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"Author of "Mystery River" and "Six Bearded Men"

"**H**ALT!"
"Seize him!"
"Throttle his throat!"
"Bind him, hand and foot!"

"The burlap about him and to the car!"

The steel-like commands followed each other in well timed succession. The voice of the leader was purposely muffled, but each word was clear-cut, sharply and quickly spoken.

With measured step, from out the quietude of the partially illuminated, seemingly deserted street, six men had emerged. They offered not a comment, neither did they tarry; each man knew his particular part of the program, and all acted quickly and with precision.

In the twinkling of an eye, the aged Kleg Pantzar, gagged, bound, and heavily wrapped in a covering that smelled of harness leather, was lifted from his feet.

The leader signaled the others to follow.

They pushed through the willowy brush, and behind the large signboards that hid them from the street. Across the vacant lot they went to the darkness of the alley.

"The plank, and strap him!"

The leader's words were more stern, more frigid than before.

Pantzar was stood upright, and two men held him thus, while three others placed the plank at his back. Three surcingle were slipped about him—one at his feet, one about his waist and one about the shoulders—and all were tightly drawn.

"He'll make a fine specimen of a mummy when we're done with him. jeered one in an undertone.

The leader sprang quickly forward and, touching the speaker lightly on the arm, spoke in low, cautious tones:

"This, I deem, is no place for jest. The guardians of the city's peace may soon be upon us. Leave your tormenting until we are in the distant spot, secure from the jurisdiction of courts and the eyes of men."

The leader swung quarter round and gestured toward the waiting truck.

"Slide the burlaped body in, and let it lie flat on the vehicle's metal bed.

A murmured word, and the helpless Pantzar was tipped backward, lifted, and slipped within the waiting car.

Two men mounted to the driver's seat, one sat on either of the flaring sides and two climbed in at the rear.

The motor spun. There was the grinding of the meshing gears, and soon they were out upon the city's thoroughfare. With darkened lamps, the car crept on to the unpaved streets of the sleeping suburbs.

A quick turn that threw the bound body to one side, and the motor belched aloud. Now they were safe. The lights flared out into the murkiness of an unlighted night. Down went the lever on the quadrant and the car lunged forward furiously.

ON AND on they went, over rough and smooth, up hill and down; a black, humming demon in the stillness of the damp, pitch-black night.

There was a whispered word. The motor was slowed down and, at a divergence of the road, the car leaped to the left. For miles they bumped along a narrow, timber-flanked byway.

Again the engine ceased to labor; the brakes creaked and squealed. The car stopped suddenly.

"We have arrived!" came a voice from the driver's seat.

Three distinct taps on the floor of the car.

"All out!" rasped six voices in unison.

Twelve human feet hit the leaf-strewn ground at the same instant. All went to the rear of the car. Six black-robed men faced toward the bound one.

It was the leader's frigid monotone that rent the moment's silence:

"Unbuckle the straps that hold him to the plank! Remove the burlap! Untie his feet, but give him not the freedom of his hands!"

Five men took their places quickly, each man to his particular task. Pantzar was dragged out and stood upright. The men worked fast, and soon he was blinking in the dazzling glare of a powerful electric bulb.

Six men with coal-black beards of equal length formed in a semicircle in front of him; each dressed in black, a tight cap of the same color pulled far down over his ears.

Pantzar glanced from one to the other. His lips were for a moment paralyzed. Again, he momentarily gazed at each of the six men in turn. His small blue eyes glistened under the gray canopy of his hair; his emaciated face quivered; his purple lips parted, and he breathed long and deeply.

"The Black Temple Band!" he gasped aloud.

"You're right, for once, you old image-maker!" sneered one.

"You super-mystic!" hissed another with a fiendish smile.

"I am not the maker of the lifelike, skeleton figures," pleaded Pantzar. "Louvili is the creator."

"Ha! Ha!" sneered the leader. "'Tis none but Pantzar's hand that shapes the images of our dead, and makes them mechanically perfect, that this degraded Louvili may use them for his designing purposes—a disgrace."

A sardonic hiss went round the semicircle.

