

P.S. A new pictorial artist will work wonders for W.T. There is a special technique to weird drawing - a sort of sinister, mocking approach to conventional design + a subtle grotesquerie & distortion. The best example I know of is S.H. Sime, who illustrates the standard editions of Duusany's books.

598 Angell St., Providence, R.I.,  
February 2, 1924

My dear Mr. Henneberger:-

I was very glad to hear from you, and to receive so many sidelights on WEIRD TALES, whose chosen field makes me very eager for its success. I know the financial end of magazine publishing must be a tremendous and often discouraging responsibility, and I have a sincere respect for the pluck and determination of anybody who undertakes such a venture. Most certainly do I hope that some favourable turn will gradually transform your burdensome debt on the two magazines into an increasingly gratifying profit---and it seems to me that many facts warrant such optimism, for in the weird field you are practically alone and with a good start, whilst in the detective field there seems to be an insatiable demand for new material. Still, I know that marketing is a venturesome and uncertain process---especially with dealers in the unscrupulous state of mind you describe!

I assure you that I was not at all disconcerted by the presence of "The Transparent Ghost" beside my "Hound". In the first place, I don't take myself too seriously; and in the second place, I can appreciate the sort of humour involved in such touches of "comic relief"---like the gravedigger in "Hamlet" or the porter in "Macbeth". When a magazine covers a popular clientele and appeals to one particular interest, it is peculiarly apt to elicit literary---or more or less literary---contributions from its readers; so that I suppose a very large proportion of those who have seen WEIRD TALES have flooded the office with unacceptable manuscripts. To them the whole subject of impossible contributions has become a live issue, so that the exploitation of some comically illiterate attempt carries a piquancy which they can feel and smile at even though others may find it somewhat tedious and inapropos. "The Transparent Ghost" may not be an austere literary asset, yet I cannot doubt but that it will make many friends for the magazine, and perhaps assuage more than one subtle sting left behind by rejected MSS.

I hope, anyway, that this matter won't be instrumental in deposing Mr. Baird from the editorship until he is himself ready to relinquish it; for I feel that he must have done very well on the whole, considering the adverse conditions encountered in the quest for really weird stories. That he could get hold of as many as five perfectly satisfactory yarns is an almost remarkable phenomenon in view of the lack of truly artistic and individual expression among professional fiction-writers. When I see a magazine tending toward the commonplace, the last people I blame are the editors and publishers; for even a cursory survey of the professional writing field shows that the trouble is something infinitely deeper and wider---something concerning no one publication, but the whole atmosphere and temperament of the American fiction business. And even when I get to such large units as this, I can't be any too savage about the blaming---because I realise that much of the trouble is absolutely inevitable---as incapable of human remedy as the fate of any protagonist in the Greek drama. Here in America we have a very conventional and half-educated public---a public trained under one phase or another of the Puritan tradition, and almost dulled to aesthetic sensitiveness because of the monotonous and omnipresent overstressing of the ethical element. We have millions who lack the intellectual independence, courage, and flexibility to get an artistic thrill out of a bizarre situation, and who enter sympathetically into a story only when it ignores the colour and vividness of actual human emotions and conventionally presents a simple plot based on artificial, ethically sugar-coated values and leading to a flat denouement which shall vindicate every current platitude and leave no mystery unexplained by the shallow comprehension of the most mediocre reader.

