

AND THREE TO GET READY . . .

By H. L. Gold

Ask a psychiatrist if any of his patients' strange stories could possibly be true and more than likely he'll give you the raised eyebrow. In that case, ask him to read Mr. Gold's spine-chilling yarn about the man who claimed he could kill simply by wishing the victim's death. It's a sure cure, we think, for skepticism, no matter how you interpret the ending.

. . . Not only is H. L. Gold responsible, as editor, for the rocket-like rise of the science fiction magazine Galaxy, but he has written over five million words of slick, pulp and radio literature — by sheer bulk alone enough to grind facets of brilliance in whatever he does these days.

Usually, people get committed to the psycho ward by their families or courts, but this guy came alone and said he wanted to be put away because he was deadly dangerous. Miss Nelson, the dragon at the reception desk, put in a call for Dr. Schatz and he took me along just in case. I'm a psycho-ward orderly, which means I'm big and know gentle judo to put these poor characters into pretzel shapes that don't hurt them, but keep them from hurting themselves or somebody else.

He was sitting there, hunched together as if he was afraid that he'd make a move that might kill anyone nearby, and about as dangerous-looking as a wilted carnation. Not much bigger than one, either. Maybe five-four, 125 pounds, slender shoulders, slender hands, little feet, the kind of delicate face no guy would ever pick for himself, but a complexion you'd switch with if you've got a beard of Brillo like mine that needs shaving every damned day.

"Do you have this gentleman's history, Miss Nelson?" asked Dr. Schatz, before talking to the patient.

Her prim lips got even tighter. "I'm afraid not, Doctor. He . . . says it would be like committing suicide to give it to me."

The little fellow nodded miserably.

"But we must have at least your name—" Dr. Schatz began.

He skittered clear over to the end of the bench and huddled there, shaking. "But that's exactly what I can't give you! Not only mine—anybody's!"

One thing you've got to say for these psychiatrists: they may feel surprised, but they never show it. Tell them you can't eat soup with anything except an egg-beater and they'll even manage to look as if they do that, too. I guess it's something you learn. I'm getting pretty good at it myself, but not when I come up against something as new as this twitch's line. I couldn't keep my eyebrows down.

Dr. Schatz, though, nodded and gave him a little smile and suggested going up to the mental hygiene office, where there wouldn't be so many people around. The little guy got up and came right along. They went into Schatz's office and I went to the room adjoining, with just a thin door I could hear through and open in a hurry if anything happened. You'd be surprised how seldom anything does happen, but it doesn't pay to take chances.

"Now, suppose you tell me what's bothering you," I heard Dr. Schatz say quietly. "Or isn't that possible, either?"

"Oh, I can tell you *that*," the little guy said. "I just can't tell you my—my name. Or yours, if I knew it. Or anyone else's."

"Why?"

The little guy was silent for a minute. I could hear him breathing hard and I knew he was pushing the words up to his mouth, trying to make them come out.

"When I say somebody's name three times," he whispered, "the person dies."

"I see." You can't throw Dr. Schatz that easy. "Only persons?"

"Well . . ." The little guy hitched his chair closer; I heard it shriek and grate on the cement floor.

"Look, I'm here because it's driving me nuts, Doc. You think I am already, so I've got to convince you

I'm not. I have to give you proof that I'm right."

The doctor waited. They always do at times like that; it kind of forces the patients to say things they maybe didn't want to.

"The first one was Willard Greenwood," said the little guy in a slow, tense voice. "You remember him—the Undersecretary down in Washington. A healthy man, right? Good career ahead of him. I see his name in the papers. Willard Greenwood. It has a ... a *round* sound to it. I find myself saying it. I say it three times. Right out loud while I'm looking at his picture. So what happens?"

"Greenwood committed suicide last week," Dr. Schatz said. "He'd evidently had psychological difficulty for some time."