Pantzar's deep-sunken, blue eyes snapped, his wan face grew tense, and the straight-cut, livid lips parted.

"Then you, that you do accuse me, must be the husband of the leather dealer's wife," he asserted, firmly. "'Twas your burlap that—"

A heavy hand clapped quickly over the speaker's mouth, and a deep voice sounded:

"No more of this! You know one of our number, we admit. By studying deeper, your acknowledgment and the rapid succession of thoughts you pursued to arrive at this recognition prove to us that you are unquestionably the one whom we did this night seek."

"Silence!" commanded the leader. "Speak no longer thus in so densely

timbered a place." He turned to the gray-haired man.

"Guide us to Louvili's palace-cave."

"Why is it that you cannot go alone, since you have come this far unguided?"

"Parley not with questioning!" retorted the leader gruffly. "We cannot find our way in this entangled labyrinth. We know there are secret wirings here and do not care to meet our fate at the hands of such an unscrupulous wretch as you." Then in firmer tones: "Lead on, and say no more!"

Pantzar was thoughtful for some moments, his aged head bowed low.

"Do you refuse?" demanded the leader, directing the blinding glare of the light on the old man's face.

"Not I!" declared Pantzar, with quickened turn of mind. "Unbind my hands that I may be free to use my arms."

His blue eyes met the leader's black ones, squarely.

"Do this, and place in my care the electric bulb. I will show the way. Once started, you shall see all, be the end what it will."

"Shall we witness your transformation?" jeered one.

"No more such remarks!" admonished the leader. "Take the bindings from his arms!"

Soon the huge light was in Pantzar's trembling hand, and he turned down the narrow trail that penetrated the timbered valley.

"Wait here!" he said. "I will clear the way. When I call, come at once."

Pantzar proceeded a little way on the rough, rock-strewn path. He stepped to a bush and pulled at a twig. Instantly the forest darkness was glittering with countless sparkling bulbs. A few paces more and he reached into a pile of rocks.

There was a shaking of the stone pathway, similar to the movements of

a grain-cleaner's screen. Suddenly the rough pathway became as smooth and even of surface as a slab of polished marble.

"Come!" cried Pantzar.

Six black-robed men dashed forward quickly, and were soon at the aged Pantzar's side.

The passage was lighter than the brightest day.

The gray-haired man bowed in reflection, then, looking up, dashed the portable lamp upon the stone.

"What you have sought," said he, in a languid monotone, "you soon shall see."

As slowly as a funeral march, Pantzar led them down the path of polished stone. Numerous lights glared brightly through the thick foliage of the overhanging branches, and giant trees, thickly set in entangling underbrush on either side, walled them in. The aged one reeled weakly from side to side as he went falteringly on, while behind him trailed the six black-robed men, all with bowed heads.

PANTZAR stopped suddenly and faced about.

"We are here!" he stated in a solemn, quivering voice.

The eyes of six black-capped men followed his directing finger. Before them was a perpendicular wall of stone, smoothly polished, and apparently without joint or crevice.

"But where is the entrance?" asked the leader, somewhat puzzled.

"'Tis here! Right here before your eyes!" declared the aged one in a cold, lifeless tone.

"Open quickly! We have no time to tarry!" commanded the leader hastily.

"Be it so," agreed Pantzar, reluctantly. "I thought you might turn back."

As his voice died out, he raised his slim, white hands heavenward and pulled at a twig above his head. A vapor encircled them, the rustling of

the leaves ceased, and an infinite stillness crept over the spot. Then moans as of unseen, suffering humans broke upon their ears.

The white-haired man, for a second time, raised his hands and touched the broken branch. Slowly, steadily, the weird sounds died away.

"Remove your robes, Black Princes of the Black Temple Band!"

He paused a moment to give them ample time. The six men did not move.

"Obey my command!" said he, with raise of voice. "Delay not! No man can enter this place dressed in black. 'Tis Louvili's steadfast rule!"

"Rules are not for us!" chimed six men in unison.

Pantzar laughed a sickening laugh.

