

APRIL

# Weird Tales

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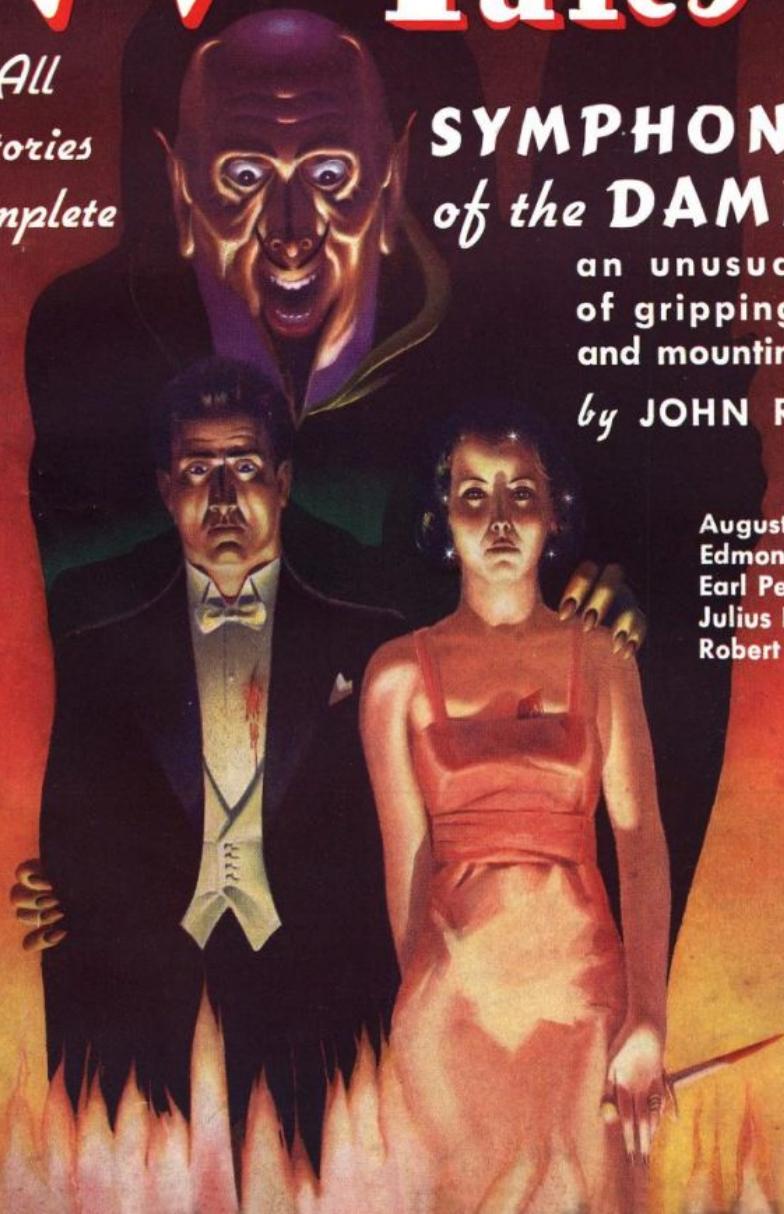
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# *We Are the Dead*

By  
HENRY KUTTNER

*A poignant, brief tale of a weird experience in Arlington Cemetery*

First published in *Weird Tales*, April 1937.

Senator Kennicott was grateful for the cool night wind on his flushed face. He wished Hobson, walking slowly at his side, would stop his interminable argument about the bill. The man's high-pitched, rather unpleasant voice seemed out of place, incongruous in the peaceful hush of Arlington Cemetery.

Hobson was panting a little, his fleshy, well-massaged face creased in annoyance. The walk through the cemetery had been no hardship to the slim, whipcord body of the Senator, but Hobson was not used to walking. Kennicott had felt that a stroll homeward from the banquet would calm his turbulent thoughts, excited by the innumerable activities of Memorial Day; and Hobson, anxious to settle the matter of the bill, had rather unwillingly decided to accompany him.

"It may bring us closer to war," the Senator said, breaking in sharply on Hobson's involved explanation.

