

# Weird Tales

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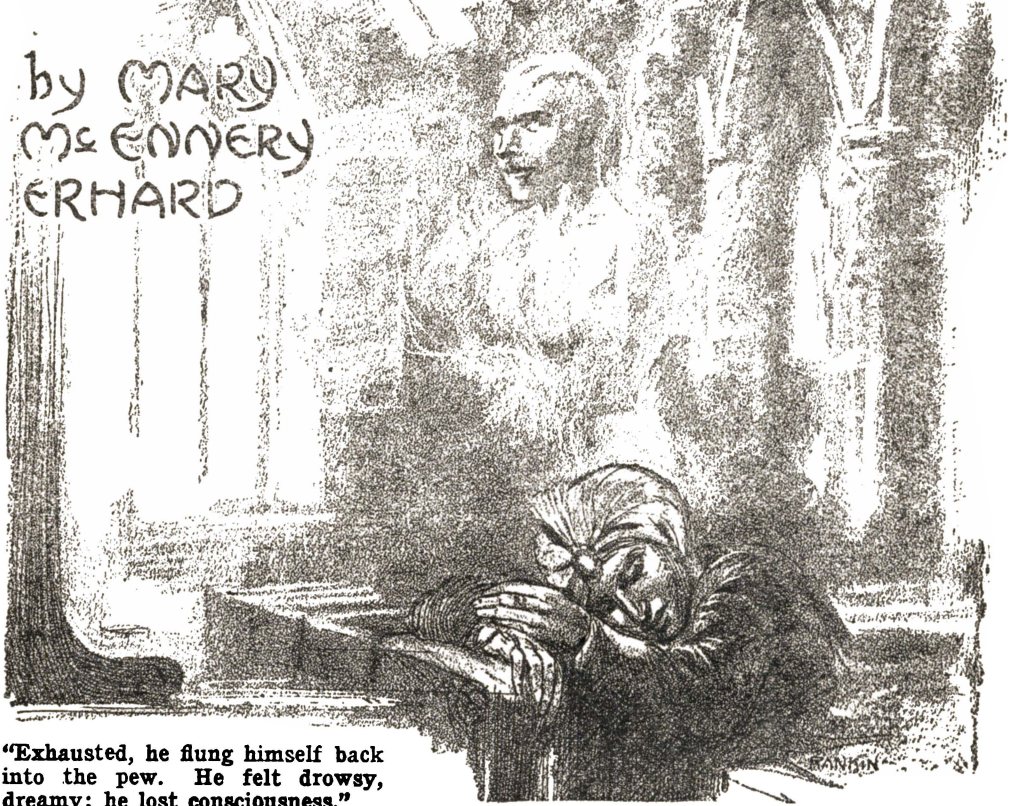
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# TANGLED SKEINS

by MARY  
Mc ENNERY  
ERHARD



"Exhausted, he flung himself back into the pew. He felt drowsy, dreamy; he lost consciousness."

**I** NEVER read of odd and bizarre occurrences or of happenings which seem beyond mortal ken, but I think of a tale related to me by a gentleman in whom I have the utmost confidence, and which is in my experience unique; although no doubt students of the occult, particularly in Eastern lands, will be able to parallel it directly it sees the light of day, which I think it has not done before. I shall begin to relate it without any further prolixity.

It was on a warm July night that I sat with my friend Cumberland—the Reverend Wilfred Cumberland—in his study. The roar of London traffic had quieted down, the stars winked at us gravely through the pall of soft coal smoke that still overhung the

city, and which was added to by the clouds of smoke from our cigars. It was very warm.

Cumberland is by nature one of the untidiest men I know, and as usual his desk was littered all over with this and that, compelling him to pull out a drawer to support his elbow as he sat and smoked. This drawer was also crammed full of heterogeneous papers, some of which appeared to be letters recently received, and some of which were yellow and cracked at the edges.

The untidy seldom censure our neatness, but we always feel we must chide their want of care. "Cumberland," said I, "do you never clear out your desk?"

"About once a year," he replied,

"but it does no good. There is seldom much in it that I can bear to part with. I don't know how others manage, but I am irresolution itself when it comes to destroying old papers! For instance, this is a memorial pamphlet gotten out at the time of the death of Gibbons, the first rector I served under. A fine chap. This is a copy of some verses—worthless I haven't a doubt—written by one of the boys in my Sunday School class on the occasion of my ordination. Of course they are funny;—they would be *merely* funny to anyone else. This is a guide to Winchester Cathedral—I might go there again, you know. So you see how it is. In fact, the place seldom gets weeded out except when I happen—hang it! I've done it again now!"

