

# Weird Tales

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*Author of "Hunger," "The Wind That Tramps the World," etc.*

**A**T DROMORE many strange legends were told about "The Castle". It was a magnificent building and perched on the extreme edge of Black Hill, like a great white albatross poised for flight. It had been built by a young oil magnate who had years before gone to California almost penniless, to return later with uncountable wealth. Blindly he had purchased a tract of barren land for a few hundred dollars, and this subsequently developed into a spectacular oil field.

After he had sold out his interests for a fabulous amount, he returned to the town of his boyhood, Dromore, a veritable conquering hero. He proposed to the most beautiful girl in the town and was instantly accepted. At once he commenced building the castle for her on Black Hill, a place dreaded by superstitious folk. It was haunted, they said, by strange wraiths as transparent as mist, and occasionally one heard eery sounds as of distant thunder. They pleaded with Dan Cooley not to build a home there, but he only derided their fears.

"The wraiths," he said, "exist only in people's distorted imaginations. They are just stray wisps of fog and mist such as float about any mountain

peak. The weird booming is a purely natural phenomenon. Such noises, phantom noises if you like, occur in all parts of the world. Only recently the newspapers gave columns to a discussion of the cause, and scientists all agree that the sounds come up from the depths of the earth, the result of subterranean disturbances. I am not superstitious. We will prove that Black Hill, despite its sinister reputation, is the happiest, most joyous spot in the countryside."

So Dan Cooley continued his building, oblivious to all the comments and forebodings of the people, and at last the work was done. At the gayest party ever held in Dromore, a party to which all the poor folk of the countryside were invited, he was married. At the moment it seemed as if all the weird legends were groundless. There was nothing wraithlike in this.

And yet less than one month later Mrs. Cooley went violently insane. She rushed up to the turret of "The Castle" and, laughing wildly and hysterically, pitched headlong down to the ragged, grim black rocks hundreds of feet below. When Dan Cooley made his way down to the rocks where the poor broken body lay, he was horrified by the sight. Her clothes were

torn to shreds and her face was so scratched and disfigured that it suggested that she had been mauled by wild beasts.

Hours later a farmer found him babbling foolishly over the lifeless body. With the aid of the servants, the farmer carried the nerve-shattered husband to his bed. For weeks he raved in delirium. His fever was so intense that it seemed to consume his body. Finally the last spark of life burned out. They buried him beside the body of his wife beneath a great pine tree in the shadow of Black Hill, and the grim old "Castle" was locked up, left to the wraiths that haunt the mountain tops.

Then the country people shunned the path leading to it more than ever. Occasionally the most venturesome of the farm lads would creep up the crooked winding path, only to return breathlessly, asserting that there were eery lights burning in the windows.

Not for a moment did anyone dispute the statement by suggesting that the lights may have been caused by the reflecting rays of the orange-red rising moon.

For five years "The Castle" remained untenanted, for who would be so foolhardy as to move into a house with such an unsavory reputation? The people of Dromore, even the poorest of them, would not have accepted it as a gift if they had been forced to live in it.

"It will fall to ruins," they said, "for lack of care, and it will be a good thing for Dromore when it is gone."

**T**HEN abruptly the unexpected happened. It was rented. Sportsly, the realtor, who was also the sheriff, the postmaster and the best informed citizen of Dromore, was so stunned by the fact that he almost suffered a stroke. He could scarcely wait to distribute the mail before broadcasting the news. He was a veritable news-

paper of gossip and circulated throughout the countryside for miles around. That morning he neglected to read any of the post cards and he mixed up the mail for the first time in forty years. But nobody protested about his glaring errors, for his news quite submerged all other considerations.

Unfortunately he could not tell who had purchased "The Castle" because all negotiations had been conducted through an agent. At first he had not taken the matter seriously. He was constantly interviewed about the property, for the most part by curiosity seekers who simply wished to hear the details of the story, which it can be assumed Sportsly was never reluctant to tell. But now at last the house had been sold to a Mr. Cass Ledyard. Whether he was young or old, married or a bachelor, Sportsly did not know.

Within a very few weeks carpenters and mechanics were putting "The Castle" in order. It had been untenanted for so long that it was badly in need of repair.

