

Weird Tales

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1954

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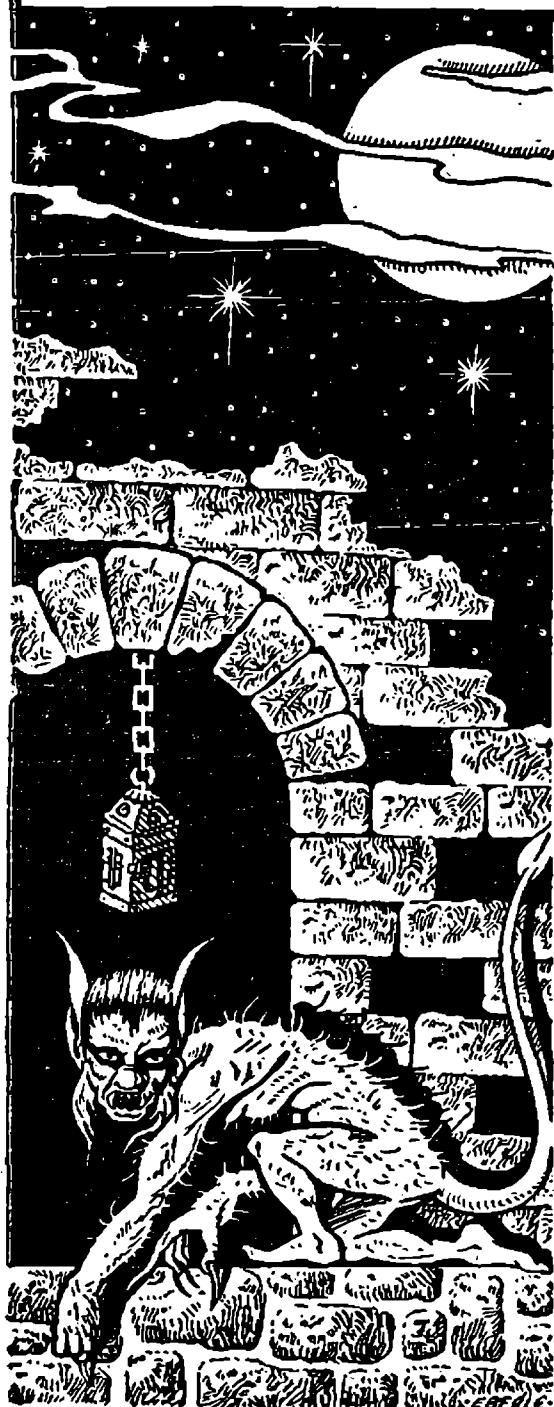
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GUARDIAN

by W. J. Suprenant



As far as the police could see
they were up against
the impossible.

“BUT this is unthinkable!” Lydia Senshaw cried, thumping one small fist against the young police lieutenant’s desk. “I am truly sorry to know that Mr. Martel died so dreadfully, but the idea that I might have had something to do with it—!”

Lieutenant Moss sighed. “Miss Senshaw,” he said quietly, disavowing any such implication with one calming gesture, “no one has accused you of anything. No one wants to accuse you. What we are trying to do is to discover by what means Mr. Martel met his death.”

“Don’t!” Lydia said, and shuddered. “Don’t go into detail again, I beg of you. I can only repeat what I told you earlier this afternoon: I went to the studio to get some pictures I’d mailed in to be developed. Mr. Martel said they’d be ready today. There was no one else in the studio when I arrived. I waited perhaps five minutes before I rang the bell Mr. Martel kept on the display table. He was a little deaf, you see, and when

Heading by Joseph Eberle

he did not come out, I went into the back and rapped on the darkroom door."

"Had you done that before?"

"Once or twice. I knew him rather well, you see. I had no reason to feel that I was being—well, presumptuous."

"I see. Would you mind saying just how well you did know him?"