"You do not understand the seriousness of your choice," said he. "My life, as it is now, is worthless to me—an aged man in six murderers' hands. One touch and through your six bodies, as well as the one I now enjoy, countless volts of electric current shall quickly pass. I give you time to reconsider. Shall I end it all?"

Six black robes fell instantly to the earth at the wearers' feet.

The gray-haired man gazed intently toward the perpendicular wall of stone. He pushed a knot on a gnarled tree. Inch by inch, mechanically, quietly, the wall began to open at the top and tip gradually outward. Soon, a faint ray of light showed around the edges. Once started, the moving wall kept swinging down, as if hinged at the bottom. Purple-white lights now gleamed into the black bearded faces of six statue-like men.

As the stone wall continued downward, seeking slowly the level of the smooth entrance, the gray vapor became denser. Gradually the men were separated from the outside world by myriads of glistening, dancing crystals.

When the wall rested horizontally at their feet, a mammoth cave lay open to their view. The purple light cast a ghastly glow over the spacious interior. A huge copper railing enclosed a massive table in which were hundreds of black buttons. Midway, across the cave from right to left, hung heavy drapes of gold and silver cloth. From the stone dome was suspended a giant hand-carved globe of countless facets, which divided the gleam of the powerful arc light into threadlike rays of violet and green and yellow hues.

The once lowering wall now formed an entrance slab, mirroring the brilliancy of the richly carved cave.

Pantzar stepped forward and, pausing in the entrance, faced the eager band.

"Do you wish to see more," he asked, "or will you leave me and return to the place from which you came?"

"We'll see all, and see your finish, too," declared the leader dryly.

Pantzar smiled a deathlike smile. "Then, be it so! Enter, Black Princes of the Black Temple Band! Walk steadily in single file and touch not a single thing, for all within these walls are current-bearing devices of Louvili's master hand."

Six men bowed acknowledgment of the aged one's command.

Pantzar turned mechanically and faced within. With timed, cat-like tread, he entered. One by one, the six black-capped men fell into line and followed to the portals.

With a wave of his bony arm, the aged Pantzar motioned them to form in single line about the outside of the polished copper railing.

Quickly, he stepped to the large, polished table with its numerous buttons. He touched one of the black beads upon its surface. The massive entrance closed with the same mechanical precision as it had opened.

"Enough of this!" cried one. "Where are the figures? They are what we want to see! Whom are you imitating now?"

Again, the aged man laughed coldly.

"Be quick!" commanded the leader, taking a step forward but avoiding the rail in front of him.

The long, tapering fingers of the aged man touched another button, another, and still another. One by one, little by little, the gold and silver drapes folded back, exposing the remainder of the cave.

Neatly arranged in a semicircle about a moss-covered, stagnant pool, were wan, ivory-complexioned, human-like heads, set upon thinly-robed waxen forms. Glistening, half-closed eyes peered down upon the murky waters in a stony, deathlike stare.

Again, the withered fingers passed over the responding buttons. Steadily, languidly, simultaneously, a slim right arm of each of the mechanical figures raised.

Pantzar chuckled weakly, and his fingers pressed quickly upon others of the black buttons.

The mechanical lips of the waxen heads parted. Beating time, the draped arms moved up and down.

Pantzar's small blue eyes turned wearily to each of the six men in turn.

All save the leader's caught his glance. He dashed around the circumference of the cave toward a waxen figure still incomplete.

The white-haired man's fingers touched other buttons quickly, and the figures ceased to move. His conciliatory smile was gone. His nervous face twitched in agony. He lunged forward and in an instant was in pursuit of the leader.

The leader reached the partly finished image, with Pantzar close behind. He jerked aside a sheet. In the semi-darkened section before him lay the likeness of an incomplete human form—a counterpart in the clay.

"Wretch!" the leader cried. "You shall this night die! Come, men! Dash him into this green pool and hold his head submerged until he shall breathe no more."

Pantzar attempted to return to the table that he might extinguish the light, but six men held him fast and moved him toward the pool.

Suddenly the leader drew back from the rest.

