

Weird Tales

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The Algerian Cave

By DICK HEINE

AT FIRST it was strange, this tragic thing, hard to understand. But now it is so clear, so logical. I thought Louis Fanon insane. Perhaps I, myself, might have perished if the bullet had come two feet nearer. Who knows? But I will tell all—all.

At 2 o'clock in the afternoon of that unforgettable day I was lounging in the sitting room of my second-story apartment in Paris and waiting for my friend, Paul Mitrande, who was to drive me to the art reception at 3. I am an American artist, Arden Dexter, finishing my studies abroad. Paul had been my friend since the great war, for we had served in the same regiment when I was brigaded with the French. I was thinking of the picture he was going to exhibit. He had never told me its name, and I hadn't the least idea what kind it was; but he had assured me that it was certain to win the prize of fifteen thousand francs. There are many reasons why I am not going to mention the name and exact locality of the place where the reception was held and where occurred the strange event that led to stranger things.

Just before 3 Paul came in, smiling as usual. He was about five feet six inches, solid and strong. He was dressed in his usual good taste, this time in gray. His face was a healthy tan, a fresh, beaming, open face, upon which rested an expression of satisfaction. His hair was sleek and black, and beneath his small,

dark mustache showed a set of ivory-white teeth. His brown eyes were almost Oriental in their depth of feeling. In spite of his French vivacity, Paul was, at the same time, the soul of calmness.

He placed both hands upon my shoulders when I rose to greet him.

"And how are you, Arden?" he asked. "The judges have told me the decision will be reached by tomorrow night. Just think—on the next morning I shall be given the award."

"You are always too sure, my friend," I said. "Your picture, no doubt, is wonderful. I wish you would tell me the name of it."

"The name—it is 'The Algerian Cave', and I have created it from sheer inspiration. It is a picture from the well of my soul. I have drawn upon the treasure house of the subconscious. That, you know, bears the writing of the Infinite; it is ever revealing something new in the history of the individual and the race. I am sure of the prize—my work is a part of me. And I believe, of course, that I am eternal."

"You have your chance, Paul, but don't forget there are dozens of good rivals. When shall we go—now?"

His roadster was soon speeding down an avenue lined with trees that were just beginning to drop the colored leaves of autumn. I settled back comfortably, smoking and thinking how pleasant it was to have a friend I dearly loved and not a care in all the world. At length we entered the Rue de la Convention, and then the

Avenue de Breteuil. We did not drive long in this, but left it for a less well-known street not so very far from the Place Vauban. Paul headed for the parking space beyond a tall building on the edge of a square, where dozens of machines were placed in line.

A number of well-dressed gentlemen were standing about in the vestibule of the building when we entered, and a few students were pacing the hall by twos and threes discussing learned subjects in clouds of tobacco smoke. We greeted the friends we saw and went to a little open space among the flowers and plants at the end of the exhibition room, where we sat down and waited for the reception to begin. It was only a few minutes of the set hour, and people were arriving in considerable numbers. From my position I had a good view of the whole room.

It was about fifty feet wide and seventy long; the floor was of polished hardwood, and the ceiling ornately decorated. Electric globes in suitable places aided the skylight. A fountain of water and a statue stood in the middle of the floor. On the walls were hung the pictures to be exhibited, each one covered with its veiling cloth.

In groups stood immaculate men and handsomely gowned women and girls. It was a crowd typical of such affairs. I could see Sir Marden Ford, who pulled always at his little mustache; there was a lady, gray and stout but finely finished, holding his arm. The students, with their attempt at correct dress and ease of manner, moved leisurely and indifferently about.

But all these people did not hold my attention long. Apart from anyone stood a man who interested me in several ways. He was somewhat taller than Paul and dressed in shiny black. He had a black look hanging about him, as if he might be a man of

shady thoughts and unknown deeds. I sensed this personal atmosphere, or whatever it was, in a way I could not understand. His beardless face was dark and sharp, and his hair jet-black. A glance into his eyes, quick, vengeful, shrewd, made me nervous; his prominent nose reminded me of an eagle's beak when he looked keenly about at everything and everybody. It was difficult to take my gaze from him. I was attempting to form some estimate of his character and wondering who he might be, when the reception formally began.

Forty-five minutes later the gathering was before the picture painted by Paul Mitrande. The artist himself stood near the wall directly by one end of his canvas, and I was at his elbow. Ford and his lady were at the other end of the picture. The circling crowd, with interested faces, awaited the lifting of the veil. When a spectacled member of some big society performed that act, I saw "The Algerian Cave" for the first time.

