

Weird Tales

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SIX BEARDED - MEN -



by Elwin J. Owens

LUCIFER P. LUGENVOLL, the money lender, was alone in the spacious library of his elaborately furnished bachelor residence. Long before, his housekeeper and his private secretary had retired for the night; but Lucifer still pondered over private papers, as had been his custom during the thirty greedy, unscrupulous years he had hoarded his wealth.

Into the early morning hours he remained. His emaciated face was tensely drawn; his gray hair was disheveled by the nervous action of his long bony fingers; and his small green eyes moved slowly, studiously over the lines of the yellowish-brown document that lay unfolded on the massive walnut table. The second reading for the night.

He settled a little deeper into the comfortable upholstering of his large winged chair. For a moment his eyes were riveted upon the feminine signature—a lonely widow. The eyelids drooped, his colorless brow wrinkled, and a quiver went through the gaunt, aged form.

He clutched at his hair, and with bowed head arose from the table. His troubled mind unconsciously carried him through the folding door into the reception room and on to the great plate-glass window that looked out upon the city street.

The Egyptian darkness of the night, as compared with his brightly illuminated rooms, the deserted pavement, and the extreme quietude, turned him back.

Reluctantly, half-mechanically, he retraced his steps. Again his eyes fell upon the faded paper on the

table. His lean, grasping fingers caught the much handled corner and he started to fold the document. The signature stood out plainer than ever before. His eyes closed and he crumpled into his chair.

Shortly, the door bell rang wearily. Lucifer listened. The sound of muffled voices and cat-like steps broke upon his ear. His trembling hand reached across the table and the forefinger pressed upon the button to summon his secretary. It would not respond to his touch.

He gasped weakly and waited. Again the alarm at the door, and again painful silence.

The knob turned, and inch by inch the heavy, paneled door swung noiselessly open.

Lucifer rested his head upon the tapestried wing of the chair. His hands dropped limply to his sides. He struggled to arise, but could not move.

A silent command. Six men dressed in black, all with flowing, black beards, marched languidly through the portals of the outer doors.

The aged money lender attempted to cry out, but words stopped in his throat; his tongue was tied.

To the library they came and formed in single line on the opposite side of the table, directly in front of him. There they stopped as if at military attention.

Lucifer cleared his throat with great effort.

The leader held up his hand for silence and averted his solemn black eyes to the man at the rear of the line.

The man stepped back and closed the double door; his face turned ceilingward; an upraised hand, and all was still. Slowly, he returned and took his place.

"The spell is upon the house; no sound can penetrate beyond this room," said he. His voice was low and frigid.

Dead silence.

The leader stroked his long, black beard.

"We are here, Lucifer, and we want you. We want you now," they whispered in deep, well-rounded unison.

"Who are you that you should enter my home unbeckoned at this unseemly hour of the night?" groaned Lucifer, his drawn face twitching painfully.

The leader took one step toward the table and, in a monotone, enunciating each word perfectly, replied:

"A judge of last resort, an administrator of the final law, am I."

He paused a moment, then bowed to number two, who likewise advanced a step.

With uplifted right hand, he spoke slowly and in deep undertone:

"A minister of the gospel, a mediator for the crimes of mortal man, a servant of the dying, has been my chosen calling."

The leader nodded to number three, who took his place beside the minister.

"A doctor's degree have I, a dispenser of medicine and skilled in delicate surgery. To the latter, my nerves have been attuned for many, many years."

He spoke sharply, but in even a lower voice than had the other two.

A gesture from the leader and the remaining three stepped promptly into place. Another signal and their voices blended together:

"Recognized masters of art are we; workers of mystic spells, and co-adjustors of moral wrongs."

They paused a moment, then turned to the leader.

"Proceed! We shall gladly await your judgment."

Lucifer leaned forward with strained eyes.

"Have mercy, men, I am weak in the fullness of years. I have money. What is your price? I wish to retire and spend my life in peace. Say what you wish! But have mercy, men, have mercy."

"He pleads for mercy," chimed the three mystics, dolefully. "Mercy! He knows not the meaning of the word!"

Again dead silence.

Five eager faces turned with solemn mien to the leader. Thoughtfully he stroked his flowing beard.

