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Contents for February, 1929

- Cover Design** ----- **Hugh Rankin**
Illustrating a scene in "The Star-Stealers"
- The Ghosts of the Gods** ----- **E. M. Hill** 148
Verse; decoration by Hugh Rankin
- The Star-Stealers** ----- **Edmond Hamilton** 149
A dread menace from outside the universe threatens to drag the solar system to destruction in the cold of outer space
- The Devil-People** ----- **Seabury Quinn** 169
Ghostly and ghastly were the Malay foes against whom the little French phantom-fighter went into action
- Highwaymen** ----- **W. Benson Dooling** 191
A brief story of a highwayman who was outmatched by a shadowy figure on horseback
- The Vengeance of the Dead (Part 1)** ----- **Eli Colter** 193
A two-part serial story of a strange monster whose ghastly depredations terrified the guests at Waggener Wilds

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]

Highwaymen

By W. BENSON DOOLING

BOYLE slipped a long pistol from his boot, and drew the trigger back. Its sharp clack-lick was mellowed by the soft swish of his cloak, as he drew it more closely about his shoulders and waist; for this was a chill night, one of the somber kind, and this a minute during such a night when sounds soften expectantly, when insects cease their drone, and seem to wait. Boyle pulled lower the sagging front of his featherless velvet hat, and slipped a mask of some dark stuff about his eyes. His horse neighed.

From below on the road by which he stood, straight and expectant on his mount—a road that twined and curled down the mountainside, a hard-packed road much used by the private carriages of the aristocracy, and hardly wide enough for a public coach—came the rattle of hoofs of a jogging pair, and the clank and turmoil of spinning wheels. The volume of sound increased, grew louder and more distinct as the vehicle approached, and Boyle heeled his beast to the road as a small coach wheeled into view.

“Stand and deliver, whelp!”

Boyle’s voice was acid, with a sharpness that brooked no argument. A frightened coachman hauled in his pair.

A moon shone, but softly; it was not bright enough to illumine any sentiment on the driver’s face, but it disclosed a gaunt, gray-mustached man, who alighted quickly from the coach—an elderly, dignified, green-coated man, who muttered, “Sire, I

had heard your kind were more polite!”

“Politeness is the courtly gesture of honest hypocrites, Milord . . . but quick!—your valuables!” Boyle waved his weapon carelessly, and leant low in his saddle, peering quickly into the dark coach.

“My money? There; it’s all I have with me, fortunately!” The gaunt man sneered, and passed a small leathern bag to Boyle’s waiting hand.

Said Boyle, “No jewels?”

Came the answer, “When traveling? But no, no jewels.”

“My thanks! Who’s in there?”

“My daughter: she’s but a child.”

“Then . . . I leave you the most precious of your accouterments. . . .”

A pale, blond head leant from the open coach, with two pretty blue, curious, peering eyes, and a small hand grasped the gentleman’s sleeve. “Father,” asked a young, frightened voice, “is that man the ghost they talked about at the Inns, who haunts the hills—the bandit ghost, Father?”

“Peace, child! Well, Sire, may we go?”

“But soft!” To the child Boyle said kindly, “Filly, I am but a collector of revenues. I have never met the spook of whom you speak, though, in sooth, I’ve heard his name. But you’ll cloud your pretty face, thinking too much on ghosts. Better forget them, like me, my pretty dear. . . . Sire, you are at liberty to go. . . . Quick, whelp!”

The blond head vanished, and the gentleman regained his seat and

slammed shut the door; the coachman whipped his horses on, too glad to go to resent the sobriquet "whelp" applied by Boyle.

Boyle heeled his sable, then gave him free rein. He wished the child had not spoken of the ghost, for Boyle did not believe in ghosts. Far forward he leant, and low-hanging branches threatened his hat. Once his cloak caught in brambles, and roughly tore loose again. The sharp wind was pleasing, biting at his hollow cheeks. Boyle was horribly emaciated: he was a sportive man, who drank and loved too much.

