

Weird Tales



MAY, 1952

Cover by Virgil Finlay

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

She Wore a Black Rose

BY FREDERICK SANDERS



"'Tis death ye ride wi' arl time ye pithers wi' they devil's own blossoms!"

INSIDE the private bar of the ancient hostelry, "The Black Horse," at Firley Village, all was warmth, light and goodwill. Out-of-doors, the countryside lay flooded beneath the silvery brightness of an almost full moon; a heavy frost sparkled on grass, trees and roof tops. The strange stillness of the old village street awoke to life, as the clock on the church tower of St. Nicholas struck the hour of nine, on one of the most seasonable Christmas Eves that Firley had enjoyed for many a year.

The "private bar" of the "The Black Horse" was really the comfortable living-room of its host, where the notables of the village gathered nightly, all the year round, year by year. Mr. Clodd, the schoolmaster; old Eli Task, the biggest farmer in the district and deacon of the "Queer People," a religious sect of rigid Biblical beliefs.

There was Mr. Downgate, the agricultural engineer, Capt. Silver, of "Grayholme," and Josiah Cork, manager of the village stores; and, to complete the party, Tom Barton, a giant of a young man, eldest son of Firley's squire. At twenty-five he was still called, by one and all, Master Tom.

This tale is of Tom Barton (may his soul rest in peace). Barton's hobby was rose-growing, and his one aim in life was to perfect a black rose. On this particular eve of Christmas he wore, as was his everyday practice, a rose buttonhole.

Roses bloomed in his famous hot-house all the year round; in the experimental hot-house grew and blossomed marvellous roses,

ranging from deep scarlet to what would appear, to the layman, black. But not quite black; Barton had on one or two occasions thought his goal reached, only to find, on strict analysis, that the unreal looking blooms were of an exceptionally deep mauve.

"AGEN CREATION"

JOSIAH remarked upon the fine rose fixed in the lapel of Master Burton's sports tweed. The old schoolmaster and the engineer praised its loveliness. Old Eli said that it was ". . . agen the true creation o' t' Lord Most High, and sarch as yew would, arl t' wur'ld, fill nor fall, yew'd never find one o' they Satanic flow'rs, sure'lye!"

Captain Silver, who held the undisputed position of parish historian, said to young Barton that he was not the first person in Firley's long history to take to rose-growing as a hobby and the evolving of a black rose.

The company immediately scented a yarn from the captain and glasses were re-filled and pipes re-stocked and lit.

"Let's have it, Captain!" enthused Barton, and so the ex-army gentleman launched forth with the following story.

According to an old legend—related 'he self-appointed rural historian—back in the sixteenth century, the beautiful wife of the then lord of the manor, Sir William Dorr, had been a great lover of flowers, particularly of roses, and for many years she

had worked hard at trying to evolve a black rose.

In a small building, studded with windows, and with windows let into the roof, which stood in the marvelous gardens of the mansion, Lady Dorl grew her wonderful roses and carried out her experiments with them.

TRAGEDY

ON CHRISTMAS EVE of the year 1569, she carried out her final tests upon two large blooms, and passed verdict on one of them as being black. Elated, she ran from the hot-house, across the gardens, to the steps of the terrace leading up to the front of the mansion.

In her haste and excitement running to tell her husband of her success, she tripped, and falling heavily, crashed her head upon the bottom step of the wide stone terrace stairway.

She was found by one of the servants who stumbled over her prostrate form in the darkness, was taken indoors, and a few hours later passed away from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Her husband went nearly crazy with grief over the sad end of his young and beautiful wife. But he could not realize her as dead, and had a special coffin made which, after the Lady Dorl, dressed in her most becoming costume, and with the fatal black rose pinned to her bosom, had been laid in it, was made air-tight and sealed with twenty-six seals, replicas of roses, being a seal for each year of her age.

The coffin was finally borne by the gardening staff down the avenue of elms from the mansion to the old church, where the grief-stricken widower saw his beloved wife finally laid to rest in the family vault of the Dorls in the centre of the graveyard.

The great gray slab of stone, giving access to the vault, was put back into its place by four of the staff and the sorrowing baronet went away, leaving the mortal remains of his lady in the cold dank atmosphere of death, asleep with the long dead generations of the Dorls.