"Is it not the law, that he who is silent, when in justice he should have spoken, shall be silent when personal gain urges that he speak?"

The leader's voice was slightly louder than a whisper. The five others each nodded in his turn.

"Then," said he in firmer tones, a slight raise in his voice, "we shall examine the papers on the table; each extortion of money shall constitute a crime, and each crime a punishment."

He turned to the man at his side.

"Right Reverend, what does the Old Testament say? An eye for an eye?"

"It does."

"Then along this line it shall be. The papers, honest men, and search them carefully. Let not one thing escape your cautious vision."

Through the folded documents the visitors of the night did quickly delve. Foreclosures, all of them. Thirteen documents. Then, the yellowish-brown sheet spread upon the table,

making fourteen in all. The first man read the unfolded one, and groaned vengeance.

"Poor woman, now a guest of charity," he mumbled and passed it to another.

Each man in turn did read the much worn document, and each was deeply pained.

The leader spoke an inaudible word and six men stepped back in line.

Lucifer's hands reached out clutchingly toward the papers; his lips moved, but no word could get beyond his teeth. He gasped, shuddered and shrank back into the chair. Muscles of his waxen face twitched, wrinkles became quickly deeper, a quiver, and he was limp. His eyes closed slowly; he breathed with effort.

The leader raised his hand, and, pointing to the man across the table, commanded: "Look you upon the wan face for a moment! Bear well in mind the documents you have read and the punishment they have inflicted upon the people who came to him to borrow. Consider with a kindly heart the weight of ripening years, and" (his voice became more firm) "in the balances of justice place the good he might have done—and did not."

He looked each man squarely in the face, and went on more slowly: "Weigh the value of his life, and be not rash. When your minds have reached a judgment, state the penalty. I wait."

The minister was the first to speak.

"Upon his promise to further wrong no man, I vote to give him one more chance."

"No, no!" cautioned the leader quickly. "You understand wrongly. This is a final judgment. Tonight he pays. No other chance did he give to the lonely widow or the others he did rob. Again, I state, the penalty must

be paid tonight, even as he does demand when settlement is due."

The three mystics stepped forward as if they were one man.

"We pass judgment—"

Lucifer leaned forward and a groan crept through his straight-cut lips.

The mystic second from the end raised his hand.

"Just now I call a spell."

His voice was strong but weird.

"Lucifer shall hear but can not speak, he shall feel but shall not move; this, that we need not mince words with him, that he may remain helpless in our power."

"What is your judgment, men?"

The leader stepped forward as he asked.

The man who stood beside the doctor answered for the three.

"He shall pay in flesh. For each small amount, we take a toe; larger amounts, a foot; and still larger, a limb."

"'Tis granted," declared the leader in a solemn tone. "Doctor of medicine and practitioner of surgery, prepare your instruments. Men of the mystic art, make bare the table and lay his body straight upon its top."

The minister stepped back and took a chair.

"You can not count me a party to the plan. I did not come to mete out a punishment such as this. I came to show this man his wrong and turn him to the right. No, men, I shall drop out but shall remain. And should his life be blotted out, I shall say the last rites over his remains."

"Proceed," ordered the leader, "the hours say that the day is soon to break, and we must of this make haste."

THE table was soon cleared, and while the mystics placed the helpless form upon its top, the surgeon

pulled up a smaller table and placed his instruments in a row upon it at his right.

One document was read, and Lucifer felt the smallest toe on his right foot removed. He twitched in pain but could not speak. Another reading and another toe. On and on they read until ten toes had each been severed from the feet.

"This eleventh document is for a greater amount. This man died destitute, and the foreclosure shows that all his property slipped into Lucifer's hands in default of a paltry loan."

The reading mystic paused and glanced at each of the other four.

"A foot or an ear," suggested one.

"An ear," the leader murmured.

The surgeon's knife moved rapidly, and soon the severed member was beside the money lender's motionless head.

"Make haste," ordered the leader. "the hands upon the clock do, at this moment, point to three. Read three documents, and pass judgment upon them all. Let the penalty be equal to the sum total of the extortion."

Quickly the mystics each picked up a document and, after reading them, conversed in whispered tones.

One bowed to the leader, who recognized his right to speak.

