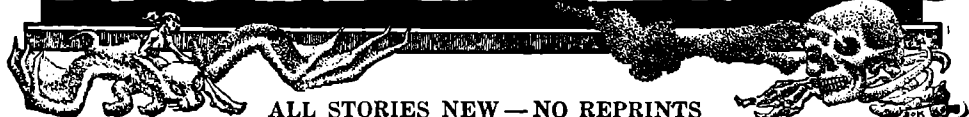


Weird Tales



JULY, 1946

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Published bi-monthly by Weird Tales, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York 20, N. Y. Registered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 15 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, 90c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. English Office: Charles Lavell, Limited, 4 Clements Inn, Strand London, W.C.2, England. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. Copyright, 1946, by Weird Tales. Copyrighted in Great Britain. 173

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Vol. 39, No. 6

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Ghost

By P. SCHUYLER MILLER



Magic is for silly fools and old men—at least, that's the saying

AT FIRST, Couranos liked to remember how the old man died.

There was one shaded lamp in the room, on the table at his elbow. Its light shone up from the papers spread before him, throwing every seam in his withered face into high relief, as though it were

carved out of yellowed bone. His eyes were shining highlights in the black hollows above his cheekbones, and his mouth was a lipless black line. The shadow of his hunched shoulders sprawled across the paneled wall behind his chair.

Couranos had come up through the

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

kitchen, and he had the bread knife in his left hand, pressed flat against his thigh where it would not show over the table. As he opened the door and smelt the musty odor of the old man's room, he felt a trickle of sweat starting down his side. His right hand was clenched over the little leather pouch which he carried in his coat pocket.

The old man looked up, and the shadows crawled over his yellow face in a grimace of satisfaction. He tilted the lampshade so that the light shone in Couranos' face, and the shadows behind the chair pushed forward to watch over his shoulder.

"You were to have been here Monday, Mr. Couranos," he said softly. "I don't like to wait, you know."

Couranos' throat was dry. He had to lick at his parched lips before he could speak. "You'll have to wait, Giannelli. I got no more money for you."

The hard specks of light in the old eyes did not move. "I am not at all happy to hear you speak like this, Mr. Couranos. There is a war—pay is good—surely you can find something to spare for me?"

Couranos had to clear his throat. "I'm through paying. This ain't the old country; this is the United States of America. They got no magic here." His own eyes narrowed for an instant, and his fingers dug hard into the little pouch his mother's sister had sent him from across the sea. "Anyway, I got friends who know about magic too. They know what to do for it."

"So?" The ivory fingers tightened ever so little on the papers, then pushed them carefully aside. The old man opened a drawer under the table and brought out a shapeless minikin of dirty wax, clothed in rags. He set it on the table under the lamp, bending the bandy legs a little so that it stood upright. Couranos felt the muscles of his own legs begin to tense, and the ache start in them. His fingers knotted around the little bag in his pocket, and the panic began to drain out of him again.

THE old man sounded tired. "Our little play is finished. Good." His spread palm came down on the crouching puppet and flattened it in a black smear of grease and rag. Couranos felt his heart leap, then drop back into its regular rhythm. This was

a good charm the old witch had sent, good even after it had crossed water. He tried to spit on the floor to show his contempt, but his mouth was like cotton.

Couranos was standing close against the table, so close that its edge pressed across his thighs. Giannelli looked up from the blot of wax, studying his face. "We are 1944 up-to-date one hundred per cent New York United States Americans now, it seems. Magic is for foreigners. Magic is tricks for silly fools and old men like Giannelli. Even an old man knows sometimes more than one trick, Mr. Couranos."

The fear began to seep back into Couranos' stomach. His hand tightened on the handle of the knife. "What you talking about, Giannelli? What tricks?"

The old man wove his bony fingers together and began to tug at the knuckles. "We are up-to-date men, Mr. Couranos—you and I," he said. "We will be modern and do business like the Chamber of Commerce or the First National Bank. That is the way for men like us." He leaned forward over the light and his voice was like sharp steel. "The government of this up-to-date Chamber of Commerce country does not like people who come to it by the back door or the open window, Mr. Couranos. I think it will like to know about the way in which you came—and when, and why. I think there are a great many things which it will be glad to know. I think it may even want to pay a little something for such interesting information—not so much, perhaps, but an old man like me does not need so much. Unless, of course, there is some friend of your acquaintance who would like to reason with me. . . ."

