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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Album

By AMELIA REYNOLDS LONG

*The story of a strange and direful doom that lurked within the pages
of an old book, bound in human skin*

IT WAS Murray who first discovered the album, in the musty back room of the second-hand book-shop. It was tucked away next to a moldy copy of Paracelsus on the top shelf, and would have escaped notice entirely had not a beam from the dusty electric light bulb glinted on a rubbed place on the brass bands that bound it.

"Hello! What's this?" Murray exclaimed aloud, and lifted it down.

Fenwick and O'Hara, who had been browsing through the shelves behind him, turned at the sound of his voice.

"It looks like an old photograph album," Fenwick observed, glancing over Murray's shoulder. "How ever do you suppose it got mixed up with these old books on magic and superstition?"

"Take it in your hand," Murray invited. An odd expression had come into his face.

Fenwick obeyed, but almost dropped it.

"It's heavier than it looks," he remarked, recovering it. Then his expression changed, as Murray's had done.

"What ails the thing?" he demanded. "It feels as if—here, O'Hara; you take it. See if you notice anything."

O'Hara took the book in his hand, and weighed it experimentally.

"It is heavy for the size of it," he commented. "But what——" A grayish pallor overspread his face, and he thrust the book back at Murray.

"Divil an' all!" he cried. "The thing crawled under my fingers!"

Murray grinned appreciatively.

"It must be the stuff it's bound in makes it feel that way," he speculated. He carried it nearer to the single electric light, in order to examine it better. "It looks like some kind of soft, whitish leather."

"Put it away," O'Hara said, wiping his hands upon his handkerchief. "I don't like the feel of it."

Murray was in the act of complying, but on sudden impulse checked himself. "May as well see what's in the thing," he murmured, and undid the brass clasps. Fenwick and O'Hara, fascinated in spite of themselves, drew near again.

The inside of the book, instead of being made of the usual heavily enameled paper, was composed of sheets of wood planed to almost paper-thinness, and varnished and polished so that the grain of the wood was brought out in a most pleasing manner. The photographs were inserted in the ordinary way.

The first picture was a daguerreotype of so early a date that it was faded almost away; and it was only by holding the page sidewise that the three men were able to distinguish its subject, a young man in the full stock and knee-breeches of the late Eighteenth Century. Unlike the ordinary subject of that early period of the photographer's art, his expression was neither stony nor wooden, but was animated by a kind of incredulous sur-

prize, that was intense and vital even after a lapse of more than a hundred years.

"Odd-looking chap," Murray commented, and flipped over the page.

The second picture brought to view a woman of early middle age, whose costume indicated a period some fifteen or twenty years later than that represented by the man. She bore no physical resemblance to him that might have indicated a blood relationship, but her features were stamped with that same expression of startled incredulity that distinguished his.

Murray leafed through several more pages. There was a young girl of the eighteen-forties; a Confederate soldier; a gentleman of the post-Civil War period. And on all of their faces was that identical expression of incredulous surprize.

"There's something strange about the lot of them," Fenwick observed thoughtfully. "Wasn't that an index or something scratched on the fly-leaf?"

While Murray held the book, he turned back the stiff wooden pages to the blank one immediately inside the top cover. But it was not an index that had been scratched into the varnished surface of the wood:

"To Whosoever may open this Booke," Murray read aloud. *"Be it set down here as a Warning to you, Sir or Madame, that ye open this Booke at no Point beyond that whereat is placed the red ribbon Booke-Mark. Better still were it should ye throw the entire Booke, unopened, into the Flames; but this I cannot hope that ye will do, being unable to accomplish it myself. But I do most earnestly adjure you that ye look no Place beyond the red Ribbon, lest ye lose yourselves to this Worlde, Bodie & Soule; for it is a veritable Tomb for the Living."*

The message was unsigned.

Murray glanced at his two companions.

"Shall we?" he inquired, fingering the wisp of faded red ribbon that dangled from the middle of the volume before the picture of a World War soldier.

Fenwick was about to nod assent; then a quizzical expression appeared about the corners of his mouth.

"Wait a bit," he counseled. "Let's buy the thing and take it along. Then we'll all meet somewhere tonight, and open it at twelve o'clock. We'll make a real ceremony of it, and defy the curse."

Murray's eyes lighted up with enthusiasm.

"Excellent!" he exclaimed. "And since I discovered the book, we'll meet at my diggings. But see to it that you're both there by midnight; for I won't wait."

O'Hara looked doubtful, but said nothing.

2

O'HARA glanced at his watch as he turned in at Murray's door. Just five minutes to twelve. He had not meant to cut it so fine; but at least he had arrived before the appointed hour.

A voice behind him made him turn. Fenwick was coming up the stairs in back of him.