By a careless gesture with the hand which held his cigar, he had started what was evidently his only method of desk-clearing—an accidental conflagration. The hot ash from the tobacco had fallen into the open drawer and the papers had started blazing merrily. Frantically he began to pull out the bundle of papers which were burning, before the whole contents of the drawer were involved.

He was successful in saving the rest of his cherished trash, but when he had flung the blazing package into the empty grate it was itself a total loss.

He viewed this with dismay. "Now see!" he cried; "there goes a bunch of papers which I valued highly. I had rather burned all the rest of the drawer than that!"

One glance had showed me that the bundle contained no securities nor anything of real value, but I tried to conceal my amusement nevertheless.

He continued: "Those were the notes from which I was about to start constructing what I hoped would be a very interesting monograph for the Society for the Investigation of

Psychic Phenomena. I was, indeed."

"And you don't recollect the story without the papers?"

"Quite. But there are certain details which people would expect to find included in such an article, and as I always have been poor on dates and other figures——" He sighed.

"Would the tale suffer so much with those left out?"

"Not as a story, I suppose, but I fear it would be unacceptable to a scientific magazine. It would not sound convincing at all. In fact I don't believe I could ever have made it sound anything but impossible, so perhaps it is no matter."

"There is nothing so interesting as an improbable tale from a truthful person, my dear chap. Won't you let me have it from your lips sometime, if I am never to have the chance to read it in the society's bulletin?"

"Well then," he retorted smiling, "no time like the present. The mist, I see, has turned to quite a heavy rain. I couldn't allow you to go out in it, unless you were extremely determined! So compose yourself, my excellent fellow, to be talked to sleep."

"Instruct, then, your audience of one, since a larger one is denied you, and in doing so crystallize your own memories before they become dimmer."

**A**FTER carefully closing the drawer, the Reverend Wilfred lit another cigar, crossed his legs and began:

"It was when I was at Oxford that it all happened; that must have been thirty years ago. My failings you know well, of course, but in one subject I never came a cropper, that of English literature. This fact came very near to changing the entire course of my life. I wonder if I should ever have been able to get used to life in an Indian palace, and if I should have made a good raja



when my turn came. Well, no matter. I was not obliged to, after all."

I stared, and he went on.

"I sat in my study at Magdalen, smoking, one evening, when someone knocked on the door. As my usual companions dispensed with that formality, I concluded it must be a proctor, and rose to open. Instantly I regretted rising, for my caller was not only merely a fellow student, but one for whom I cared very little, although principally for racial reasons. He was an East Indian.

"No one could say that Chundun had anything wrong with him, yet I strongly preferred my own color and race; and, childishly, the fact that I had been so courteous as to rise and open for him, irked me.

"'Good evening, Mr. Cumberland,' he said in his almost perfect English, 'May I come in?'

"'Certainly,' I growled, resuming my seat and my pipe churlishly, but I motioned him to a chair.

"He entered, and shut the door behind him. With a grace that seemed a little out of place for some reason—it suggested a panther to me—he crossed the room and took the chair I had indicated.

"'I have come to ask you a very great favor,' he began immediately.

"I frowned and was silent.

"'I am most anxious,' he continued, 'to return to my home. England is no place for me. It is too cold, too cold in every way. My father is old, very old. He can not live long now, we fear. I should be with him; I should also be at hand in case the time comes for me to succeed to the throne. There are other sons, older than I (although I am the only child of the ranee, and there is but one ranee), and if I am not on the spot, my father's throne may be polluted by the son of a nautch girl. Who knows? And in that case what would he do to my mother, who

would never acknowledge him? I do not like to think, sir.'

"'Well, Chundun, I never realized you were a prince before,' I replied, 'but the government will take care of your rights, I have no doubt.'

"'Perhaps,' he said, 'and perhaps not. As long as there was no general massacre, your government might keep its hands off. Ours is but a small principality among the hills. And with the best of intentions, troops do not reach a place instantly they are sent. Much can be done to a woman in a few hours. My mother is but a small woman.'

"This last sentence which he introduced so irrelevantly somehow brought up such a picture of horror that I am still at a loss to account for it except by means of thought transference. I had never inquired into the details of Indian methods of torture.

"I shuddered, and Chundun went on, almost without a pause; 'And I can not return to India without my degree. My father expects it.'