"Yes. I didn't think much about it. A coincidence, like. But then I see a newsreel of this submarine launching a few days ago. *The Barnacle*. I say the name out loud three times, same as anybody else might. You've done that yourself sometimes, haven't you? Haven't you?"

"Of course. Names occasionally have a fascination."

"Sure. So *The Barnacle* runs into something and sinks. I began to suspect what was going on; so, like an experiment, you might say, I picked another name out of the papers. I figured it ought to be somebody who isn't psycho, like Greenwood turned out to be, or old and sick, or a submarine which might be expected to run into danger. It had to be somebody young and healthy. I picked the name out of the school news. A girl named Clara Newland. Graduating from Emanuel High. Seventeen."

"She died?"

The little guy gave a kind of sob. "Automobile crash. She was the only one who was killed. The others all only got hurt. Last Sunday."

"Those could be coincidences, you know," Dr. Schatz said very gently. "Perhaps you said other names aloud and nothing happened, but you remember those because something did."

The guy kicked his chair back; I could hear it slide. He probably got up and leaned over the desk; they do that when they're all excited. I put my hand on the knob and got ready.

"As soon as I knew what was going on," he said, "I stopped saying names three times. I didn't dare say them even *once*, because that might make me say them again and then again—and you know what the payoff would be. But then last night . . ."

"Yes?" Dr. Schatz said, prompting him when he halted.

"A bar got held up. It was when the customers had left and the bartender was getting ready to lock the place. Two guys. There was a scuffle and the bartender was killed. The cops came. One of the crooks was shot; the other got away. The crook who was shot was—"

I opened the door a slit and looked in. He was showing a clipping to Schatz, with his finger pointing shakily at one place. "Paul Michaels," said the doctor.

"Don't say it!" the little guy yelled. I was ready to race in, but Dr. Schatz made a warning motion that the guy wouldn't notice that told me I wasn't needed. "I don't want to say it! If I do, it'll be three times and he'll die!"

"I think I understand," Schatz said. "You're afraid to mention names three times because of the result, and—well, what do you want us to do?"

"Keep me here. Stop me from saying names three times. Save God knows how many people from me. Because I'm deadly!"

Schatz said we'd do our best, and he got the guy committed for observation. It wasn't easy, because he still wouldn't give his name, and Dr. Merriman, the head of the psychiatric department, almost had another heart attack fighting about it.

We got together, Dr. Schatz and I, after the little guy had his pajamas and stuff issued and a bed assigned to him.

"That's a hell of a thing to carry around," I said, "thinking people die when you say their names three times. It would drive anybody batty."

"A vestige of childhood," he told me, and explained how kids unconsciously believe their wishes can do anything. I could remember some of that from my own childhood—my old man was a holy terror with the strap and many's the time I wished he was dead—and then got scared that maybe he would die and it

would all be my fault. But I outgrew it, which Schatz said most people do. Only there are some who don't, like our little nameless friend, and they often get themselves twisted up like this.

"But that Paul Michaels," I said. "The crook who got shot. He's in the critical ward right here in this hospital."

"It's a city hospital," he answered, lighting a butt and looking tired. "Everything the private hospitals won't touch, we get. That's why we have this patient, too."

"Any special instructions?" I asked.

"I don't think so. This kind of case is seldom either suicidal or homicidal, unless the guilt feelings get out of hand. Keep him calm, that's all. Sedation if he needs it."

I had plenty to do around the mental hygiene ward without the little guy to worry about, but he wasn't much trouble. Until about an hour or two after supper, that is. I had some beds to move around and a tough customer to get into the hydrotherapy room, so I didn't pay much attention to the little guy and his restless eyes.

He came up to *me*, twitchy as hell, and grabbed my arm with both his hands.

"I keep thinking about that—that name," he babbled. "I keep wanting to say it. *Do* something! Don't let me say it!"