"Oh!" Lydia gasped, her heart-shaped little face turning rosy beneath its tan. "Are you being deliberately offensive, Lieutenant? Mr. Martel was an old man, a respectable old man. And I—"

Again the lieutenant raised one apologetic hand. "I meant no offense, Miss. We're only trying to learn what we can. You were telling about knocking on the darkroom door; there was no response of any kind?"

Lydia hesitated. Her velvet black eyes rested thoughtfully upon a fly drowsing in one sunny corner of the office, but she was not seeing the fly. She was remembering the darkroom door and the small, dreadful sound that had escaped from behind it. And one thing more—

"There was a faint sound," she said finally. "It was more like a chuckle of laughter than anything else, but of course that is not possible. It couldn't have been a laugh, could it?" For a moment, the dark eyes rested

upon the lieutenant's face, in a look almost of pleading. "And then the door swung open; suddenly, without sound. I felt a rush of hot air, almost like a blast of heat from a furnace, really. And I was afraid. I don't know why. Then I saw the hand lying on the darkroom floor and I—I ran outside and told the janitor. He called the police. And that is every bit I can tell you."

LIEUTENANT MOSS studied the distressed little face. He felt that she had told the truth. But if it was the truth, all-of it, then he was in for a very bad time indeed.

Albert Martel had not been quite dead when the police found him lying on the floor of his darkroom. He was dead before the m.e. had given his opinion that the man could not have lived ten minutes with the wounds he had received. The room had been in total darkness just as Miss Senshaw had left it. There was no exit except the door leading into the studio. From the studio itself there were two exits: the door leading into the hallway where a cleaning woman had been at work throughout the entire period between the time Miss Senshaw had entered the studio and the time the police arrived—and the cleaning woman had seen no one

but the girl—and a fire escape which had also been under close observation the entire time.

A workman had been busy repairing a damaged section of masonry where the fire escape joined the building at the top. He had not, however, been so busy that he would not have known whether anyone had gone up or down. The workman's story was verified by two boys who had spent the time playing marbles at the foot of the fire escape. Turn as he would, Moss could place no suspect at the scene of the crime within the critical period. No one, that is, but Lydia Senshaw. And there the lieutenant came up against the impossible. Albert Martel was a gutted red ruin. The walls, the floor; even the ceiling of the darkroom were spattered with his blood. It was not possible that the murderer could have escaped without a stain, yet here was Miss Senshaw, just as they had found her, attired in immaculate white: hat, dress, purse, shoes; even her small hands were covered by crisp white gloves of net. And the only touch of red about her was the glowing velvet of her mouth. Besides, the lieutenant thought—not without some relief—the girl was the last thing in the vicious killer type that one could well expect.

"We appreciate what you

have been able to tell us," Lieutenant Moss said, then, "If you should remember anything else, however inconsequential, get in touch with me, won't you?"

"Of course," Miss Senshaw said, smiling rather wanly. She opened the door, hesitated, and turned once more to the lieutenant. "The pictures," she said, "if you find them, I can have them, can't I?" Again the rosy flush spread beneath the tanned cheeks. "They are snapshots my fiancé and I took while on vacation. I *would* like to have them."

"No harm in that, if they turn up, and I can't think why they shouldn't. If you'll give some identification—"

"Well, there were one or two of myself, I suppose; a few of Arthur, my fiancé, that is. And several of the sea, and the ruins at Point Desmond."

Lieutenant Moss assured her that the pictures were as good as in her hands.

THE pictures were, in fact, lying ready for trimming on the low shelf in the darkroom. Moss recognized Lydia's face on at least seven of the prints. If he had needed any further verification of her story, without question he had found it. He moved among the few men still busy at the scene of the crime, asking an occasional question, expecting no answers but the

ones he received. The murderer, in the opinion of every man there, would be apprehended by nothing short of an act of God. There were one or two half-hearted wisecrack from Detective Gregory, concerning the attitude of Captain Casey when he should learn the impossible facts of the case, but these Moss managed to ignore. The pictures safe in his breast pocket, he went out and down the stairs and forgot about them until some time around ten that night, too late to call Miss Senshaw.