When the workmen had departed, Cass Ledyard moved in. His daughter Nona accompanied him.

Cass Ledyard in time grew to be almost as great a mystery in Dromore as the Black Hill itself. Who he was, nobody knew. Nor did they have the faintest inkling whence he had come. He had covered his tracks as absolutely as if he had been a renowned criminal with a price upon his head. At Dromore he made friends with no one. Not a soul was ever invited to the house. For the most part in the evenings it remained in darkness. It still seemed as austere and cheerless as when it was vacant. Once a week York Sills, who kept the general store, delivered to the house enough meat and provisions to last throughout the ensuing seven days. He always placed the bundles upon the porch. He was never asked to

enter the house, for which he was thankful, and he was always paid at once in cash by Nona. At first he had entertained the suspicion that Cass Ledyard was a forger and hence his almost hermitlike existence, until Mr. Roberts of the bank in Middletown had assured him that the money was as good as any the treasury had ever turned out. So a splendid theoretical bubble was burst.

In appearance, Cass Ledyard was rather odd. His great, glittering, deep-sunken eyes, shaded by huge bushy eyebrows, gave to his white, gaunt, somber face a rather fanatical appearance. He was very tall and slightly round-shouldered. He carried himself in a furtive, hang-dog fashion, as if he were always expecting a blow. When he looked up at one, only his eyes moved. Unless absolutely forced to, he seldom turned his head. His mouth was covered by a thick, bushy, uncared-for beard and his hair was so long it reached almost to his shoulders. Add to this the fact that his head was rather huge, and it can be imagined that he presented a rather grotesque appearance. He always dressed in black, which accentuated the sallow color of his face and the wildness of his habitual expression.

"The only difference between Mrs. Cooley and Cass Ledyard," declared York Sills, "is that she went crazy after living in 'The Castle' and Ledyard was crazy before he moved in."

"A man would have to be insane," asserted Sportsly, "to even think of living on Black Hill."

"It must be terrible for his daughter," added York Sills.

Nona Ledyard was beautiful in the fullest sense of the word; a dark, languid beauty that made one think of the paintings of old Italian masters. There must have been a trace of Latin blood in her, for all the beauty of southern Europe seemed reflected in her sad, rather wistful expression.

Her eyes were dark and expressive and were veiled by lashes of wondrous length. Her hair was as black as old ebony and cast off the same soft glittering glow. Her warm red lips served to emphasize the ivory whiteness of her face. She was magnificent. Yet as one gazed into her face one was far more impressed by her tragic, mournful expression than by the beauty and grace of her features.

The people of Dromore pitied her, a girl who should have had every luxury as a setting for her jewel-like loveliness and yet was forced to remain in a weird and shadowy house all alone except for the presence of a grim old man whose very sanity was open to question.

Night after night she used to sit alone in her dark room gazing out on the somber black countryside, a prey to fears and worries too frightful to describe. She lived in abject fear. She was mortally afraid, not of her father, but for her father. The fear that gnawed like a hungry rat at his mind was beginning to grip hers, until life itself became a veritable torture.

Every night, at the darkest hour, her father rushed from the house like a wild animal, his long hair streaming in the breeze as he fled. And always it seemed to Nona as if he were trying to escape from himself. It is frightful when one endeavors to escape from something that is buried in his body as firmly as his very heart. Always when he returned it was nearly dawn, and the wan look of his face was appalling. He was breathless and more colorless than ordinarily, and his dank face was bathed in perspiration. And all through the hours when he was absent, Nona would sit at the window, as cold as ice, as if carved of stone. Every screech of the wind, every crackle of the tree branches, every hoot of an owl threw her into a veritable panic.

AT LAST she could stand it no longer. Her taut nerves had reached the breaking point. She approached her father, not directly telling him of her fears and terrors, but in a rather guarded way. She declared they needed a servant—the work was more than she could handle alone. Her father acquiesced at once. He hardly seemed conscious of what she was saying.

So immediately she commenced advertising in a newspaper that was published in a town about ten miles away, but though she received many answers, no one was willing to take a job in a house on Black Hill. They shunned it as if it had been plague-infested. At last an ex-convict answered the advertisement, a man who had just completed a ten-year prison term and who looked almost as uncouth as a gorilla. His name was Sig. But whether it was his first name or his last he refused to say.

