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"What's the matter?" she asked one day.

"Nothing's the matter with me!" he said. "What do you mean?"

"You act as if you didn't like me any more."

"Nonsense! I'm trying to act as well as I can and that's the thanks I get. Your imagination is running riot with you!"

Maybe her imagination was running riot. And other things. The sounds she heard, for one thing.

Laura's room was next to Jerome's. A big, old fashioned room, as all of the rooms in the old Taylor house were—big and old fashioned. But quiet. Really quiet at night, for the windows opened out on the big garden and no one lived very near.

And now, after she was in bed, Laura heard noises. At first she thought they came from the little radio which stood at her bedside table. But they didn't seem to come from the radio, for that was turned off—and, when she did turn it on, no station gave out those particular sounds.

They were wails! And seemed to have her name in them. "Ooooo ooooo! Lauraaaaa!" the sounds seemed to sing, in a peculiarly and unpleasant song.

She'd wake up in the night hearing the sounds. Then they'd stop and she'd fall asleep. And the next night she'd hear them again.

She spoke to Jerome about them. "You do have the wildest ideas," he said.

"Didn't you hear anything?"

"Certainly not. I go to bed to sleep, not to hear noises."

Laura didn't exactly go to bed to hear them. But she went to bed—and there they were! Could she be imagining them?

Then she felt that some one was following her! She'd walk into town—a pleasant walk on a fine day—and see a man back of her. A peculiar looking man, almost like a tramp, whom she'd never seen before. One day she turned, called to him.

"What do you want? Are you following me?" she called. And he turned, went away. Two days later he was back again.

At first she tried to dismiss the man from her mind. How silly! She was letting things affect her. Noises at night! And now a man tagging at her heels! Finally it made her so nervous she had to speak of it. She told Jerome.

"You are the one!" he said. "You'd better be careful or you'll get like Tid Bishop's brother. He heard sounds and had people following him and they had to put him away."

"But there really was a man following me," said Laura.

"All right. Point him out to me some time," Jerome said. But the man was never around when any one else was with her!

Jerome insisted on getting rid of Dave and Clara.

"They are too old and doddering," he said.

Laura liked them around. They were her friends, those two old servants. But she didn't like quarreling with Jerome. She was too nervous for quarrels. Dave and Clara had bought a little farm during the years and Laura gave them money now so that they would be comfortable always. But still she missed them a great deal.

"I've got just the servants we want," said Jerome. "They worked for the man who had the cracker factory that burned down. Named Roberts. You didn't know him. They're trained, City servants. Know something."

The new servants were well trained, that was true. They were respectful. Quiet. Did all they were supposed to do. But because they were hired by Jerome Hamilton they paid more attention to him than they did to Laura—looked to him for orders.

They were good cooks, the new servants. Laura liked the flavor of their food. For a while, anyhow.

And then, suddenly, everything seemed to have a bitter taste! Not the sweets, but the meats and soups and vegetables. Laura tasted her food eagerly at each meal, hoping the bitter taste was gone. But there it was!

She traced it to the salt, finally. In her salt cellar. She called Jerome's attention to it.

"It's that imagination of yours."

"Taste this salt! Now!"

"Of course I'll taste it, tho I've some of my own right in front of me."

Jerome reached over for Laura's salt cellar, took some of the salt between his fingers, put it on his tongue.

"Tastes all right to me," he said. "Salty. Just like salt. What will you be thinking of next?"

Laura didn't like to tell Jerome what she thought of next. She was

afraid. For, with the bitter food came another difficulty. Headaches. And now she couldn't tell if the headaches came from the food—or the bitterness of the food from the headaches. She had a headache every day!

A Giant White Rat Scurries Across Room

One night, as she tried to fall asleep, she heard something in the corner of her room. She snapped on her bed light. And saw a giant white rat scurrying across the room!

She had to put her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming.

She told Jerome about the rat, in the morning.

He laughed, as he always laughed now, at the things she told him. Skeptically polite, impersonal.

"Of course, if you really saw a rat, you must set a trap for him. Only I believe an imaginary trap would be just as good."

Two days later, in the afternoon, with the sun shining into her room from the broad windows, as she was changing her dress, Laura looked down and saw the white rat again. He walked slowly. Stopped near her. Seemed to stand on his hind legs and, with his front paws wipe off his whiskers. And Laura fainted.

She hit her head with her fall. She came to, sitting there on the floor. Her head was aching worse than ever! She didn't dare call one of the servants—or say anything!



"The white rat seemed to stand on his hind legs and, with his front paws, wipe off his whiskers."

Her head grew worse and worse in the days that followed. And the sounds in the room grew worse. And the rat scurried across her room!

She told Jerome about her head, finally. She had put it off as long as she could. She had to tell him.

"I must see a doctor," she told Jerome.

"That's a very good idea," he said. She felt sorry for Jerome. Certainly, it wasn't pleasant for him to be at home any more. She never felt well.