"Glad to see I'm not the only one," Fenwick said. "I had engine trouble; what made you late?"

"Late?" O'Hara repeated. "We've still got five minutes."

"Your watch must be run down," Fenwick told him. He brought out his own watch. Its hands stood at a quarter past twelve.

"No chance that Murray's waited for us, I suppose," O'Hara said uneasily. He had an unaccountable feeling of having failed in some vital emergency.

"Well, it couldn't be helped." Fenwick shrugged philosophically. "But, at least, he's bound to let us see his treasure."

He raised his hand and rapped sharply upon the outer door. There was no answer.

Fenwick waited a minute or so, then repeated his knock, this time a trifle louder. Again there was no answer save a hollow echo from the otherwise silent rooms beyond.

"What the deuce!" he exclaimed impatiently. "Is he dead in there?"

"Don't say that," O'Hara muttered nervously. "I don't like it."

Fenwick glanced at him quickly, but made no comment.

"I'm going in," he declared when a third knock had failed to bring any response. "If he's gone out a minute on some errand, he'll expect us to do that."

The door swung open under his hand; and followed by O'Hara, he stepped into the silent hall.

Through an open doorway ahead of them, a light flickered in grotesque dance. Fenwick and O'Hara followed its lurid beckonings into the room beyond.

A fire had been lighted in the fireplace; and it was the undulation of its flames that had sent the flickering light into the hall. The large reading-lamp upon the library table had not been lighted, for the fire furnished sufficient illumination for ordinary purposes; although it left the corners of the large room filled with hanging masses of shadow, like great bats clinging by their claws to the blackened wainscot. There was about the place an air of almost sentient expectancy, as though its regular occupant had quitted it only a minute before, and would return any instant.

FENWICK and O'Hara seated themselves in the deep armchairs on either side of the fireplace to await the return of their missing host. But five minutes lengthened into ten, and ten into twenty; and he did not appear. When a half-

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hour had passed, O'Hara rose and began to pace the floor restlessly, pausing occasionally to pick up and examine some object on one of the small stands scattered about the room.

The glint of metal attracted his attention, and he stopped to investigate. It was the gleam of the firelight upon the brass clasps of the album, lying unwrapped upon the library table.

O'Hara put out his hand tentatively, and although the touch of that whitish, leather-like substance revolted him, half opened the top cover. His eyes turned inquiringly to Fenwick's.

"Why not?" Fenwick rose languidly, and crossed to his side. "Apparently Murray's had his look without waiting for us; so there's no reason why we should wait any longer for him."

With a feeling of growing excitement that neither of them would have acknowledged, they began to leaf through the book; past the man of over a hundred years ago, past the young woman of the 'forties, past the dozen or so others until they came to the World War soldier, at whose page the red ribbon book-mark had lain that morning.

"Murray has been tampering," Fenwick observed suddenly. "See, he has moved the book-mark."

"But only to the next page," O'Hara said.

He turned over the thin wooden leaf. An instant his glance rested upon the one that had been beneath. Then, with a startled cry, he clapped the book shut.

Fenwick's eyes flickered. Without a word, he took the book from O'Hara's trembling hands, and reopened it at the place where the ribbon now lay.

Staring up at him with the same expression of incredulous surprize that had characterized the subjects of all the other photographs, was the face of the missing Murray!

Fenwick looked at O'Hara, who looked back at him with questioning apprehension. Suddenly a formless darkness seemed to dim the ruddy glow of the fire-light, while an arctic chill permeated the air. The undulating shadows crept nearer.

"Let's get out of here," O'Hara muttered thickly, and started toward the door. Fenwick followed.

3

FENWICK and O'Hara faced each other across the restaurant table. In the faces of both were fine lines that had not been there two weeks before.

"He's been gone ten days now," O'Hara observed, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

Fenwick nodded. "And no trace of him has been found," he said.

"Nor will there be," O'Hara declared with conviction; then he added, "He has lost himself to this world."

Fenwick's keen glance flew searchingly to his companion's face. He offered no comment, but his hand clenched involuntarily upon the table-cloth. O'Hara saw the gesture.

"Oh, why go on denying it to each other?" he cried. His voice rose to a pitch approaching hysteria. "The book got Murray; we both know it did. And it will get us too unless we destroy it!"

"Steady, old man," Fenwick counseled, but his own voice was tight under its calm. "If it's finding Murray's picture in the album that's worrying you, put your mind at rest. Placing it there was just one of his silly ideas of humor. He left us alone with the mysterious volume, in order to work our curiosity to fever-pitch. Then, when we couldn't resist the temptation any longer, we opened it—to find his photograph on the forbidden page, just as he had intended that we should,

Why, at this very minute, he is probably——"

"It was no joke," O'Hara interrupted. He was speaking rapidly, almost incoherently. "If it had been, he'd have come back long ago; he'd never have let it go so far. But he hasn't come back because he *can't* come back. I tell you *the book got him!*"

Fenwick was silent for several minutes. When he finally spoke, it was with a kind of grim decision.