"When I went to prison," he said, "I lost my personality. The man I was is dead. There are no threads of existence for me to take up again. The few living relatives I had went back on me. There isn't a soul in the world willing to give me a chance."

His words sounded so hopeless, Nona felt sorry for him at once, despite his untruthfulness.

"If you wish," said she, "you can come and work for us; that is, if you are not afraid of Black Hill."

He laughed savagely.

"I am afraid of nothing," said he emphatically, "death least of all. If I were afraid of anything it would be of life. For ten years I lived in prison, never visited by a soul, haunted by all sorts of wild thoughts and desires for revenge. I was going to 'get' the man that got me."

He smiled mirthlessly.

"Anger is a peculiar thing," he said. "It burns itself out by its very intensity. When I was finally released, my hatred had vanished, leav-

ing me cold. Only hopelessness remained."

Nona could not help thinking how akin was her own case to that of Sig. She felt that like him, she, too, had been shut up in prison until only hopelessness remained.

And yet less than one week later, her viewpoint slightly changed. Much of the somberness vanished, for she met Stark Laurier by the simplest accident. Cass Ledyard had been out walking in the woods and had tripped over a hidden tree-stump, spraining his ankle rather badly. For a while he was unable to walk. He lay on the ground groaning in pain, when Stark Laurier found him. At first he was rather surly despite his agony and was unwilling to accept help, but finally, realizing that he was forced to, his attitude changed. In fact, after Stark Laurier had helped him home—almost carried him in fact—he grew positively cordial and urged Stark to remain with them a while.

"We seldom, in fact never, have company," he said, "and your presence with us would undoubtedly help to break the monotony of the mountain silence."

Stark Laurier agreed with him absolutely after he had met Nona, for he realized that wherever she was no place could be monotonous for him. So that very afternoon he moved his things over to "The Castle." And again the country people shook their heads and declared that no good could come of it.

## 2

STARK LAURIER was a novelist, but fortunately he had inherited a moderate fortune from his father, which permitted him to follow his own inclinations regarding the type of stories he wrote. He specialized in unusual fiction, and therefore "The Castle" was an absolute magnet to him. He was quite young, well under thirty and a keen lover of excitement

and adventure. Romance, too, held its allure for him, and romance was typified in the person of Nona Ledyard.

During the ensuing days he wandered much in the woods with her. She told him all the superstitions pertaining to Black Hill, of the phantom noises, the mistlike wraiths that haunted the mountain fastnesses, and of the girl who had gone insane on her honeymoon in "The Castle".

"It is all very interesting," commented Stark Laurier, "but fiction purely. The phantom noises are undoubtedly merely a natural phenomenon. The girl who went insane would probably have done so whether she dwelt in 'The Castle' or not. Perhaps insanity runs in her family. Did anyone ever take the trouble to trace her antecedents?"

"Perhaps you are right," said Nona reluctantly, "but even I seem to feel as if there is something sinister about Black Hill. At night when I gaze off into the shadows of the forest it is not hard for me to imagine that all sorts of weird, fantastic monstrosities are lurking in among those velvet shrouds of blackness. Every night, or almost every night, my father rushes off as if all the terrors of earth are following right at his heels. I wish more than anything else in the world that I had seen the last of Black Hill forever."

Although Stark Laurier did not admit it to Nona, he, too, felt as if some terrible weight were crushing down on his shoulders, some impending disaster too frightful to dwell upon. Perhaps the gloom of "The Castle" added to his general depression, for it was seldom lighted cheerfully. Cass Ledyard would not permit more than one room to be lighted at a time, and as the lights were rather dull in any case because the shades were made of antique colored glass, the gloom of the halls and the other rooms seemed intensified by the single light. Stark

Laurier would have preferred that the entire house remain dark rather than have this travesty of brilliance. Once when he disregarded instructions and turned on the light in the hall he encountered such a look of diabolical hatred in the glaring eyes of Cass Ledyard that he never repeated the indiscretion.

