

# The RED LAMP



By MARY ROBERTS RINEHART

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June 23.

There is a division in my family. Edith has come out with her plan, which is to "spread out," as she puts it, in the main house at Twin Hollows, and to let Warren Halliday spend his vacation at the boat-house!

"Renting it to him, I suppose?" I inquired over my breakfast bacon.

"Renting it?" she said indignantly.

"You wouldn't have the nerve to ask money for that tumble-down place, would you? And anyhow, you can't get blood out of a stone."

There is a terrible frankness about Edith at times.

But Jane is as equally determined not to occupy the house at any cost. It was written all over her yesterday, and there is still an ominous set look about her mouth.

If Jane would be more open it would be easier; if she would only come to me and say that she is afraid of the house I think I could reassure her. It may be that that silly photograph is still in her mind. But why



So, Tonight, I Am Wondering.

would she not even stay in the house yesterday? She went out into the garden and picked some of its neglected flowers instead.

"It's a pity not to use them," she said, and then looked at me with such a white and pitiful face that I put my arm around her.

"I must have been a very bad husband," I said, "if you think I am going to force you to live here. Who am I?" I added, "against you and Jack?"

But she did not smile. "If you want to come here," she said, making what I felt was a painful concession, "why couldn't we live at the Lodge? It is really quite sweet. And we could rent this."

"Would that be quite moral, under the circumstances?" I'm not asking the circumstances," I added hastily. "I'm simply putting the question."

"We could ask a lower rent."

There is, I sometimes think, a fundamental difference in the ethical views of men and women. To Jane it is quite proper to let a house with what she believes is a most undesirable quality, if she lowers the price. She does not suggest advertising: "One house, furnished, reputed to be haunted." On the contrary, she proposes to entice tenants with a lower rent, and once having got them there, to be able to say, in effect: "What would you? The house is cheap. True, it has certain disadvantages; I am sorry you have been bothered. But you have saved money."

Aside from this viewpoint, however, the idea is sound enough. We can be comfortable at the Lodge. And—let me always be frank in this Journal—I may have my occasional yearnings for adventure, but they have their limitations, and the talk Edith has reported as taking place between old Thomas and herself yesterday after I left them has revealed them to myself.

Edith, on the contrary, finds the situation "really thrilling."

"It's a good house, yes'm," said Thomas. "For them as likes it, I wouldn't be caught dead in it at night myself."

"I hope you never will be," said Edith.

"It ain't nothing you can put your finger on," said Thomas. "It's just knocks and raps, and doors opening and closing. But I say that's enough."

"It sounds like plenty," said Edith. "Of course it may be rats."

"It's a right husky rat that'll open a closed door, and I ain't yet seen a rat that could move a chair. Besides, I ain't ever heard that rats are partial to a red light."

"Now, see here, Thomas," Edith reports herself as saying, "either you've said too much or you've said too little. What about a red light?"

Stripped of further trimming, it appears that some two years ago a small red lamp was installed in the den at Twin Hollows, and is now still there, Thomas having declined to destroy it for fear of some dire and mysterious vengeance.

"Not for light, as far as I could see, miss," he said. "I never seen him read by it. But put in it was, and the night it first came Annie Cochran said something came into her room and pulled the covers off her bed."

"How—shameless!" said Edith.

Like the lady of color who said to the judge that she had "just sort of lost her taste" for her husband, I begin to lose my taste for this lamp. But one wonders whether its evil reputation is not a survival from the days of Mrs. Riggs, when "a small red lamp was found to offer least disturbance, and was customarily used."

June 24.

Edith has lost and Jane has won. We shall spend the summer at the Lodge.

But I feel that Jane's victory brings her no particular pleasure, that even to go to the Lodge is a concession she is making against some hidden apprehension.

Edith, however, has won in one way. Warren Halliday is to have the boat-house.

We motored out together today, I to look over the Lodge more carefully, and Halliday to inspect his prospective quarters. He is thoroughly likeable, a nice clean-cut young fellow, not too handsome but manly and with a good war record, and badly cut up at his failure to find a job for the summer.