"Hold, men!" said he thoughtfully, "Let Pantzar witness the wrecking of his fortune."

"Do not ruin my life's work," cried the white-haired man in despair. "Please grant that I may exhibit it to an art-admiring world. Let me show that Louvili's teaching has made of me a super-master at the trade. Numerous patents are now pending. This wealth will I divide. Grant me my time that—"

"Patents, bah! Life, three times bah!" hissed the leader. "One hold the guilty wretch! Others to the waxen forms. Spare not one."

Quickly, five men dashed forward toward the silent likenesses of life, leaving the white-haired man within the sixth one's sturdy grip.

A SHRIEK of pain echoed throughout the cave, and five men halted in their steps. The leader had touched one of the forms lightly and had received a tingling sting.

Mumbled words passed among the five men. The leader's eyes focused fiendishly upon the trembling, helpless Pantzar.

"Turn off the current!" he commanded loudly.

"To do so, I must be free to return to the table," was Pantzar's quick reply.

"You may," said the leader, "but we will accompany you. Touch also the button that opens the heavy door.

Hurriedly they seized him and, carefully avoiding the encircling pol-

ished copper railing, they rushed him to the button-covered slab.

Quietly, the heavy door swung down. His fingers moved slowly, as if in agony. Momentarily, his hands rested on the buttons, his head raised, and the pallid lips parted.

"'Tis done," he gasped, his tear-filled eyes raising to meet the black eyes of the leader of the gang. "Save the images," he pleaded. "Save the images, for they are masterpieces of a master art. Louvili has gone to barter them for a fortune, and still I hesitate to transfer ownership. For fifty years have I toiled unceasingly upon them. Save them, I beg, even though I shall not live to see the light of day. Consider, men, should you in a fit of hate destroy the work it has taken a lifetime to perfect?"

Each bearded man stepped back, and each again studied the figures near the pool. Whispers went from ear to ear. The leader moved apart from the rest, and addressed the aged Pantzar:

"We grant you the request you make."

His voice was low. Each word was slowly, clearly enunciated.

"Your images shall be spared, for we shall load them in the truck. They shall be sold! 'Twill pay us for our trip."

"And me?" interrupted Pantzar, with bowed head.

"You have seen, for a last time, the summer's rising sun," declared the leader frigidly.

Turning to the men, the leader waved them round the railing.

"Go about your work, and parley not!" he ordered. "We will reap the reward of this miser's clandestine life."

One by one, the images were carried through the opening and down the narrow, stony path, and carefully placed in the car. Tears coursed down the withered cheeks of the watchful, white-haired man as the last one passed from view.

The leader seized him by the arm and started toward the pool.

Pantzar drew back.

The leader called to his men, and instantly they were at his side. Picking up the aged man, they carried him and stood him near the water's edge.

"Tear his garments into shreds!" commanded the leader gruffly. "Tie them round about his worthless frame so that neither hands nor feet can move. This done, we shall hold him below the surface of this greenish pool." His voice sank to a deep, acrimonious bass. "And let—him—die!"

Between parted lips, the aged Pantzar clenched his pearly teeth, and struggled in their grasp. Pushing backward and then forward, he moved the men close to the shining copper rail. Suddenly, he dropped upon his hands and knees and crawled. They pounced upon him, but their fingers slipped their hold. Try as they would, his shoulders passed under the railing, inch by inch.

"Rip the garments!" ordered the leader hoarsely. "We'll bind him when he stops!"

Under the polished copper railing, the struggling Pantzar crept. To stop him, two men unthinkingly braced against the current-carrying rail. A painful groan. Pantzar moved on untouched. Six pairs of eyes rolled painfully heavenward, and six men dropped, a quivering, lifeless mass.

WHEN the morning sun crept up the cloudless eastern sky, the weary Pantzar, with a wan, solemn, yet purposeful face, slowly guided the laden car down the city's quiet thoroughfare. The door to the well-hidden cave had been securely closed, never to swing again; the electric wirings had been stripped from the forest-furnished hangings; and what was dearer to the aged Pantzar than life itself, his works, had been saved to keep him company.