For the most part Cass Ledyard kept to his own room, but occasionally he joined Stark Laurier before the open hearth in the library. At such times he was the most agreeable of companions and a most interesting conversationist. He seemed familiar with every quarter of the globe and could talk intelligently on almost any subject. He was particularly interested in the lore of precious stones and in the science of color. Once he told a peculiar story about an old soothsayer of the East who was well versed in all the arts, black, white and gray. He knew the science of color more definitely than any other man that ever lived. And he had a theory with which he wished to experiment. One day he enticed his enemy to his dwelling, which was fitted out with enough paraphernalia to shock a ghost. He placed his enemy in a certain spot, then turned on two rays of light of his own invention, which clashed so violently that his enemy, who sat in the exact spot where the color forces met, was shattered to atoms. Not even a vestige of him remained. Of course it was purely a bit of Persian fantasy, but to Stark Laurier it was interesting nevertheless.

Then he told all sorts of odd little stories about the power of precious stones—how the opal has grown to be an omen of ill-luck—how melted pearls in vinegar can cure illness, how the amethyst is the most soothing of gems because it blends best with the sun.

Thus would he keep on telling almost endless anecdotes. At such

times all the mystery of his wild appearance seemed to slip from him and he seemed as rational and calm as anyone else. And yet in the late evenings he would continue his wild dashes into the forest like a frightened, hunted thing.

CASS LEDYARD permitted Stark Laurier to wander wherever he wished over the house, with the exception of one room. This room opened off the library and was always kept locked.

"If you enter that room without my permission," he said gravely, "I shall not be responsible for what happens thereafter."

This peculiar warning only served to make Stark Laurier's curiosity more acute. He wondered if there were some living thing in that room, some living horror too awful to gaze upon, but he soon abandoned this theory because Cass Ledyard never entered the room. If there were any living thing there it would be necessary to feed it. As the days dragged on his curiosity grew.

Sig, also, seemed rather mysterious in his actions. He crept about the house, utterly soundless. Occasionally Stark Laurier would look up from his book with a start to find Sig standing over him, his grotesque, gorillalike face looking more formidable than ever. Although Sig was always polite and servile, Stark Laurier realized that in his manner there was a hidden note of hatred. He resented Stark's presence there.

It was not always gloomy, however, for as time wore on, Nona's fascination increased. Her loveliness wove a spell about him, a net from which he did not wish to escape. At last he told her how much she meant to him, and to his surprize and joy she confessed that she cared equally as much for him. So they became engaged.

Cass Ledyard made no objection to their marriage, although he became

immediately quiet and grave and went to his room right after supper. That night Sig disappeared without a word of explanation. His life was shattered as completely as that of the Persian in Cass Ledyard's story, who had unfortunately sat in the direct path of the clashing colors. Although no one even suspected it, Sig had begun to think of Nona as his own. He imagined that she too, like him, was a social outcast. He believed eventually she would consent to become his wife. He did not realize the absurdity of the thought, nor did he realize that he was a loathsome monstrosity. It is fortunate that we see only the most pleasing aspect of our faces when we gaze into mirrors. Sig had studied Cass Ledyard every moment they had been together and he had arrived at the conclusion that Cass Ledyard was a far more notorious criminal than even he himself. The thought increased his own egotism. He was less in fear of the law than his employer, who evidently lived in constant dread of it.

### 3

THE next night Cass Ledyard was just as cordial as usual to Stark Laurier. He had not appeared at breakfast or lunch. He had remained in his room, and Nona, knowing her father's eccentricities, did not disturb him. But at supper he was quite talkative. He recounted many interesting anecdotes and proved himself in truth a charming host. After supper he and Stark Laurier went into the library and seated themselves before the hearth while Nona went to the kitchen to wash the dishes, for now that Sig had disappeared they were entirely without servants.

Most of Cass Ledyard's talk that evening was about the Orient, odd little tales whose settings were in the fabulous romance countries of the East. He talked of India and southern China so vividly that the cities

he told of seemed to materialize before their eyes among the crackling embers of the open fire. And then eventually conversation veered around to Tibet—that wild, desolate little country situated at the roof of the world.

“It is a land of drifting shadows,” he said, “a land in the grip of a fanatical religion, ruled by a revered Lama of whom the people stand in as great awe as if he were the White God himself. In Tibet one hears many strange incidents. For example, a prognosticator once foretold a happening which irritated the Dalai Lama. In a fit of rage he summoned the man before him and ordered that his lips be sewn together by a tentmaker, proclaiming that if what the soothsayer predicted came to pass he was to be signally honored; if not, the stitches were to remain as a fitting reminder that it is unwise even for a prophet to talk too much.”