"'Naturally,' I remarked dryly.

"I fancied the dark face flushed, but Chundun went on quite calmly, 'I can pass in everything but English literature. It—I ask your pardon—fails to hold my attention, my interest. No doubt the manner of thinking in the two races is too different. This Addison, for example—what is he to me? I can read him, but afterward I can not answer questions about what I have read. What is it to me? Pardon me, it is only nonsense.'

"'Then why not elect something else?'

"'Ah, but it is too late. I have elected. At the end of this term I should be finished all. I should receive my degree and return to my dear father. And so I am asking your help.'

"'If you want a tutor I'll take you on' (I had become interested at

last), 'but it's awfully late to start in with a tutor now!'

"'Too late,' replied Chundun. 'The examination is but a week off, I must use different means. Someone must take the examination for me.'"

Cumberland paused for a few puffs, and then smiled at me ruefully: "Now I know just what I should have done then, as well as you do. I ought to have stood up and showed Chundun the door. But I didn't. I was short of funds as usual. I needed to return home, not to succeed to my father's throne, but to help him with the family exchequer. Where even the expenses of my graduation were coming from I was not certain. So, to my shame it is spoken, I looked at the Indian with a sickly smile and answered, 'Do you think we look enough alike that with some sort of face stain——?'

"'I mean nothing so crude as that, Mr. Cumberland,' he rejoined. 'I mean to suggest that we exchange bodies for the day of the examination in literature.'

"'We what?' I jumped from my seat.

"'Do not be so astonished, sir,' went on Chundun smoothly. 'I am not surprized at your feelings, and am deeply grateful that you have not doubted my sanity, as many of your countrymen would have done. It is true, nevertheless, that I am able to do this thing; in fact I have repeatedly done it. I exchanged forms several times with a servant in India, and I do not doubt that with some degree of concentration it can be done equally well in England. If it does not turn out as we expect, we shall be none the worse off—you in particular.'

"I flushed silently.

"Chundun went on in his clear smooth tones: 'I am not, you see, as densely ignorant of all matters as of English literature. I have studied

for some years with the priests and Brahmins of my country.'

He relapsed into silence.

"My curiosity thoroughly aroused by this time, I wished intensely to see what this intended process could be like. I had not the least faith in it, but wanted to see it through, as I should in those days have stayed out a show in a cheap museum. Also I wanted to laugh a little at Chundun when he failed. We agreed to his plans, which included a large fee to me, part of which he insisted upon paying immediately. His knowledge of my finances seemed to me then almost uncanny. Now I think it is the most ordinary reasoning."

Cumberland laughed. He continued:

"The date for the experiment was set the day previous to the examination in which Chundun expected in his own character to fail. I had finished all my own, so was free. He came to my rooms at 8 o'clock that evening, and we talked awhile first, he telling me something of his habits, that the next morning Chundun might not appear to be acting too oddly.

"'And what do you call this process, Chundun?' I asked.

"'It is called in India' (then followed a long Indian word instantly forgotten) 'and sometimes' (another unpronounceable name). 'In English it is termed a metempsychosis, but this strikes me as singularly inaccurate, as to change souls would be manifestly impossible. The body envelope, so readily laid aside universally at the hour of death, can also be laid aside temporarily during life. My soul, however, is indissolubly connected with my consciousness!'

"I agreed with him.

"At a quarter before 9, I remember looking at my clock as I lay on my bed. The process of body exchange, according to Chundun, was now about to commence.

"I had expected a fire in a brazier, incense, smoke, incantations, and I know not what of mystic ceremonies; in this I was disappointed. I can not remember any fear, only a faint sense of amusement and a great curiosity. Had I been a good Christian in those days I should undoubtedly have had nothing to do with the whole matter. Had I been even a poor Romanist, I should have protected myself in some way by prayer. Alas! those were my agnostic days!

"Chundun began proceedings by a brief injunction to me to concentrate on the matter in hand, and then was silent himself. He was reclining on my lounge. The body being wholly at rest, he said, assisted the powers of the mind and soul. We continued in silence a few minutes, and I began to get drowsy. Then I heard Chundun's voice a few moments in some sort of singsong chant in what I knew to be Hindustani, but could not catch a word of. The voice now ceased and I began again to grow sleepy.

"Presently, although the drowsiness continued, it was strangely permeated by a sense, first of strain, then of giddiness similar to the feeling when succumbing to an anesthetic. It was accompanied now, however, by no drumming in the ears. As total unconsciousness supervened, I was conscious of a sense of being lifted in some way. Then I returned to my senses very suddenly, with a feeling of having been 'out' only about a minute.