"We are agreed. Each one of us, before speaking to the other two, had fixed the same penalty for one crime. A woman's home did go to pay the debt incurred in borrowing money to pay for the burial of her one supporting child."

"What do you say? Nothing could be too great!"

The minister stepped forward before the answer could be given.

"Pray men, do not go further. Can you good men not stay your maddening desire? This man is maimed for life. Why do you persist in carrying out your strict intent—to kill this

man piece by piece? Let me at this opportune time suggest that the surgeon dress the feet and head; allow Lucifer to live, that he, in living, may repent."

"May repent!" repeated the leader with knowing emphasis. "You do not know the man of whom you speak. His clutching hand can not be stayed by mere weaklings such as words." Then, with a slight change of voice, "No, I can not grant your request. To do so would be folly; and, too, did you not state that you would not take a hand? You wished that you might comfort him when breath was all that did remain. This I shall grant. Nothing more. Be seated, Right Reverend, and in a short time you may assume the duties which fall into your calling."

As the minister, with lowered head, tiptoed to his chair, the leader directed his eyes to the three mystics who stood waiting to continue with their words.

"What is it, men of the mystic art?"

"A lower limb we deem would pay the price."

The leader stroked his beard thoughtfully, while his eyes traced the outline of the man upon the table. At last he spoke:

"A leg, careful surgeon. Let it be severed at the knee."

The doctor took up his instrument, as the leader continued:

"The hours are passing. Read while our surgeon works. Leave the document which we found unfolded upon the table until the thirteenth one is done."

As the limb fell from the body, the mystics raised their eyes.

"Again the same amount and, therefore, an equal penalty."

A nod of sanction from the leader, and the instrument touched the flesh.

All were silent while the surgeon amputated the doomed member. This done, he wiped his instruments, laid them upon the small table and stood erect.

"This man," said he, as his eyes turned to each of the bearded men, "has suffered much. His breathing is slow and irregular. His voice is stilled. Let us leave him thus."

"Never!" declared the leader in a determined tone. "It shall not be. We each have read the unfolded document. It is most brutal that he should take all that this kind old woman trusted in his hands. She now does die in want and misery, while Lucifer does still live. He takes her life blood, and you would ask that we should let him pass."

His voice grew strong.

"Men of the mystic art, this doctor has grown weak. We can not falter now. Say what you will. I wait."

"It shall be death," declared the mystic of the third art.

"Not by my hands," said the doctor with a groan.

"Perhaps not," the leader replied, "but so shall it be. Lucifer can not speak, nor can he walk, neither can he move from the flatness of his back. Still his clutching hands remain."

"Just that," murmured the three mystics in unison.

"Doctor, we excuse you," said one, reaching out his hand. "Place in my hand the keenest instrument that you have and we will ask no more."

A moment, and the shining blade was in his hand. He held up the other.

"Lucifer can now move his right arm," he whispered.

He held the knife toward the man on the table.

Lucifer's clutching fingers seized the handle.

"The point shall go to his chest," commanded the mystic, "and he shall press it to the hilt."

He stood over the white-haired man and spoke in sepulchral tones.

"Place your forefinger upon the end and meet death by your own hand."

Slowly, the point went to the place indicated. Little by little, the blade entered the flesh.

"Hold!" commanded the leader. "We leave now. Let the spell still hold him. But I decree that he shall be alone when the end does come."

He turned quarter way round and addressed the minister.

"Offer up a silent prayer, and we shall be gone."

With upraised hands the minister prayed, then touched the forehead of the money lender. He folded his arms and nodded that he was through.

"When we are out the door, press hard, Lucifer," ordered the mystic. "Press hard or we will return."

Six bearded men fell into line, and fled swiftly out of the room, and through the outer door.

LUCIFER pressed hard and long with his forefinger. Faintly, the sound of a distant bell rang in his ears. It was not until he heard the foot-falls of his approaching secretary that he unclosed his eyes.

Before him lay the open document, and beside it the numerous folded ones. He beckoned the secretary to come close.

"Take these papers," said he weakly, "and bring every one of the people who have signed them to my library at noon today. Call my banker and have him present also, for I shall write checks freely—freely, my dear fellow, freely."

He arose and staggered forward a few steps.

"Your arm, dear sir, your arm. I will now go to my room that I may become rested."