He forgot about them because Captain Casey's attitude had fallen not the least jot short of the previously estimated opinion. At first, he was incredulous. Then, not wishing to appear quite so foolish as he felt, he was furious. They had bungled the job, the lot of them. Did Moss expect him to believe that the homicide had been committed by spooks—or that Martel had inflicted those terrible wounds with his own hands? They'd find some sane, rational explanation before sun-up tomorrow, or there'd be some changes made on the force.

Ten o'clock found Moss, still quivering from the lash of the Captain's tongue, at his desk. Remotely, came the irregular clatter of the teletype, the voices of the night operator and the few men still on duty. The

homicide squad had reported nothing new, and Moss considered the coming dawn with nothing short of distaste. His fingers, reaching for a cigarette in his breast pocket, encountered the envelope containing Miss Senshaw's snapshots.

HE PUT them on the desk, determined to put that matter, at least, right. He would call her in the morning. With nothing to do but wait for Gregory's sporadic reports, Moss idly shook the pictures out onto his desk and sifted through them once more. There she was, laughing back over her shoulder at him, or rather, at the taker of the picture. She was climbing a ridge of rock and the bathing suit she wore was charming. So was Miss Senshaw, Moss reflected glumly. Here was one of a rather wind blown young man who showed a glint of laughter in his eyes. Tall, well built, handsome. And here they were together, arms entwined, looking out over the sea; just such a pose as young lovers will assume. Next was a spoiled film. Moss was about to return the pictures to the envelope when his eye was caught and held by a scene that had escaped him in his hurried inspection of the afternoon.

A dismal scene, taken apparently on an overcast day, of what appeared to be the ruin

of a vast building or buildings. Stone, broken masonry, were scattered in desolate abandon over a large radius. In the left side of the picture, far in the background, stood the ruin of an old stone tower. At its base, an entrance showed dim signs of a stairway leading up into darkness. What appeared to be a bundle of old rags lay at one side of the entrance; or was it merely a distortion, a trick of light? Moss sorted through the remaining pictures. Here was one of the tower, taken at close range. There was the stairway, just inside the entrance. And the bundle of old rags... Moss dropped the picture as if it were hot. His hands were trembling, and for the space of a minute he dared not look again at the picture in an effort to verify his eyesight. It was impossible, a freakish distortion... but when he looked once more, it had not changed.

The creature was crouched in a menacing position at the foot of the stair, leaning forward upon arms of a disturbing thinness yet corded with tendons that bespoke an awful strength. The hands were long and thin and powerful, ending in nails like talons. Over what could be seen of the creature's flesh lay a black matting of wiry hair. But it was the face that turned Moss' blood to ice; thin, the bone ridged and gleaming palely, it

was set in an expression of such malevolent fury and purpose as would cause any beholder to start back involuntarily. The eyes of the creature were feral slits fastened with a dreadful intensity upon the lens of the camera, giving the impression that the eyes looked directly into Moss' own, as indeed he felt that they did.

Moss, at that moment, would have given a month's pay to see a fellow human walk into the office. As it was, the desk 'phone rang with a shattering clamor. Moss grabbed for it with a hand wet with sweat. His thoughts were in such chaos he was compelled to pause for a moment to collect himself; but much sooner than it seemed to him, he answered the summons with only the slightest quaver of voice. It was Gregory. They had found something: the print of a naked foot, outlined in blood, on the *wall* beneath the low shelf running the length of the darkroom. Gregory refused to elaborate. He was having troubles of his own.

"I'll be out there right away," Moss told him.