The painting represented the interior of a cave, lighted by the sun's rays streaming in through the mouth, which, from the view selected, could be observed opening upon the shining stretches of a barren wasteland. In one corner of the cave was a niche in the wall; in this niche rested the golden bust of a beautiful goddess. She shone in the sunlight. On the ground beneath her was an open treasure chest filled with precious stones. On each side of the chest were stacks of bars of gold. Kneeling by the treasure was a Roman soldier, lightly armored but wearing a helmet. His hands were filled with the stones, and he was looking into the face of the goddess. Back of this soldier stood another similarly clad. They were both fine examples of their race and breed; doubtless, no better men had ever thrust the short-sword. The picture was marvelously colored, and I felt that Paul Mitrande had in-

deed created something from the well of his soul. The eternal Rome is forever in the hearts of men; this picture called from the canvas the glory and adventure of the legions, fighting their way of conquest over the world. In the hinterland of northern Africa, two brave men had stumbled upon the workings of some unknown race. As Paul explained, perhaps the treasure and statue had been placed there by thieves, who had looted a far city ages before the birth of Rome. He would leave that to the fancy of the individual.

Many were the sighs of wonder and admiration. I could scarcely realize myself the triumph of my friend. Only one other picture had a chance against his.

The moment after the first wave of enthusiasm, it happened.

The people gave way to the dark man in the shiny black suit. He forced himself rudely to the front and gazed with wild interest at the picture. On his face was the keenness of the hawk after its prey. Suddenly he pointed his finger at smiling Paul and cried: "You!" A revolver flashed in the hand of the man, and a sharp report followed.

Paul fell into my arms with the blood spurting from his neck. The stranger would have fired again, but Sir Marden Ford sprang at him, tore the weapon from his hand, and choked him to the floor. I dragged Paul out of the crowd and hastened with him to a bench. With the assistance of some other gentlemen, Sir Marden secured his prisoner.

I SHALL relate briefly the events preceding my visit on the following afternoon to the Dépôt of Prefecture of Police in the Palais de Justice. The officers came in from the street when summoned and relieved the gallant Englishman of his charge. The madman proved to be Louis Fanon, and he was rushed away to the local com-

missaire de police and then taken to the Dépôt and put in solitary confinement. An ambulance was called. Poor Paul was carried to a hospital. The examining surgeon performed an emergency operation, but he would give out no word about my friend's condition; I did not know at 7 o'clock in the evening whether Paul would live.

The people had been horrified at the attempted murder, no one being able to understand why such a sudden and brutal attack should have been made. Sir Marden sent me a personal note at my rooms, expressing his sympathy and asking to be remembered to Paul's mother; he was sorry that he had not foreseen the villain's intention.

All night I waited in anxiety. I made no attempt to sleep, but paced the sitting room, smoking and trying to understand the thing that had happened, in which I was so much concerned. The thought of Paul's possible death almost felled me. A few years before, I had been hardened against death and destruction, having seen them in all forms; but now, relaxed into the ease of peace, I felt the deep grief of a normal man. Paul was the dearest friend I had in Paris. Life would be sad without him. I felt as if I could no longer continue my studies. But the thing that hung about me was the mystery of the attack. Why should the man have attempted Paul's life? Other pictures had been exhibited. Where was the relation between "The Algerian Cave" and the brain of this insane criminal? For the life of me I could make no progress. If Paul were to die, I should have a thing unsolved that would haunt me down the years. I wanted to see my friend, to clear up this mystery, to know that in the life of Paul Mitrande there was no justification for this deed. I decided to go as soon as possible and see him;

then I should endeavor to discover the motive of the criminal.

At 10 o'clock I called on Paul's mother. She was so overcome that she could hardly speak. While it was true that so far I had heard nothing of her son's condition, I tried to console her, saying that I had indeed heard and that all was sure to be well. She begged me to go and learn more. I left her and went directly to the hospital.

The attendants were reluctant to let me see the patient, but upon hearing that I was the man's best friend and came at the request of his mother, they admitted me to the sickroom. Before I entered, the nurse told me the bullet had missed the jugular vein, but that some of the smaller blood-vessels had been damaged. Paul, having stood the anesthetic well, was resting quite comfortably amid his white surroundings, but he was not permitted to speak. His face indicated that he knew of my anxiety, and when he heard that I had reassured his mother, his teeth showed in a game grin. Yet there was a ghastly look to his face, and I knew that if chance there was, it was small indeed. Only the next few hours could tell.

"I am going to find out if possible, Paul," I said to him, "why the attack was committed. I suppose you think, as I do, that the man is a maniac. I shall ask permission this afternoon to see him. If he will talk, I shall no doubt have something to tell you when I see you again."

With a grasp of the hand he thanked me for coming, and I left him. But still I did not know whether he would live. I should have to lie again to his mother. If death came, she would overlook the lie; if life prevailed, there would be no harm done.