As Cass Ledyard finished speaking, some unseen hand switched off the electric lights, plunging the room into a well of darkness. The fire on the hearth had burned low. Only an eery blue flame remained, which cast off no illumination. It seemed, on the contrary, to make the blackness of the room more impenetrable. There came a sudden draft, as cold and damp and dismal as if a window had been stealthily opened and the night fog was drifting in. From the distant mountain solitudes floated a dismal wail as if some animal were in distress. The treetops outside the window swayed and swished, and seemed to be murmuring plaintively to one another about the haunted horror that had broken loose once more in the mountains. Stark Laurier sat rigid in his chair, every nerve tense, listening, trying to peer through the curtains of blackness.

He felt as if some other presence were in the room besides himself and his host. Once some unseen shape

passed soundlessly between him and the blue flame of the fire, hiding it for a brief moment. Cass Ledyard groaned; he was breathing heavily as if the very act of living had become a pain to him.

Then like a flash, Stark Laurier thought of Nona. She was in the kitchen, alone, unprotected, left to the mercy of the intruder.

Not hesitating for a moment, Stark Laurier sprang to his feet. He rushed blindly toward the kitchen door, but he never reached it. For he tripped over a great chair and fell with such a crash that it echoed uncannily throughout the house. The next moment he felt two bony hands creeping toward his throat, feeling their way up his coat. They were cold and damp, as the hands of a forest prowler naturally would be. Stark Laurier recoiled in horror. Then he pulled himself together and the struggle began in earnest. Each endeavored to grip the other's throat. Their sole desire was to kill.

Stark Laurier realized that at last he was face to face with the specter that haunted the mountain. It was not a wraith made of cloudlike mist, but a strong man of flesh and blood, though no less of a menace because of that fact. He wondered what had become of Nona. If he lost the fight, he shuddered to think of her possible fate. The very thought doubled his strength. With one mighty effort he broke free of the steel-like talons of fingers. The next moment his hands had closed about a scrawny though muscular throat. He emitted a little chuckle of satisfaction as he commenced to close his fingers together. Even as he did so the lights flared up again. Nona Ledyard stood in the doorway. Her face was very white and she was breathing heavily. Stark Laurier looked down at his victim and recoiled in horror. It was Cass Ledyard. In the darkness they had been fighting each other.



Cass Ledyard struggled to his feet. He was just barely able to breathe but he did not seem to bear any resentment toward Stark Laurier. For the mistake in the blackness they were equally to blame. But his usually pale face was a sickly green, as if he were a plague-sufferer, and his eyes seemed bursting from their sockets.

"What is the matter?" gasped Nona.

As she spoke, Cass Ledyard rushed across the room in a panic. The door of the adjoining room, the room which he had forbidden Stark Laurier to enter, was open. When Stark Laurier and Nona followed Cass Ledyard, they beheld him standing before an empty mantelpiece.

"It's gone!" he shrieked. "It's gone!"

He clutched paralytically at the air.

"The Golden Buddha is stolen!"

"Perhaps," hazarded Stark Laurier, "you will recover it in time."

Cass Ledyard's face as he turned upon him was horrible to behold. His mouth worked convulsively and he was drooling at the lips. There was no accounting for the hatred and fury of his expression.

"Fool!" he rasped. "Fool!"

Then he burst into delirious laughter.

"I have lived ten years for this moment," he raged, "and now you speak of recovery."

He seized a hugh cane.

"Get out of my house!" he screamed, as he brandished the heavy knotted stick above Stark Laurier's head. "Get out of my house, you fool!"

Stark was speechless with astonishment at the turn which events had taken. Nona took his arm.

"Father is not himself," she pleaded; "please go."

AS IF in a dream, Stark Laurier permitted himself to be led unresisting to the door. Nona pressed her cold lips to his. The next moment she was gone and the door of "The Castle" had been barricaded against him.