"Very well," he said. "If you feel that way about it, we'll get the book and destroy it. Meet me at Murray's place at ten o'clock tonight."

4

FENWICK glanced impatiently at his watch, then slipped it back into his pocket and resumed his restless pacing of the floor. What in the devil, he asked himself for the twentieth time, could be keeping O'Hara? They had agreed to meet here in Murray's room at ten o'clock; and it was now nearly eleven.

He paused beside the library table where the book lay, and looked down at it; but he did not touch it. Not that he had any ridiculous superstitions about it, of course; but—hang it all!—there *was* something disquieting about the blasted thing, and the way he found himself wanting to finger that soft, repulsive stuff in which it was bound. What was it the stuff reminded him of? It wasn't leather; it was more like—like—good Lord!—it was like human flesh!

The too apt simile gave rise in him to a feeling of revulsion, and he crossed to the fireplace and sat down in one of the armchairs. Why the devil didn't O'Hara come? He leaned back and closed his eyes. . . .

He came to with the disquieting sensation that he had been sound asleep, and

that while he slept, someone had come into the room. With a feeling of drugged sluggishness, like that of a man who had not entirely thrown off the bonds of sleep, he turned his head and peered into the shadows.

At first he could discern nothing; for the fire had burned down to a mere bed of red ashes, so that except for a little space immediately in front of the fireplace, the room was in almost complete darkness. But then he saw them, dim in the gloom; the vague blur of a woman's full-skirted white dress, and the gleam of brass buttons on a man's military uniform among the dozen or so forms that moved noiselessly about the room.

Seeing that he had observed them, several of the figures came closer to him, but not quite near enough for him to distinguish their faces clearly. Nevertheless, he was impressed by an uncanny air of familiarity about them, as though he had encountered them all somewhere before, under slightly different circumstances.

Fenwick struggled to cast off the dream-like stupor that still enveloped him, and partly succeeded.

"I must have been napping when you came in," he mumbled, wondering at himself that he was not more surprized to discover this company of people in Murray's untenanted rooms. "I—I'm sorry if I kept you waiting."

The figure of a man detached itself from the group, and came forward. It was the only one, Fenwick observed, that was not costumed in the style of an earlier day. It rested its arms across the back of his chair and stood looking down at him, as though waiting recognition.

Fenwick raised his eyes to the figure's, then sprang to his feet with a cry of astonishment.

"Murray!" he exclaimed incredulously.

Murray nodded, but did not speak. Linking his arm through Fenwick's, he led him to the table where the book lay.

Actuated by an impulse independent of his own will, Fenwick picked it up and opened the cover. It did not quiver under his hand as on former occasions, but was like the inanimate leather binding of any other book. He turned over the first page.

"This is strange," he observed to Murray. "The pictures have been removed."

Murray nodded. He seemed to be trying to convey some message to Fenwick; although for some mysterious reason he still did not speak. Almost covertly he gestured toward his shadowy companions.

Of a sudden, Fenwick realized why those others had appeared so uncannily familiar to him, and where it was that he had seen them before: *They were the people of the photographs in the album!*

Ignoring the pressure of Murray's suddenly restraining hand upon his arm, and swept along by a burning curiosity that he was powerless to resist, he leafed quickly over the now empty pages until he came to the place where the book-mark lay. He removed it, and turned the leaf. . . .

5

O'HARA stood perplexedly in the middle of Murray's empty living-room. When that slight accident to his taxi had delayed him over an hour, he had been positive that Fenwick would arrive at their rendezvous ahead of him; yet he found the place empty.

But perhaps Fenwick *had* arrived, and had gone out to look for *him*. The room had that unmistakable air of recent occupancy. . . .

The fire had burned itself down to a mere bed of red ashes, leaving the room

almost in darkness. O'Hara crossed to the library table, and switched on the reading-lamp. Its light glinted upon the brass clasps of the album.

Fighting down the feeling of nausea that the touch of it aroused in him, O'Hara opened its cover, and turned over the first page. There was the daguerreotype of the man in the knee-breeches, and beyond him that of the middle-aged woman.

Mechanically O'Hara turned the leaves until he came to the one containing the

picture of Murray. He caught his breath with a sharp, hissing sound.

"So!" he exclaimed aloud. "Fenwick *has* been here. And he's moved the bookmark one page forward!"

A moment he hesitated; then, his heart beating with a strange excitement, he turned over the page and glanced fearfully down.

Staring up at him with the same expression of incredulous surprize that had characterized all the others, was the pictured face of Fenwick!