

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

# Strange STORIES

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*A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers*

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

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# I Am Going to Cracow!

By MARIA MORAVSKY

Author of "Spider Woman," "Soul of the Cello," etc.



Through the fog, Jacob saw the old city

*His Country Needed a Savior  
and Jacob Wolski's Body was  
Old — but a Florida Swamp  
Witch Showed Him the Road  
to His Heart's Desire!*

**O**LD Jacob Wolski smoothed the page of the *Tropical Gazette* with trembling fingers and re-read the news. Yes, it was ever so. After he had worked and slaved for years—

He dropped the wrinkled paper to the bare floor of his hut and stared stonily at the double hibiscus outside

the windows without seeing it. Humming birds hovered over the great red stars of poinsettias. Mockers sang lustily. But all that was nothing to Jacob, now that he had lost his dream.

He dropped his head on the unpainted table and wept. He would never go to Poland, because Poland was no more. Worse than no more—conquered by the old enemy.

He remembered the first line of the old hymn. Poles were once jailed for singing it.

"POLAND SHALL NOT PERISH. . ."

Once more they would be forbidden to sing it. Jacob's shoulders, stooped from bending for years over his strawberry patch, shook spasmodically. He would never see Cracow.

Like an echo of his own sob, he heard another, somewhere outside. He went out. By his potting shed, he saw a big Negro girl covering her face with her palms.

"What's the matter, Joda?"

She rolled up her enormous black eyes and whimpered.

"I's hongry!"

"That's easy to remedy," he said, patting her crinkly head. "Come inside, child."

He gave her a slab of buttered bread and a glass of milk. She ate in big mouthfuls, her large sugar-white teeth biting off pieces of bread.

"It's more than that. Why are you still crying?" he asked.

"Lost me job," she answered between mouthfuls, her thick, purplish lips quivering.

"Why? I know you don't steal white folks victuals, and you're a mighty good worker. What's the matter?"

"It's me powers," she whispered, her eyes rounded with self amazement. "I got powers. But, so help me, I uses 'em jes' on bad folks. I wuz a hired help at Burpies, but cows went dry. They say I done it. But no, so help me, no!"

"Of course not. Stupid superstition! Fed now?"

She nodded so vigorously that the great double brass loops stuck in her ears jingled.

"Cain't you all use me here?" Her

staring black eyes were hopeful now.

He was back with his new sorrow and did not hear her. Again the vision of the ancient city which he would never see, swam before him in the mist of his own tears. The homely face of the black girl lit with understanding.

"It's about them news from the other side you-all grieve about."

**U**NDER the impact of that unexpected understanding, Jacob broke down.

"I'll never see my country any more!" he cried, and beat his hollow chest with his gnarled hands.

The black girl straightened. Strange grace seemed to flow now through her long body. Her manlike muscles were momentarily tensed, as if for a blow, meant for some unseen enemy. Then, her face softened, became almost comely because of its compassionate expression.

"Oh, yes, you-all will see Cracow, Jacob Wolski!"

He was surprised, not by her fantastic prophecy, but by a detail of her speech—how did she know the name of the Polish capital he longed to visit? Thought transmission?

She looked at him keenly, rolling the whites of her eyes in uncanny fashion.

"I has powers!" she whispered, and a small, sharp arrow of weird surprise slipped into Jacob's heart and lodged there.

The two stood there, face to face, their heads bent a little toward each other, like two conspirators, when a coarse voice startled them.

"Hey, Uncle Jacob," it bellowed, "you stop hobnobbing with that black witch! Don't you know she is smelled for a hexer?"

Jacob turned toward him with as much authority as he could summon. That nephew, Bartek, with his carousing and his ignorant superstitions.

"She is no witch. She is our hired help, from now on. Remember that, Bartek!"

There was no use living frugally and saving, now that the *hope* was gone, Jacob thought, showing the girl

her sleeping quarters in the hayloft. He might as well have someone to bend over those strawberry beds, and take it easy himself. No, he would never see Cracow.

But he could not kill the dream. Next morning, when his black helper took a basket-full of young shoots and went to transplant them into the strawberry field, Jacob went out for a walk, nursing his sorrow.