"**Y**OU may believe me or not, Griswold, I awoke on the couch. I looked over to the bed in surprise for Chundun, but on it lay a white man of a familiar appearance. I sat up suddenly, and saw that my hands were brown. I ran over to examine the man on the bed. He was living in my own body."

"So the thing really happened!" I interjected.

"Yes," went on Cumberland, "the impossible actually occurred, as one hears of its doing every once in a while. My powers of mind and memory were just what they had always been (when I recovered from the shock of surprize and terror which accompanied my awaking from the trance), and although my friend would not allow me to go in my bewildered state to his rooms to spend the night, but insisted on my occupying my own bed for the nonce while he used the couch, in the morning I was quite myself—in a brown body."

"And you took the examination successfully for the Indian prince?"

"To my shame, yes."

"And then changed back, I suppose? Most astounding!"

"The next night I spent in my own rooms also, as Chundun and I agreed it would be best to stay where one of us knew exactly where everything was. I could see, though, that my striker was more than astonished to find an Indian spending two nights with me. He was plainly disgusted.

"At 5 o'clock the following evening, thoroughly tired of each other's bodies, we agreed to resume our own, and, locking the door as before, prepared for the second change. We lay down, we concentrated, Chundun chanted, I became drowsy, and then—nothing more. I awoke out of the drowsiness (I had not lost my senses completely as at first) to find myself still brown, still a prisoner in a body not my own!

"How can I describe that endless night? The repetition of the process, the strained 'concentrating' which one of us knew nothing about in reality, the varied incantations in Hindustani, all perfectly useless! We faced the dawn in utter despair, which even Chundun's Eastern stoicism could not conceal.

"As we sat there in the gray mist of morning, we could make no plans save for the immediate present. The

next night we would both spend in his rooms until I became accustomed to where he kept his belongings, and then the false life must continue, until—what?

“‘Perhaps,’ Chundun suggested, ‘we are now unduly exhausted. All may go well next time we make the attempt to change. In the meanwhile let us rest, relax, refresh mind and body.’

“Rest? Relax? With this frightful problem eating out our hearts? Should I never again be myself, never again see my family, embrace my mother and sisters? Should I have to go and be a prince in India? Loathsome thought! How I should undoubtedly hate the climate and the surroundings! I had no fear but that I would make an excellent ruler, but this gave me little comfort.

“Chundun being an Indian, I have no way of guessing how much of similar import went through his mind. When I met him in the halls and grounds of the college, his face (my face!) appeared unmoved. But I presume his face which I wore betrayed my grief conspicuously and disgraced its real owner.

“Our deceitful examination in literature had been the last one scheduled for either of us. The day of commencement drew on, arrived. I received Chundun’s diploma, and he mine. I carried his continually in a pocket.

“That night I went to my old rooms to see him. We tried once more to regain our own bodies; it was in vain. Under a calm exterior, he looked haggard and worn. He insisted on accompanying me back to his rooms, where he divided equally between us, come what would, the thousand or so pounds which he kept there. He declared that if we finally failed to regain our own physical envelopes, I must go to India and take up his duties, and he would let his father know, lest I be found out and

suffer. I was silent. Never could I counsel him to take my place. Could I see my sisters in the arms of one whose body was a brother to them, but whose soul was that of an Indian? No, he must stay away from Deven, I thought.

“Most of the time we were now alone. I suppose Chundun did not act like me, and so was shunned as a changed man by my old cronies. I was too disheartened to care for any company, and no one spoke to me but the instructors and a couple of other Indian students, who, I suspect, knew all, having been confided in by Chundun. It was manifestly impossible for me to do the same with my friends. My troubles would merely have been aggravated by the risk of being committed to a madhouse.

“IT WAS NOW the day following the graduating exercises. The previous day most of the students had departed. I was glad that none of my people had been up to the commencement; I could not have borne it. Today was the latest day I could with any face start for home. I did not know if Chundun intended to do this for me or not. I could not bear to think of him with my family. It was worse than the thought of going to India (I had not even asked the exact location of the kingdom in which he expected me to take his place) and never seeing my dear ones again myself.

“I wandered about Oxford in a despairing state, unable to make up my mind as to my next move. The only trouble that I did not have (I felt) was lack of funds, and finally I decided to take train for Liverpool, and ship for America. There at least I could lose myself among strangers, and grief might finally dull itself out. No doubt I should be able to get some kind of work in time. And as virtually no one in America was acquainted with any of the tongues



of India, I should not present the anomaly of an East Indian unable to talk a word of Hindustani.