That is the kind of a public publishers confront, and only a fool or a rejection-venomed author could blame the publishers for a condition caused not by them but by the whole essence and historic tradition of our civilisation. If publishers of general magazines sought and used artistically original types of fiction, they would lose their readers almost to a man. Half of the people wouldn't understand what the tales were about, and the other half would find the characters unsympathetic---because they would think and act like real people instead of like the dummies which the American middle classes have been taught and persuaded to consider and accept as people. Such, I repeat, is the inevitable condition regarding general fiction; the enormous bulk of fiction which sets the national standard and determines the type of technical training given all fictional students. But even this is not all! Added to this, as if by the perversity of a malign fate, is the demand of an overspeeding public for excessive quantity production. Baldly put, the American people demand more stories per year than the really artistic authors of America could possibly write. A real artist never works fast, and never turns out large quantities. He can't contract to deliver so many words in such and such a time, but must work slowly, gradually, and by mood; utilising favourable states of mind and refraining from putting down the stuff his brain turns out when it is tired or disinclined to such work. Now this, of course, won't do when there are hundreds of magazines to fill at regular intervals. So many pages per month or week have got to be filled, and if the artistic writers can't do it, the publishers must find the next-best thing---persons of mere talent, who can learn certain mechanical rules and technical twists, and put forth stuff of external smoothness, whose sole merit is conforming to patterns and rehashing the situations and reactions which have been found interesting to the people by previous experience. In many cases these writers achieve popularity---because the public recognise the elements that pleased them before, and are satisfied to receive them again in transposed form. Actually, the typical reader has very little true taste; and judges by absurd freaks, sentimentalities, and analogies. So it has come to be an accepted tradition that American fiction is not an art but a trade---a thing to be learnt by rule by almost anybody, and demanding above all else a complete submergence of one's own personality and thought in the general stream of conventional patterns which correspond to the bleakly uniform view of life forced on us by mediocre leadership. Success therefore comes not to the man of genius, but to the clever fellow who knows how to catch the public point of view and play up to it. Glittering tinsel reputations are built up, and dumb driven hundreds of otherwise honest plumbers take correspondence courses and try to be like these scintillant "great ones" whose achievements are really no more than mere charlatany. Such is our fictional situation---indiscriminate hordes of writers, mostly without genius, striving by erroneous methods toward a goal which is erroneous to start with! You see the thing at its zenith in papers like THE SATURDAY EVENING POST---where men of more or less real talent are weighted down with the freely-flung gold which forms the price of their originality and artistic conscience. A fearful incubus---which only a few adroit or daring souls ever shake off.

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Now weird fiction, even in America, is not subject to the limitations of general fiction. When a person---the sort of person forming the readers of macabre fiction---wants an outré narrative at all, he is willing and anxious to take something removed from the beaten track of the national tradition; the tradition of conventional insipidity. Here is our real exception---the man who wants something original---but in the face of a general tradition which usurps all the education of our story-tellers, we can only ask in tragic accents, who is going to give it to him? Popular custom dings it into every young author that he must conform to patterns and reflect a smug artificial world and psychology. How can he beat this game of loaded dice in the one matter of the weird, which as a minority branch can hardly be expected to develop a school all its own in defiance of general fictional custom? I've yet to see the person who can answer that question. I've tried to take in hand a bright young chap in this town---a fellow with a conventional start, but who is now anxious to succeed with the weird. Time and again I alter his work, deleting commonplace situations, images, and reactions, and introducing touches which he never thought of, but which I consider dramatically effective in that kind of work. Time and again I do this, yet with the most discouraging results. I succeed for a time---then in some knotty tangle his old training asserts itself and he surmounts a situation in the stereotyped, unimaginative popular way. And all the time I am trying to help him I have a curiously contrary sensation of guilt, in that I may be spoiling him for salable work in the non-weird field by shaking his faith in flashy conventions!