He seldom had any leisure before, and found out that grief thrives on idleness. As he walked toward Cypress Swamp, the recollection of yesterday's news grew more poignant. Cracow, which had fallen into the enemy's hands, was besieged again and bombed once more in his agonized thoughts.

Trying to stop looking inward, he lifted his head to the sky.

**B**UT the sky that morning was not its usual brilliant blue. Fog obscured it. One of the three fogs allotted yearly to southern Florida, by the official weather prophet. He remembered that wearily, with a semblance of a smile. First fog of the season.

Two thin fogs and one heavy, this was generally Dade County's fog ration. This one, which now clouded the village of Palmingo, was a thin fog, almost a mist. The difference was, that mists came here at dawn and went with sunrise, but that purplish haze stayed on, even after daylight came.

Jacob groped in the amethystine fog, out and away from his fertile acres, out of the town limits. Every hamlet here was called a town or a city, he reflected, a faint, ironic smile stirring his bushy white mustache. In Poland, a settlement had to be centuries old, or at least well populated, before it was accorded the name of a city. But here, why, a few huts on stilts in that yonder Cypress Swamp would pass for a town, with a Chamber of Commerce springing from nowhere among the rabbit tobacco weed.

With that bitterly whimsical smile still on his lips, ruddy in spite of his sixty years, Jacob glanced in the direction of the distant swamp. Some-

thing in there made his pale-blue, farsighted eyes open wider. Strange peaked buildings were sticking up through the fog, like solid dark furniture through a curtain.

He walked faster. If it were illusion, let it last, he thought. Those were neither Negro shacks on stilts, nor jerry-built villas for Northern tourists.

It was a real city—real and familiar. The cobblestone streets. . . . The moat around King Sobieski's castle. . . . The gothic towers of Cracow's Coronation Cathedral. . . .

Jacob did not even rub his eyes. What if only in a bewitched dream he was seeing Cracow? He was seeing it. That was enough. Oh, the fog, the merciful fog!

The noise in his ears, which had persisted lately, since the chronic catarrah made him partly deaf, dissolved itself into bells, ringing joyously, as during a wedding or — a coronation?

His eyes were still feasting on the vision, slowly and enchantingly, unveiling when he heard Bartek calling him.

"Uncle! Uncle Jacob! Where are you going? Come back. Trouble at home!"

Jacob furtively wiped the happy tears that had filled his eyes a moment before, and looked back. He saw his nephew clearly. There was no more fog. The fierce Florida sunshine kindled rainbows in the long leaf pines, the black muck steamed under the mid-day heat. Jacob looked at the royal palms lining the coral-paved road which ran by the swamp. Their shadows were short. He sighed. He did not know it was so late.

"What's the matter, Bartek? You hurt someone in a brawl again? Sheriff after you?"

"No. I ain't been dissipatin' so much these days, and you know I only fight when soused. It's Joda. In hot water again. Folks want to string her up!"

"Why? Just because those cows went dry? Of all the stupid superstitions!"

"It's not only them cows," Bartek said soberly, "though the neighbors

are plumb mad you befriended her. This time they think you're harboring a murderer."

"A what? Joda wouldn't kill anybody."

"Well they say she did. You know that sickly one, with tuberculosis?"

**J**ACOB shook his head and then clucked distractedly. This was serious. In silent consternation, both men returned to Palmingo and entered their home, built on the "wrong" side of a black irrigation ditch. Authorities called it an irrigation canal, but the natives never ceased calling it a ditch.

As they crossed the rotting log bridge, two moccasins slid lazily into the coffee-colored water, frightening away a myriad of minnows.

"The girl, I mean the dead one, Piety, wanted to drown herself in this here ditch, when Joda saw her. Joda is smelled for a witch, you know. The rumor is, that she gave the white girl a potion to give her the 'glamor' to bring back the man who jilted her."

"You mean that ne'er-do-well Browser boy? Why the girl was much better off without him."

Bartek looked at the cement floor of the hut they entered, and scowled. Something as near to compassion as he could feel crossed his brutish face.

"She never could have been much better. She had white plague something fierce. Last stages, the doc said."

Jacob tapped the damp floor with his muddy wading boot.