"I've arranged for you to see Dr. Withers this afternoon," Jerome reported the next day. "You remember him? He said he treated you once when you were a little girl."

"I remember him," said Laura. He drove her to Dr. Withers's office. Went into the office with her. She was shown immediately into a private room. Dr. Withers came in. With him was another physician, a Dr. Newbold. The four of them sat there and the three men looked at her.

Laura felt more nervous than she had ever felt in her life. Her head ached.

"Now tell me just what is the matter," said Dr. Withers gently. Too gently, as if he were talking to a child.

She told him about her headaches. "But you're more nervous than headaches alone would make you," he said.

"Yes," Laura admitted, "there have been noises, in my room."

Before she was quite aware of what she was saying, with promptings from the doctors and from Jerome, she told about the noises and the man following her. And how bitter her food tasted. And about the rat!

"I can well see why you are nervous," Dr. Withers said, in his too kind voice. And Laura was afraid. She had told too much! And yet it was all true. Why shouldn't she have told?

They were through the examination, the doctors.

Very gravely Dr. Withers wrote out a prescription.

"I'll see you again in a few days," he said. And Jerome, very attentively, with his bland, impersonal air, helped Laura to their car.

The new medicine made her sleepy. Dope. O, well, if it would cure her headache, so much the better!

A day passed. Or was it an hour? Or two days?

Jerome bending over her, as she lay in bed. Telling her to get up. Helping her to dress. All through a haze of what the sleeping tablets had done to her.

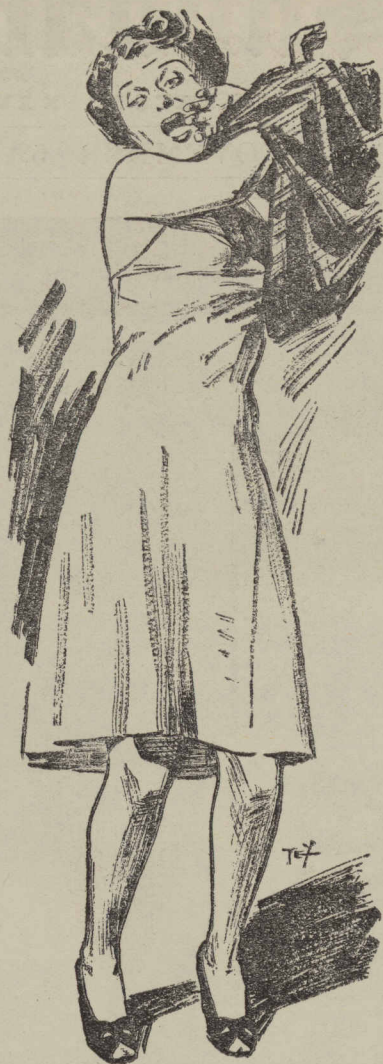
She felt herself getting into the car. Driving out into the country. A big brick building.

"A hospital. For an examination," Jerome explained.

Doctors, then. And nurses. White corridors. And hurrying feet. A little room. A white bed.

"You'll be all right, take it easy!" a voice said. She took it easy. She slept. A long, white sleep.

When she did wake up her head



"The white rat seemed to stand on his hind legs and, with his front paws, wipe off his whiskers."

was still heavy. But she felt better. A nurse was bending over her.

"If you'd like to dress, now, and go out into the sunshine," the nurse said. It was morning! The next morning? Laura never knew.

She dressed herself. And looked around. It was a nice room. Plain but pleasant, with pink walls and white furniture. There was a little private bath off of it and a closet, in which hung some of her clothes. She must have been quite ill during the night and Jerome had brought her here. Maybe it was just as well. Her head felt better than it had felt in days! She went out into the sunlight.

Declared Insane and Committed to Hospital

It was three days before she knew part of the truth. A whole week before she knew everything—everything she was to know, now.

She was in a hospital, to be sure. But in a hospital for mental cases, only. In the hospital where Tid Bishop had brought his brother!

Jerome had had her committed—and two doctors had declared her insane. She found that out from the nurses.

But, if she were insane then, surely she was well, now.



"She was helping old Mrs. Fendler with her knitting when Dr. Bradley spoke to her. 'Do you like knitting?' he asked."

For suddenly, the headaches were gone! And the noises were gone! And the rat was gone! She was herself again. And locked up, here.

She talked to the nurses—tried to convince them of her sanity. They spoke nicely to her. They were friendly, most of them. But they were plainly unbelieving. Too many patients acted sane, it seemed.

She talked to the doctors. They were more attentive than the nurses, but she could tell by their professional manner that they were listening to her only out of politeness.

Once a week Jerome came to see her. His whole attitude was the impersonal politeness he had assumed before, with an added aloofness, a sort of cold armor, which might have hidden actual hate. He listened gravely when she talked to him. Smiled and said, "I'm so glad you're feeling better," when she told him she was well again. And he did nothing to get her out!

She began to read—to read everything she could find.