So when I read WEIRD TALES, and note here and there a story full of hackneyed stuff---the laboratory, the club-room with well-groomed men around the fire, the beautiful queen of remote planets, the ghost that is a human villain trying to scare somebody out of a house...etc. etc....I never think of blaming Mr. Baird; for out of a somewhat wide knowledge of non-eminent writers, gained through various club affiliations, I am perfectly well aware that he had to take the stuff because no man living could get enough of anything else to fill the required number of pages at the required intervals. I don't believe there is enough first-rate weird fiction written in America to fill a monthly magazine the size of WEIRD TALES---and it could be developed only by catching the author young and making it possible for him to abstain from doing conventional fiction. The best you'll ever get is from men of liberal culture who do that sort of thing as an avocation---for the sheer thrill of it, and not with a professional frame of mind. I should say Paul Suter is like that---or Burton Peter Thom, or Seabury Quinn, or M. Humphreys, or Anthony M. Rud (though he's had a book published), or several others I don't recall plainly by name. These people have all been represented by excellent work, and I believe it would almost be better to have more than one tale by each in a single issue than to use less vivid material merely for the sake of non-repeating on the same table of contents. "Beyond the Door" was a finely effective piece---as were "The Floor Above", "Ooze", and "The Phantom Farmhouse". Another thing I noted---some of the best ideas---the ideas which showed the most original power and understanding of the essence of the terrible and grotesque---were handled by obvious novices or at least writers with no command of technique or sense of literary balance. I'm quite enthusiastic about "The Weaving Shadows", by W.H. Holmes in your very first issue. That thing is bungling and halting so far as form goes---but I'll be hanged if it hasn't got a thrill which no commonplace person, however highly trained, could ever duplicate. "The Open Window" by Frank Owen (January) is not dissimilar as a case of first-rate idea and third-rate development; though here the poignancy of the idea and the crudeness of the narration are both less marked. I honestly believe that one way to get good weird material is to tell the editor to sharpen his scent for the genuinely bizarre irrespective of technique, accept any powerful plot or atmospheric triumph irrespective of technique or even literacy---paying half the usual

market price and telling the author why---and then have the raw material completely re-written by some staff writer of competent training, who could add his name as collaborator or not, according to the amount of work he puts into it. In this way, I am confident, you could get many better things than you could by excluding all MSS. below a certain technical standard. It isn't always the college man, or even the reasonably proficient writer, who has the mental slant that makes vivid ideas. Of course, there would hardly be an abundance of these notable but inadequate MSS., yet I think there would be enough to warrant their acceptance and re-writing. I know I've many a time doctored up something for another fellow which seemed very crude at first, but when after completion made me wish I were its full author. But at best it's hard work getting convincing horror material. Among even the most eminent the true touch of sublime and delirious fear is deucedly hard to find. Arthur Machen is the only living master---in the full sense of the word---I could possibly name in this field.....a point which I think anyone can appreciate by comparing his episode of "The White Powder" in "The Three Impostors" with every other tale of terror known to this generation. I think, though, that with the requisite capital, a magazine could train up a group of effective weird writers by offering them a free and lucrative field, and letting some expert give them recommendations as to reading---what authors to avoid, and what ones to emulate. I know a kid---a junior at Columbia named Frank B. Long, Jr.,---who could give you some creepy stuff if he could be persuaded to write out half the ideas he has. I'm inducing him to send in a poem---"An Old Wife Speaketh It"---to WEIRD TALES, and if he receives encouragement he may furnish more. There must be more like him---if one has the time to look them up. A youth in your own city---Alfred Galpin Jr., now holding a post-graduate fellowship at the university of Chicago---wrote something at sixteen which would chill any average blood; but circumstance---and the general scholastic genius which is going to make an eminent professor of him some day---sidetracked this phase of his genius.

What you say about writing up and amplifying real horrors and ghastly tragedies is interesting and probably sensible from the standpoint of popular interest. It ought to attract readers because of its appeal to the strings of memory---nearly everyone will have heard each theme mentioned in Associated Press items, hence will feel an added sense of shuddering reality. Yet from the art standpoint---from the standpoint of effective evocation of nameless ecstasies of keen-edged and titillating fear---I don't think anything can equal good weird fiction. There is only a passing horror in sordid, sanguinary gruesomeness---in bloody axe murders and sadistic morbidities. What really moves the profoundest springs of human fear and unholy fascination is something which suggests black infinite vistas of cryptic, brooding, half-inscrutable monstrosities for ever lurking behind Nature and as capable of being manifested again as in the case treated. The supreme principle of this sort of horror is any suggestion of the major violation of some basic law of Nature---the breaking down of the line betwixt life and death, man and the other animals, etc.---or the annihilation of the principle of time and space, bringing vastly remote ages or localities