"I'd do anything," he said. "Sell neckties if necessary! But I can't even land that. Although—" he forced a grin—"I have a nice taste in neckties!"

On the way out I told him something of the history of the house, and a little—very little—of Jane's nervousness concerning it.

In view of our conversation, it was interesting later that day, at the Lodge, to have old Thomas intimate that Uncle Horace had not died a natural death, but had "seen something" which had caused it.

As a matter of fact, he brought out certain rather curious facts, which appear to have been somehow overlooked, or at least considered unimportant, at the inquest.

For instance, he had been writing at his desk when the attack came. His pen was found on the floor. But there was no sign of what he had been writing, save for a mark on the fresh blotter, as if he had blotted something there. The most curious thing, however, according to old Thomas, was the matter of lights.

When Annie Cochran found him the following morning, on the floor beside his desk, all the lights were out, including his desk lamp.

"But the red lamp was going in the den," said old Thomas. "It didn't make much light, so nobody noticed it until the doctor came. He saw it

right off. I leave it to you, what shut off that desk lamp?"

I rather gather from Thomas that the ill-repute of the red lamp has spread over the countryside. The house had a bad reputation to start with, and now comes Annie Cochran and her red lamp, and a fairly poor outlook so far as renting the property is concerned.

The Lodge proves to be weather-proof and in good condition, and the boat-house quite livable, with the addition of a few things from the main house.

(Note: It is necessary, for the sake of the narrative, to describe the boat-house. It is built up on piles which raise it above tide level, and the dory and canoe belonging to the house are stored in the lower portion of it in winter. The old sloop, however, not in commission for several years, was at this time anchored to a buoy about a hundred yards out in the bay, and showed the buffeting of wind and tide.

Across the salt marsh, from the foot of the lawn, extended a raised wooden runway which led to the boat-house and the beach. This walk also prolongs itself into a sort of ramshackle pier, from which a runway extends to a wooden float. At the time of our visit examination showed the float badly in need of repair, a number of the barrels which supported it having more or less gone to pieces.

It was, as will be seen, during Halliday's repair of this float that he made that discovery which was later to see the commencement of my troubles.)

All in all, Jane's scheme is practical, although Edith is frankly disappointed.

"I would have looked so sweet on that terrace!" she says, and makes a dreadful face at me.

But she is secretly pleased. She sees herself in the cottage, in a bungalow apron, presenting a picture of lovely but humble domesticity to young Halliday, and thus forcing his hand. For if I know anything of Edith, she is going to marry him. And if I know anything of Halliday, he is going to marry nobody he cannot support.

It may be an interesting summer. Curious about that lamp on the desk, the night the poor old chap passed out. Of course, he might have turned it out and risen to go upstairs when he felt the attack coming on. But wouldn't he have laid the pen down first? One would do that automatically.

It's a pity the blotting pad has been destroyed.

June 25.

The last, or almost the last, word Uncle Horace wrote the night of his death was "danger."

But how much significance am I to attach to that? To poor old Horace there would have been danger in over exertion; in that sense of the word he was always in danger. But it was not a word he was apt to use lightly.

Yet what conceivable danger could have threatened him?

This morning, clearing my desk preparatory to our exodus, I resorted to an old trick of mine. I turned over my large desk blotter and presented a fresh and unblemished side to the world. It came to me then that thus probably since the invention of blotting paper neatness been established with a minimum of effort, and that it might have been resorted to by Annie Cochran.

After luncheon I started to Twin Hollows with the back of the car piled high with a varied assortment of breakable toilet articles, a lamp or two, and a certain number of dishes. The Lodge was open, and Annie Cochran vigorously cleaning it, and having deposited my fragile load there, I wandered up to the house.

Thomas was cutting the lawn, with a mare borrowed for the purpose pulling the old horse mower, and the Oakville constable, Starr, who is also the local carpenter, was replacing old boards with new on the raised walk to the beach.

"Hear you're going to live in the Lodge," said Starr, spitting over the rail.

"Mrs. Porter feels the main house is too large for us."

He eyed me sharply.

