

MAR. 25c

Weird Tales



CLUTCHING HANDS
OF
DEATH

By HAROLD WARD



C. L. Moore
Robert E. Howard
Otis Adelbert Kline

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 25

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Clutching Hands of Death

By HAROLD WARD

A tale of terror—of a weird surgical operation performed in France—and a ghastly horror that stalked by night

JOHN HURST met death in the electric chair today. Standing on the brink of eternity, he refused to make any statement, maintaining the same enigmatical silence that had marked his demeanor from the day of his arrest.

Those who followed the case will remember that I represented Hurst at the trial. There was little I could do, for he positively declined to allow me to put up any defense. From the very first he knew that he was doomed; in fact, he told me several times that he wanted to die.

Yesterday I visited him for the last time, conveying to him the sad—to me—news that the governor had refused to grant a reprieve. He received the information with a smile.

"You didn't think that he would, did you?" he asked. "But, nevertheless, I appreciate what you have done for me."

He accompanied me to the cell door. Then, as we shook hands for the last time, he handed me a sealed envelope.

"The truth is in this," he said. "When I am gone, give it to the press. Nobody will believe what I have written, but I, at least, have had the pleasure of putting it down without interference from——"

He hesitated for the infinitesimal part of a second.

"Never mind," he finally resumed. "It is all in there. I'd like my friends to know the whole damnable story."

This morning I sat beside the radio waiting for the flash that told me John Hurst had gone to his maker. Then I opened the envelope. For a moment the

thought came over me that the man had gone insane. But as I reconstructed the crime for which he was executed, I realized that John Hurst was telling the truth. But the reader must be his own judge. The narrative follows:

John Hurst's Statement

THIS is not a war story. Yet the horrible series of events which I am about to relate had their beginning in a base hospital somewhere in France.

My last distinct recollection before that was the nightmarish, indescribable second when the captain held his hand aloft, his eyes glued on his wrist-watch. He dropped his arm to indicate that the zero hour had come. We went over the top, a scattered khaki line. I recall no more.

I have a faint remembrance of jolting along in an ambulance on the way to the rear. I was sick—horribly sick—and

● Harold Ward is a prolific writer, surpassing even the late Edgar Wallace in the fecundity of his facile typewriter. He is the author of many published novels and serials, and manages to keep a very high standard of excellence in all that he writes. He is known to the readers of WEIRD TALES as author of "The House of the Living Dead" and other sensational stories of the occult. He is at his best in this story of weird surgery: "Clutching Hands of Death."



"Where his hands should have been were only stumps."

weak. My arms felt numb, dead. I glanced down at them. My right hand was gone—evidently shattered by the premature explosion of the hand grenade I had been carrying when we went over the top. My left hand was so badly mangled that even I, a layman, could see that amputation would be necessary. I knew, too, that my chances for recovery were about one in ten thousand. Nor did I care.

I was reconciled to death, when I thought of it, which was seldom, for most of the time I was unconscious. Some first-aid man had bandaged me after a

fashion, putting ligatures on my arms to halt the bleeding; I lacked the strength or I would have pulled them off; for what man cares to go through life with two stumps for hands?

I do not remember when I reached the hospital. My mind is a blank on many points. In fact, most of the events which I am about to relate happened while I was in a sort of trance. At other times I was in a sort of "twilight sleep," catching indistinct snatches of conversation, but paying no attention to what was going on about me.

Two men were talking.

"I've been wanting to do an operation like this ever since I quit school. . . . Here's one that is made to order for me. . . . Tell the nurse to get them ready. . . ."

" . . . Both going . . . die. . . ."

"That's the point. But with such an operation there's one chance in a million that the fellow whose hands are off will live. The other has . . . no . . ."

". . . will kill him. . . ."

"What's the odds? . . . Matter of a few hours one way or the other. . . ."

The voices seemed to come from a great distance. Yet I knew that the speakers were standing beside me. And, for some reason, I knew that they were talking about me. I did not care.

Then I drifted off again.

I seemed to be floating through space . . . I was as light as a balloon . . . I . . .

I realized suddenly that there was a smell of disinfectants in the air. I was sick to my stomach . . . and sleepy—oh, so sleepy. I managed to open my eyes, trying to recollect what had happened. Was it morning? Were we getting ready to go over the top again? Then my blurred vision made out the outlines of a clean, white bed and I knew that I was in a hospital.

I closed my weary eyes and dropped back to sleep.