"Who?" I asked, blank for a minute, and then I remembered. "You mean this crook Paul Michaels—"

He got white and jumped up and tried to stop my mouth, but I'd already said it. I tried to calm him down and finally had the nurse give him some phenobarb, all the time explaining that the name had slipped out and I was sorry. You know, soothing him.

He said, trembling, "Now I know I'm going to say it. I just know I will." And he shuffled over to the window and sat there holding his head, looking sick.

I got to bed about midnight, still wondering about the poor little guy who thought he could kill people that easy. I had the next morning off, but I didn't take it. There were cops all over the place and Dr. Schatz looked real worried.

"I don't know how our new patient is going to take this," he said, shaking his head. "That Paul Michaels we had here—"

"*Had?*" I repeated. "What do you mean, had? He transferred to a prison hospital or something?"

"He's dead," Schatz said.

I closed my mouth after a few seconds. "Aw, nuts," I grumbled, disgusted with myself. "I was almost believing the little guy did it. Michaels was shot up bad. Hell, he was on the critical list."

"That's right. There'd be nothing remarkable if he died ... from the bullet wound. But his throat was slit."

"And the little guy?"

"We have him full of Nembutal. He was shouting that he had said Michaels' name three times and that Michaels would have to die and he would be responsible."

"You haven't told him yet," I said.

"Naturally not. It would really put him into a spin."

It was a solid mess from top floor to basement, so I had to give up my morning off. The patients, except the little guy who was in isolation, all found out about Michaels somehow—you can't stop things like that from spreading—and I had a time handling them. In between, though, I learned how the case was developing.

There was this old cop Slattery we generally have for cases like Michaels sitting outside the critical ward, watching who went in and out. There had been somebody with Michaels on the stick-up, see, who made it while Michaels was plugged, and the cops don't take chances that maybe the accomplice or someone from the underworld might want to get at the patient when he's helpless. They always put a guard on.

Well, Slattery is all right, but he maybe isn't so alert any more, and somebody slipped past him late at night, cut Michaels' neck with probably a razor blade, and then got out again without Slattery noticing. The other patients were all doped up or asleep, so they were no help. Slattery, though, swore nobody

except nurses on duty in the ward or on the floor went past him. He claimed he didn't fall asleep once during the night, and the funny thing is the nurses said the same. Or maybe it's not so funny; they like the old man and might do a little lying to help him off a rough spot.

Well, that put the girls on an even worse spot. If they were telling the truth, that Slattery had been awake the whole night, then one of them must have done it. Because Slattery had said that only the nurses went in and out of the ward. Capt. Warren, the Homicide man, jumped on that fast and got the girls to line up in front of Slattery.

"Well, Slattery?" Warren said. "One of these nurses must have been the killer. Do you recognize one who went in there with no business to? Or did one of them act suspicious, and which was it?"

Slattery looked unhappy as he went down the line and stared at the girls' faces. He shook his head figuring, I guess, that he was in for some real trouble now.

"It was pretty dim in the ward," he mumbled. "All they keep on is a little night light—just enough so the girls can find their way around without tripping, but not bright enough to keep the patients awake. I can't even be sure which nurses went in and out."

"Nothing suspicious?" Slattery demanded.

"Search me. They were nurses and my job is to keep anybody else out. As long as they were nurses and it was so dim there, one of them could have had an army rifle under her uniform and I wouldn't know."

Capt. Warren questioned the girls, got nowhere, and had them all checked to see if one didn't know Michaels well enough to want to knock him off.

I got all that from Sally Norton, one of the homely babes in the mental hygiene ward, when she came back from the grilling to go on duty. She went to her locker to change and then ran back, yipping, and grabbed Dr. Schatz. She had her uniform held up in front of her, like a shield, kind of, and she was shaking it angrily.

"Just take a look at this, Doctor!" she said. "Came back clean from the laundry yesterday and I haven't even worn it yet, and look at it now!"