The night was intensely dark. Against the reflected sheen of the blood-burning moon the trees stood out in jagged silhouette. The forest trails were very damp. Stray bits of mist, illuminated, white-glowing, moved stealthily about as if they were lost spirits searching for bodies to enter. The distant, feeble dripping of a mountain stream floated to his ears so monotonously that eventually it seemed to grow to drum-pitch. The thickets seemed filled with subdued voices, as if all the woodfolk were deep in conversation. Stark leaned against a tree. He shivered. The intense cold of the night air was as cutting as a meat-cleaver. It dug to his very bones. The fact that he was hatless served to increase his general discomfort. His head was in a whirl. He could not find his way down the perilous mountain paths in the darkness. But even if he had been able, he could not leave Nona to the mercy of all the unexplainable mysteries of Black Hill. At any moment she might call to him for help. So he sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree not twenty feet from "The Castle". Now all the lights were out and it looked as grim and ghostlike as a tomb.

The ensuing hours seemed endless. The coldness increased. The night dew fell from the leaves above his head like chips of ice. Once something crawled across his foot. He imagined it was only a hallucination. But when he put his hand down and felt his shoe it was slimy. Never once did he close his eyes. In his misery sleep was impossible, nor did he wish to sleep. He waited intently, his ears strained for the slightest cry, but none came. The silence was unbroken, if a

forest can be called silent that seems to contain a thousand whispering voices.

Dawn came at last. To Stark Laurier it seemed considerably delayed. He rose to his feet, surprized that he was not frozen stiff. His body contained less warmth than a snowman. For half an hour he walked briskly up and down to get his sluggish blood back into circulation.

The sun climbed gradually higher and higher. The roving bits of fog vanished. The warm rays sucked up the night dew. Even his spirits emerged from their depression as the charm of the morning grew. Suddenly as he passed the main entrance of "The Castle", he was surprized to see Nona Ledyard standing pensively in the doorway.

"All night I have worried," she said. "I was miserable. I pictured you killed, lying broken on the rocks of some ravine. I knew it would have been impossible to get safely away in the blackness."

"I could not have gone in any case," he said. "The thought of you held me here more completely than even the darkness."

She smiled wistfully.

"Then you are not angry with me?" she said.

"I could not be angry with you," he answered; "only if it is all the same to you, the next time you intend to drive me out of doors, choose a warmer night."

He was in excellent spirits now that his worry over Nona was lifted from his shoulders.

"However," he continued lightly, "I suppose I should be thankful that we didn't have a blizzard."

"Father is full of remorse this morning," she told him, "so you must have breakfast with him and give him an opportunity to explain his peculiar actions of last night."

Stark Laurier needed no second bidding. Curiosity had ever been his

weak point; besides, he was ravenously hungry. His appetite was a very good friend. It never deserted him. So he entered the house.

He found Cass Ledyard already seated at the table in the dining room. As Stark Laurier approached, he rose and held out his hand.

"My shame is boundless," he said, and it was hard to realize that this calm-faced man was the maniac of the night before, "and yet it is not sufficient to make me unhappy, for I have been a virtual prisoner for ten years, a prisoner of fear, but now I am free at last. I have lived through an inferno worse than Dante ever pictured."

He walked over and opened the window.

"It is a beautiful morning," he said. "I do not know when the countryside has seemed so perfect. Those mountains to the east I like to think of as 'The Mountains of the Morning'. Beyond their purple ridges the sun goes into camp at night."

Then he returned and seated himself at the table.

"I owe you an explanation," he said. "If you will let me tell you the story of the Golden Buddha I am sure many of my fanatical actions of the last few weeks will be clarified."

He did not wait for Stark Laurier to assent, but plunged at once into his story.

"**T**O TELL about the Golden Buddha," he began thoughtfully, "I will have to carry you in revery away off to the interior of unexplored Tibet, where the Dalai Lama rules as absolute and merciless as any tribal chief in darkest Africa. Whatever drew my footsteps to the bleak and bare wilderness of Tibet in the first place I cannot explain. Perhaps it was the lure of forbidden lands, the desire to walk through cities to which no other Christian had ever penetrated, to gaze upon mountain ranges,

ravines and glacial lakes piled with ice upon which the subdued glare of the sun painted prismatic colors, to fight a way through wind-beaten, storm-swept mountain passes, enduring a cold so intense that every breath of wind shrieking down from the needle-pointed peaks crashed against the face like a solid thing, and to know as each new scene loomed up that no other Christian had ever penetrated those inhospitable, bleak and desolate regions."