FOR some reason I seemed to be the prize catch of the season from a medical standpoint. I was in a private ward; that much I realized, even though I was in a semi-stupor most of the time. The room was constantly filled with doctors and nurses; there was an almost incessant buzz of whispered conversation through which I drifted drowsily. I know now, what I did not know then, that I was kept under the influence of opiates. I think that I vaguely wondered why so much attention was being paid to me, a com-

mon sergeant. Yet I cared little. I was too ill, too weak, even to speculate.

Time had no value to me. For several weeks I must have hovered between life and death, realizing little. Then I took a turn for the better; this much I knew from the tone of the conversation.

It was hard to realize that my hands were gone. I often imagined that I could feel the touch of the bandages against them. Yet something back in my subconscious mind told me that such was not the case. It was worse at night. It seemed at times as if someone were trying to seize my hands and drag them from me. Sometimes I woke up screaming, imagining that a wraith-like form was hovering over me. It was vague, indistinct; it always disappeared when I opened my eyes. The nurse was constantly outside the door; the touch of her cool fingers on my fevered brow usually quieted me.

As I grew better I cursed myself for a fool for allowing my imagination to run riot. I had heard stories of men who had lost their limbs and who, for weeks afterward—sometimes even for months—imagined at times that they were still in possession of their complete bodies. I remembered a tale my mother once told me of a boy who had had his fingers cut off in an accident and who cried for days, asserting that his fingers were crossed. In desperation, a member of the family had finally dug up the buried digits and found that, in rattling around in the box before burial, they had become twisted. He had straightened them out and the boy cried no more.

So, as I say, as I began to regain my strength, I began to grow morose. I often wished for death. For who cares to go through life a helpless cripple?

The day came when the young doctor, dropping in to dress my wounds, found me wide awake. The superintendent of

nurses was with him. He greeted me with a smile and a cheery nod.

I turned my head away as he unfastened the bandages.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed with enthusiasm. "Look for yourself, Hurst."

"I have no desire to gaze upon my helplessness," I answered bitterly.

For an instant he looked at me. Then realization swept over him.

"God in heaven! Is it possible that you fail to understand that a miracle has been performed?" he demanded. "Turn your head, man. Turn your head and be prepared for a happy surprize."

Something told me to do as he commanded.

Where there had been but mangled stumps there were now two hands. Big hands, they were—horrible hands, the fingers stubby, muscular, the nails thick, the backs covered with coarse, black hair. But they were hands, nevertheless—*my hands*. Yet they were not my hands. My hands had been slender, the fingers spatulate. These were simian hands—the hands of a caveman. Yet when I tried them I felt movement in them. I wriggled the fingers a trifle.

I turned to the young doctor in astonishment. Was I dreaming—the victim of another hallucination?

He sensed my bewilderment and hastened to explain.

"The miracle of modern surgery," he said. "It is to be regretted that Colonel Ernest is not here to gaze upon the triumph of his skill. Unfortunately, he was transferred back to the States shortly after doing the work——"

"I—I do not understand," I said thickly, gazing down at the stubby ill-shaped hands—*my hands*—again.

"It is the first time in history that such a grafting operation has been performed," he went on. "True, never before has a surgeon had the opportunity, for what

man would give to another man his legs or his arms? But here the conditions were different. You were little better than dead, but the man in the cot beside you was worse—practically dying. Doctor Ernest took the one chance in a million. He removed the hands from the living man and grafted them onto your arms. He worked for hours, tying the muscles—the bones—together. And such was his skill that they knit. But Colonel Ernest is one of our greatest surgeons. This proves his skill."

"The other man?" I asked.

"Naturally, he died," the young surgeon laughed. "But he would have died, anyway. For that matter, so would you. Out of what was left of two men, Doctor Ernest made one good body again."

"His name—poor devil?" I asked weakly.

The young doctor—a lieutenant, I think he was—shook his head.

"His identification tag was lost," he answered. "He was a blooming Englishman, I think, but he was in French uniform."

I AM going to skip the years that followed. Naturally, it was hard to get used to the hands. The borrowed fingers were unskilful, clumsy. But I learned to use them as my own, acquiring a deftness that had been denied me at first. And so, as the flesh and muscles co-ordinated and became one entity, I almost forgot that they were not my own, except when I looked at them. Sometimes they made me shudder. They were cruel hands, it seemed to me. Yet they were better far than no hands at all.

But I could not entirely forget that they were borrowed. There was a vague, indefinable *something* that seemed wrong. At first I only sensed it. Then the feeling grew stronger and stronger until I seemed to have it with me constantly. It was a

sensation of being watched—of being spied upon. Time after time I caught myself turning suddenly, thinking that some alien presence was in the room.