Inside Stephen Couranos' body a steel spring broke with the twang of a cut harp-string. He came up on his toes, his thighs hard against the table top, leaning a little forward, and the knife licked out under the light and bit into the old man's body just under the inverted V of his breastbone, where a thick gold watch chain sagged across his vest. The blade slid into the old flesh as though it were sawdust. Couranos felt it grate against the spinal bones, then its point chugged solidly into the oak back of the chair and stuck there. He stood for a moment leaning across the table, his whole

weight on the hilt of the knife; then he rolled back on his heels and stepped away. There was no blood on his fingers, which surprised him a little, but his palms were slimy with sweat and he stood scrubbing them slowly up and down along his thighs as he stared at the old man.

The lamp shade had swung around and the light shone up into the sneering yellow face, and made the shadows that clumped behind it black and heavy. The old man's skinny body was pinned upright against the chair, so that he looked very tall, and the evil black eyes were still open, staring straight into his face under heavy lids. He waited for the face to change, for the slitted eyes to close, for the old body to slump forward against the knife, but all that happened was that after a minute or two something began to drip slowly, like thick syrup, from the end of the knife-handle.

AT FIRST Couranos liked to remember how it happened. It never crossed his mind in the daytime, but when the day was over and he was back in his room, he liked to light a cigarette and lie back on the bed with his ankles crossed, looking at the blank wall. It wasn't dreaming, what he saw—it was more like remembering, for after a little while, maybe two or three minutes, maybe even ten or fifteen, he would begin to see the old man sitting there in the shadows, just like he had been when Couranos came into the room; and then it would all be acted out there on the wall like on a movie screen, only the sounds would be in his head, very low and quiet so that no one else would hear them. He would lie back against the pillow with his eyes partly closed and watch it all happen again, just as it had been that night, until the old man's blood began to drip slowly from the handle of the kitchen knife that pinned him up against the back of the big chair. Then he would stub out his cigarette and go to sleep.

Even after he had seen it twenty, thirty, fifty times, every night just the same, just as it had been, Couranos liked to watch it happen. When it was over he would wipe his palms down on the blanket as if he were wiping off the feel of something filthy. That was the way Giannelli had made him feel—ugly, and slimy, and evil-black like his filthy

black magic. Couranos still wore the amulet his aunt had sent him from Greece on a string around his neck, under his shirt, against the skin. At first he had been glad to pay the old man a little every week, because he knew from talking to other men what happened when Giannelli got a clip of your hair from the barber or a rag of cloth from one of your shirts, and made one of his little dolls with your soul inside it. Then he began to ask for more—and more and more—and when there was no other way he had written a letter to the aunt who was his mother's half sister, and who had a name for being a witch. She had sent him the little pouch, all across the seas, although some people said that magic which has crossed water will lose its power. It had protected him against the evil magic of the old man's little doll—though when you came right down to it, it was the knife that really did the trick. That he had used himself, for himself, and he liked to remember it.

AFTER a while Couranos found that he could make the picture of the old man's dying stand still, or run backward like a film in reverse, so that he could savor every detail of it over and over. He could lie and hold it with his mind as though it were a painted picture, studying every line of age and evil in the old man's face. There should have been terror in it—terror and surprise—but there never was. There was nothing—nothing except a kind of sardonic, haughty amusement that glittered in the slitted old eyes.

After a few months he knew every detail of the picture, but somehow he never wearied of it. There was satisfaction in the fact that it didn't change, that it was done and over and written down in the books of the gods for all time and forever. Then one night, as he began to drift off into sleep, a memory—no more than an impression—slipped into his mind, that something *had* been different. He lay staring at the ceiling, trying to remember. He tried to make the picture again, though he knew that it would never come twice in one night. The next night and the next he studied it, trying to pick out the thing that had changed. Nearly a week passed before he found it.

The room where the old man died was full of shadows, crowding into the corners, running along the paneled walls, filling the place thigh-deep like black fog. They crowded in close to his shoulder, jowl to jowl with him, watching everything he did. And in the instant when Couranos drove the knife hard into the hollow under the old man's ribs, a shadow moved.

It was a bare flicker of motion, caught in the corner of his eye, as if something had darted out to catch at his hand, and then withdrawn. It was a motion of shadow against shadow, darkness in darkness, without shape, yet as Couranos studied it, it seemed that he could almost sense an outline that separated something black and formless out of the deeper blackness in which it lurked.

He had always lain with his eyes open, smoking a last cigarette, letting the picture grow against the darkness at the foot of his bed, then taking control of it. Now it was different. He closed his eyes and found that it grew against the blackness of their lids. Night by night it seemed to grow clearer and more definite, as though it were moving out of the shrouding shadows behind the old man's shoulder into the full light of the single lamp, and he was sure now that each night the satisfaction and grim laughter which glinted in the old man's eyes was stronger and more mocking.