"I don't see no reason for doing away with Piety. She did nobody any harm."

"I don't neither. She was a mild sort of a girl, wouldn't harm a fly. Hm-m, too bad!"

More heavy silence. Mockers still shrilled outside. Dragon flies droned busily, catching mosquitoes which danced in a cloud over the black canal.

"Funny, that," Bartek mused. "Piety died smiling. When her folks came in, the girl muttered something about him coming back. She looked downright pretty with that smile on

her waxy face, like one of them muck-water lilies. They buried her in her would-be wedding dress."

Jacob did not hear the last words. Familiar smell assailed his nostrils, the smoky odor of burning Dade County pine. Alarmed he looked out.

"Fire, it smells like. And we without fire protection in this hole, and no insurance. Better run and ring the village fire gong."

Bartek looked out, too. Then he sighed portentously and turned his head away from the window.

"It ain't no fire, Uncle. It's them witch hunters after Joda. They're headed right here."

In a few seconds, a crowd came, carrying torches in broad daylight. It was a familiarly sinister sight. Jacob remembered another lynching years ago. That time it was an old Negro accused of horse stealing.

"They wouldn't string up a woman?" he asked fearfully.

"Wouldn't they!" Bartek laughed mirthlessly.

A catbird outside seemed to mimic his laughter with its screeching.

"Well, we got to stop them! Guilty or not, it's for the court to decide about Joda. I won't lend a hand to murder."

"But what can we do, Uncle?"

"Take out the truck. We'll spirit the girl away. I got a friendly customer in South Miami. I'll ask him to keep her."

"Is that the same guy who wanted to buy a hive of bees off you?"

"Good thing you reminded me. I'll go and pack me those bees, hive and all. You fetch Joda."

They could hear the mob approaching.

**A**S BARTEK went reluctantly to the hayloft, Jacob took out his bee helmet and gloves, and went into the garden at the back of the house. The mob was already shouting and hammering at his front door, but he seemed to pay no heed to them.

When he came back, he saw the girl, her lips ashen, cowering in the corner where his walking stick stood leaning against the whitewashed wall.

"What are you doing with that

stick, child?" he asked gently, hearing her crooning over it.

"Castin' a spell," she said simply, and continued to croon.

This time her words were audible to his ears.

"And lead him to his heart's desire, you good old stick. Lead him, lead him . . . to his good old heart's desire."

Then she broke down and wept.

"You-all won't give me up? Honest? Bartek says . . ."

The house shuddered under the mob's blows.

"Bartek is right. Hop on the truck. Don't stare at that door. Hurry!"

The door was already giving way under the violent blows of the attackers. Their shouts were deafening, filled with mysterious fear and hysterical fury.

"Give up the witch!"

"Give up the hexer or you'll burn, too!"

Slowly Jacob cast his eyes around the room, looking for a weapon. Then he pursed his lips and shook his head in silent self-approval. The dynamite box!

He picked up the heavy black box and held it out through a slit in the door, now enlarged by the pickaxe blows to the side of a window.

"See this? I'll throw it at your heads, if you don't go away!" he said with ominous calm.

The enraged men recognized the familiar black container in which citrus growers kept their dynamite used for blowing plant holes in coral rock. At first, they thought that the old man was bluffing, that the box was empty. But one look at his tensed, trembling old arms, showed them plainly that the box was heavy.

"Don't think I can't do it. I won't blow myself up. There are little holes in it, to put in the fuse. I'll throw it and run," he said with a grim smile.

The mob hesitated. Then quickly put out their torches dipping them into the canal one after another. Their leader warned them.

"He might do it, for all we know. Those crazy Poles are mean fighters. Next to the Irish, I dunno—"

"Lost your nerve, Gruber?" the

drunkest grower taunted him. "Jacob won't dare. Come on, you guys!"

Jacob did not wait for them to come inside. With all his strength, he threw the box into the midst of the rushing crowd.

**T**HE lid, marked DYNAMITE, flew off. Terrible screams rent the air. But there was no smoke, no explosion, no sign of bursting fire. Still, the would-be lynchers threw down their guns, their hands clawing the air, chasing away the swarm of bees that flew out of the box.