BUT for a short time, he remained seated at the desk. Reason told him that the bloody footprint was better left alone. He had no desire to verify the sickening suspicion that was insidiously taking possession of his

brain. He was about to rise when out of the corner of his eye he caught a stealthy movement just behind him. It might have been mere shadow; it might have been an exceedingly incautious rat. Moss turned his head a fraction. It was neither. In the all too insufficient light of the room a familiar outline moved just beyond the fringe of his vision. With an oath, Moss sprang from the chair and turned to face whatever horror had crouched behind him. There was nothing to be seen except for a shimmering in the gloom that soon stilled itself, leaving the office untenanted save for Moss and his fright. Steeling himself, he swept the damnable pictures into a desk drawer and turned the key upon them. Then he walked out to where the switchboard operator sat drowsing over a textbook. At Moss' hurried approach, the operator looked up, noticed the pallor of the lieutenant's face and asked what was wrong.

"Nothing, Bates. Just tell the Captain, if he calls in, that I've gone over to Martel's place, will you?"

"Sure thing," Bates agreed.

TELL me, Moss," Captain Casey said, a little after midnight, "have you been drinking?" One steely gray eye was lost in a cynical squint, the other fastened itself upon the

harried lieutenant's drawn face. "Bloody footprints — snapshots of demons—bah! Do you hear me, Moss? Bah!"

"I'm sorry, sir. I realize how it must sound to you, but I've told the truth to the best of my ability, sir." As if in an effort to wipe out some memory, he passed one hand over his face.

The Captain grunted. One of his best men, too! "If you need a few days off, I'll put Gregory in charge."

"I'd rather stay on the case, Captain. I'm afraid I would get little enough rest with the thought of—that—behind me. If you'd look at the picture, sir—"

Captain Casey made an uncomplimentary sound with his tongue, but he nodded brusquely. "All right, I'll humor you. Send them here to the house. I'll look at them just to show you how asinine this whole thing is. A good night's sleep you're ruining for me, Moss. But send them over, by all means!"

IT WAS perhaps an hour later that Captain Casey launched himself into the presence of Lieutenant Moss. He could not unbend so far as to tell the occurrences of the past half hour, but that he was a changed man was undeniable. His face, no longer so thoroughly cynical, showed rather dreadful ravages.

"You might have come over, yourself," Captain Casey said, not without bitterness. "What the devil is it, Moss? Do you have any notion? Is it what you said—a demon—or have I gone stark, staring mad?"

"When you had looked at the pictures," Moss said, "afterwards—did anything happen?"

Captain Casey turned one haggard eye upon his subordinate. "It did."

"Was it as I said?"

"In God's name, don't speak of it, man! Give me a minute to consult with St. Patrick!"

Moss let that go by. "I think the thing to do is find out about this from the owner of the pictures."

"That witness, you mean?" Casey asked, glancing once more, with obvious unease, behind his left shoulder. "If she has anything to do with this, she shouldn't be let loose among God-fearing people, I can tell you!"

"It will have to wait until morning. It's well after one, and she's probably sleeping," Moss said.

"Get her down here. If I can't sleep—and I probably never will again—why should she? Get her, I say!"

MISS SENSHAW was indignant. It was late and she needed her sleep. She had

a job waiting for her in the morning and her employer did not tolerate tardiness. She thought that the young lieutenant was far more haggard than the lateness of the hour would seem to warrant. And the Captain looked like a surly old bear. For no reason she could define, Lydia began to feel frightened.

"Sit down," Captain Casey said gruffly. "I have a few questions to ask you and I want straight answers, young lady!"

Lydia sat. And then her eye fell upon the pictures spread out upon the desk. A pleased smile drove the gloom from her small face. "You found them!" she exclaimed to Lieutenant Moss. "May I have them now?"

"Don't even touch them!" Captain Casey barked, snatching for the pictures.

"But they're mine!" Lydia protested.

"Miss Senshaw," Lieutenant Moss interrupted hastily, "we have reason to feel—the Captain and myself—that there is danger attached to certain of these pictures: the ones you took of the tower. I think the others are harmless enough, but if there is anything you can tell us about that tower, whether you noticed anything at all—well, alien to the scene. . . ."

"But I told you, Lieutenant. The pictures were taken at Point Desmond. It's on the coast of

Maine, a private property belonging to an uncle of mine. The tower is a hideous old thing, but outside of that there is nothing but those old stones lying about. I can't understand your ferocious attitude." She added, turning to Captain Casey, "we did no harm that I know of."