"Yes," he said. "Pretty big house. Well, I'm in a dollar on it."

"A dollar?"

"I bet you'd never live in it," he said, and there was a furtive gleam of amusement in his eye as he marked a board preparatory to sawing it.

"It's my opinion, Starr," I said, "that you people around here have talked this place into disrepute."

"Maybe we have," he said, non-committally.

"Mr. Horace Porter lived there for twenty years."

"And died there," he reminded me.

"Of chronic heart trouble."

"So the doctor says."

"But you don't think so?"

"I know he had got a right forcible knock on the head, too."

"I thought that came from his fall."

"Well, it may have," he said, and signified the end of the conversation by falling to work with his saw. I waited, but he evidently felt he had said enough, and his further speech was guarded in the extreme. He didn't know whether Mr. Porter had been writing or not when it happened. No, he'd been the first to get there, and he had seen no paper.

Asked if he had had any reason, any experience of his own, to make him wager we would not live in the house, he only shook his head. But as I started back he called after me.

"I don't know as there's any truth in it," he said. "But they do say, on still nights, that he's been heard

coughing around the place. I ain't ever heard it myself."

So Thomas thinks that Uncle Horace was frightened to death, and Starr intimates that he was murdered, and all this was seething in the minds of these people a year ago, without it reaching me at all. There had been no inquest; simply, as I recall, Doctor Hayward notifying the coroner by telephone, and giving organic heart disease as the cause.

I was, I admit, startled this morning as I turned back to the main house. But I knew the tendency of small inbred communities to feed on themselves, for lack of outside nutriment, and by the time I had reached the terrace I was putting Starr's state-



"And Died There," He Reminded Me.

ment about a blow in the same class with the cough heard at night.

I turned and went into the house to find that Annie Cochran had turned the blotter and that the last word the poor old boy had written had been "danger."

June 26.

We are settled in the Lodge, and whatever Edith may say as to its romantic outside appearance, within it is frankly hideous. It is all a clutter of organ downstairs to beds that dip in the center above, it is atrocious

Yet tonight Jane is a happy woman.

Can it be that women require rest from their possessions, as for instance I do from my dinner clothes? That it gives them the same sense of freedom to don, speaking figuratively, a parlor organ and the cheapest of other furnishings, as it does me to put on my ancient fishing garments?

Or is Jane simply relieved?

I confess that tonight with Larkin's advertisement for the other house before me, I feel not only in the position of a man attempting to sell a gold brick, but that I have a secret hankering for the gold brick myself.

"For rent for the season, large handsomely furnished house on bay three miles from Oakville. Beautiful location. Thirty-two acres, landscaped. Flower and kitchen gardens. Low rental."

Yet I dare say we shall do well enough. After all, there comes a time when ambition ceases to burn, or romance to stir, and the highest cry of the human heart is for peace. Here, I feel, is peace.

June 27.

I have found Uncle Horace's letter, and in it seems so curious that there can be, it matters to me, but two interpretations of it. One is that, somehow, I have had all along a subconscious knowledge of its presence behind the drawer. But I hesitate to accept that. I am orderly by instinct, and when I went over the desk after his death, the merest indication of a paper caught behind the drawer would have sent me after it.

The other explanation is that I received a telepathic message. It came, as I fancy such messages must come, not from outside but from within. I heard nothing; it welled up, above the incoherent and vague wanderings of a mind not definitely in action, in a clear cut and definite form. "Take out the bottom drawer on the right."

But if I am to accept telepathy, I am to believe that I am not alone in my knowledge of this letter. Yet considering the tone of it, the awful possibility it indicates, who could have such a knowledge and yet keep it to himself?

How did it get behind the drawer? If the brownish substance on the corner turns out to be blood, and I think it is, then it was placed in the drawer after he died. Annie Cochran and Thomas both deny having seen any paper about. The doctor, perhaps? But would he not have read it first?

It had been crumpled into a ball and thrown into the drawer, and the subsequent opening of the drawer had pushed it back, out of sight. So much is clear.

But—after he fell!