At 4 o'clock I made my way to the proper officials. They said the

prisoner was not dangerous unarmed and that I might have a short interview. Soon, surrounded by things of steel, I was face to face with Louis Fanon. The conducting gentleman of arms, chin in air, respectfully walked away down the corridor, holding his keys behind his back and digging his heels into the floor with an air of absolute indifference.

FANON sat on a bench in his cell and received me with perfect calm. He was clad in his black suit and looked quite comfortable. I was surprised to see that the mean expression had vanished. He did not look the same man at all; some sort of relaxation had come over him. The extraordinary keenness of his eyes was absent, and they were now of a softer light. I sat down opposite him, and he spoke to me in French.

"So you are Monsieur Dexter, the friend of Paul Mitrande?"

"I am," I said, "and I have come, Monsieur Fanon, to ask you to tell me why you committed this assault. The man is unknown to you. You doubtless had never seen him before."

"There are many things to be explained," he said suavely. "But I will tell them all. You assume, *Monsieur*, that I am insane. I assure you that nothing could be more untrue. A saner man never walked; a man more devout in his worship of right never lived. I have achieved my purpose, and my heart is calm."

"Calm! You are indeed cold-blooded to speak so when at the hospital this man lies near to death!"

"Your feelings will be different when you hear my story. There are things—many things—beyond the comprehension of materialistic Americans like you. No doubt this criminal Mitrande will have a few apologies to make to me!"

I could not tolerate these caustic comments; I was almost in a rage when Fanon bade me keep my temper.

"You shall have no interview unless you let me say what I must say. You may leave this prison with a hand-clasp of affection for me instead of with the hatred that you bring."

"Proceed with your story," I said.

He placed the tips of his fingers together, leaned back, and looked at me with an air of complete ease.

"I presume, Monsieur Dexter, that you have some imagination. We artists must have, or we could never become artists. Imagine, then, if you can, a shining stretch of desert wasteland. Picture the sand, the far distances, and reflections, and colors. Make some blue mountains rising into the sky a long way off. Imagine that you saw two Roman soldiers walking across the wasteland. They were lightly armored and wore helmets. They were a legion's finest. You can imagine those things, can you?"

"Easily," I said, looking into his eyes for some brightness or dilation that would reveal his evident lunacy.

"Then I shall proceed to tell you the story of the two soldiers. One was the soldier Quintian, and the other the soldier Severus. And devoted friends they were. They would have died for each other. They had obtained leave from their company in order to make a four-day trip into the mountains in search of adventure. The blue mountains you created in the distance were not so very far from them when their first day's march was over. The morning of the second day found them high in the hills, scanning the gorges, peering into dark holes, and looking everywhere for anything of interest.

"At length they came to the mouth of a cave. When they went inside, they looked behind them and

saw the shining stretches of the desert framed by the mouth of the cave. In one corner of the cavern, lighted by the rays of the sun, was a little projecting ledge or table, upon which rested the bust of a golden goddess. Down on the ground was a small treasure chest, and near each end some stacks of gold bars.

"With a sharp cry Severus dropped on his knees before the chest and lifted the lid. Quintian remained standing behind him. They saw, gleaming with the colors of Paradise, a thousand precious stones—jewels that would make them rich beyond the dream of mortals. The sticks of gold were nothing beside the gems. Severus feasted his eyes and scooped up a handful.

"Now Severus could not have known what went on in the mind of Quintian nor what he did. But I can easily imagine that. Quintian stood looking down at what was before him. Slowly his face hardened. His right hand went to his short-sword. His left hand snatched the unbuckled helmet from the head of Severus. Then in a flash the butt of the sword descended upon the bared head. Severus fell limp and unconscious with the blood pouring from his scalp. Then what did Quintian do? Oh, yes. He kicked the body of Severus to one side and stooped to examine the chest. He filled it with the gold bars and strained to lift it to his shoulder. It was almost too much for one man to carry, but he carried it anyway. A last satisfied look at the motionless Severus, and Quintian left the cave.

"Severus lay for a day and a half. When he came to his senses, he slowly turned over on his side and tried to sit up. He succeeded feebly. His hand went to his head, which seemed bursting with pain. He crawled to the mouth of the cave and looked out. Nothing was to be seen of Quintian. And Severus then re-

flected how fortunate he was to be alive. He slept. Upon awakening, his head was clearer, and he left the cave and made his way down among the rocks to a little stream. Here he bathed and refreshed himself. Then he ate some berries and descended to the plain. A few days later he was captured by a wandering tribe and carried away to slavery."

"And what became of him after that?" I asked impatiently.

"He escaped on the borders of Egypt and fled into the interior of that country. A few years' labor found him still poor, and finally sickness overtook him. He fell in the streets with running sores, and he had to beg for his bread. On his deathbed he cursed the trusted friend who had wrecked his life.

