

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

EDWIN BAIRD, *Editor*

Published monthly by THE RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 325 North Capitol Avenue, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3 a year in the United States; \$3.50 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our possession. All manuscripts and other editorial matters should be directed to WEIRD TALES, 854 North Clark Street, Chicago, Ill. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright, and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part. Copyright, 1923, by the Rural Publishing Corporation.

VOLUME II

25 Cents

NUMBER 1

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Riders in the Dark

OPPPOSITE the name of Robert Hamelin had been placed the red symbol of death.

Although it was Locklear's turn, I myself contributed the crimson drop, for Locklear's wound still kept him between the sheets, and already he was sufficiently exsanguined. His stertorous breathing came to us in little gusts from the inner room as we bent above the document of justice; with sinister accuracy, the sound punctuated our accusing sentences as Ridenour read them from the paper.

The sentence passed upon Hamelin was just. There had been no dispute; we were not accustomed to debate our motives nor explain our deeds. And in the index before us, from which we had chosen the name of Robert Hamelin, there appeared no other name but which, with equal justice, might have been selected.

"Tonight, then?" I asked.

"Tonight," replied Flood, soberly. "We have always been prompt. Why do you ask, Stormont?"

Sardis laughed offensively. "Hamelin has a beautiful wife," he sneered.

Flood turned on him in a cold fury.

"There are to be no more such remarks," said the captain, "this evening or any other evening. While I am your leader you will address one another openly and with complete respect. Whatever your private grievances may be, you will not bring them into this house. If your information is of such import as to merit our collective attention, a means is provided in committee."

Before his icy anger, Sardis shrank away; but I only laughed.

"My dear Sardis," I said, "were the motive you would seem to impute to me true, would I not be the first to welcome immediate action?"

At this Flood smiled, and the tense moment passed. Yet I was glad there had been no occasion directly to reply to the captain's question. Truth to tell, there was no assignable reason for my apparent hesitation; the emotion which had dictated my own query was at the moment beyond analysis.

Bereft of its sneer, Sardis's observation was a mere statement of fact. Hamelin *did* have a wife, but what was that to me? Although reports of her beauty had filled the countryside at the time of

her arrival, a year previous to our condemnation of Hamelin, I had never seen her. Had Sardis? I could not help but wonder.

Sardis I hated cordially on general principles; he wore the aspect of a Judas; but his jealousy puzzled me. Was it because of my lieutenantcy in the Brotherhood, or this woman?

Remotely, I suppose, I had thought of her, or had been influenced by the subconscious knowledge of her existence. It is true that I had wondered what she— young and lovely, according to gossip— could find to love in Robert Hamelin, the musty and middle-aged lawyer; but that thought had passed. It was no affair of mine, and in those days I had a grand passion for minding my own business. I had been with Flood scarcely six months, in spite of my position at his elbow.

The night was forbidding enough, black as the devil's riding boots, and shot at intervals with far, weird fire, although no rain fell. At the rendezvous our dozen met in silence save for the low trample of the horses' hoofs on the soft earth.

Sardis was the last to arrive. On his coming, a low word of command was given, and we moved out of the grove of young trees into the road. A mile beyond lay the denser tangle of the forest, and, beyond that, rose the mountains, dim and vast in the distorting exaggeration of darkness. Over the scene, with little respites of darkness, played the mysterious fire of the skies, and once in the distance I caught the low mutter of thunder in the hills.

In the wood we walked our horses, threading the maze in silence as deep as our thoughts, although at the moment there was no great need for secrecy. Taciturnity had been our rule for so long, however, that speech would have affected us much as a profanation of our ideals. Therefore, riding in my position at the rear, I was surprised when there came back to me on the light breeze a crisp command.

"Ride beside me, Stormont," ordered Flood, and I pressed forward to his side.

For a time no more was said. We rode close together, and often our knees touched as simultaneously the horses swung inward. Behind us, much in the same order, rose and fell the fantastic

procession of our associates. The accidental jingle of a stirrup iron or the clink of rifle against buckle was exaggerated tenfold in the stillness; the stumbling of a horse seemed heavy with portent.

The captain leaned toward me and spoke in a low tone:

"There was nothing in what Sardis said this evening?"

"Nothing, Captain!" I responded. "I have never seen the woman."

He pressed my knee with his disengaged hand.

"I trust you thoroughly, Stormont," he said. "Be prepared to ride forward as scout when we have crossed the mountains."

There was no further speech during the journey, but the lightning wrote amazing messages across the sky. And in the mountains the night was as cold and black as the somber valley of a dream.

