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Title: In the Dark

Author: Dale Clark

Release Date: June 1, 2010 [EBook #32638]

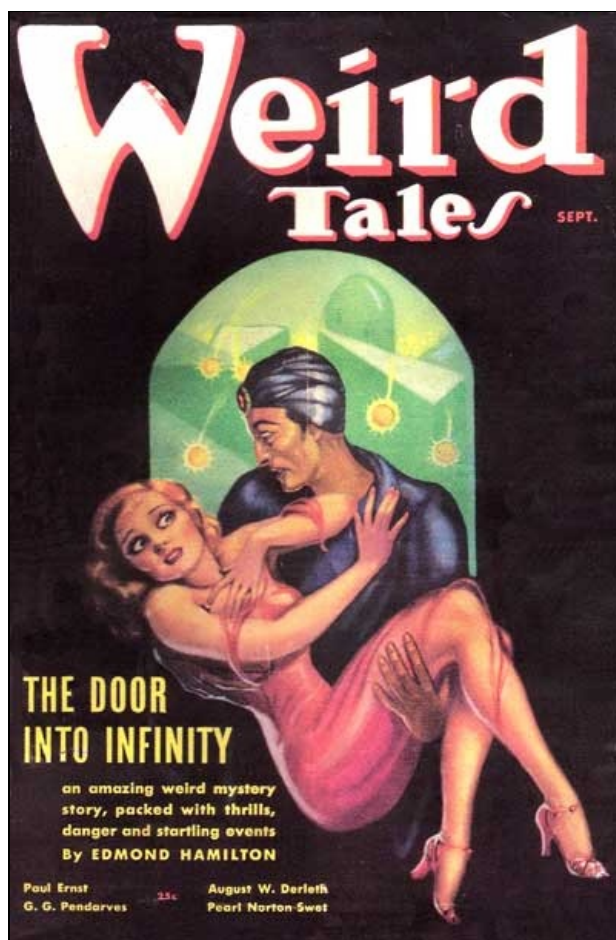
Language: English

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In the Dark

By RONAL KAYSER

*It was a tale of sheer horror that old Asa Gregg
poured into the dictaphone*

The watchman's flashlight printed a white circle on the frosted-glass, black-lettered door:

GREGG CHEMICAL CO., MFRS.
ASA GREGG, PRES.
PRIVATE

The watchman's hand closed on the knob, rattled the door in its frame. Queer, but tonight the sound had seemed to come from in there.... But that couldn't be. He knew that Mr. Gregg and Miss Carruthers carried the only keys to the office, so any intruder would have been forced to smash the lock.

Maybe the sound came from the storage room. The watchman clumped along the rubber-matted corridor, flung his weight against that door. It opened hard, being of ponderous metal fitted into a cork casing. The room was an air-tight, fire-proof vault, really. His shoes gritted on the concrete floor as he prowled among the big porcelain vats. The flashlight bored through bluish haze to the concrete walls. Acid fumes escaping under the vat lids made the haze and seared the man's throat.

He hurried out, coughing and wiping his eyes. It was damn funny. Every night lately he heard the same peculiar noise somewhere in this wing of the building.... Like a body groaning and turning in restless sleep, it was. It scared him. He didn't mention the mystery to anyone, though. He was an old man, and he didn't want Mr. Gregg to think he was getting too old for the job.

"Asa 'd think I was crazy, if I told him about it," he mumbled.

Inside the office, Asa Gregg heard the muttered words plainly. He sat very still in the big, leather-cushioned chair, hardly breathing until the scrape of the watchman's feet had thinned away down the hall. There was no light in the room to betray him; only the cherry-colored tip of his cigar, which couldn't be visible through the frosted glass door. Anyway, it'd be an hour before the watchman's round brought him past the office again. Asa Gregg had that hour, if he could screw up his nerve to use it....

He took the frayed end of the cigar from his mouth. His hand, which had wasted to mere skin and bone these past few months, groped through the darkness, slid over the polished coolness of the dictaphone hood, and snapped the switch. Machinery faintly whirred. His fingers found the tube, lifted it.

"Miss Carruthers!" he snapped. Then he hesitated. Surely, he could trust Mary Carruthers! He'd never wondered about her before. She'd been his secretary for a dozen years—lately, since he couldn't look after affairs himself as he used to, she had practically run the business. She was forty, sensible, unbeautiful, and tight-lipped. Hell, he had to trust her!

His voice plunged into the darkness.

"What I have to say now is intended for Mrs. Gregg's ears only. She will take the first boat home, of course. Meet that boat and bring her to the office. Since my wife knows nothing about a dictaphone, it will be necessary for you to set this record running. As soon as you have done so, leave her alone in the room. Make sure she's not interrupted for a half-hour. That's all."

