

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# Nude With a Dagger

By JOHN FLANDERS

*The old money-lender bumped into a weird problem that all his hardness could not penetrate*

**O**LD GRYDE was a money-lender, and a hard one. In the course of his career, five thousand clients owed him money, he was the occasion of one hundred and twelve suicides, of nine sensational murders, of assignments, bankruptcies and financial disasters without number.

A hundred thousand maledictions were called down on his head, and he laughed at all of them. But the hundred thousand and first malediction killed him, in the strangest and most frightful fashion.

I owed him two hundred pounds, he ground out of me the most abominable interest payments every month, and yet he had made me his intimate friend. As a matter of fact, this was only a way he had of torturing me, for I was forced to submit to every sort of cruelty and malice at his hands, to echo his boisterous laughter as his victims begged, entreated, and even died at his hands.

He scrupulously recorded all this suffering and blood in his day-book and his ledger, as his ill-gotten fortune grew day after day.

But today I do not regret the pain he caused me, because I was allowed at last to witness his death-agony. And I wish all his dear colleagues a like fate.

**O**NE morning I found him in his office engaged in an argument with a client, a very pale and very handsome young man.

The young man was speaking:

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"It is impossible for me to pay you, Mr. Gryde, but I implore you not to sell me out. Take this painting. It is the one good piece of work I have done. I have worked it over a hundred times; I have put my heart's blood into it. Even now I realize that it isn't quite finished. There is something lacking still—I can't tell exactly what it is—but I know I shall find out in time, and then I will finish it.

"Take it for this debt which is killing me—and is killing my poor mother!"

Gryde sneered. When he noticed me, he called my attention to a moderately large painting which stood against his bookcase. When I caught sight of it, I started with surprise and admiration. It seemed to me that I had never seen anything so perfect.

It was a life-size nude, a man as handsome as a god, standing out against a vague, cloudy background, a background of tempest, night and flame.

"I don't know yet what I shall call it," said the artist in a voice filled with pain. "That figure you see there—I have been dreaming of it ever since I was a child; it came to me in a dream just as certain melodies came from heaven in the night to Mozart and Haydn."

"You owe me three hundred pounds, Mr. Warton," said Gryde.

The young man clasped his hands together.

"And my painting, Mr. Gryde! It is

worth twice that, three times that, ten times that!"

"In a hundred years," assented Gryde. "I shan't live long enough to get the good of it."

But as he spoke I seemed to catch in his face a sort of vacillating glimmer which was different from the steel-hard gaze I had always seen there before. Was it admiration of an artistic masterpiece, or was it the prospect of fabulous profit?

Then Gryde went on:

"I am sorry for you," he said, "and away down in my heart I have a weakness for artists. I will take it and credit you with a hundred pounds on your debt."

The artist opened his mouth to reply. The usurer cut him off.

"You owe me three hundred pounds, payable at the rate of ten pounds a month. I will sign a receipt for ten months. Don't forget to be prompt in your payment eleven months from today, Mr. Warton!"

Warton had covered his face with his beautiful hands.

"Ten months! You are giving me ten months free from worry, ten months of relief for Mother—Mother is sadly nervous and ill, Mr. Gryde—and I can work hard in these ten months——"

He took the receipt.

"But," added Gryde, "you admit yourself that there is something still lacking to the picture. You must put the finishing touch to it, and you must find a name for it by the time the ten months are up."

The artist promised all this, and the picture was hung on the wall above old Gryde's desk.

**E**LEVEN months went by, and Warton was unable to pay his installment of ten pounds. He begged and implored Gryde to allow him more time, but to no avail. The usurer secured an order for the sale of the poor boy's effects. When the

officers came, they found mother and son sleeping the sleep of death in a room filled with asphyxiating fumes from a brazier of live coals.

On the table, there was a letter for Gryde.

"I agreed to furnish you a name for my picture," the artist had written him. "You may call it *Vengeance*. And as for my promise to finish the picture, I will keep that promise, too."

Gryde was very much annoyed.

"The name," he argued "doesn't fit the picture at all. And how can a dead man come back and finish a picture?"

But his challenge to the other world was answered.

**O**NE morning I found Gryde terribly worried and excited.

"Look at the painting!" he cried, the moment I entered the room. "Don't you see something strange about it?"

I studied the painting, but I could discover no change in it. My assurance seemed to relieve him greatly.

"Do you know——" he began. He passed his hand over his forehead, and I could see drops of perspiration standing out on his brow.

"It was last night, sometime after midnight. I had gone to bed; then all at once I remembered that I had left some very important papers lying on my desk.

"I got up at once to see that they were put away safely. I never have any trouble in finding my way about in the dark in this house, for I know every corner and crevice of it. I came into my office here without taking the trouble to turn on a light. There was really no need for one, for the moonlight fell square on my desk. As I leaned over my papers, I had a feeling that something was moving between the window and me——

"Look at the picture! Look at the pic-

ture!" Gryde cried out suddenly in abject terror.

Then, in a moment, he murmured: "I must be imagining things. I have heard of hallucinations but I can't remember ever having had one—I thought I saw the man in the picture move again.

"Well, when I came in here last night, it seemed to me I saw—no, I swear I *did* see that man in the painting reach out his arm to seize me!"

"You're going crazy," said I.

"I wish I could explain it so," said Gryde; "that would be better than——"

"Well, why don't you destroy the painting, if you think all this isn't just imagination?"

Gryde's face brightened.

"That hadn't occurred to me," he said; "I suppose because it was too simple."

He opened a drawer and took out a long-bladed dagger with a delicately chiseled handle.

He walked toward the picture with the dagger in his hand. Then, suddenly, he seemed to change his mind.

"No!" he said. "I'm not going to fling a hundred pounds into the fire just because I had a bad dream. You're the one that's crazy, young friend."

And he flung the weapon angrily down on his desk.

**W**HEN I went back the next day, I did not find the same Gryde. In his stead was a broken old man with the eyes of a tracked beast, shaking with insane terror.

"No," he howled, "I'm not crazy, I'm not an imbecile! I know what I'm talking about. I got up again last night, and came in here to see if the other thing had been a dream. And I tell you—I tell you—*he* came out of the picture," Gryde bellowed, twisting his hands around each other, "and—and—look at the picture, you damned fool! He took my dagger away from me!"

I put my hands up to my head. I felt myself turning as crazy as old Gryde was. The thing was impossible, but it was true. The nude figure in the painting held in his hand a dagger which had not been there the day before, a dagger that I recognized by the artistic carving on the handle. It was the weapon which Gryde had flung down on the desk when I was here last!

I begged Gryde, by all he held sacred, to destroy the painting. But mad with terror though he was, he could not bring himself to wreck an object that had money value.

*He still did not believe that Warton would keep his promise!*

\* \* \* \* \*

**G**RYDE is dead.

We found him in his armchair, his body emptied of blood, his throat cut clear across. The murderous steel had slashed into the leather of the chair.

And when I looked at the painting, I saw that the blade of the dagger was red to the hilt.