Then she began to help the nurses. In little ways. At first she cleaned her own room. Then she helped with some of the patients. Read to them. It was better than nothing. It helped pass the time. But this couldn't go on! Something had to happen!

Laura cried herself to sleep at night. That didn't help a great deal. And she prayed. Little wordless prayers. Something had to happen!

Dr. Wallace Bradley came to the sanitarium. He came as one of the visiting doctors, but, as he was new to the sanitarium and to Baker City he paid more attention to details than the other doctors, who took their visits as purely routine work.

Laura saw him. She liked his appearance immediately. He was tall, too slight, and his face was rugged but kind. His temples were gray. He was about 40, Laura judged.

She was helping old Mrs. Fendler with her knitting when Dr. Bradley spoke to her.

"Do you like knitting?" he asked. "I didn't used to like it," she said. "Now it seems fun. Anything that takes your mind off this place! Not," she added quickly, "that the nurses aren't awfully good—every one does all she can—but—" she paused, confused.

"But you still don't like being here."

"Exactly."

"Why not take a walk with me and let's talk about it."

"I'd love it!"

They walked thru the grounds. And Laura found herself for the first time in longer than she liked to remember, being perfectly natural. Dr. Bradley didn't condescend. He didn't assume a false veneer of kindness.

Dr. Bradley asked questions. And she could see that he was puzzled. But he didn't say a great deal.

Three days later Dr. Bradley knocked at Laura's door. She was reading. She put her book aside.

They didn't talk about her case, this time. Their conversation might have been in a drawing room. But Laura knew she hadn't been as happy in a long time. If—if only he believed her sane!

"Dr. Bradley has all the papers on

your case," one of the nurses volunteered a few days later. "I heard it from one of the house doctors."

But Dr. Bradley didn't mention this to Laura, the next time he saw her. They had a pretty pretense of not being in the sanitarium now. He'd bring her books to read. They'd take walks in the grounds. Talk of everything but Laura's case.

Laura lived for those brief visits. She read the newspapers, so she could talk to Dr. Bradley about the events of the day. She refitted her dresses, took special care of her hair and nails. She wondered if he thought of her only as another unfortunate.

It was Dr. Bradley who brought up Laura's condition.

"I know it's painful," he said. "But there are certain things I want to ask you. Those sounds, now—"

Laura told what she could about the sounds. And the man who followed her. And the taste of the food. And the headaches. And the rat.

"It was a large white rat!" she said. "Horrid! And he seemed tame!"

"A WHITE rat?"

"Yes."

"And you saw him in the daytime?"

"Yes, in the afternoon. A couple of times."

That was all! Dr. Bradley talked of other things. Laura was so afraid she had said the wrong things. But she had to tell the truth.

Two days later he came to her. "You are going home," he said. But at the light of happiness in her eyes he shook his head.

"It isn't as pleasant as you think, I'm afraid. You have an ordeal in front of you. I can't tell you more than that. But try not to worry. Try to be calm. In the end it will be for the best. That I promise you!"

Jerome came to take her home. He smiled, but his smile was as impersonal as his sympathy had been.

"I'm so glad you are better," he said. "I hope you will stay well." His voice was as cold as his smile!

But in a few weeks she was ill again! It frightened her more than the first illness had frightened her. She had almost persuaded herself that she had imagined the way things had been. And now the food was bitter! And her headaches had come back!

And then she heard the noises! In her room at night. The peculiar whine. The moaning. The calling of her name!

She went into town, to get away from the house, from herself. And the man followed her!

The White Rat Returns to Mystify Laura

She ran home. Threw herself on the bed. Sobbed herself to sleep. And the next day she saw the rat, again! She knew the worst, now. She was insane! Really! All of her hopes were gone.

She had not seen Dr. Bradley since she had come home. She had dared hope that he had liked her for herself. But, evidently, she was only a patient to him. Even so, he was the only doctor she could trust. He was the one who had made this brief freedom possible.

She managed to get to a telephone. "Dr. Bradley!" she said. "All your help—it didn't matter! Everything is back. The noises. The man following me! The headaches. The rat!"

"My dear, that is wonderful! Stop worrying, please. Don't say anything to any one! Lie down and try to sleep. I'll see you as soon as I can. It may not be until tomorrow! Please have faith in me! You poor, poor darling!" he said.

She hadn't any idea what he was talking about. But her head ached too much to make words important. But he had said darling! Poor darling! But darling! You don't say that, do you, if you're just sorry for a person?

It was the next afternoon when he came. Two other doctors and a nurse were with him. They asked that Jerome be called home. He was at his office. He'd be right there.

The nurse disappeared. The two doctors sat there stiffly. Made conversation. Laura ordered tea for them. And waited.

Jerome came in.

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"Your wife has been ill—" began Dr. Bradley.

"As if I didn't know!"

"She was better at the sanitarium," the doctor went on, "but as soon as she returned home—"

Jerome interrupted. "She got her headaches and heard noises again."

"Exactly," said Dr. Bradley. "Remarkable, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"If you'll sit down!"

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