77

"This damn rooster is getting more obnoxious every day," said Fred as he stood in the barnyard.

"Yeah. I've noticed that too. He always was a pistol but I think he's becoming worse." Fred's partner, John, his brown hair, sun streaked, jeans riding low on slender hips, stood looking across the land they owned jointly. Life had been good, he thought. He brushed a whisp of straw off his plaid shirt.

"But I love the way that crazy bird takes on the hawk when he's after the hens. One day the hawk is gonna finish him. Well, get to work, buddy," he said to Fred.

The other man, more solidly built, 7 years older, said, "Yeah, can't stand around all day, chores to do."

The two men ambled off.

In the late afternoon, Fred sat at his desk going over the books. Suddenly he heard screams from the back yard. When he rushed to the window, he saw Marsha, his wife, backing up, waving her hands furiously at Opie, the rooster/With puffed feathers, he advanced, pecked at her leg, jumped to attack her knee. His beak dug in deeply. Fred saw blood course down her leg, rushed out, grabbed a stick, swung it madly as the rooster slowly retreated.

"My, God, honey. What happened?"

"Nothing. I went to feed the chickens and he went for me."

"Let's get you inside and check on that."

John hurried across the fields. "I could hear the screams over by the creek. What the Hell." Marsha leaned on both men as they helped her toward the house.

Fred surveyed his pasture and watched as the sun bounced off the flock of Rhode Island Red chickens, turning the baby chicks a rusty red color, the mature birds, a mahogany, the entire setting awash in vibrant color. Looking up the road, he saw a cloud of dust. Out of it emerged Charlie and his Jeep. His nearest neighbor hopped out.

"Boy, the chickens are restless the last couple of days. What's up? Storm brewing. How are yours?"

Fred related the incident of the previous day. Charlie listened, hands in pockets, shook his head. "I'll beat the Hell out of them dumb animals."

"Don't do that. You're always too hard on them," Fred said.

"I know. You even named that damn rooster, Opie, isn't it? Well, name or not, if he were mine, I'd fix him good."

Fred glanced over, saw Opie perched on the bench. The bird's dark eyes bored through him, switched to Charlie, a malevolent glint appeared in them. Was he imagining that and some thing else-the bird seemed larger.

As Marsha underwent antibiotic treatment and suffered the effects of a tetanus shot, reports of animal attacks escalated, even spreading to the neighboring states. John and Fred learned to carry a large stick that seemed to discourage Opie from approaching too closely. One evening John placed it in a far corner of the barn. The next morning it was gone. He called to Fred. "Did you or anyone else move that piece of wood I use to keep Opie from getting too close."

"Nope. I saw it there last night. You mean it's gone."

"Yeah. I must be going crazy." He shook his head, strolled through the grounds, called to Fred. "Here it is but it's cut in two." John bent over, retrieved the pieces, felt as if he were being watched. When he looked up, Opie stood near, then strutted away.

"Let's get another one and make sure where we keep it." After chores, Fred walked the countryside, found a suitable weapon, returned to the house, carefully stored it in the garage. No one could get in there. My gosh, I'm getting paranoid about this, he thought. The next morning as he fed Opie and the brood of chickens, the rooster ignored the corn, puffed feathers, red comb glinted, a whirling ball of violence, attacked. Fred ran toward the garage.

"Where is that stick?"

No sign of it. He tossed hay, moved tools, looked up and the rooster stood next to him. Low guttural sounds came from his throat. Fred prepared to fight, grabbed a hoe but the Bird retreated. I'm being used a pawn in a chess game and Opie is the castle, moving Quickly from side to side.

Sneak Peek at Fading Shadows New Pulp-Style Fiction Magazines

Steve, white lab coat in hand, entered the office marked Genetically Engineered Food. His brow furrowed as he leafed through the latest reports. His assistant, Mark, entered. "Did you read these?" he asked. "I always knew we were breaking the rules of nature. Told you this was coming."

"I know you did but I don't think it's a problem. This cuts down on insecticide use. Bugs bite, they die. This bioengineered corn, farmers love it."

Mark, brown eyes flashing, threw the paper on the desk. "Read some of the reports and then tell me, they love it. We have no idea what long term use of modified corn can do. Remember the rat experiment, ate potatoes, affected their stomachs, so much for bio modified food. No wonder Europe protests. I think we're about to see a Revolution, a poultry uprising."

"Aw, you're nuts."

The swaggering rooster herded the chickens, a potentate caring for his harem. John watched, thought you've got to admire the birds tenacity. Any animal approaching was immediately driven away. Marsha, brown hair tousled, leaned out the kitchen entrance, called to him. "Is it my imagination or not but are those birds growing larger?"

"Looks that way, doesn't it."

She shivered, closed the door.

The phone rang. When Fred groped for it, he saw the clock 12:15. "Yes."

"Oh, Fred. Get over here quick. Charlie's been killed." It was Jane, his neighbor's wife. He saw the houselights blazing, as he sped down the road. Before he could turn off the motor, Jane ran over to him. "Charlie heard a noise, went to check, never returned. I came out and found him like this." She grabbed Fred's hand and led him towards the barn. Charlie's body, clad in jeans only, lay there, impaled, a stick driven through his heart. A chill ran through Fred's body. He glanced down, saw fresh imprints of chicken scratches, one larger than the rest.

"Look at this," screamed Jane. Atop the stick was a perfect mahogany colored feather.

It was early morning when Fred returned home after attending to all the multitude of details involved in a suspicious death. He sat in the car, leaned his head against the steering wheel. Tears ran down his cheeks. He pounded the wheel, swore. Sorry to see Charlie like that, although he had never cared for the man. Sorry to see his own dreams vanishing. When he alighted from the car, he stood for a moment, looked up at the moonlit sky, saw hovering above him Opie and his flock, perched on the barn roof, a dead hawk on the rooster's talons. How did they get up there? And they were still growing.

THE END

Copyright 2001 by Jean Hooper