In Cass Ledyard's eyes there was a far-away, dreamy expression as if in retrospection he was again seeing the mysterious visions that haunt the mountain passes.

"I first heard of the little Golden Buddha at Simla in India," he continued presently, "immediately on my return from Nepal. Colonel Gerould, of the British army, told me its story one evening as we sat out on the balcony of the London Club. All about us people were laughing and chatting merrily. From far in the distance came strains of delightful music, blending pleasantly with the exquisite fragrance of a million flowers.

"If you are looking for adventure," drawled Colonel Gerould, "why don't you journey to Lassa in quest of the myth-famed Golden Buddha, which is more revered by the people than is the Dalai Lama? The tiny statue is kept in a sacred temple that has stood for a thousand years. It is guarded by two old men, which is considered sufficient, for who would even attempt to steal so sacred a relic? And yet the Golden Buddha is not really the property of the Tibetans, for many years ago it was stolen from a temple somewhere in inland China. So you see by procuring the Buddha you would not be robbing the Tibetans, for surely one cannot lose title to a thing which one has never really owned."

"Thus for an hour Colonel Gerould talked and extolled the merits of the Golden Buddha, until at last he kindled a fire of longing in my heart to journey to Lassa on a quest almost as obscure as Ponce de Leon's search for the Fountain of Youth. In less than two hours we were discussing the details of my journey. I fully appreciated the dangers which would be encountered on the road to Lassa, for the almost unknown city of mystery is one of the great centers of the religious world.

"The days that followed were as busy as any I have ever known. I went about purchasing and collecting such paraphernalia as I deemed necessary for the expedition. In this task, which was by no means small, I was ably assisted by Ben Ali Reyham, an Arab guide who had a dozen times proved his extraordinary worth to me, and Noor el Arfi, Ben Ali's greatest friend. Thus the final snags were unraveled, and at last the eventful day came which marked the start of our expedition. . . .

"Of the first few days of travel nothing need be said. They contained little of interest. It was not until we got well away from the grass-covered hill country that the real trouble of our march began. Up forest-clad mountains we pushed our way, skirting moraines, through a region of perpetual snow and then down into a fertile valley once again. But the valley was only a fitting part of our journey, for soon we climbed a precipitous slope and entered the great corrugated uplands of Tibet, cut by bleak mountain ranges of tremendous height. Now we were in a weirdly wild and desolate country with nothing to break the frightful monotony but bleak walls of bare, gray rock, vast glaciers and high ranges crowned with eternal snow. Added to this, we were passing through a section peopled by tribes of fierce, warlike hills-

men who hold the right of way to Lassa, and our position can be imagined."

Again Cass Ledyard lapsed into silence. Stark Laurier made no effort to interrupt his reverie.

"I fear I am beginning to ramble," he continued slowly.

"Eventually we arrived within two miles of the sacred city of Lassa. We were fortunate in finding a cave in the mountains, wherein we could lie hidden. If our presence had been discovered we should undoubtedly have been made captives to be dealt with according to the passing mood of the Dalai Lama. . . .

"When night came on, I stole forth alone from our hiding place. As I look back, I shiver even now as I think of that night's adventures. Something in the uncanny, grim coldness of the forbidden country seemed to chill my blood to ice. My teeth chattered and my knees trembled so that it was a wonder I was able to reach the temple at all. I frankly dreaded to go forward and nothing on earth could have made me turn back. I feared cowardice more than I feared danger, just as some men would rather face death than ridicule.

"At the open door of the temple I paused and peered nervously within. A faint light burned near the altar upon which stood the Golden Buddha. To this day I could not describe the furnishings of that temple if you were to offer me all the treasure of the Incas. My eyes were glued upon that little Golden Buddha. I gloated over it as avariciously as any miser might gloat over money. I think, now, that at that moment I was temporarily delirious as a result of the terrible hardships we had encountered on the road to Lassa. But at the moment I did not wonder at my intense cupidity. To long to possess that statue of Buddha seemed the most natural thing in the world.