Thus ended the captain's tale. Tom Barton's eyes were twinkling as he remarked that the Lady Dorl might well have been

his soul-mate, and, said he, if she was still as beautiful this Christmas Eve in her air-tight coffin as when she was laid to rest that Christmastide, over four hundred and fifty years ago, he'd be bound if he would not break every rose seal and raise the coffin lid to kiss the fair, cool lips of Lady Dorl, and see for himself the black rose pinned upon her breast.

All smiled at Master Tom's exuberance of mind, but old Eli could not see that Barton only jested. "Ye speak blasphemy, young man!" angrily cried Eli. "'Tis the poor dead ye'd be a' kissen; a openin' coffins for t' see your flowers o' Satan. 'Twas heaven's wrath that descended upon yon fair woman in t' old vault, for a'fering with t' good Lord's creation! Mark thee well. Mairster Tom Barton, 'tis death ye ride wi' arl time ye pithers wi' they devil's own blossoms! 'Taint nat'ral, boy, 'taint nat'ral."

DEATH THE JESTER

BARTON laughed and jested further with old Eli, saying that a warm kiss on such a cold night might wake the life within the long still heart. Here Eli got up, and stamping to the door in his anger went outside, and away home, but not before giving a final warning to the laughing squire's son.

"'Tis Death ye would play wi' but Death is *the* Jester, Mairster Barton, sure-lye! Ye cry aloud with your sinning lips for the wrath to visit ye, and by arl that's holy, 'twill come t' ye lad, 'twill come t' ye wi'out warnin'!"

Soon after Eli's going the landlord blew his little silver whistle and "Time, gentlemen, please!" warned all that ten o'clock was near. The small party broke up and each went home his own particular way. Tom Barton's way, a short cut, lay through the old churchyard.

That night Tom Barton did not return home. His family were not particularly perturbed, for it was not the first time that he had failed to come home, having at times gone to a friend's house at a minute's invitation, to stay the night. But the next day consternation and dread reigned supreme in Squire Barton's house. Tom had been found that very morning wandering

in the Ten Acre Meadow, part of the property of Farmer Stile, of Honeysuckle Farm. Wandering in circles, naked—except for his boots, socks and suspenders—bereft of speech and sanity. Mad! An imbecile; a speechless madman!

That evening poor Tom Barton reposed in a little room at an exclusive private mental hospital in a far-away corner of the county. The cause of madness, according to the mental specialists was shock; something beyond any sort of natural shock.

Diligent search around the village brought Tom's apparel to light; his hat and jacket in the churchyard; pullover, gloves, collar and torn tie at different distances along Plumtree Lane which led to the four-way or cross-roads; the trousers, braces and vest at intervals down the old Forestway road; in a field near Bramble Farm his pants, from which point he had evidently been wandering nearly two miles over fields to Ten Acre Meadow, where he was found.

Two years went by, during which period Captain Silver, who happened to be an old friend of Dr. Stark, the head of the nursing staff of the private mental hospital in which Tom Barton spent his days, would motor over to the hospital to see Tom and discuss his strange case with the doctor.

Tom remained the same, month after month. He gave no trouble. He was pathetically docile and obedient. A classic patient in a little world of disordered minds. Gradually Tom became restless. He tried to speak, but no sound would pass his lips. By way of signs he was able at last to make the doctor understand he wanted to write.

He was given pencil and paper and left to himself at the little table in his room.

MEANINGLESS WORDS

DAY after day Barton would sit at the table, scribbling away. Every day the papers would be collected from him and he would stand mutely by while the doctor scanned them, and listen to the words of praise at his efforts from Doctor Stark.

Mostly the manuscripts contained only a jumble of meaningless words and scrawls. But the word "roses" occurred dozens of times and here and there crude little drawings of what appeared to be those flowers.

Then, one day, Master Tom came home. Came home in an oak coffin with his name, age, birth and death dates engraved upon a large silver rose screwed upon the lid of his little wooden house. He was buried in the old churchyard of the church of St. Nicholas, and, it being midsummer, everyone sent wreaths and crosses and bunches of roses for his grave.