The lynching party became disorganized long enough to enable Bartek to drive the truck out of the yard. As he stepped on the accelerator, he shouted into Jacob's ear.

"It lost you the whole hiveful of bees, Uncle. Think she is worth it?"

Jacob only smiled, muttering to himself in a congratulatory manner.

"Good job I drilled those holes in the top and did not nail the hive in the box," he said. "I was afraid the bees might suffocate." He chuckled. "No, I haven't lost them. They'll come home, all right, all except a few that they mashed with their boots."

On the way to South Miami, the two men questioned Joda.

"Did you really do away with Piety?"

"So help me, I didn't!" The girl rolled her reddened eyes. "I traded with her. She gave me her red juju beads, and I gave her her heart's desire for them. I got powers."

"So this is why poor little Piety died smiling," Jacob thought. "She must have thought herself in her faithless fellow's arms. The Negress is a hypnotist and doesn't know it."

"Yes, yes," he asserted aloud, remembering his own happy vision.

"Lemme down, you good people," Joda begged them when the car had reached South Miami's city limits. "Lemme. I'll find me a job here. Season's on."

"But, your things?"

"I got only one whole dress. The other is in rags. Jes' give me fifty cents for a night's lodging, if you-all can spare it."

She jumped off the running board,

when the car reached an intersection, without even waiting for it to stop fully for the red light. As the traffic light was changing, it fell on her face, giving her drab coffee-colored complexion a weird, greenish cast. Still, her homely face looked almost pretty, as she spoke magnanimously to Jacob.

"You shall get your heart's desire, Jacob Wolski!"

She turned to walk away, then hesitated, turned to Bartek as if with an after-decision.

"You too, young 'un."

Young Bartek's eyes lighted up for a moment as they did when he was pleasure bent, and Jacob knew what his heart's desire would be.

That was the last her rescuers saw or heard of her.

On their way back, Bartek kept morosely silent. Dank smell of swampy lowlands near Okeechobee seemed to dampen both men's spirits. When they reached Big Cypress Swamp, he exploded.

"So, you wasted gas for nothing! You threw away a hive of our best Italian bees, and made a trip, just to save that good-for-nothing girl!"

Jacob was in no mood for arguing. "I'm too old," he said, "to waste my time on bitter words that lead nowhere. Besides, quarrels are bad for my heart. I'm getting off right here!"

Without waiting for the truck to slow down, he opened the rattling door and jumped out. It was not as dangerous as it seemed. In his youth, Jacob studied jiu jitsu which, among other things, taught him how to fall easily. He rolled down the canal and made no effort to rise until quite near the muddy water. Then he picked himself up with lightning rapidity, unusual in a man of his age, and stood shading his sad eyes with the palm of his gnarled hand, looking after the rattling truck.

"Mad as a hatter! All right, let him go alone. I'm through with—with—"

**H**E COULD not define what he was through with. It was too melancholy to admit, even to himself, that one was through with life.

He walked into the lowlands, far away from the sparsely inhabited

suburb. Bullfrogs croaked like so many celestial guitars. There was moonlight behind those milky clouds, passing over the swamp. Luminous vapors rose from it, and joined the clouds, forming bluish white mists.

Jacob looked around. Nothing could be seen save the faint outlines of palmettos, their leaves spread like gigantic fingers. He realized with a start that he had run into the second of the season's rare fogs.

Bullfrogs' voices were now more like the ringing of bells. Or was that permanent noise in his ears growing stronger? No matter. All of a sudden, he knew where he was going.

Narrow streets of Cracow beckoned him again. Oil lamps, set in the gutters for some gala illumination, flickered ahead of him. And he followed the unseen road.

Coronation Cathedral again. This time it was brilliantly lit and full of singing crowds. As he entered, he was surprised that people gave him the right of way toward the *sancta sanctorum* of the altar. But he accepted their bows and stopped only before the altar steps. As he knelt on the cold, damp granite slabs of the cathedral, it did not seem strange to him that the stones gave way under his knees, and the incense trembling before his eyes smelled of water lilies.

When he rose up from the floor, after what seemed centuries, he heard a tumult of acclaim. He looked behind to see for whom it was meant.