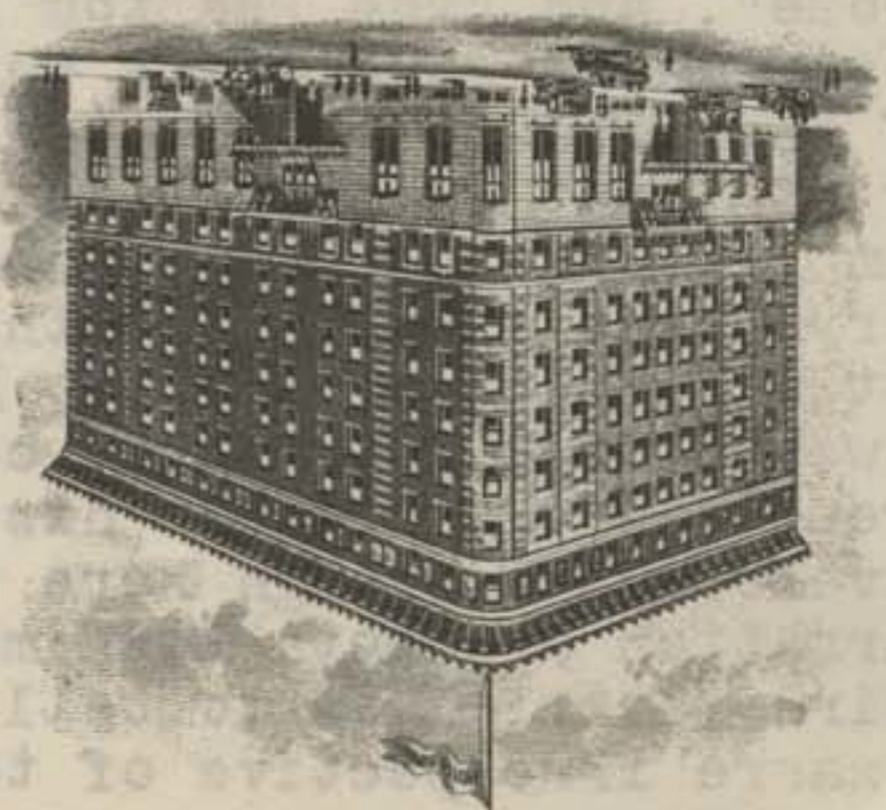
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into juxtaposition. A true artist in the terrible can always invent ideas and plots a thousandfold more effective than any real tragedy or fright which ever darkened the earth, gilding them---or ebonising them---with a subtlety of atmosphere which is after all the most potent single factor in any imaginative tale. Come to think of it, I guess atmosphere and colour mean more any day than idea or plot---this being the reason we have so few effective phantasies in these days when plot and action are played up at the expense of the more leisurely attributes of writing. Of course, atmosphere is the one thing which a skilful developer can give a real-life tragedy. He can colour it to his heart's content, and inject suspicions of more than mortal motives and agencies which bring it close to the effective fictional state. I certainly think your idea is worth trying, though as a lover of fictional art for its own sake I should hate to see the monthly quota of stories descend to the minimum record of two or three, exclusive of a novel. I don't think I really enjoy anything so much as a really good weird story. I would give a thousand dollars not to have read Poe's "House of Usher" or "Ligeia", just for the thrill of following them breathlessly with pristine suspense over what was coming! I have never seen a copy of "The Terrific Register", and must confess to a perfect ignorance of what it is. If you can connect me with a copy, at my expense, I shall consider myself ever afterward your debtor! By the way, though---just before I forget it---let me say that I think the weakest thing about the present WEIRD TALES is the prevalence of news "fillers", some of which have a very remote connection with actual weirdness. Bald news certainly needs a skilful retouching before it assorts well with the fictional atmosphere. I'd suggest that the new policy of using poetry is very good....and don't think I say this because Mr. Baird has just accepted some verse from me! I wish you could use more verse by my California friend Clark Ashton Smith, who has perpetrated some terrific flights such as "The Hashish-Eater; or, The Apocalypse of Evil." Smith also draws splendidly, and with more encouragement than he received from Houtain, could turn out some sketches much better than his illustrations to my "Lurking Fear". But all this is mere random suggestion, made whilst I think of it.