Suppose—and in the privacy of this Journal I may surely let my imagination wander—suppose then, that some other hand picked up this paper, ignorant of its contents, and in a hurried attempt to put the room in or-

der, flung it into the drawer? Or toward the waste basket beside it, and it fell short? Suppose, in a word, that some other hand, again, turned out the dim red lamp in the next room or left it to see the way to escape?

I must not let my nerves run away with me. Murder is an ugly word, and after all we have Hayward's verdict of death by heart failure. But a sufficient shock or a blow, might have brought that on. Fright, even, for the poor old chap was frightened when he wrote that letter. Trembling but uncompromising. That was like him.

"I realize fully the unpleasantness of my own situation; even, if you are consistent, its danger. But—"

But what? But in spite of this I shall do as I have threatened, probably.

I am profoundly moved tonight. We did not love one another, but he was old and alone, and menaced by some monstrous wickedness. Just what that wickedness was no one can say, but I fully believe tonight that he died of it. . . .

I began to go through the desk once more. All important papers had been taken away after the death, and the drawers contained the usual ruffian of such depositories, old keys, ancient check books, their stubs filled in Uncle Horace's neat hand.

Naturally, I was thinking of him. More or less, I was concentrated on him, if this is any comfort to my spiritualistic friends. He had, indeed, fallen out of the very chair in which I sat when he was stricken, and had apparently cut his head badly on the corner of the desk. All this was in my mind, as I closed the last drawer and surveyed the heap of rubbish on the desk.

I suppose I was subconsciously reconstructing the night of his death, when he had penned that word "danger" which now lay, clearly outlined in reverse, on the blotter. And that when I wandered into the den, looking for a place to store what Lear calls the detritus piled up on the desk, I was still thinking of it. But I cannot feel that my entrance into the room, or my idly scribbling on the red lamp which stood there, had the slightest connection with the message I seemed at that moment to receive: "Take out the bottom drawer on the right."

I have heard people who believe in this sort of thing emphasize the peculiar insistence of the messages, and this was true in this case. I do not recall that there was any question in my mind, either, as to which bottom drawer on the right I was to remove. And behind the drawer I found the letter.

(Note: I made no copy of the letter in the original Journal, so I give it here.)

Unfinished letter of Mr. Horace Por-

ter, addressed to some one unknown, and dated the day of his death, June 27 of the preceding year:

"I am writing this in great distress of mind, and in what I feel is a righteous anger. It is incredible to me that you cannot see the wickedness of the course you have proposed.

"In all earnestness I appeal to you to consider the enormity of the idea. Your failure to comprehend my own attitude to it, however, makes me believe that you may be tempted to go on with it. In that case I shall feel it my duty, not only to go to the police but to warn society in general.

"I realize fully the unpleasantness of my own situation; even, if you are consistent, its danger. But—"

The letter had not been finished.

(Continued Next Week)

## My Favorite Stories

by Irvin S. Cobb

### Practically No Reason for It

THERE once was a clerk of the hotel in a small Maine town who had a unique way of keeping a diary. Each evening he wrote on the bottom lines of the page of the register for the current date a brief account of the principal daily doings in the community, usually coupled with a summary of his own personal reactions to them. Sometimes his phrasology was unusual but always it was amply descriptive.

A friend of mine was stopping at the hotel, having gone up to Maine on a fishing trip. He fell into the habit of glancing through the back pages of the register, more from the enjoyment he got from the quaint language of the entries than because he was interested in bygone neighborhood history.

On succeeding pages of the book for a week of the early spring of the year previous, he found these progressive records of a local tragedy:

Tuesday—"While fishing through the ice yesterday, Henry Whippet fell in the Sac river up to his neck. He was drawn out and took home."

Wednesday—"Henry Whippet is in bed with a powerful bad cold. His folks are thinking some about calling in a doctor."

Thursday—"Henry Whippet rapidly continuing to get no better. It now looks like he is fixing to break out with the pneumonia."

Friday—"Henry Whippet is sinking rapidly."

Saturday—"At nine o'clock this morning our esteemed fellow-citizen, Henry J. Whippet, Esq., went to his Maker entirely uncalled for."

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