"Not at all. It's merely preparedness." Hobson's sharp little eyes searched the other's face. "We must protect American interests in foreign countries. Surely——"

"But this is very—aggressive," Kennicott objected. "After all, we don't want the hatred of other countries."

"Oh, come now! That's going it a bit strong. I've already explained how——"

"But—war," the Senator said, looking absently at a tombstone in the distance.

"There'll be no war," Hobson insisted somewhat shrilly. "If I thought this bill were really dangerous I'd be the first to demand its withdrawal."

"How much do you stand to make out of it?" the Senator asked abruptly. "Well—never mind. That's scarcely a fair question. Can't we let this go till tomorrow, Hobson? I'm so utterly tired!"

Hobson stared at him for a moment. Then, choosing his words with care, he said, "The bill really should go through, Senator. I think it will—assure your securing the nomination next year."

Kennicott looked at him keenly, little lines bracketing his mouth. Hobson's support was valuable—in fact, indispensable. If he were to withdraw it——

Glancing sideways at his companion, the Senator almost walked into a shadowy, slim figure that stood quietly in the darkness beneath a tall elm.

A drawn, white face was turned to Kennicott, and he felt a sudden sense of shock at the agony in the dark, brooding eyes. It was a young man, almost a boy, with deep lines of pain etched in his face.

"I'm sorry," the Senator said quickly, glancing at the boy's faded, worn khaki uniform. "I didn't see you."

The boy made no answer, and the Senator made a tentative movement to pass on. Abruptly the youthful, haggard face was turned away, and the boy said in a muffled tone, "I can't sleep."

"Eh?" Kennicott stared.

"I say I can't sleep," the boy repeated, his voice dull with pain.

Hobson made a clucking sound of commiseration and glanced at the Senator.

Kennicott felt a surge of sympathy. The obvious youthfulness of the boy was so incongruous with his taut face, the white tortured line of his lips.

"I know," Kennicott said. "It can be terrible. I had insomnia for almost a week once."

"A week," the other said scornfully. "That's nothing. It's been ages——"

Kennicott was scribbling something on the back of an envelope. "Be with you in a minute," he said under his breath to Hobson, who was chafing at the delay. "Here—any druggist can fill this," he said, giving the paper to the boy. "It will fix you up if anything can. I know how you feel," he ended sympathetically.

The youth took it skeptically and thrust it into a pocket. "Thanks just the same," he said oddly. "It's always like this on Memorial Day—it's worse then, you know."

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Hobson moved impatiently, his pale eyes flickering uneasily over the boy's form.

"Oh," the Senator said understandingly. "I see—but—look here, aren't you rather young to —"

"Am I?" the youth asked. "I'm not so young as I look. I was in the war, all right."

Hobson gave a grunt of disbelief. Even the Senator felt that the boy was lying. True, his face was worn, haggard—but he couldn't be over twenty-five at most. Probably he didn't mean the World War. There were always battles going on—Manchuria, South America, Africa.

"Well—you get those powders," the Senator said after an awkward pause. "I'm sure they'll do the trick." He cleared his throat. "Can you use——" He drew out his wallet rather hesitantly, but the boy was not offended.

"No, thanks," he said, a boyish grin suddenly appearing on his face. Then it was gone, replaced by that strained expression of pain. He suddenly seemed to notice a low, gray tombstone near by, and took a few slow steps toward it. "Poor fool," he murmured very softly.

The Senator looked away quickly. It was a shock to hear Hobson's high-pitched, rasping voice. Had the man no intelligence, no decency? Kennicott put up a restraining hand, but it was too late.

"Oh—come, come," Hobson was saying. "Don't say a thing like that, son. It isn't right."

"Come on," Kennicott urged under his breath, but the boy interrupted him.

"Why not?" he asked, a sharp note in his tired young voice. "Wasn't he a fool?"

Hobson would try to argue with the boy, the Senator thought hopelessly. Couldn't he see that——

"You're too young. You don't understand what he died for—what his comrades died for," Hobson said, his plump face very earnest.

"Does it matter?" the boy asked very quietly. "They—died."