I am interested in the idea you originally formed from my stuff in HOME BREW---especially interested because I consider that stuff among my poorest. Ordinarily I refuse altogether to write to order, or to give my tales any mechanical limitations to suit other people. But Houtain is a personal friend of mine---he'd have to be, to get me to read his ribald rag---and when he started HOME BREW he was desperately anxious to get me to give him some of my stuff. I offered him his pick of all my MSS., but they didn't look quite flashy and lowbrow enough to suit him; so he began to entreat that I prepare him a series of six tales, each of 2000 words and complete in itself, which should go the limit for sensational morbidity. I might add that my taste does not run especially to the morbid asx such. What I love is the unreal and the fantastic in every form; though of course only such of my work as is terrible could ever please a popular audience. Finally I agreed, for friendship's sake, to give Houtain what he wanted, running over a list of possible plots until he took a fancy to the notion of a grave-robbing physician who restored life to bodies and was finally snatched himself by the bodies he had resuscitated, together with certain nameless companions of theirs. This I developed into the series "Herbert West--Reanimator", and I can assure you I was sick of the job before I was half done. The necessity for the completeness of each instalment spoiled the artistry of the whole thing---involving as it did the wearisome recapitulation of former matter in each instalment, and the eternal repetition of the description of Dr. Herbert West and his unamiable pursuits. When I had that out of the way, I vowed I would never again write a tale to order; and succumbed in the case of "The Lurking Fear" only because Houtain permitted me to forego the series form and make it a regular serial. The prospect of Smith's illustrations was another bait---though in the end they proved much

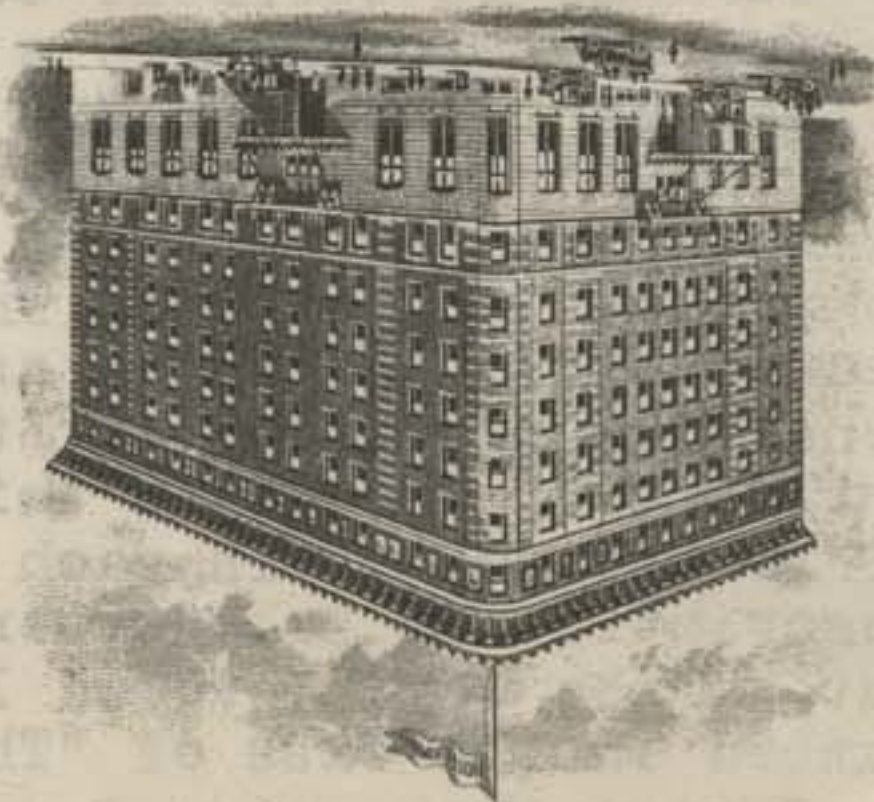
below his usual pictorial batting average. But "The Lurking Fear" never satisfied me, because I unwisely tried to follow Houtain's wish for perfectly equal instalments---irrespective of dramatic values---and for a smashing sub-climax at the end of each instalment. The result of all this was a certain artificiality and straining, and a redundancy of incident in many of the instalments. I still feel that I have half-wasted a good plot idea, and often believe I would like to rewrite the thing for my own artistic satisfaction and let some magazine publish the new version free after securing the necessary permission from Houtain! I don't think it ought to be a serial at all---it's short enough to be complete without a break or chapter-division, especially with the redundant matter cut out. But it taught me one thing---never to try to suit the other fellow or let my original instincts of form get overridden! Now I'm fully resolved to let all my work stay unpublished unless somebody will print it without a comma or semicolon changed! The old-fashioned touch in my work is the result of my natural temperament and reading. I grew up with a large family library in a big house, and browsed at random because I was too ill to attend school or even follow a tutor's course with any regularity. Somehow I acquired a fondness for the past as compared with the present---a fondness which had plenty of chance to reign because my semi-invalidism continued and kept me from college and business despite the most extravagant ambitions of boyhood. Nothing modern had any permanent power to fascinate me---and until my WEIRD TALES venture my only acquaintance with modern magazines was a spell of ALL-STORY and ARGOSY reading ten or fifteen years ago, undertaken for the purpose of capturing the occasional weird yarns in these periodicals---especially the former. The classics were my diet, and I have never found anything else half so good! My style, of course, is fundamentally and immutably antique---complacently antique, I might add---and most of my tastes correspond. A new interest which has grown as my health has grown during the past three years, is that of Colonial architecture---the visual re-creation of the 18th century by study of its surviving landmarks---and most of my new-born strength has been utilised in the exploration of the antique towns which abound in my native New-England. So really, I don't think you could have paid me a handsomer unconscious compliment than when you suspected my "Lurking Fear" of being a re-written antique. I hope you didn't think it was very extensively re-written! Only a charge of verbatim plagiarism from an 18th century master could have pleased me more!