"If there's anything wrong with the laundry, take it up with them," he said, annoyed. "I'm having enough trouble keeping my patients quiet with all this racket going on over Michaels."

"But that's just it. I wouldn't be surprised if it has something to do with Michaels." And she showed him the sleeve, where there were red spots down near the wrist.

Schatz called in Capt. Warren and Dr. Merriman, the head of the mental hygiene department. Merriman looked sicker than usual; he kept his hand inside his jacket, over his heart. All this excitement wasn't doing him any more good than it was doing the patients.

Warren was interested, all right. Being there in the hospital, it was easy to run a test and prove the spots were blood, human, Type B—which happened to be Michaels' blood type. He wasn't the only one in the hospital with that type, of course, but it isn't so common that Capt. Warren could disregard it.

Warren started to give Sally a bad time, but Dr. Merriman cut in and told him about the little guy and the story about saying names three times.

"What in hell kind of nonsense is this?" Warren asked. "I'm looking for evidence, not a screwball fairy tale some nut thought up."

"Exactly," Dr. Schatz said fast; he'd been trying to head off Dr. Merriman, but hadn't dared to interrupt. "It's a fairly typical delusion with no more basis in fact than witches or goblins. I can't sanction questioning a disturbed patient because of it."

"You don't have to bother," said Warren. "I've got more important things—"

"The point," Dr. Merriman went on, "is that this man claimed he was afraid to mention—specifically, mind you—the name of Paul Michaels. That was why he wanted to be committed, in fact."

Warren looked baffled. "You mean you think he said Michaels' name three times and Michaels died because of that?"

"Certainly not," Merriman said stiffly. "It's a remarkable coincidence that deserves investigation, that's all. Or perhaps my idea of police work differs from yours."

I don't know how Schatz managed it, but he let Capt. Warren know that Dr. Merriman was getting

on in years and ought to be humored. So I went along with them to the little guy's bed, where he was just coming out of the sedative. He was still groggy, but he saw us coming and ducked his left hand under the blanket.

Well, that's all you have to do to get a cop suspicious, make a sudden move like running out of a bank at high noon or ducking one hand under a blanket. Warren hauled it out, with the little guy resisting and trying to hide his pinky in his palm. The cop straightened out the pinky. It was colored red under the fingernail.

"Blood?" I asked, confused, and then got busy because the little guy was trying to pull away while Capt. Warren took some scrapings.

It wasn't blood. It was lipstick, according to the lab test. "There," said Dr. Schatz, satisfied, "you see? You've upset my patient, and for what?"

"Plenty," Warren said between his teeth, "and I'm going to upset him some more."

He had me hold the little guy down—I didn't want to until Dr. Merriman overrode Schatz's objections and ordered me to—while two cops put the little guy into Sally Norton's stained uniform and painted his mouth with lipstick.

You know, with that slender build of his and the cap on, he didn't look bad. Better than Sally, if you want to know, but who doesn't?

"All right," Schatz said, "he could have gotten past Slattery in that dim light. Admitted. But what makes you think he did? And why should he have done so?"

"The lipstick on the pinky," said Warren. "If you want to do a decent job, you don't just slap it on—you shape it with your little finger. Why? That depends. If the guy's psycho, he could have done Michaels in just because. But suppose he's the guy who was with Michaels on the job—Michaels was the only one who could have identified him. But Michaels was in a coma. So this character had to get into the hospital somehow and slit Michaels' throat to keep him from talking. Either way, it figures."

Dr. Merriman nodded. "That was my own opinion, Captain."

"You're lying! You're lying!" the little guy screamed. "I said his name three times and he died! They always die! It's the curse I have to bear!"

"We'll see," said Dr. Merriman. "Say my name three times." The little guy cowered away. "I—I can't. I have enough deaths on my conscience now."

"You heard me!" Dr. Merriman shouted, turning a dangerous red in the face. "Say my name three times!"