Little things were constantly coming up to intensify this feeling. Let me give one instance: Like most young men, I fell in love. The girl of my choice was visiting in another city. I sat down to write to her. Naturally, my thoughts were of love. And it was of my love for her that I was writing. Having finished the letter, I was about to place it in the envelope to mail it before I went to bed when something prompted me to glance over it.

It was filled with profanities—vile things as unlike me as day is unlike the night. My hand had not obeyed the dictates of my brain.

There were innumerable other instances of a similar nature. I began to notice that they always occurred at night.

Then came the beginning of the end.

It was in the middle of the night. I was sleeping dreamlessly, when suddenly I was awakened by a feeling of suffocation—of being throttled. Fingers were gripped about my throat, pressing against my windpipe. I breathed with difficulty. I was choking. I tried to raise my hands to defend myself. My arms were numb, useless.

Across the bed I floundered. The pressure against my gullet increased. My tongue was protruding, my eyes bulging from their sockets.

The room was, I believe that I have said, in darkness. The shades were up, and a vagrant moonbeam filtered through the window. In my struggles I chanced to cross it.

I saw my own hands pressing against my throat! I was choking myself to death!

I shrieked with horror as I jerked my hands away from my throat. Yet it was a struggle. Something within me rebelled

against it—told me to choke and choke and choke until all of the breath had left my body.

To almost every man there comes at least once in a lifetime that gripping, heart-stopping, blood-congealing sensation that we know as fear. It swept over me now. For a vague, indistinct form stood beside the bed.

I tried to reach for the gun beneath my pillow. My laggard hands refused to obey the impulses of my brain. I could only lie there, the icy chills racing up and down my spinal column as that horrible, indescribable thing leered at me. It was a man—that much I could see in spite of the darkness—a tall man, broad-shouldered, his face flat and brutal. He glared at me with eyes filled with hatred and demoniacal fury. How do I know this, since the room was in darkness? I can not answer that question. Perhaps I *felt* him—sensed him. I only know that I did see him distinctly in spite of the blackness of the night.

And I saw something else, even though it was but for an instant before he faded away.

Where his hands should have been were only stumps!

He held them up to my gaze. I shrieked again, for something seemed to link this thing—this wraith with me.

For a split second my brain raced like an engine robbed of its balance wheel. Yet in that infinitesimal passage of time the whole truth was revealed to me.

This was the man whose dying body had been robbed—desecrated—in order to provide me with hands. He was dead—yes, but part of him was still alive. Alive and attached to me—he was a part of me. I was keeping him lingering between this world and the next. He was dead and yet alive.

My teeth were chattering as I forced my legs out of the bed and onto the

floor. I reached for the light switch and pressed it.

I spent the remainder of the night pacing the floor, my body bathed in cold perspiration.

FROM that moment my body was, apparently, under the control of that fearful thing from beyond the veil. Yet I never saw him again. But I felt him—felt his presence constantly with me. I grew fearful of myself, sensing his deadly hatred of me. A hundred times I caught myself in the act of killing myself. Caught myself, I say. Let me explain: My hands refused to do the bidding of my brain. They seemed endowed with an intelligence alien to mine. I threw my gun into the furnace when I woke up one night in the nick of time, finding my hands groping for it beneath the pillow. On another occasion my razor slipped; I jerked it away from my windpipe, knowing that I had been in the act of slitting my own throat. I allowed my beard to grow.

My hands had assumed the mastery of my body, doing things constantly that were beyond my control. I grew morose and moody. Luckily I was possessed of ample means and my wants were few. Packing a few belongings into a trailer, I locked up my rooms, filled my car with books and drove to a little place I owned a hundred miles from the city. It was a hunting-shack surrounded by a few acres of ground in the midst, almost, of a wilderness. Here, my dog as my only companion, I intended fighting my battle with myself.

Before leaving, I wrote a letter to the woman I loved, breaking off our engagement. I gave no reason. Nor did I tell her where I was going. She replied, demanding an explanation of my strange conduct. I gave her none.

And so, in the wilderness, the nearest neighbor miles away, I took up my residence. Fearful of having a sharp-edged weapon of any kind, I allowed my hair and beard to grow. It became long and matted. I was but a shadow of what I had once been.

Even my dog sensed the change in me. In the daytime he was as he had always been. But at night, possessed of that strange sixth sense that is the birthright of the lower animals, he seemed to see beyond me—through me, if you will—catching glimpses of the hellish being that was always by my side. There is no other explanation for his conduct. Night after night he walked around me stiff-legged, his tail between his legs, his fangs bared, his hair bristling, a low, menacing growl issuing from his throat. Once I tried to pet him. He snapped at my hands. I never tried to pet him again at night. Yet in the sunlight he fawned on me, allowing me to caress him at will.