Couranos had lived in the same room for four out of the five years he had been in the city, and he knew it as he knew the picture of the old man's death. The wall beyond the foot of the bed was blank, papered with a faded flower pattern. The ceiling light shone full on it, and there was nothing in between, yet one evening as he came into the room it seemed that something moved against the baseboard. He crossed the floor and peered down at it, but there was nothing there—then as he turned his head it flickered again at the periphery of his vision. Slowly, trying to look past instead of directly at it, he turned back, and this time it was there—a blotch of shadow, the size of a small dog, lying at the base of the wall.

That night he moved his bed and screwed a brighter bulb into the ceiling fixture. Now the bed faced the window, with light from

the hotel sign across the street beating into his face, yet as he lay back against the pillow the shadows of the old man's paneled room seemed to swell up out of the corners and cover the window, blotting it out, and then out of them emerged the disc of light from the lamp, and Giannelli's ivory hands, and his evil old face. This time the shadow stood close beside his shoulder, thick and black so that the wall behind it was concealed. It was crouched, poised, watching its chance—and when morning came, Couranos saw that the shadow on the wall had moved with the picture and was crouching under the window, like a small black lamb.

Stephen Couranos had a good business in this city where he had finally come to spend his final years. He had been many things since he had come into this country of opportunity—sponge diver, fisherman, peddler—but the corner newsstand was the best of all. Some of the people who bought his papers were important, the kind who got into the headlines or the pictures themselves sometimes, and he liked it that they knew him to call by name. He made a little money with the numbers, a little out of lottery tickets, a dollar now and then placing bets for the clerks and insurance salesmen who waited for their buses at his corner.

THEN one morning there was a sign scrawled on the wrapping of the bundle of papers on the sidewalk in front of his stand. He knew what it meant; in the old country people knew about such things. He waited: one night when he got home there was a piece gone from the shirt the laundry had brought back; a few days later the barber whom he usually visited mentioned, as if casually, that an old woman had come into the shop after he had left, and snatched up a snip of Couranos' hair. That was when Couranos went to see Giannelli, and Giannelli had shown him the little doll, and squeezed it in his long yellow fingers until Couranos thought that the heart would burst in his breast.

He paid, at first until the old man grew greedier; then he sent the letter to his mother's sister in the old country. And at last he had gone to the old man's room with the knife . . .

WEIRD TALES

Day by day the shadow under the wall of his room grew larger and more definite. He could see it now without having to watch for it out of the corner of his eye. Night by night the shadow in the picture grew more solid and moved out more from its background. He moved to another room; the picture followed, and the shadow went with the picture. Giannelli had had friends, and the thought had long since occurred to him that they might be using some of the old man's own black tricks against him now—sending these visions, making shadows where none should be. One night he left his stand and took the first train that came into the station. In a bigger city he would be harder to find.

As he opened the door of the room he had found, tucked away on a back street, the shadow was there—not quite as tall as a man yet, but broader and blunter and without any particular shape that he could describe in words. In the back of his mind he knew that it had a shape, if he could only see it.

Couranos knew now that a night would come when the shadowy shape behind the old man's chair would no longer miss, when the shape against the wall would no longer be vague, when its pounce at his wrist would thrust the knife aside and pin him down for its own or for the old man's pleasures. As its bulk and outline grew blacker and stronger against the shadows of the dream-room, and as its day-shape grew blacker and stronger against his wall, he found himself counting the nights until that time would come—that he was deciding, in his own mind, just how its shape would change with each passing night, and finding his prediction right.

As the nights passed, he held the picture before him for minute after minute, struggling to pierce the blackness at the old man's shoulder, to know what to expect, and be warned a little before the end. And what he could make out brought the sweat out on his whole body in icy little beads of dread.

The last day was Friday. As the morning drew on, he found the heat draining out of his flesh, felt his palms growing slippery with fear and his lips dry. He clung to each second of the day as he had once clung

to the grim satisfaction of the picture of death, but they were whisked out of his straining fingers, taking the hours with them. The shadows of the buildings opposite the restaurant where he had found a waiter's job, sidled across the pavement and lengthened as the afternoon wore on, until the great shadow of the world itself came up over the edge of the planet and it was night.