The cause of death had been heart failure due to a sudden shock. Doctor Stark came to the funeral. Afterwards he and Captain Silver sat discussing Tom, his madness, his sudden death. The doctor returned to the hospital accompanied by the captain. Once there the peculiar manuscripts written by Tom Barton were handed to Captain Silver to read.

Slowly, painstakingly, the ex-soldier read them over; a hundred and thirty sheets of words, scribbles, scrawls and drawings. The captain found the word "rose" occurred 200 times; "roses," 158 times; "black," 42; "deep red," 30; "roses in a row," 39; "26 roses," 62; and over 100 crude little drawings of roses full front.

A CLUE

IT WAS the "26 roses" which gave him a clue.

The doctor and the captain made no move until several weeks after Tom Barton's funeral, then they repaired one dark night to the old graveyard, and made their way to where the old vault of the Dorls was situated.

Then they stood over the great gray slab of stone with its rusted centre lifting ring which gave, when removed, entrance to the steep steps leading down to the vault of the Dorl family.

"If your theory is correct, John, we shall discover why Tom Barton went mad," said the doctor quietly. "Shock caused his madness; shock caused his death. I know the cause of the death shock and what brought about his death *must* have brought about his madness in the first place. The evidence of that I have not yet shown you, but after our investigation here tonight and what facts we can glean from it, I shall," and as he spoke the doctor tapped his overcoat pocket.

It took the united efforts of the two men with their iron crowbars, wedges and wooden handspike to remove the heavy slab away from the entrance. The doctor remarked that it would have "taken a bull of a man to lift that stone alone." The two men went below. Once inside the vault, a large one, they went to work.

Scores of coffins of all sizes, in all kinds of stages of decay, lay neatly each in its own little recess. Tiers of little coffin-filled recesses all around them, and they sought but one. A coffin, if legend was true, with 26 seals upon its lid in the form of roses.

At last they found it, a coffin made of beaten light iron, beautifully riveted and the lid sealed with 26 seals in the shape of roses. The iron was flaked with rust; some of the seals had pieces broken away, but here, untouched for centuries it had lain, with all its seals still intact.

OLD ROSE PETALS

UPON the floor of the vault the eyes of the Captain noticed some shreds or minute rolls of black. In the light of the electric torches the pieces of blackish stuff were identified as old rose-petals. How old? Well, weeks, months, maybe years? These remnants of a dark red rose? A black rose? The atmosphere had kept them well.

The vault brooded over the secrets of the dead. The rusty iron coffin with the 26 seals in the form of roses in bloom lay mute and mysterious covered by the dust of four and a half centuries.

An hour after their visit to the old vault of the Dorls, the Doctor and Captain were seated in the study at "Greyholme" turning over the evidence of the strange affair of Tom Barton.

The Doctor was of the opinion that Tom, on the Christmas Eve two years before, had, while going through the churchyard, become obsessed with the desire to see if such a coffin really did exist in the Dorl vault as described, and that, by reason of his massive strength, he had pulled up the heavy slab to the entrance and gone down into the old vault.

There he had seen, or imagined he saw, something so unearthly as to shock him into madness. From the rose he wore in his but-

tonhole that night the petals had fallen while in the vault, where they had lain until found by the Captain.

That Tom, fleeing from the dread place, had found enough sense and a few seconds to spare to replace the large stone slab back into position before his senses fully left him, and had then wandered away.

The Captain was in full agreement with the Doctor's theory, but added that, if one could go by the theory of reincarnation, that maybe Barton was an embodiment of the long dead Lady Dorl's spirit mind; or was, perhaps, in another way, a sympathetic spirit in tune with Lady Dorl.

DOCUMENT OF DEATH

THE doctor, though not inclined to put invisible things before the evidence of hard facts, drew from his pocket a manuscript, which he handed to the Captain, saying as he did so that the papers constituted Tom Barton's last effort at writing.

"This manuscript," continued Doctor Stark, "caused poor Barton's death. His attempts at writing were indications that his mind was beginning to function more rationally; that his memory was returning. He regained his sanity long enough to record what happened to him on that Christmas Eve over two years ago.