UP TO this time I was fearful only of myself. But, after a few weeks in the hunting-shack, something happened which gave me new cause for alarm. I have said, I believe, that the community in which the shack was located was sparsely settled, the houses miles apart. Livestock roamed at will through the dark forests. One of the nearest neighbors, passing my place one day, stopped long enough to tell me of the death of one of his calves.

"Not a mark of any kind on it," he said. "I found it back yonder a mile or two. Its mouth was open, its tongue lolling out, just as if it had choked to death. And its eyes were wide open and bulging, too."

For the moment I thought nothing of it. But other farmers passing by during the days that followed told me of similar

deaths among their livestock. Calves, sheep, a hog or two. In every instance death had resulted from the same cause. The open mouth and protruding eyes told their story only too well. Some monster was roaming the countryside—some fiend who killed for the love of killing.

And still I did not attribute this epidemic of death to myself. My nights were dreamless. I seemed to have got used to the strange thing that was haunting me, even though I spent my waking hours in worry. I was a mass of nerves. In spite of my excellent nights, I woke up each morning tired and weary. I put this down to my nervousness during the day.

Then, one morning, I awoke to find my dog lying by the side of the bed, dead. His mouth was open, his eyes protruding. He had been choked to death. Realization swept over me. I proved the case against myself. The door and windows, all locked on the inside, had not been disturbed.

My tired feeling each morning was plain to me now. I had killed the dog just as I had killed the calves and sheep that roamed the countryside. I was the monster for whom the farmers were searching.

Instead of sleeping nights, I was in some sort of hypnotic trance brought on by the thing to which I was attached. My brain was master of my body by day, but by night my hands ruled my brain. I was spending the hours of the night wandering through the darkness in search of victims. I was a killer—a maniac.

What was I to do? A thousand plans went through my head while I buried my poor dog a little distance from the house. I rejected all of them. I should have given myself up—asked the officials to lock me up as a homicidal maniac. But something kept me from it just as I was kept from killing myself. I tried a dozen times

to take my own life, but my hand was stayed each time. I could not understand it; only a few weeks before I was struggling with myself in an effort to avoid doing what I was now attempting to do.

How was I to know that the foul fiend was keeping me alive in order to achieve a more subtle, more diabolical revenge?

When I buried myself in the barren country I had, so far as possible, cut myself off from civilization. I read but little; my few books sufficed me. Newspapers never passed my threshold—why, I do not know. But I had never been a great reader of the daily press; now it seemed as if I had taken a sudden aversion to every paper. I know now that it was the strange being that had taken possession of me—that he, hating the Fourth Estate for its exposure of him, had implanted this dislike in me. Thus it was that I did not know of the holocaust of death that was sweeping over the surrounding territory. Women, girls, innocent children were being killed—throttled to death by some hellish monster, as had been the calves and sheep. A score of detectives and county officials were scouring the country everywhere within a radius of a hundred miles. And yet I went peacefully on to my doom, knowing nothing of all this.

I took precautions, as I thought. I devised all sorts of little tricks to guard me against myself—little gadgets to wake me up in case I attempted to release myself from the complicated system of locks that I had constructed to keep me from wandering about in the strange amnesia which came with the setting of the sun. I did not realize that the cunning brain of the devilish thing from beyond the veil was clever enough to have me replace the traps before I lay down after one of my nocturnal excursions.

THEN, one morning, I woke up more weary than usual. I felt dull and lethargic. I looked at my reflection in the mirror. The side of my face was bruised and blackened as if from a blow.

And still I did not realize the truth. I imagined that I had hurt myself while asleep.

It was a few days later that, wandering through the woods a short distance from my humble shack—I had started for a neighboring brook after a mess of trout and had, for some reason, switched off—I chanced across a week-old paper, evidently dropped by some fisherman who had had it wrapped about his lunch. I was about to pass it by when a vagrant breath of wind blew it open. A picture stared up at me.

I leaped back with a shriek of terror.

It was the face of the handless monster who was now my master.

I seized the paper, my eyes searching the glaring headlines that covered half of the front page:

DOES DEAD MAN LIVE AGAIN?

Is Notorious London Throttler Alive in This Country?

Fingerprints of Bill Duxton, Newcastle Street Slayer, Found on Vanity Case of Woman Slain Last Night

Thought Killed During World War

The paper told of the series of crimes that had shocked the entire civilized world. Women and children had been throttled—killed in cold blood by a fiend—a monster. Night after night for two weeks he had swooped down on villages and farmhouses, selecting his victims with maniacal cunning, never leaving a clue—until now.