The house toward which we were riding was set upon a small hillside, and in daylight was visible from the last ridge of the final mountain. Instinctively, as we reached the crest, we checked our horses and looked down and across the interval to the foothills.

The distance was not great, and at once we saw the pinpoint of light which marked the dwelling. Flood and Sardis exclaimed in surprise. The hour now was late, and in this country the scattered citizenry retired early to their chambers.

"This may prove awkward," observed Flood thoughtfully. "If he has a visitor there may be complications."

He swung in the saddle with quick decision.

"Ride forward at once, Stormont, and reconnoiter. We shall follow slowly and halt in the ravine. Return as quickly as possible."

I pricked my horse gently and began the descent, then, reaching the flat, set out on a slow canter for the opposite hillside.

A curious change had taken place in me. Whereas in the forest and in the mountains premonitions of evil had troubled me, now, in the exhilaration of active service, I was again the daring avenger. The warning sky no longer crushed me with its weight; its hieroglyphics were only futile lightning

flashes. As I swept across the valley a high elation perched beside me in the saddle.

Then, as I neared the rise, I loosened my carbine and reined in the horse until he seemed to walk on tiptoe.

THE HOUSE now was plainly visible; a solid stone building facing the climbing road.

The rooms behind the portico were in darkness, but from a side window on the lower floor still shone the single square of light that we had seen from the mountain. A veranda running back and partly around the house from the front afforded an open road to the window and whatever lay behind its illumination.

I walked my horse forward in shadow until I was almost beneath the veranda and in the shelter of a great tree. Then I dismounted and climbed the railing to the porch. A moment later I had cautiously adventured my head around a corner of the window frame.

Robert Hamelin sat before a wide table on which were scattered books and papers in a noble profusion. He was writing rapidly and in silence save for the scratching of his pen, which came to me faintly through the glass curtain. A calm, studious face, intelligent but weak, beneath a tangle of gray-black hair.

His hand was firm as it traveled swiftly over the paper; no adumbration of doom had occurred to shake those fingers or haunt the room with fear. He wrote without pause and with exquisite ease, and I wondered what task kept him until this hour in his study.

Apparently he had no visitor, but an influence, of whose working I had been unconscious, now drew my eyes away, and I saw—*her*.

I shall not attempt to describe her, save to say that no report of her beauty that I had heard had been adequate. And her dark perfection was rendered the more incredible that it was found in this prison of books and legal papers.

Yet she lived and breathed in these surroundings as triumphantly young as when she had left her own civilization to dwell in this bleak district of blood and hate; and if her face were any mirror, her mind and heart were alight with thoughts that never had been mine. Tall she must be, I assumed, and lithe and powerful for a woman; but her face as she sat beside—. Well, I have said I would not attempt description.

Her eyes, at least, were for the man who bent in complete absorption above his papers. In them I read a devotion beyond limit, a depth of love that asked nothing in return; and in that understanding I experienced a happiness and

a bitterness that wrung my heart. For I knew now that I had loved her always, and that she would never be mine.

As I watched, she rose and turned as if to leave the room. Despairingly, I leaned forward to follow her movement, and my impetuosity betrayed my presence. Her quick glance sought the window, and my face pressed against it turned her own white. A low cry must have left her lips, for Hamelin's glance followed hers, and in an instant he was on his feet, trembling. Then, with a bound, she had sprung for the window.

What her intention was I can not say. I did not stop to see, but sprang over the low rail and into the saddle. In another moment I was in full gallop across the valley, for the shock had cleared my wits and I knew that we were discovered.

I doubted if the respite would save Hamelin, but my duty was clear. I must report the situation at once. When I looked back over my shoulder the light in the window had disappeared. The house was in blackness.

I had no difficulty in finding my comrades, who were slowly advancing to meet me and who spurred their horses forward at my headlong coming. I turned beside Flood, in a shower of flying earth, and as we thundered down the road I jerked out my story in brief summary. He made no reply until we had all but reached the house; then he checked his horse and with a gesture commanded attention.

"Stormont and Sardis will come with me," he said evenly. "The rest of you will surround the house at the proper intervals and shoot down anybody attempting to leave."

Without further thought of concealment, we spurred our animals toward the front gate of the stone dwelling, and in a few moments confronted the blackness of the house.

I repeated my tale to the captain and omitted nothing; I knew that no word of mine could save Hamelin, even if I had wished to save him. But when I had finished, I said: "Captain, you must save *her*!"

He looked at me queerly in the darkness; a flash of lightning illumined his hard face and gleamed on his rifle barrel.

"Must?" he asked, and laughed a curious laugh.

