

Strange STORIES

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He Who Spoke

By BERNARD BRESLAUER

Author of "Them That's Tough," "Mountain Justice," etc.
(Illustrated on the Cover of this Issue)



WHY couldn't he move?

Often in dreams, Richard Carey had experienced this sensation of unwilling immobility, when the soul cries out for flight but the body takes root in the quagmire of nightmare. This was no dream.

What had become of the man in black. The thin man in black—the asker of questions. He was no longer there. He no longer cut off Richard Carey's vision of the brook and the pool and the green bank.

Suddenly Richard Carey found himself capable of motion. He walked to the pool's edge, took off his shoes and socks, dipped an experimental toe into the water. It was cool.

Hastily he divested himself of his clothes. He looked down into the pool. A boy's face looked up at him. But he did not think that was strange. He didn't think it was strange that the reflected body was that of a boy. He dove in.

A boy swam in the pool, turned somersaults, spouted water like a little whale. The afternoon sun moved westward, a breeze sprang up, and the boy came out and let his body dry in the breeze and sunlight. And the boy made as if to stretch, and as he did—the man once again found . . . that he could not move.

As a man's thirst increases when he finds that there is no water, so Richard Carey's desire for motion increased when he found that he could not move.

"I want to walk!" he thought

wildly. And an instant later he thought wonderingly: "But I've just come from a walk. It was a long walk and I got very tired." And he thought he heard his own wild laughter rattle at the queer perversity of his desires.

His laughter stopped. The voice of the man in black had dropped into it, but only in memory, like an echo.

"Speak. Give up the secret. The secret is heavy. Two can carry it more easily than one."

The man in black was gone now, carrying away with him Richard Carey's thin-lipped silence.

"Don't run, walk to the nearest exit," Richard Carey thought, but he could not remember the name of the Fire Commissioner who signed his name to that familiar warning in all theatres.

"I'll twist it around," he thought. "Don't walk—run. Don't walk—run!"

THE boy ran through fields and across meadows, dropping bits of paper on the way, in the game of hare and hounds. His sun-burned sweating face shone in the sunlight. Panting, he lay down to rest. A moment later he sat up. He was tired. And almost at once he was more than tired, he was old. And he could not move.

"Speak," said a voice, and it was the now familiar voice of the asker of questions.

But Richard Carey would not speak.

Where bank and pool and brook had been was desert, stretching away into loneliness. The meadows and the fields of buckwheat, barley, rye

The Face of the Sphinx was the Face of Richard Carey!

and clover were gone. There was sand where they had been, and there was the Sphinx. But the face of the Sphinx was the face of Richard Carey, and Richard Carey would not speak.

"Shut up," said Richard Carey to the memory of the man in black.

"I walked and then I ran," he thought. "I swam and I played hare and hounds. I ran—and the hounds couldn't catch me."

But he was wrong. The hounds had caught him. He could not move.

For an instant he stared into blackness. There was no brook, no bank, no boy in a pool, no hare and no hounds, no vernal sun nor April breeze.

Then suddenly there was light, there was a corruscating flash of flame! There was lightning and there was thunder, but a thunder and lightning such as he had never before heard or seen. And above the thunder there was the now familiar voice.

"Speak! Share your secret! You cannot take it with you! It's heavy! Give me some of it to carry!"

If he could not move before, he was ten times less able to move now! The lightning and thunder were within him, roaring in his veins like a torrent, and his inner self was ablaze with light.

But there was also light all around him now—and he gazed upon horror. A fiddler with eyeless sockets scraped upon a violin. The tune he scraped was a dance of death. The figures danced to the tune within the confines of imprisoning chains.

One sang, and Richard Carey's eyes

went to her. Loveliness unimaginable, but crowned with serpent tresses. And Richard Carey knew that what he was looking upon was the face of truth, but truth in chains. The other was also a female thing, with bat-wings and the head of a crocodile, and Richard Carey knew that this must be the outward representation of his thin-lipped silence.

"I did it!"

The fiddling stopped. The fiddler with the ~~æd~~ eye-sockets faded back into white light and nothingness. The bat-winged thing faded with him. But the creature with the serpent tresses remained for an instant. The serpents that had been her hair and her fingers were gone, and her chains had snapped. On tip-toe she moved toward Richard Carey and kissed him with feather-lightness on the forehead. Then she too was gone—and so was Richard Carey. . . .

THE minister in black, the warden of the prison, the witnesses of the electrocution, all looked at each other.

"You heard him . . . we all heard him . . ." the minister said. "He spoke, broke his silence at last, confessed—but, my God, it was *after* the executioner threw the switch for the first shock. How was that possible, Doctor?"

"It's not," said the doctor in a low voice, "but it happened. We all heard him."

"I knew he would speak," the man in black murmured . . . "I knew he would speak. Now we are all sure. The Governor will be much relieved."