"And now, Monsieur Dexter, you doubtless want to know what became of the soldier Quintian. Severus, before his death, had learned a good deal about him by carefully questioning travelers from Rome. In fact, he had learned nearly all I shall tell you. Quintian escaped from the mountains with his treasure, hired a substitute to serve in the army, and went to Rome. There he disposed of his jewels and gold. He moved to Sicily and established himself in a fine estate. He built a great house and made a vast garden surrounded by marble walls. Now what think you of the fate of Severus compared with that of Quintian?"

"Quintian was a knave and a scoundrel, and Severus an unfortunate man betrayed by his friend," I said. "Monsieur Fanon, you have but imaginatively constructed a tale around the picture painted by Paul Mitrande, who lies now almost certain to die. You are indeed insane!" I waxed angry and rose to my feet. "Unless you can establish your sanity, you will be sent to a prison worse than death, where are many like you. If you can prove that you

are in your right senses, you will fare little better. You will be convicted and put to death or given a life sentence at hard labor. I shall rejoice if the blade falls upon your neck! You have no resource. I believe that by this fabrication you hope somehow to escape."

Fanon smiled.

"You are inclined to doubt me, *Monsieur*. There are many things you may doubt. But do you not see any relation between what I have told you and my attack on Paul Mitrande?"

"Not the slightest," I answered.

"*Paul Mitrande was the soldier Quintian, and I, Louis Fanon, was the soldier Severus!*"

I gasped with staggering comprehension.

"I refuse to believe you!" I shouted. "How do you know? How do you know?"

"I was a queer child, *Monsieur*, born in the south of France. At an early age I used to stand upon the seashore and point toward Africa, begging my nurse to take me there—just there, over there, where I used to live. She would ignore my childish fancies and drag me back to the house, sometimes punishing me. I had flashes of some past existence—visions of sands, of rivers, of black slaves toiling in the sun. At five years of age I fashioned a sword from a board, though I had never seen a sword, and drove my playmates from the nursery. At six I lay supposedly dying of a fever. Delirious, I was crying in an unknown tongue. The priest they brought in rose from the bedside and rushed from the room. Later he returned with the most learned father in the district. They both listened and agreed that I was talking in Latin; they would not translate, but said I was calling for someone. The elder placed his hand upon my head and answered me in Latin. Immediately

I became calm, the fever subsided, and the old family doctor clapped his hands for joy that life was mine. But I was delicate for some time after that. I still wanted to go across the sea. The doctor advised my father to take me to Africa to satisfy the craving. We went. On the desert I was at home. They said I seemed to recognize places, to be joyous at times. They observed a great emotion when we approached the Nile. After six months in Egypt, I grew stronger in every way. I was brought home to begin my schooling.

"I learned rapidly. I seemed to know some of the Latin stories, when we came to that study, before I read them. The teachers, astounded, hinted at precocious idiocy. My father feared I should die before maturity. But my passion for outdoor play developed me into a running, tearing, shouting youth, who would fearlessly charge upon his comrades in the games.

"I know that I was Severus. There is no other explanation."

Fanon paused. His face was tense and wet with sweat.

I felt as if I wanted to flee from that cell, to hide myself somewhere, to wipe the memory of this day from my brain. Paul Mitrande——!

I rose and stepped toward the door. The hand of Fanon held me back. His face had changed to peacefulness again, and he spoke less vehemently.

"In my life, *Monsieur*, I have been cursed with a passion for revenge—a thing I could not understand. I have hated my fellowmen since becoming a man. I have gone armed of late years. Yesterday, when I saw that picture, the things of my other life flashed back to me. I knew that Paul Mitrande could not

have painted that picture unless he had been Quintian in that cave of Africa two thousand years ago! Hardly knowing what I did, I shot him. You know the rest. Here I am, perhaps to be adjudged insane, perhaps to be convicted and imprisoned or put to death, and never to finish my studies and become an artist known to the world. But it may be well after all. I have not the means to complete my courses. I shall have to wait upon the doing of the law."

Tears came into his eyes, and he sank back upon his bench.

I left the prison hurriedly. In the taxicab that hurled me along the boulevards I tried to collect my reason. I could do nothing but believe the things Fanon had told me. The dangerous condition of Paul Mitrande finally brought me in touch with reality again, and when I entered the hospital, I was almost myself again.

PAUL MITRANDE lived. He is calmly sitting on my sofa now while I finish the story I have set myself to write. Every day he has driven over to sit by the fire, to gaze into its flames, and to muse over the things that may be and that may not be. Sometimes he is sad, sometimes joyous; and often in his deep, brown eyes, I see the welling of man's impenetrable soul. "The Algerian Cave" was awarded the prize. Paul recommended that lenity be shown Louis Fanon, and the court gave it. The prisoner was released after a very short term. The day he was freed, Paul met him at the prison gates and handed him a deposit-book and a check-book; then Fanon learned that Paul had deposited to his credit ten thousand francs of the prize money.