"Vivat Król Sobieski!" the cries rolled through the nave.

He looked harder, but saw no king. Perhaps the smoke from the incense burners made his eyes dim? He rubbed them and looked again. This time, he glimpsed an image reflected in a knight's shield. It was his own face.

His face but not his garb. Instead of the crude tropical overalls, he wore in Florida when planting strawberries, he now had on a richly embroidered coat opened in front. Beneath, was displayed a shirt of purple linen belted with a golden *pas*. From that ancient Polish belt there hung a long, hooked saber with a hilt set in precious stones.

"Take off your *shabla*, my lord

*wojewoda*, and replace it with a crown."

It was a priest speaking. A Polish priest wearing snow-white lacy ornaty over his black clerical dress.

"Rise, our victorious war leader, as our beloved king!" the priest said solemnly. And the crowd echoed and roared.

"King! Long live King Sobieski! Vivat!"

As the new king bowed with grave courtesy to his subjects, he remembered what they expected. The historical phrase, came to him in a flash.

"Poland, the buffer of the Asiatic invasion!"

Yes, this was his destiny, his self-appointed task. The century into which he had catapulted back from some distant, now forgotten future, needed him. And he solemnly responded to its need.

**N**O SOONER was the coronation over, than he was in the saddle again, soldier first, rather than king.

"Turks are coming from the East. Turkish hordes just passed the Russian border into Poland."

He heard his heralds with a weird feeling of one who had read all of this many years—or was it centuries ago?

"Could the past be lived differently?" He asked himself the involuntary question, and could find no answer, while his brain reeled in the chaos of conflicting memories.

Without pomp, he went to the Front in a war uniform. He arrived just in time for the decisive battle. It lasted late into afternoon. Winged hussars struck terror into the ranks of the Turks. Polish warriors followed as fast with the amaranthine flag with the white Polish eagle, as if they, too, could fly like birds of prey. Yet the Istanbul crescent still held its own.

King Sobieski watched the battle from a hill. Under him his stallion stood beating the bloody earth with its silver-shod hooves. Its master was as impatient as his spirited beast.

Suddenly, he gave the order to the stirrup holder. The boy could not believe his ears. The king, after having promised his ministers to keep

out of the battle, to save himself for Poland, was galloping into the thick of it!

"Give my regards to the Seim's chairman. Tell him that the King could not stay out!"

Closer, closer. Hussars' wings swished. As the matchless troops saw their *wojewoda*, they struck with almost joyous fierceness. In another bloody hour, the enemy would run. An hour? No, half an hour, twenty minutes! Time dragged and leaped alternately during that fierce human storm.

In a short time, there would be darkness, and the Turks would reach the safety of the forest. Oh, if the daylight could only last longer! He prayed for it, swinging his saber with the viciousness of all his might.

Once again, time stopped for the Polish legion. Was it according to reality or an old legend? Again, during that interminable hour—or did it only seem like an hour—King Sobieski, former grower from the Everglades, felt that motionless time filled with vague remembrances. A swamp—a Negro girl—prophecies—

For a split second, he was not in the ornamental saddle. Stripped of his rich *sukmana*, he knelt on the trembly bog, his knees sinking deeper and deeper.

After an interminable time, his soaring soul saw a few bleached bones, brought back to the surface by a hurricane.

Darkness again. And out of that darkness, a blinding flash of crimson light—blood over his face, and someone crying:

"You're wounded, *Panie!*"

And the shouts:

"Vivat! Vivat! Victory! We won!"

Days later, supported by his faithful Hussars, he was being led to a banquet hall. His hand was in a sling. He was limping, but great joy shone on his battered face. The Turks were stopped by the Polish human wall. Europe was safe.

Safe for future trials?

Even as the pipers played, their high notes punctuated by the drums, as the tapers burned low, and as his elders grew more hilarious, the king



asked himself that pensive question.

"Safe for future trials?"

He felt suddenly very tired, sleepy and old. Poland had won. They would not need him now. He, the war leader, would feel so useless in the council chamber. The old battle-wolf, what did he know about peacetime affairs of state? He wished that the elected king could retire.

But no, it would be an insult to the electorate. Once given the supreme power by the *sejm*, he had to stay on the throne.