He waited a decent interval. The invisible needle peeled its thread into the revolving wax cylinder.

"Jeannette," muttered Asa Gregg, and hesitated again. This wasn't going to be easy to say. He decided to begin matter-of-factly. "As you probably know, my will and the insurance policies are in the vault at the First National. I believe you will find all of my papers in excellent order. If any questions arise, consult Miss Carruthers. What I have to say to you now is purely personal—I feel, my dear, that I owe you an explanation—that is——"

God, it came harder than he had expected.

"Jeannette," he started in afresh, "you remember three years ago when I was in the hospital. You were in Palm Beach at the time, and I wired that there'd been an accident here at the plant. That wasn't strictly so. The fact is, I'd gotten mixed up with a girl——"

He paused, shivering. In the darkness a picture of Dot swam before him. The oval face, framed by gleaming swirls of lemon-tinted hair, had pouting scarlet lips, and eyes whose allure was

intensified by violet make-up. The full-length picture of her included a streamlined, full-blossomed and yet delectably lithe body. A costly, enticing, Broadway-chorus orchid! As a matter of fact, that was where he'd found her.

"I won't make any excuses for myself," Asa Gregg said harshly. "I might point out that you were always in Florida or Bermuda or France, and that I was a lonely man. But it wasn't just loneliness, and I didn't seek companionship. I thought I was making a last bow to Romance. I was successful, sixty, and silly, and I did all the damn fool things—I even wrote letters to her. Popsy-wopsy letters." The dictaphone couldn't record the grimace that jerked his lips. "She saved them, of course, and by and by she put a price on them—ten thousand dollars. Dot claimed that one of those filthy tabloids had offered her that much for them—and what was a poor working-girl to do? She lied. I knew that.

"I told her to bring the letters to the office after business hours, and I'd take care of her. I took care of her, all right. I shot her, Jeannette!"

He mopped his face with a handkerchief that was already damp.

"Not on account of the money, you understand. It was the things she said, after she had tucked the bills into her purse ... vile things, about the way she had earned it ten times over by enduring my beastly kisses. I'd really loved that girl, and I'd thought she'd cared for me a little. It was her hate that maddened me, and I got the gun out of my desk drawer——"

Asa Gregg reached through the darkness for the switch. He fumbled for the bottle which stood on the desk. His hand trembled, spilling some of the liquor onto his lap. He drank from the bottle....

This part of the story he'd skip. It was too horrible, even to think about it. He didn't want to remember how the blood pooled inside Dot's fur coat, and how he'd managed to carry the body out of the office without leaking any of her blood onto the floor. He tried to forget the musky sweetness of the perfume on the dead girl, mingled with that other evil blood-smell. Especially he didn't want to remember the frightful time he'd had stripping the gold rings from her fingers, and the one gold tooth in her head....

The horror of it coiled in the blackness about him. His own teeth rattled against the bottle when he gulped the second drink. He snapped the switch savagely, but when he spoke his voice cringed into the tube:

"I carried her into the storage room. I got the lid off one of the acid tanks. The vat contained an acid powerful enough to destroy anything—except gold. In fact, the vat itself had to be lined with gold-leaf. I knew that in twenty-four hours there wouldn't be a recognizable body left, and in a week there wouldn't be anything at all. No matter what the police suspected, they couldn't prove a murder charge without a *corpus delicti*. I had committed the perfect crime—except for one thing. I didn't realize that there'd be a *splash* when she went into the vat."

Gregg laughed, not pleasantly. His wife might think it'd been a sob, when she heard this record. "Now you understand why I went to the hospital," he jerked. "Possibly you'd call that poetic justice. Oh, God!"

His voice broke. Again he thumbed off the switch, and mopped his face with the damp linen.

The rest—how could he explain the rest of it?

He spent a long minute arranging his thoughts.

"You haven't any idea," he resumed, "no one has any idea, of how I've been punished for the thing I did. I don't mean the sheer physical agony—but the fear that I'd talk coming out of the ether at the hospital. The fear that she'd been traced to my office—I'd simply hidden her rings away, expecting to drop them into the river—or that she might have confided in her lover ... yes, she had one. Or, suppose a whopping big order came through and that tank was emptied the very next day. And I couldn't ask any questions—I didn't even know what was in the papers.

"However, that part of it gradually cleared up. I quizzed Miss Carruthers, and learned that an unidentified female body had been fished out of the East River a few days after Dot disappeared. That's how the police 'solved' the case. I got rid of her rings. I ordered that vat left alone.

"The other thing began about six months ago."