Night resumed its somber sounds: the chirping of tiny nocturnal insects; from somewhere away the hungry bay of a wolf; above, a screech-owl voiced its curdling sound. Boyle's horse drew back, affrighted; then, at a reassuring word from Boyle, moved on.

Suddenly he drew him in. This was a clearing in the wood, and the moon seemed suddenly more bright. Boyle was perplexed, and lost; he did not know this place. Strange! his horse had led him astray, though the beast knew so well the way from the road, through almost imperceptible paths in the thick wood, to the cabin that Boyle at present occupied.

A formation of trees, beyond the clearing, fascinated him: the moon shone full upon it, making strange shadows in the grass below. Sparse near the trunk, two trees stretched out long arms—chill and bare arms that touched, and seemed one lengthened arm. It looked like a gibbet, and, through some monstrous fantasy—caused, perhaps, by branches and leaves of trees beyond—the shadow on the sward enhanced this effect, and added a shadow like a man's, which seemed gently to move, to swing.

Affrighted, Boyle's horse drew back, and chawed his bit, and pawed with his forefeet, and rolled his flank. Boyle held him in, and perspiration

beaded his brow: he saw that the horse was innocent of the trees and their fantasmagoria; that the beast was alarmed at something more subtle, something Boyle had not yet sensed.

"Soft, Ned!"

The beast was still: he trusted Boyle's intelligence.

"Stand and deliver, Sire!" The command came from behind him—a soft modulation, in courteous, almost tender tones, but hollow, somber, chilling; they seemed the voice of another world; the sentence seemed to come unwillingly, as though its author spoke against inclination, did something repugnant that seemed expected of him.

Boyle wheeled his horse. Before him, in the full moonlight, another horseman stood. His mount was snow-white, and fleshy, but looked fleet. Its rider was cloaked and masked, yet under the mask was a mat-white skull—a skull that did not grin, but held its jaws tight-set. A wisp of mustache adhered to where the upper lip had been. Dark, burning, liquid points shone through the mask slits; and the velvet hat was drawn too low for a forehead to be seen. Straight in his saddle the specter stood, holding his pistol muzzle toward Boyle's breast. He pulled his cloak about his waist, as though those fleshless ribs were chill. Boyle knew the saga of this one; knew that he had been hanged a hundred years before.

Boyle moaned: "The Ghost! . . . the devil! . . . the Ghost!"

Instinctively his hand reached down—a nervous, shaking, groping hand—and drew the pistol from his boot. A chill crept along his spine; his jaw gaped; his tongue slid out, strangely parched, and back again. His teeth chattered.

Clack-click! his pistol hammer made an awesome sound that seemed very loud. He swung the muzzle toward the other's head, and touched

(Continued on page 288)

Highwaymen

(Continued from page 192)

the trigger. Ned plunged at the sharp report, but the white steed stood nonchalantly, unperturbed. A little whiff of smoke cleared in the wind. The specter wiped the back of a hand across his brow, then leveled his pistol at Boyle's head, but refrained from firing it. Boyle was an excellent shot; he knew, despite his nervousness, that his bullet had struck his adversary between the eyes. He shoved his pistol into his boot.

Spectral and cool came the lamenting command: "Stand and deliver, Sire!"

A hand of white, glaring bones stretched out, and grasped the little leathern bag proffered by Boyle's outstretched, quavering palm.

"Sire, you are at liberty to go: but quickly, Sire!"

There was no sound from the white steed's quick hoofs as he wheeled and hurried his ghastly rider away—a rider who seemed not to stoop before low-hanging limbs, but who stayed in his saddle as he rode. Boyle was alone.

How long he waited there, trembling, is problematical. Drawing his pistol, he reloaded it and played nervously with the hammer. Ned was still, but a cold sweat covered him. Boyle looked again toward the trees that had startled him: they seemed but trees.

Then he spoke softly to Ned, heeled him on, riding gently, his weapon across his chest.

Then he laughed harshly, as Ned swung into a trot, at last free of that spectral clearing and the things it had held: "Soft, Ned, good horse! . . . I hope Mag's in tender mood tonight . . . I hope she has some hot punch on . . . in sooth, we can hand her nothing that jingles tonight, old horse!"