Perversely, the night dragged as the day had refused to do, spinning out the seconds into minutes and the minutes into an eternity. It seemed to Couranos that he had now lost all power over his own body; that it moved without volition, following its accustomed habits of work, while his mind crouched shivering behind his eyes, waiting for what would come to it when the work was done. Yet, when it was over and he had put on his coat and hat and was following the clack-clack of his heels through the streets of the sleeping city, he was clinging desperately to one last thread of hope, holding open one last doorway of escape from the thing that was hounding him.

He closed the door and locked it; that was the pattern of every night. He went to the bed and stood beside it, looking over the foot at the wall beside the dresser. The shadow was there, hunched down, turned toward him so that it stood out a little from the wall, and had thickness and body. It was waiting for him to lie down, waiting for the picture—the last picture—to begin. Then it would leave the corner where it crouched and come out into the room. Then in the dream it would come out from behind Giannelli's shoulder, and stare at him across the table—lean toward him . . .

He sat down on the edge of the bed without taking off his coat or hat. He swung his feet up on the coverlet and let his shoulders sag back against the pillow. As he touched it, the picture began to form, just beyond the foot of the bed, faster than it had ever come before. He could no longer control it; it moved on at its own speed hungrily, eagerly, impatient to reach the end. He felt the edge of the table pressing against his taut thighs; he saw the shadow gathering at Giannelli's shoulder; and before it could move he had driven the knife deep under the V of his own breastbone, so

that it glanced sickeningly against the bones of his spine and chunked into the mattress under his back . . .

STEPHEN COURANOS felt the last chill of fear drain out of his body and his mind, and leave them both empty. The picture was gone. There was nothing but darkness in the shadows which gathered against the wall beyond the foot of his bed. He had found the one escape from Giannelli's sending—flight into the emptiness of death.

Stephen Couranos began to go down into a blackness that surged around him like the tide of an endless sea, touched with phosphorescence that lined each wave with light. The light merged and melted into a gray mist which was clotting into the form of a bleak gray plain, bare and rocky, stretching without limit into the past and the future and limitless through all the present.

He, Stephen Couranos, stood naked in that gray land, feeling its cold seep into his bones. He began to walk, aimlessly, knowing nothing and caring nothing for where he went, and the gray plain and the fog and the universe drifted past him like the tide of a gray sea, in which he floated alone, naked in the cold of death.

Out of the mists a gray shape moved toward him soundlessly. It was a naked man, gaunt and shrunken so that the shapes of his bones showed through his translucent skin. His eyes were bright points in the hollow sockets of a skull, and his lips were shrunken back over a skull's sharp teeth. He saw Couranos, and eyed him beadily, tittering, then veered away and was gone into the mist.

Presently another of the things appeared, a woman-thing who sobbed and tittered like the first with a horrid excitement which showed in the way her death's-head with its stringy wisps of hair was thrust forward, and her tongue protruding from between her grinning lips. He turned and followed her.

SOON they were all around him, hurrying through the gray wrack, mewing and tittering to themselves as they ran. A gnawing hunger was beginning to suck at his own belly, and he hurried after them

through the gray mist, over the gray plain. His own lips writhed back in their grimace of anticipation, and he tittered nervously.

They were crowded together on the plain in a milling, drifting throng through which he was able to push himself as through a field of growing wheat, stronger—newer—than they. Something in him knew why they had come here, what it was they sought—what he sought with them. As he pressed forward, the gnawing in his body grew and he began to pant and whimper with eagerness like a hound closing in on its quarry.

The last gray shape whirled out of his way, and he fell on his knees beside a black stain that sprawled over the gray rock, a pool of liquid shadow from which rose a steaming warmth, good to his chilled bones. A man-thing crouched on all fours beside him like a hungry beast, lapping at the pool like a great gaunt cat. A woman-shape lapped thirstily beyond him. They were pushed aside and others of the gray folk flung themselves savagely at the pool and began their bestial lapping. Skeleton fingers clawed at his back and voices whimpered behind him, trying to get past.

Who he was, who he had been, everything was dissolved now in the tearing hunger which burned in every vein of his body and in the marrow of his bones. The scent of the steaming ichor swirled through his brain, blinding him with ravening desire. He went down on all fours on the ground, the hot fumes rising around him as he thrust his face forward—then across the pool two sardonic slitted eyes found him, and he crouched back on his naked haunches like a cornered beast.

He saw the gray shape of the old man rising from the hot pool of his own spilled blood, its thin lips smeared and dripping. He saw the crowding ghosts swirl back in panic, and saw behind the old man's shoulder the black shape of the thing from which he had fled into death. And he began to run, sobbing and twittering, over the gray desert of eternity with the cold breath of the hunting blackness on his naked back.
