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W. T.—1

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Masquerade

By MEARLE PROUT

A brief but gripping tale of a struggle against stark horror in a lantern-lit garden—by the author of "The House of the Worm"

MAY I cut in, please?" It was as simple as that. Yet, for all the gay masquerade throng, Donald shivered at the voice. He looked at the intruder and was not reassured. Tall and gaunt, the man was clad in the long flowing robes of a priest of ancient Egypt. His eyes were shaded, nearly covered by the black hood of his mask, but as he looked into them Donald had the uncanny impression of looking across a great dark void. Below the line of the mask the face was thin and creased, yellowed like old parchment.

With the barest trace of a smile the intruder bowed and said again, "If you don't mind."

Donald hesitated. Strangely, he felt his partner would not object if he were to refuse the very usual request. But to refuse would be unthinkable. He released his partner, and in a moment the tall man had whirled her away. Yet Donald was aware of her gaze upon him as he threaded across the crowded floor.

Away from the dancers, he paused and looked for the first time at the card she had slipped into his hand.

"Leonora Starr."

The name was printed in simple pica type; beyond that, the card was blank.

He frowned at first, then smiled. She so obviously expected him to see her again. He recalled with pleasure her lithe surrender to his arms while they

danced, the warmth with which she had pressed the small card into his hand.

Who was she? he wondered. The name, Leonora Starr, told him nothing. They had met less than five minutes before, and even then had spoken but little.

The music of the waltz rose to a higher, more exciting strain. Donald searched the crowd with his eyes until he found her, still dancing with the mysterious stranger. They were at the south end of the ballroom now, near the door that led into the garden. The tall man, Donald noted, danced gracefully but stiffly, as though he had once been an excellent dancer, but was now long out of practise.

Across the crowd Donald caught Leonora's eye, and something flashed between them. An appeal, he thought it was. His pulse raced while he stared across the intervening space, and then—his glance clashed with that of the giant. He was conscious of the same chilling sensation at the pit of his stomach, as though he were falling; felt the same prickling at the roots of his hair. . . . Then, in another whirl of the dance, the man had turned away.

A little group of people near by was not dancing. Donald strolled toward them, halted half-way and looked back across the floor. He felt a light touch at his elbow.

"That man who tagged you—who is he?" said Betty Cosgrove as he turned. She was obviously agitated.

"I've been wondering. Doesn't anyone know?"

"No—except that he wasn't invited."

"Are—you sure? It might be just the costume."

"No—none of the guests is so tall. Besides, he wasn't announced." She shuddered.

"He—he looks like a death's-head, or a mummy. If he asks me to dance, I'll faint."

Abruptly the music ceased, to be replaced by the hum of voices and scattered applause. Apprehensive now in spite of himself, Donald shouldered his way through the crowd in search of Leonora. She was not on the floor. Hurriedly he surveyed the guests again. The man too had disappeared. The garden, perhaps?

Quickly he stepped to the door. There was no moon, but the garden was dimly lighted by a single Japanese lantern hung near the center. Donald could see no one. Dense shrubbery bordered the walks, and in the far corner a thick grove of trees loomed black in the shadows. He drew a deep breath and walked swiftly toward it.

BEHIND him the music began again, a haunting Viennese melody in waltz time. He looked back at the lighted windows. People, in their brilliant costumes, were again taking the floor. No one else had come out after him; to all appearances he was alone in the garden. He hesitated, half minded to turn back. Fool's errand!

Suddenly, above the music, he heard a woman scream, a muffled scream that was not repeated. It came from the grove of trees. His heart leaping, he turned and ran toward it, searching his pockets for a weapon as he ran. There was none.

He reached the trees. It was not as dark there as it had seemed. The level rays of the Japanese lantern, though dim, shone redly through the shadows. Suddenly in his haste he stumbled over a creeper of vine, and, catching himself, stopped short at the sight before him.

At this spot the heavy growth of trees gave way to a circular clearing, and the ground was covered by a lush carpet of grass. The light of the Japanese lantern seemed to filter undiminished through the trees and become amplified at this spot, so that everything which occurred was as clear to the watcher as in the light of day. And at the very center of the circle, at the top of a small rise, was the horrifying tableau. Leonora was lying on her side, her face half buried in the grass; over her, his knee on her shoulder, his left hand covering her mouth, was the tall man in the priestly robe. In his right hand he held aloft a glittering knife with a long curved blade, which he held poised in a perpetual threat. He had not yet struck.

The man, disheveled by the struggle, could be seen better now. From the arm which held the knife aloft the robe had fallen away, revealing it to the shoulder; it was thin as bone, it had the appearance of bone stretched tightly over with yellow, parchment-like skin. His head-dress was lost, revealing a smooth hairless head which seemed deathly white even in the red rays of the lantern. The mask, too, was gone, and his eyes—in the shadows they appeared like something which Donald, if he were to remain sane, dared not think about.

A cold perspiration beading his skin, Donald looked about him for a weapon, while the two before him held the same motionless pose. A stone, a broken limb of a tree, any weapon would suffice—if only the demon did not strike, if only Leonora could hold him back a moment

longer! In his excitement he never wondered why he had not already done so, why, if he wished to kill, he had not killed and fled minutes before. Nor did he wonder how Leonora, facing death, could wait for it so passively. If he had stopped to think of those things, to realize their meaning, perhaps he might have noticed other, more obvious, circumstances: that the music, which had sounded so loudly in the garden a few seconds before, had died to nothing the moment he had entered the hellish grove; that the light breeze from out of the west no longer fanned his cheek, and now did not even rustle the leaves of the trees; that the very starlight seemed to drip unwillingly through the interlaced branches overhead. . . .