The little guy looked appealingly at Dr. Schatz, who said soothingly, "Go ahead. I know you're convinced it works, but it's completely contrary to logic. Wishes *can't* kill. This may prove it to you."

The little guy said Dr. Merriman's name three times, pale and shaking and looking about ready to throw up with fear.

Warren put Slattery—and another guard—on the psycho ward, and started a check on the little guy's fingerprints.

When I got to work the next day, the ward was a tomb. It might as well have been. Sally Norton was crying and Dr. Schatz was all pinch-faced and the little guy was running around the room yelling that he shouldn't have been forced to do it.

"Do what?" I wanted to know.

"Dr. Merriman died last night," Schatz said.

I looked at the little guy in horror. "Him?"

"No, no, of course not," said Schatz, but it was in a flat voice, not the impatient way he would have told me a day ago. "Dr. Merriman had a cardiac lesion. He could have gone at any time. There may even have been a deep unconscious wish to escape the pain and fear, and this patient's delusion could have given Dr. Merriman a psychological escape. It's the principle behind voodooism. The victim wills himself to death; the hexer merely supplies the suggestion."

It was pretty bad for a while, until Capt. Warren showed up with a big grin on his face. It soured when he heard that Dr. Merriman had died, but he threw out the idea that the little guy had done it.

Matter of fact, he had the cops put the arm on him and said, "Arnold Roach, I arrest you for

complicity in the murder—" And so forth and so on.

The little guy, whose name turned out to be what Warren said, had been unlucky enough to leave some fingerprints around. They had him, sure enough, except that he stuck to this whammy story and hired a good psychiatrist, who got him an insanity plea. So we have him back in the ward here. And if you think he's given up and started mentioning people's names even once, let alone three times, you're battier than he is. He screams whenever somebody mentions any name. It's a hell of a job remembering not to call the patients by name when he's around.

"Look, what do you think?" I asked Dr. Schatz. "Is the guy psychotic or did he cop a lucky plea?"

Dr. Schatz ran his hand across his mouth and talked through his fingers. "I think he's psychotic. There's never any proof of that, of course, but his behavior bears me out. It's definitely psychotic."

"And what about this story of his about saying names three times? All right, maybe he made up those items before he showed up here—after all, they were dead already and nobody could say he had or hadn't said their names three times before they died. And Michaels—the little guy helped him shuffle out with a razor across the throat. But what about Dr. Merriman?"

"I've already told you," Schatz said tiredly. "Cardiac lesion and hypothetical death wish triggered by suggestion."

I put the mop back in the bucket and began wringing it after a fast swab at the floor. I didn't feel happy and I showed it.

"That's a guess," I answered. "What if the little guy is right and people *do* die when he says their names three times?"

"Why don't you try it and see?" he asked.

I almost upset the pail. "Me? You're the psychiatrist. Why don't you?"

"Because I know it's purely a childish delusion. I don't need any proof."

"That," I said, leaning on the mop, "is not a scientific attitude, Doctor."

"The devil with it," he grunted in annoyance. "If it's bothering you that much, I'll do it."

But he always seems to have something else to do whenever I remind him.

SCIENCE-FICTION rejects the premise that man can travel back into the past through the medium of a time machine, and that by doing so he can become his own grandfather. Obviously, this is ridiculous!

But is it?

Try this simple formula: Marry a woman with a good-looking daughter.

Your father, the old codger, likes pretty young girls, so he marries your pretty young stepdaughter, thus becoming your son-in-law, while your pretty young stepdaughter becomes your mother, since she's your father's wife.

Now, your wife gives birth to a son — your son who is also your father's brother-in-law and your uncle as the brother of your step-mother.

So, not to be outdone, your father and mother have a son too, and their son is your brother and your grandchild too.

Thus, your wife being your mother's mother is your grandmother, while you're her husband and grandchild too. And since your wife's husband would be her grandchild's grandfather, you're — that's right!