Yet why stay, if Poland needed him no more?

How about that rumor of the spirited legion? He remembered the story his old nurse told him.

"And all these centuries, the lost legion sleeps—all but the sentinel with the golden horn."

Through the thumping of Krakoviaks, danced by the peasantry on the cobblestones of the walled courtyard, he seemed to hear the old woman crooning her tale.

"They sleep. Their pointed helmets drip with dew at night, and reflect the sun by day. They sleep, but they will awaken when Poland needs them. The golden horn of liberty will blow. . . ."

The king, tired by the festivities, dozed off.

Through the noise of the revel, he heard a faint voice of the golden horn calling, calling. . . .

He threw on a plain dark cloak over his glittering robes and went out of the palace. At the gate, a sentry stopped him with a crossed halberd.

"I'm your king," Sobieski said simply, and the sentinel saluted, perplexed.

"Do you need bodyguards, *Najasnieszy Panie?*"

"No. Since when do I mistrust my people?"

The sentry saluted again and then moved out of his way. King Sobieski walked into the darkness of the night that was punctuated by torchlights.

Once away from the center of Cracow, he breathed the piney air of the encroaching woods. Strange pines grew here, short-leaved, dark. Not like some deep-leaved pines with rainbows

reflected in them he remembered. . . . Where? In some distant country of the South. . . .

He tried to recall it.

And then his thoughts were stirred away from their task of concentration by the sound of the horn growing louder.

He was in the mountains now. He saw himself, like one in a mirror sees his reflection, climbing a slope of Tatry, higher and higher. His personality was strangely divided between conflicting memories — that tropical village and the unseen blower of the horn.

Suddenly, he came upon the "Lost Legion."

He saw the sleeping postures of Winged Hussars, their horses, and the sentinel with a golden horn. He saw clear mountain stars above their heads, the rays reaching them, touching each closed eyelid with a silver finger of light. He saw the setting moon reflected in each metallic helmet, and the dew that filmed its many darkened images. He saw the sentinel stir.

The sentinel lifted the horn to his puckered mouth and blew his hollow cheeks. They expanded like a balloon near the bursting point. Clear, sonorous tones filled the air, musical and urging, unlike any other bugle call he ever heard.

**T**HE sleeping knights awakened like one man. And, as one man, they shouted:

"Now is the time! Poland lies prostrate! You shall lead us again to her rescue!"

And the multiple mountain echo repeated the cry.

"To the rescue! Rescue . . . rescue. . . ."

Even as the king sprang into the saddle of the stately white horse, which came to him out of nowhere, he was king no more. Instead, old Jacob heard the voice of his nephew muttering:

"Where did you see those bones, neighbor? Are you sure they were human bones. Could they be—my uncle's?" Bartek said.

"I don't know, and I don't care!"

a sunburned Florida cracker responded grouchy. "It's getting dark, fog is rolling in. The third darned fog this season!"

Dragging his boots out of the muddy ground, the cracker waded away to the safety of the road and soon was lost to view around the bend in the road.

Jacob stood face to face with his worthless nephew and saw him examining the bones. Jacob's own bones! He could not go to the rescue of the recently conquered Poland. His old enemies, the Germans didn't need to fear him. Jacob was just a skeleton of himself drowned in a bog.

But his nephew, Bartek! Now there was as strong and enduring a body as Poland could wish for. Only lacking a patriotic soul, only interested in carousing. So what? Why shouldn't his body be enlisted into the service of the cause?

Over there, at the Medieval Court of Cracow, the gross soul of the young sot would be at home, in old Jacob's body. King Sobieski, no longer needed in his century, might degenerate into a drunken sot. While Jacob, in his young nephew's flesh—

A small Florida owl hooted in the distance. Now closer. Now it was sitting on a ghostly finger of palmetto, sticking out of the fog like a pointing finger.

"You shall go to Cracow!" Jacob heard his memory.

"And you, too. You both will get your heart's desire," Joda's voice rang again in his ears. . . .

In the morning, the citizens of Palmingo were very much surprised by the news. Young Wolski, who was born here, and never cared two hoots about the restoration of his old country, was going to France to enlist in the Polish Legion.