Twenty feet to the left, Donald saw a spade leaning against a tree. He started for it, but at that moment a sudden burst of activity on the part of Leonora freed her mouth and she called weakly,

"Quickly—help!"

Being young, Donald could not resist that appeal. He left the spade untouched, and turned and ran to fling himself against the gaunt attacker.

With a single bound the other rose to meet his attack, the knife drawn to strike, the lips snarling. The girl too rose to her feet and stood.

"Back to the house, Leonora—run!" shouted Donald. He had halted, crouched ready to spring, ten feet from the towering skeleton before him.

But the girl stood still, apparently tense with excitement.

"You must kill him," she hissed, "or he'll kill me."

"Who is he?" Donald rasped.

"He's—a priest," she lied. "His name is Ozaman."

Donald knew that she was lying, though he could not tell how he knew it—nor why she was.

"Go to the house," he said again, "and send some men out; I'll keep him here."

A sardonic smile twisted the features of Ozaman.

"You—don't want me alone?" he taunted.

IN THAT instant it happened. Leonora had crept up behind the priest; suddenly she charged him, grasped the hand that held the knife. The priest swung upon her, ready to crash a heavy fist upon her face. Donald rushed in.

He caught the blow in the chest. It staggered him. Then with all his power he flung himself forward and closed.

Donald was athletic. In college he had been a member of the wrestling team, had been rated fair at boxing. But he knew in a second that he had underrated his opponent. The arms of this fleshless skeleton were like bands of steel, the legs as firm as if rooted in the ground. Suddenly Ozaman laughed. He tossed the knife from him, picked Donald up bodily, whirled him through the air until he was dizzy, then threw him to the ground with stunning force. Then he dropped quickly upon him and pinned his arms to the ground.

Donald lay on his back in the grass, helpless, staring up at the twin caverns of the monster's eyes. A wave of revulsion shook him, left him weak and pale, his body wet with sweat. Those eyes again! Was he insane? But he knew that he was not. This was real. This was happening! Back there, behind those trees, was the ballroom, and a gay throng, and music, and laughter. And here—this!

His mind, stimulated by terror, worked fast. The knife! It had been lost in the struggle. Then, surely, Leonora—he twisted his head to look for her. She was standing on his left ten feet away, her eyes shining, her lips slightly parted.

He called to her. "Find the knife—and hurry!" he said.

She made no reply, but stood smiling, neutral. A gleam in the grass near her caught his eye.

"What's the matter? It's there at your feet. Help me!" he shouted.

As she made no move he realized that she would not—that what was to be done he must do for himself. A black rage gave new strength to his arms. She must be in league with the priest! She had confessed to knowing him. . . . He saw now that he had been lured into this unequal contest. But why?

The priest tightened his hold on Donald's arms again, so that Donald writhed with the pain.

"Why are you holding me? What do you want?" he cried at last.

"Only your body," said Ozaman softly. His body! The man was insane!

If only he could reach the knife—if he could get an arm free!

He feigned a struggle, edging toward the knife as he fought. When he was again overcome, he was two feet nearer. He rested. Then another struggle, another two feet gained. He had a feeling the priest was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse, encouraging him to escape and then dashing his hopes. Well, there might be a surprize! . . .

Two more pretended struggles, and the knife was within his reach. Now if an arm were free. . . .

Suddenly the priest bent his head low, so that his fetid breath seared the nostrils of the prostrate man.

"I'm going to kill you now," he said.

Simultaneously he loosed Donald's arms and clutched his neck with bony fingers. Donald felt the breath in his lungs pent up, fighting for escape while he flailed his left arm in search of the knife. He grasped the smooth handle,

balanced it a moment in his hand. He focussed his staring eyes upon the figure leaning low over him, aimed his blow well. As he struck, the priest inclined his head to the left, leaving a clean path for the knife. It severed the veins in his neck.

At once Donald felt his body galvanized as from an electric shock. He was aware of a mighty force penetrating his brain. Red flashes seemed to shoot from the priest's eyes, to play into his own. Giddiness and nausea as in a violent earthquake racked his consciousness. And then, for a moment, he fainted away.

When he again opened his eyes the scene was, to all appearances, unchanged. Over him were the same trees, the same. . . . He raised his hand to a gutting pain in his throat, felt something warm spurt over it. He looked. Blood! But surely this was not his own hand—this was thin, and bony. The garment which covered the arm was not his own either, but white and flowing—the garment of a priest! The words of Ozaman resounded in his brain like a death-knell:

"I want your body!"

And now his dimming eyes beheld a scene which tore his soul with despair. A man, clad as he had been, with the same proud tilt of the head, the same athletic carriage, but with eyes which glittered strangely now in the pale light, stepped toward a beautiful girl.

"Come, Leonora," he said, in a voice which Donald recognized as his own. "It is time to go."

She looked at him with a slow smile.

"You really are very, very handsome, Ozaman," she answered.

And as the eyes of the prostrate figure slowly filmed in death the now perfectly matched pair looked back at him and laughed with wild abandon.