"They died for something very real," Hobson plowed on. "If they could——"

"For God's sake, come on," Kennicott snapped, grasping Hobson's arm. "Leave him alone. Can't you see——"

"All right," the boy said suddenly. "Maybe you're right. But—let me tell you a little story." He came closer, his eyes dark and tortured. "About a fellow who went over to France in '17. Just an ordinary fellow, I guess—who was scared stiff when the shells started bursting around, and the machine-guns were making their racket in the dark. But he was like the rest of the fellows. He didn't dare show how much he was afraid. A sniper got him in '18."

The Senator was uncomfortable and showed it, but to his disgust he saw that Hobson was preparing to answer the boy.

"Wait—let me finish. A sniper got him, I said, and that was fine. He didn't hear the bullets screaming over the trench, or the groaning of dying men; all the horrors were gone, and he was resting, forgetting. The darkness was kind . . . and then one day he awoke."

"Eh?" That was Hobson, frankly staring.

"I say he woke up. Glory woke him up—splendor and a stone monument that was very heavy. Bitter glory and squalid splendor," the boy went on fiercely. "They tortured and shamed him. You see, he was awake now, and he wanted—God!—how he wanted to *forget!*"

There were tears in the tortured eyes, and the boy brushed them away roughly with his sleeve. Then, catching his breath in a little gasp, he turned suddenly and began to walk quickly away.

For a heartbeat the Senator stood silent, unmoving, staring at that slim, khaki figure receding into the gloom. "Wait," he called.

"Let him go," Hobson said, an angry undercurrent in his voice. "You can't——"

But Kennicott was remembering that white, drawn face, those brooding eyes from which all the youthfulness had been drained. "No—I've got to——" he said in an inarticulate aside to Hobson and took a few hasty steps forward. He saw the pale blur that was the boy's face turned toward him briefly, and the slender figure increased its pace. Ignoring Hobson's remonstrances, the Senator began to hurry after the boy.

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Kennicott had to exert himself to overtake his quarry, and was glad that his muscles were still firm and elastic. He saw the boy turn hastily down a side path, and broke into a run. For a hundred feet or so the path was very dark, and then it broadened out into a large clearing. At its edge Kennicott swept a searching glance around, and jerked abruptly to a halt. His jaw dropped.

A moment later Hobson pounded up, wheezing a little. He paused, scrutinizing Kennicott's face. "What's the matter?" he asked quickly.

The Senator did not answer, and Hobson repeated his question. Then Kennicott turned a startled, almost frightened face to his companion. "Did—did you see that?" he asked unsteadily.

"What?" Hobson glanced around. "The boy? He's gone."

"He's—yes, he's gone. Hobson, I—I saw——" He brushed a hand across his eyes. "Hobson—can a man *vanish?*"

"What?" Hobson stared, his mouth open. "A—a man——"

"But I saw it!" the Senator said earnestly, as though pleading for belief. "That boy—wasn't——" He pointed toward a great white block in the center of the clearing. "It was right there—I—I saw——" He could not finish.

"What are you talking about?" Hobson's voice was purposely crisp and peremptory. "You're all unnerved. Come on—the boy's gone. We can't stay here."

"You go on," Kennicott said suddenly. "I'm going to—stay here for a while."

Hobson hesitated. Then, making up his mind, he drew a paper from his pocket, held it out. "Here's the bill, then. I'll phone you tomorrow."

Kennicott made no move. He said dully, "The bill. No, no, I can't——"

"Look here," Hobson said furiously. "You're not going to act like a damned fool, are you? What the devil's the matter?"

The Senator turned to him a face of white marble and said nothing.

Hobson hesitated, and then his rage pushed aside his diplomacy, his caution. "Because—by Heaven, I can break you," he snarled. "You're not President yet! I can ruin your career, and you know it."

"I know it," the Senator said quietly. "But that bill won't pass while I'm in the Senate." He turned his back on Hobson and stood silently gazing at the gaunt white mausoleum in the

clearing. He had spoken patriotically and at length there not six hours before.

It was the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

[The end of *We Are the Dead* by Henry Kuttner]