"Yet from our evidence, the sealed coffin, the rose petals and the legend of Lady Dorl, we can draw more than one conclusion. So read this document of death, John, and, if I may say so, whatever your final conclusions may be, like mine, they are open to question. The verdict of what caused Tom's destruction must always remain an open one."

And this is the document, written in the private mental hospital, by the man whose sole hobby and aim in life has been the evolving of a black rose:

"I remember now! Yes; it is all coming back to me out of the blackness that has been my only companion all these long, weary months! I remember the bright moonlight, the stars and the frost; the white path through the silent churchyard; remember walking over the old graves towards where the vault lay.

"Then I was standing over the great slab to the entrance to the vault beneath my feet. A terrible, though exultant fascination gripped me. I thought: 'Is the legend of the Black Rose true?'"

"Then I had laid hold upon the iron ring of the stone and with my great strength hurled it aside and, by the light of the moon, had descended to the last home of the long dead Dorls.

"The coffin-lined vault was eerily still and lit up in ghostly fashion from the broad moonbeam which flooded down the stone steps into the underground chamber.

"I gazed, fascinated, around. How deathly was the peace of this place of the long forgotten dead of the ancient families of the Firley Dorls! Opposite to me, in its recess, three tiers up, I saw a coffin which, even in the pale moonlight of the place, spoke silently of skilled workmanship.

"I stepped up to it and, rapping upon it, found it to be of metal well flaked with the rust of many years. Looking at the coffin closer, I felt a sharp stab in my breast of sudden fright! The lid was sealed with the seals of blossoming roses!

"I counted them along one side. Thirteen in number. On the other side would be thirteen more! Twenty-six in all. One for each year of Lady Dorl's short life! 'It is true then,' I said to myself, 'she really lived, and was buried here.'

"Suddenly the stillness of the vault awoke to an echo! One of the seals had fallen off! More followed. The sounds were like foot-falls made by falling rose seals.

"Then came a terrifying silence. Noiselessly the lid of the coffin was opening inch by inch. A pale, beautiful hand clutched hold of the edge of the coffin, then, the lid fell back with a noise like thunder as the echoes reverberated around the coffin stacked chamber.

THE BLACK ROSE

"**T**HEN, from out of the iron case arose a woman's form, clothed in a long well-fitting dress of blood red. Her face was beautiful to behold. Around her slender white throat was a necklet of fine pearls, upon her bosom—fastened by a golden pin—a black rose! Then the glorious apparition

stood before me, eyes shining with delight and love.

"'LADY DORL!' my mind hammered at me, 'Lady Dorl!' Then her hands were upon my shoulders and she whispered 'Oh, William, you've come to me at last! The Black Rose—I have created it! Seal my success, my dear one, with your kiss!' She pulled my head gently down to her own. My mind hammered, 'William? William? Sir William Dorl?'"

"Then my lips touched hers, not cold, but warm and soft, pulsing with life! I closed my eyes. Then, slowly I opened them, and—*found myself looking into the rotting face of a corpse!* Shreds of putrid skin curled upon the cheeks of it! Upon my lips were shreds—wisps of rotten flesh! The face changed from putrifying flesh to a lemon-colored chalk-like mask.

"The mask flaked away into dust. Dust dribbled from the eyeless sockets.

"I tried to turn, to run away, anywhere, from this ghastly form in front of me, but I was transfixed! I felt the rotten flesh upon my lips, but could not wipe it off, for my arms were paralysed! The lovely robe she wore, fell into tatters, became dust and disappeared before my shocked eyes.

"Before me stood a blackened figure, hideous in the extreme. Around its feet lay a bundle of gray hair from off the bony head. The dry black flesh was becoming dust.

"It trickled down to the floor with a sound like distant rain. The lower jaw fell to the floor; the grinning skull rolled forward and fell after it.

"Then with a clatter the whole structure, that had once been so fair and beautiful, fell apart and dropped down, throwing up a smother of dust. The dust that had once been Lady Dorl!

"It got into my eyes! It filtered into my nose! Found its way, grittily, into my mouth! I tried to move! Tried in my terrible agony of fear to scream!

"Suddenly something at the back of my head went numb, then leaped to life, turned over—turned over—turned over—"

(All the characters in the above story are fictitious and do not represent any living persons.)