A spasm contorted his face. His fingers ached their grip into the dictaphone tube.

"Jeannette, you remember when I began to object to the radio, how I'd shout at you to turn it off in the middle of a program? You thought I was ill, and worried about business.... You were wrong. The thing that got me was *hearing her voice*——"

He gripped the cold cigar, chewed it. "It's very strange that you didn't notice it. No matter what station we dialed to, always that same voice came stealing into the room! But perhaps you did notice? You said, once or twice, that all those blues singers sounded alike!

"And she was a blues singer.... It was she, all right, somewhere out in the ether, reminding me...."

"The next thing was—well, at first when I noticed it in the office I thought Miss Carruthers had suddenly taken up with young ideas. You see, I kept smelling perfume."

And he smelled it now. It was like a miasma in the dark.

"It isn't anything that Carruthers wears," he grated. "It comes from—yes, the storage room. I realized that about a month ago. Just after you sailed—one night I stayed late at the office, and I went in there.... It seemed to be strongest around the vat—*her* vat—and I lifted the lid.

"The sweet, sticky musk-smell hit me like a blow in the face.

"And that isn't all!"

Terror stalked in this room. Asa Gregg crouched in his chair, felt the weight of Fear on him like a submarine pressure. His cigar pitched to his knees, dropped to the floor.

"You won't believe this, Jeannette." He hammered the words like nails into the darkness in front of him. "You will say that it's impossible. I know that. It *is* impossible. It is a physiological absurdity—it contradicts the laws of natural science.

"*But I saw something on the bottom of that vat!*"

He groped for the bottle. His wife would hear a long gurgle, and then a coughing gasp....

"The vat was nearly full of this transparent, oily acid," he went on. "What I saw was a lot of sediment on the golden floor. And there shouldn't have been any sediment! The stuff utterly dissolves animal tissue, bone, even the common ores—keeps them in suspension.

"It didn't look like sediment, either. It looked like a heap of mold ... grave-mold!

"I replaced the lid. I spent a week convincing myself that it was all impossible, that I *couldn't* have seen anything of the sort. Then I went to the vat again—"

Silence hung in the darkness while he sucked wind into his lungs. And the words burst—separate, yammering shrieks:

"I looked, night after night! For hours at a time I've watched the change.... Did you ever see a body decompose? Of course not! Neither have I. But you must know in a general way what the process is. Well, this has been the exact opposite!

"First, I stared at the heap of grave-mold as it shaped itself into *bones*, a skeleton.

"I watched the coming of hair, a yellow tangle of it sprouting from the bare round skull, until—oh, God!—the flesh began making itself before my eyes! I couldn't bear any more. I stayed away—didn't come to the office for five days."

The tube slipped from his sweating, slick fingers. Panting, Asa Gregg fumbled in the dark until he found it.

Exhaustion, not self-control, flattened his voice to a deadly monotone. "I tried to think of a way out. If I could fish the corpse out of the tank! But I couldn't smuggle it out of the plant—alone. You know that, and so do I. Besides, what would be the use? If acid can't kill her, nothing can.

"That's why I can't have the lid cemented on. It wouldn't do any good, either! Until three days ago, she hadn't the least color, looked as white as a ghost in the vat. A naked ghost, because there's been no resurrection for her clothing....

"I've watched her limbs grow rosy! Her lips are scarlet! Her eyes are bright—they opened yesterday—and her breasts were rising and falling—oh, almost imperceptibly—but that was last night.

"And tonight—I swear it—her lips moved! She muttered my name! She turned—she'd been lying on her side—over onto her back!"

The record would be badly blurred. His hand shook violently, bobbed the tube against his lips. Gregg braced his elbow against the desk.

"She isn't dead," he choked. "She's only asleep ... not very soundly asleep.... She's waking up!"

The invisible needle quivered as it traced several noises. There was his tortured breathing, and the clawing of his fingernails rattling over the desk. The drawer clicked as it opened.

The loud click was the cocking of the revolver.

"*Soon she's going to get out of that vat!*" Gregg bleated. "Jeannette, forgive me—God, forgive me—but I will not—I cannot—I dare not stay here to see her then!"

he sound of the shot brought the watchman stumbling along the corridor. He crashed against the

Toffice door. It banged open in a shower of falling frosted glass. The watchman's flashlight severed the darkness, and printed its white circle on the face of Asa Gregg.

He had fallen back into the chair, a blackish gout of blood running from the hole in his temple. He stared sightlessly into the light with his eyes that were two gnarls of shrunken brown flesh, like knots in a pine board.

Asa Gregg was blind ... had been, since that night three years past when the acid splashed...

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE DARK ***

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