Sardis sneered openly.

"You understand my use of the word," I replied. "It is a plea. . . . She loves him!"

He made no reply. In the heavy gloom I could now read nothing in his features. And suddenly I wondered if she would care to be saved.

"At least," I said, "she should be spared the sight of his death."

Flood laughed a low, amused laugh, and slowly nodded his head.

"All right, Stormont," he said. "Stay here, both of you." He rode in through the gate and turned. "There is to be nothing between you and Sardis," he added casually.

"If Sardis opens his lips I shall kill him!" I snapped, my hatred overmastering my caution.

Flood rode slowly back to our side.

"If either of you lifts a finger, I shall kill you both!" he said with deadly evenness.

Then, as we dismounted, he cantered lightly up to the house and, urging his horse up the steps onto the veranda, knocked with the butt of his whip on the door panels.

I shuddered, thinking how that terrible knocking would sound upon the hearts of a man and woman within.

Sardis was painfully silent. In the west the low thunder still mocked and muttered, but otherwise the stillness was profound. The great house rose before us at twice its normal height, and at the doorstep, sinister in the saddle, sat Flood—knocking—

The disturbing influence of the earlier hours again had fallen upon me; a weight lay heavily on my consciousness.

With infinite relief, I heard from within the walls the high voice of Robert Hamelin, made higher by its pitch of terror. It was asking the meaning of the midnight visit, but its agony was the answer to the question. For Robert Hamelin knew the object and meaning of our errand; I had seen it in his face when he saw my eyes looking in at him through the window.

Flood's voice replied in crisp authority:

"The Riders do not explain. What they command is that Robert Hamelin shall come forth. If he does not obey, his house will be entered and burned. If he comes forth like a man, his house and family shall be unmolested."

"To what does he go forth?" asked a clear, ringing voice that struck through me like an ecstasy of steel.

"To death!" replied Flood dispassionately. His voice might have been that of a presiding judge upon the bench.

"He will appear," cried the fearless accents beyond the door; and then we heard again the quavering tones of Robert Hamelin: "A moment—just a moment with my wife! I shall not keep you long."

Flood turned in the saddle and peered down into the darkness, then, wheeling

his horse, he rode down the steps and to the side of the walk.

"Ridenour and Payne will join Stormont and Sardis at the gate," he commanded, and our fellow executioners moved out of the shadows and advanced to our side.

We were all picked riflemen, but the firing party never exceeded four, and none ever had failed. Tonight one would fail.

The door slowly opened with a creaking sound that I shall never forget. Flood raised his hand, and instantly our four rifles were at our shoulders. Framed in the doorway appeared the tall dark figure of—

"My God!" I screamed. "Don't fire! *That is not the man!*"

Alone of them all I had sensed the situation, but my warning cry came too late. Three rifles flashed simultaneously as the captain's hand dropped, and with a sharp sob the figure in the doorway crumpled and fell. At the same instant, Flood cried out with an awful oath and pitched from his saddle to the earth.

I turned in horror to my companions

at this double fall, and in the face of Sardis beheld the answer to my question. Before my flaming glance he leaped away and tried to raise his rifle, but I had dropped mine and now held my revolver in my hand.

I had fired before he could raise his arms, and he dropped half inside the gate and lay still. Then, bitterly calm, I turned upon my astounded associates.

"Sardis has murdered the captain," I said harshly. "Look after Flood, Ridenour; and you, Payne, hurry to the rear. Hamelin is escaping at the back."

But as I hastened after Payne, a sudden burst of firing at the rear of the house halted my steps. There were good men at the back, and by now Hamelin was dead and damned.

I returned and knelt beside our fallen leader. His well-trained horse stood quietly beside him.

"Still breathing," whispered Ridenour, "but he has no chance. I was once a doctor, you know!"

I nodded and bent over the dying man. His lips were trying to frame a sentence.

"Stormont," he breathed.

"Yes, Captain," I said obediently, and put my ear to his lips.

"I—loved her!"

"Yes, Captain," I repeated.

"She is—?"

"Yes, Captain," I said for the third time, lying easily. "She is safe. I will take care of her."

He squeezed my hand faintly and did not speak again. Tears were in my eyes as I arose, and my heart was heavy as I strode toward the steps.

There was no need for haste now, for two bullets at least had reached their mark in the open doorway. Oh, yes, we were all rifle men!

SHE LAY where she had fallen, half outside the door, lovely in death, beautiful even in the hideous men's garments she had donned to save the worthless coward who had allowed the sacrifice.

On her lips was sealed a secret smile, and in its sweetness I found the soul I had never known that I possessed.