The Captain was studying her intently, trying to establish in his own mind whether this child could have any possible connection with that abominable horror. He could not bring himself to believe it. He looked at Moss, who looked back, at a loss. Very slightly, he shook his head.

"This Point Desmond, Miss Senshaw," Casey said grimly, "is it open to the public? That is, are these ruins often visited by sightseers like yourselves?"

Lydia looked a little puzzled. "Certainly not. It is private land, very heavily wooded. The ruins are known thereabouts, but no one cares to inspect them, not only because of trespass, but because for years there has been a local legend that the place is haunted." She laughed a little and threw them a look of chagrin. "I might confess to trespassing, myself, since my uncle has expressly forbidden me to visit the tower. There was some trouble, a while ago, and since then Uncle Ambrose has spent much of his time abroad. Perhaps it is really haunted. Certainly the

place has an oppressive atmosphere. We did not stay long after we took the pictures. I had the strangest feeling that we were being followed, but after I dropped the roll of film into the mail, the feeling just—evaporated. Silly of me, wasn't it?"

Captain Casey did not reply at once. Instead, he sorted through the pictures, removing the only two showing a view of the tower. The others he handed to Miss Senshaw. He said, "I'm taking the liberty of removing those views of the tower, Miss. Will you accept my apologies for disturbing you—and believe me when I say I hope you will never visit that place again? There is evil there. I may even say that you have escaped it by the narrowest of margins. And for whatever purpose, it has attached itself to the pictures of its haunt. I don't know why. The pictures you now have are harmless enough, to the best of my knowledge. But if you should experience the least disturbance, remember there is safety in numbers.

"Thank you, Miss Senshaw said, looking completely bewildered. "I'll remember."

WHEN she had gone, Lieutenant Moss said, "I hope you're right, Captain. I'm inclined to agree with you about the others, but how about these

two? I'll confess I wouldn't care to spend the night with them in my possession."

"Nor I. Call Havens in. I want these enlarged. And Lieutenant—better keep him company. I don't want any more of my men complaining of—well, let's say no more. On second thought, I'll come, too!"

Less than an hour later, Captain Casey clutched at an enlargement of the clearer picture of the tower. "That's it!" he whispered hoarsely, trying not to look at the enlarged version of the croucher in the doorway. "Look here, Moss, at the archway; the inscription running round it. Do you make out what it says?"

Lieutenant Moss, likewise avoiding the horror on the stair, studied the picture. He translated laboriously from the Latin: *Guard that which is given into thy keeping, nor show thyself.*

Police photographer Havens broke in with a forceful if respectful complaint: "Can't we hurry it up out of here, Captain? It's colder than death warmed over!"

Captain Casey preceded Moss from the room, Havens following closely after. He wanted, did Havens, an explanation for what he had seen, but from the set of the Captain's jaw, he was not likely to get one. Havens shiver-

ed. Perhaps there were some things better left unexplained. . . .

In his office, Captain Casey applied a match to the photographs and stirred them about in the metal tray until nothing remained but a charred residue.

"Let's hope that is sufficient to exorcise that particular ghost," he said fervently.

"We should know by morning," Moss replied with half-hearted levity. "What I can't understand is how it knew it would appear on the prints; how it knew where to find them, so far from home, one might say. And the blast of heat, Miss Senshaw said she felt, while I experienced nothing but an abysmal chill."

"If you had seen it as I did," Captain Casey said grimly, "you'd wonder at nothing for the rest of your life. That was a very lucky girl, that Miss Senshaw."

Lieutenant Moss agreed. He was unusually tired and he wanted to go home. "About my report, Captain," he said, "how shall I explain the cause of Martel's death?"

The captain clapped hat to head on his way through the door. "Just say: murder at the hands of person or persons unknown."

Even Captain Casey preferred demotion to explaining the truth to the Inspector.