"I repaired to the railroad station, and bought my ticket for Liverpool. I took first class that I might be alone. The train did not start for an hour. I wandered about waiting. I had no luggage. I did not know which set of luggage belonged to me, and was too discouraged to try to find out.

"As I traversed for the last time the well-known streets of the old town, I was drawn by the strains of one of Chopin's nocturnes and found myself entering a small old church, very dark and peaceful, where the organist was giving a most beautiful recital to himself and the doves in the ivy-covered belfry above. I sank into a pew, and seemed to stop thinking.

"I often wonder now how long that blessed musician played, and I sat motionless, scarcely knowing who or what I was, stunned still by my grief, yet comforted by the familiar and beautiful strains of some of the best music ever written by mortals. Finally I think I fell asleep.

"Suddenly I came to myself with a start. The music had ceased; I was wide-awake, with my mind unusually clear, clearer far than it had been since the day I had left my own body. But what astonished me most was that I had also a complete change of mind. Not in regard to my grief at my dreadful predicament, but in regard to my worse than indifference to the religion of my parents. Suddenly I saw myself as I was, and the enormity of my offense against God and Man in agreeing to a cheat, in taking part in a mystic ceremony of whose import I must necessarily be ignorant, in carrying out the deception. Come what would, I thought, I would do what I could to rectify matters. What should I do? The first thing that occurred to me was to find Chundun and re-

turn the money. Then a second and stronger impulse forced me to unaccustomed knees, and to a prayer of penitence which was probably the first genuine one I had ever offered. The sweep of utterly new religious feeling (I had always hated church from a child, probably because I was taken to too many services each Sunday) seemed to me far the most wonderful thing in my whole experience. And after praying for forgiveness, I was moved to ask also for a deliverance from my dreadful predicament. Then, exhausted, I flung myself back into the pew.

"I felt drowsy, dreamy; I lost consciousness.

"Then I awoke with a start. I leaped to my feet. The church would be locked up for the night, perhaps. I must find Chundun, I must make restitution. I started for the door.

"Then I staggered back in surprise. Where was I? Not in the little old church near the railway station but in my own room at Magdalen. I fell back into a chair, astounded. I glanced down at my hands.

"They were white!

"I was myself again, thanks be to God! But where was Chundun?

"It took a few moments of reflection to see that he must have been sitting, probably dozing and receptive, in a chair in my sitting room; and I upon my return to my own body had found myself there. So he must have awakened in the church. Thither I hastened.

"It was still unlocked, but the sexton was about to close it. I asked if I might first see if a friend of mine were there, perhaps asleep. 'He has just had a great shock,' I had the forethought to explain. We went in together, the sexton and I. The church was empty.

"I came out perplexed. I wandered about and then sought the station. Had an Indian gentleman

taken the Liverpool train? He had.

"Quick-witted Chundun! No doubt he had found the ticket in my pocket when he came to himself, and fearing perhaps even to look once more on myself or the scenes where his Indian enchantments worked only in their first part, he had fled incontinently for home.

"I never saw him again, nor heard from him. He never even sent for the contents of his rooms at the college, and I believe they were finally sold at auction. I fancied he wished me to have them, but he never left any word to that effect, for which I was very glad. The cheat was now irrevocable, or at least it would have served no purpose to have exposed it. No doubt Chundun knew far more than the average Oxford don. As for the money, in the course of years I have paid it to the church—to missions in India," he added with a smile.

"And how do you account for it, Cumberland?"

"I don't, altogether. Perhaps, as

I said, charms don't work so well away from their native heath. Perhaps again, one person had to be dominant at the first change, the other at the second. And I had always left the responsibility to Chundun. Perhaps again, the sweeping changes of conversion in my own soul necessitated in some way its also returning to the body in which it had been created. No, Griswold, I don't explain it. I am only very thankful I am not on an Indian throne at this moment, a place I should be about as fit to occupy as Fido here. That is all there is to the story."

And he arose and strolled to the window. It was late. The rain had ceased. Big Ben was chiming midnight.

"After all," I said as I rose to depart, "Cumberland, I don't think it is a paper for the society. I am inclined to think it is a sermon."

He smiled a little ruefully. "Shoemaker, stick to your last!" said he. "Anyhow it's a story."

And in that I agreed with him.

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