I shall watch the modified future of WEIRD TALES with keen interest, looking with especial avidity for your own work, since you so emphatically share my aversion for the insipid rubber-stamp popular magazine atmosphere. The acquisition of Houdini ought to be a great selling asset, for his fame and ability in his spectacular line are vast and indisputable. I am not much of a vaudeville follower, but it happens that I saw him at the old Keith's Theatre here nearly a quarter of a century ago---it must have been at the very outset of his career, for he was not then especially well known. Since then it interested me to hear that he comes from Appleton, Wisconsin, the home town of my learned young friend Alfred Galpin, whom I mentioned earlier ~~in this epistle~~ in this epistle. I did not know that he

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writes, or that he possessed such a notable library as you describe. Certainly, it will afford me unmeasured delight to meet this library and its versatile owner---a thing the more probable because, although not much given to long trips, it is very likely that I shall live in New York after the coming spring. I suppose his articles naturally would have the imperfect background you mention, because he has been mainly accustomed to expressing his personality in different ways. I can tell better after seeing the one in the March issue. Perhaps Houdini furnishes an instance of the condition I mentioned before---the creator of genius who needs a re-writer to give his recorded work the form which may perfectly express its spirit.

Your compliment anent "The Rats in the Walls" delights me mightily---the more so because Robert H. Davis of the Munsey firm rejected it after some deliberation as too horrible for his readers.....another illustration of the essential insipidity and conventionality inculcated into our writing public by some of its leaders. When the manuscript was read among the circle of my friends in New York, Arthur Leeds---the man who conducts the "Thinks and Things" department in THE WRITER'S MONTHLY---was gratifyingly enthusiastic about it, but declared pretty dogmatically, I am told, that no American magazine would ever accept it. Such are the tacitly acknowledged and submissively accepted conventions of the ~~timid~~ timid majority!