The night before the issuance of the paper a crime of unusual atrocity had been committed. A young girl driving down a lonely country road had evidently run out of gas. At least, so the offi-

cial had deduced when the car was found a quarter of a mile from the scene of the crime, the tank empty. A stranger in that part of the country, she had apparently started out to walk to the nearest habitation for help when overtaken by the throttler.

That she had battled desperately for her life was demonstrated by the trampled grass. Her mesh bag, open, its contents strewn about, was found beside the bruised and battered body, her dead fingers still gripping the chain. Upon the vanity case beside the open bag were the prints of a man's fingers.

The officers had reconstructed the crime thus: The girl had been carrying the bag, woman-like, when attacked. She had swung it at her attacker. The blow had evidently forced the bag open. The monster, seizing it to jerk it away from the girl, had accidentally touched the vanity case, leaving his fingerprints on the clear, smooth surface.

The case had been rushed to the city and the fingerprints developed. While comparing them with the files of the police department someone had accidentally stumbled upon a set of prints, yellow with age, of one Bill Duxton, a monster who had, a decade earlier, startled London with the ferocity of his crimes. The two sets of prints were identical.

But Bill Duxton had disappeared at the beginning of the World War. It was believed that he had joined one of the armies fighting in France and had been killed somewhere at the front.

The enterprising press photographer had taken pictures, both of the prints on the vanity case and those of Bill Duxton. They were displayed, side by side, on the front page beneath his picture.

I had known fear before. But now I was to understand its full meaning. It was a chill autumn day, yet the beads of

perspiration gathered across my forehead and trickled down into my eyes.

For there was another picture on an inside page—the picture of the murdered girl. Even in death I recognized her. She was Joan Beresford, the woman I loved.

I stuffed the paper in my pocket and ran back to my lonely shack like a thing accursed.

The bruise on the side of my face was explained now. She had struck me there with the mesh bag. Like a man in a dream, I went to the table I used for a desk and, pressing my fingers against the ink-pad, imprinted them upon a smooth piece of white paper. Then I compared them with those in the news sheet.

All three sets were identical. Bill Duxton, the notorious London throtler, lived again in me. He was the man who, dying, had been hastened to his doom by the removal of his hands. A part of his flesh had been grafted to my flesh. He was a part of me.

A surge of manhood swept over me. My flivver was standing in the yard. Hastening out to it, I measured the gas. The tank was almost empty—mute evidence of my foul deed; for the place where the crime had been committed was forty miles away. I climbed under the wheel and stepped on the starter. My mind was made up. I would go to the city and give myself up.

I looked at my wrist watch, knowing that I must hurry. It should be dark within an hour or two. And with the coming of darkness Bill Duxton would again be my master. And Bill Duxton, I knew, would not let me carry out my plans. The scourge of death must cease.

It was growing dark when I turned off from the side road onto the pavement. Already I felt an almost overpowering desire to turn back. Bill Duxton was asserting himself. It was with difficulty that I kept my hands—*his hands*—from

twisting the wheel and turning the car around. I pressed my foot a bit harder on the gas. . . .

There was a crash. Then oblivion.

I AWOKE in a hospital. It was night-time, for the lights were on. A nurse was bending over me, removing my blood-soaked clothing. She gave a sudden gasp at sight of the innumerable scars upon my torso.

"For heaven's sake, look at this man, Doctor Ernest!" she exclaimed. "His entire body is a mass of scars. And his arms! Merciful heavens! The color of the hair upon them is different . . . a scar runs completely around them. . . . It is as if the hands had been cut off and new ones fastened on!"

I heard an exclamation in a masculine voice. Then a man in surgical garb bent over me.

"The same! The same!" he ejaculated. "I'd know that operation in a million. It's the man I was telling you about in class, Miss Miller. . . . The grafting operation I performed in France. I often wondered if he lived."

I gathered my strength. It was Bill Duxton and I working together now. My hands—Duxton's hands—leaped upward and seized him by his skinny throat. He tried to pull away. I clung to him as he dragged my battered body from the operating-table. He dropped to the floor, his eyes bulging, his tongue protruding from his mouth.

The nurse ran screaming from the room. A moment later they were upon me. They tried to pull me off, but I hung on relentlessly, putting every ounce of strength I possessed into that throttling grip.

"For Joan!" I gasped, digging my blunt fingers deeper into his gullet.

When they pried me loose, he was dead.