"I STOLE into the temple unchallenged. I might have been walking through a dead city for all the opposition I encountered. Five minutes later I had the idol in my possession and was fleeing back to the mountain solitudes. And now fear conquered. I sped down that mountain pass as if pursued by a thousand warlike hillmen. Every shrieking wail of the wind among the jagged rocks seemed to me like the war cry of my pursuers. And yet I sped down that dark and silent ravine absolutely alone. Not a single Tibetan followed me.

"In some unknown way I reached the cave and fell exhausted at the feet of my two guides, Ben Ali Reyham and his comrade. That night I lay and tossed on my blanket in the wildest delirium. When morning came I was in the grip of a raging fever. So it was impossible for us to return to Simla. I could not walk a single step.

"During the next two weeks my brain recorded little of the happenings about me. I just lay weak and only semi-conscious, at the point of death. Every day my companions expected the last spark of life to flicker out of my wasted body. Yet somehow I pulled through.

"At the beginning of the third week the fever lifted and I regained full consciousness. I was still very weak, but there was no longer any doubt of my recovery.

"Then it was that Ben Ali Reyham approached the blanket on which I lay. 'Master,' he said, 'the ways of Allah are marvelous. He has drawn suspicion away from us and placed it upon the heads of the two old men who used to guard the temple of the Golden Buddha. The Dalai Lama has decreed that they must die to atone for the theft. If, within the next ten sunrises, the Golden Buddha is not returned, they are to be tied together, hand and foot, and cast into the river.

So you see, my master, a great danger has been lifted from our shoulders'.

"Weeks later we were back in Simla, or rather, I should say I arrived at an inferno, for I have never known a happy moment since the Buddha has been in my possession. Sometimes I seem to see the bloated, ghastly corpses of the old men floating on that ancient river in Tibet. And the thongs that bind them together have bound my happiness as well. I have been a slave to that idol more truly than any lama ever was. Always I have had the fear of retribution hanging over me. I have been a hunted thing, always watching for the grim, gaunt emissaries who must surely be relentlessly seeking me out.

"I used to live with Nona at Cresco, but we fled when some suspicious looking gipsies came and camped within half a mile of our house. I was afraid. Fear is a terrible thing. To be hunted like a wild thing is dreadful. But to be tormented by one's conscience is even worse.

"Sometimes at night I feel as if my mind is breaking. A sudden impulse overcomes me and I race out into the night over the crooked winding roads until I return absolutely exhausted and sleep from utter weariness.

"That Golden Buddha hypnotized me. I longed to get rid of it, yet I could not throw it away. My hands were tied. I have been under a spell. But now the spell has been lifted, for the lamas have gotten back their sacred idol after a relentless pursuit that lasted more than ten years."

## 4

**S**TARK LAURIER and Nona were married early the next week and they left at once for a quiet honeymoon in New York City.

"I haven't been in New York for years," said Nona, "and I could not

take a trip anywhere I would enjoy more."

As the train sped down through the mountains, Stark Laurier said thoughtfully, "I have been thinking a great deal about the disappearance of the Golden Buddha and I have come to the conclusion that the Tibetans did not again secure possession of it as your father imagined."

"I thought," she drawled, "I had married a novelist, and now to my surprize I find I have married a detective. What is your theory?"

"I think," he told her, "in fact I am almost certain that Sig took the golden idol when he ran away. He was an ex-convict and undoubtedly realized that the little statue was of great value because it was made of pure gold."

"That is splendid," she asserted, "as far as it goes, but like most deductions it doesn't go far enough."

As she spoke she opened her black over-night bag and drew from it the Golden Buddha.

"You see," she went on wickedly, "you have married a scoundrel, because it was I who stole the Golden Buddha. It was I who turned off the electric lights and then opened the window to give the affair an uncanny appearance. For I realized that the Golden Buddha was wrecking my father's life, driving him mad. He was fleeing from pursuers that did not exist. I do not believe that a single soul is following him. I knew he wished to get rid of the statue but did not have the strength nor courage to destroy it himself. Now we must carefully dispose of it so he will never see it again."

Stark Laurier was amazed, but he was also delighted with her stratagem.

"A moment ago," he said, "you stated that you had married a detective as well as a novelist, but you were wrong. You married only a novelist."