I feel flattered that you should wish to see a long manuscript of mine--25,000 words or more---and will probably have something of the sort to show you in the near future. Formerly I wrote only short stories, believing that this was the ideal form for weird fiction; but perusal of certain weird novels gradually changed my point of view, until after my Houtain experiments in greater length I began to map out certain of my more involved ideas as possible novels. I keep plot ideas and skeletonic synopses recorded in a blank-book---the sort one would call a "commonplace-book" if the term did not carry a certain irony as applied to the contents of this particular one! My main novel idea is that of a long phantasy to be called (subject to change) "Azathoth", dealing with bizarre scenes somewhat in the exotic spirit of the Arabian Nights. I don't know when I shall tackle the actual writing of this, but I'm sure you wouldn't care for it for WEIRD TALES, since it will be horrible only in parts, and contain also much prose-poetic matter and descriptions of cities and landscapes which are marvellous and weird, but not gruesome or terrible. It will belong to the category of "Vathek", or some of Dunsany's longer, more ethereal, and less sophisticated things. In the horrible parts, though, I don't intend to be in the least insipid or commonplace! The scene will probably be in a distant planet, and there may be no human characters in the accepted sense of the word. Other things than humans, you know, may go through very vivid adventures and embark on very picturesque quests. But I think I shall send you, unless it pans out too long, a second tale which is about ready for the actual composition. This (also provisionally) will be known as "The House of the Worm", and deal with the frantic message sent by a dying and prematurely aged father to the boy who ran away twenty years before because of a nameless dread of his new stepmother....the heiress who lived in the dark house in the swamp. The young man comes, and finds his father alone in the house (or castle---I'm not sure whether I'll put it in New England or Old England or the German Black Forest).....alone, yet not alone.....for he looks furtively about him....and other forms flit through remote corridors, strangely attracting swarms of flies after them....and vultures hover over the whole swamp.....and the young man sees things when he goes out on one occasion.....but I needn't say more. You can see what sort of a yarn it is, and I shall certainly send it when it is done; unless, as I say, it comes to an odd and peculiarly unacceptable length. Perhaps I'll send it anyway.

But I see that I've rattled this letter out to unconscionable lengths--- for which I trust you'll duly forgive me. I hope my various remarks may have buried in them some grains of sense which will answer for intelligent suggestions, though as a practical planner I never was very notable. I certainly wish you the very best of luck with WEIRD TALES, and hope every modification may develop in the right direction; though I realise very fully all the difficulties besetting any experiment of the sort. Is it ethical and possible to get in touch with writers in other magazines? In thinking over my old ALL-STORY reading, and newer specimens brought to my attention, I recall several people who did very fair work---and one case of actual excellence. This last is a writer signing himself A. Merritt, who some five years ago had a novelette in the ALL-STORY called "The Moon Pool". The power of dark and titanic suggestion in this unexplained mystery was enormous; and I was not surprised when the thing came out in book form, with two errors of astronomical nature removed. Later Merritt had two more things in the All-Story, both inferior, and showing the devitalising pressure of the cheap popular-magazine ideal. Given a free hand, I feel that this writer could snap back into his old mood and beat any other weird author in the current magazine field; and I wish there were a way of getting in touch with him. Another man with promise is Philip M. Fisher, Jr., who had a fine thing in a recent ALL-STORY, spoiled only by a tame ending obviously designed to suit the gentle Bob Davis. Told to let the human race go to hell, Fisher could accomplish wonders. His tale was called "Fungus Island". Then there were some old-timers whom I recall only dimly. Victor Rousseau was an ALL-STORY star of the first magnitude, who wrote at least one noxiously powerful thing called "The Sea-Demons". Street and Smith in 1919 published a magazine called THE THRILL BOOK, which although I unfortunately never saw it, is spoken of very highly by those who did see it. Some of its writers must be useful hands to have around WEIRD TALES, and I think they would be worth looking up unless my informant greatly exaggerated. This same informant, by the way, is quite certain that the best story in the November WEIRD TALES is pilfered word for word from a story in that magazine---"The Crawling Death", by P.A. Connolly. I think he wrote Mr. Baird about it, and he is still uncertain whether it was an out-and-out steal, or a case of the same writer selling his work twice on the chance that THE THRILL BOOK was too short-lived to be remembered.

But I certainly have rambled enough! I shall be very glad to see the cheque when it comes, though well knowing that my own straits are shared more or less by everybody else all along the line! I hope the difficulty of payment doesn't deter any first-rate writers from contributing....I suggested to Mr. Baird that it might have exactly the opposite effect, scaring off the mercenaries, and leaving those artistic writers who draw horror for horror's sake!

With all good wishes and appreciations, believe me,

Springfield, Massachusetts, most sincerely yours,

*H.P. Lovecraft*

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