

Weird Tales

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Contents for November, 1926

- Cover Design E. M. Stevenson
Illustrating a scene from "The Peacock's Shadow"
- The Peacock's Shadow E. Hoffmann Price 580
A tale of devil-worship and the Adytum of Darkness—a mystery story of graphic action and exotic imagery
- The Star Shell (Part 1) George C. Wallis & B. Wallis 597
A four-part weird-scientific serial about a thrilling voyage to the planet Jupiter
- November A. Leslie 618
Verse
- The Parasitic Hand R. Anthony 619
A terrific life-and-death struggle between a living man and a hand that groped among his vitals

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- The City of Spiders**.....**H. Warner Munn** 625
A complete novelette of shuddery horror and eery fascination that will remain long in your memory
- The Creature of Man**.....**Oscar Cook** 647
A Chinese tale about a cruel mandarin and the terrible deception that was practised by his majordomo
- The Ode to Pegasus****Maria Moravsky** 659
A dream-tale of the winged horse, and the yearnings of a boy to fly in the sky
- The Fiend of the Marsh**.. **R. E. Lewis & Martha M. Cockrill** 663
The haunted marsh-woods finally gave up the dread secret that had terrorized the community
- The Tenth Commandment****Victor Rousseau** 677
The third in a series of stories, each complete in itself, dealing with Dr. Ivan Brodsky, "The Surgeon of Souls"
- The Assault Upon Miracle Castle**.....**J. M. Hiatt** 684
Into one of the "holes in space," into another dimension, stepped a horde of Moorish warriors
- For Clytie****Binny Koras** 689
Verse
- Across Space (Conclusion)**.....**Edmond Hamilton** 690
A three-part weird-scientific serial—strange beings under Easter Island pull the planet Mars from its orbit
- The Dog-Eared God**.....**Frank Belknap Long, Jr.** 699
There were strange kings in the old forgotten days in Egypt, and they would not brook irreverent modern prying
- The Caves of Kooli-Kan**.....**Robert S. Carr** 704
Verse
- Weird Story Reprint**
No. 17. Ligeia**Edgar Allan Poe** 705
This is the story that Poe himself considered his supreme prose masterpiece
- The Eyrie** 715
A chat with the readers

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An Utterly Bizarre Story is

The Assault Upon Miracle Castle

By J. M. HIATT

“**M**EDIEVAL!” I exclaimed to my friend and host, Count Ramon de Nuñez, as we surveyed his estate from the tallest tower of his ancestral castle. “Nothing could be more medieval, even in Spain.”

Don Ramon smiled with pleasure, for his hobby was the Middle Ages. “I grant that there is little of the modern in that landscape,” he replied.

We were in east central Spain, in the province of Cuenca, the most thinly populated province of the most backward country in Europe. From the castle, which sat on an eminence, we could see the barren, rocky hill-land, rolling away to the horizon. Below us lay a narrow valley, cultivated, here and there, by methods as old as the Romans. A road, created by generation after generation of men and beasts, wound from the valley up to the castle. To this trail’s exceeding roughness I could testify, having come over it the preceding evening in Don Ramon’s automobile.

“Pardon my compelling you to view the countryside before breakfast,” continued the count, “but I wished you to see it before the sun makes the battlements too warm to be comfortable. My ancestors established themselves here in 1177, when Alfonso the Eighth wrested the province from the Moors. Milagro Castle was long a fiercely contested spot on the frontier, and more than one attack was broken before these walls.”

“The hand of Time seems to have rested lightly upon the fortress,” I observed.

“Ah, Señor Hawthorne, it was a ruin long before we were born. The edifice which you see was built nine years ago, after I was lucky enough to make a little money in the Argentine. Still, I flatter myself that this is an exact reproduction of the old stronghold. If one of my forefathers were to ride up the road, I doubt if he could tell the difference until he had passed the gates.”

“Not even then, perhaps,” said I, recalling the heavy, rough-hewn fur-

niture, the beautiful tapestries, and the ancient armor and weapons which filled the chambers below us.

"You are too hard on my poor habitation," my host responded, laughing. "I admit that electricity and the telephone are lacking, but there are some conveniences here, among them breakfast. Shall we go down?"

We descended by means of several winding staircases of stone and were soon seated in the dining hall.

"*Milagro*," I queried, over the repast, "that is the Spanish for 'miracle,' isn't it? A queer name, Miracle Castle."

"The place has been so titled since 1211, when the event occurred which gave rise to the name. The incident is the only thing of the supernatural of which my castle can boast, for, I regret to say, an appropriate ghost has yet to show itself. If you like, I shall read you the story, which the chronicler has told better than I can."

After breakfast, I followed the count to his study, where he found a parchment manuscript, written in Latin and with illuminated characters, which had faded with age.

"In the fifty-third year of King Alfonso, to whom may the saints grant blessed rest," translated Don Ramon, "the Moors, again waxing strong, began to fall upon the strong places and villages of the Castilians which were the nearest to them. The cursed unbeliever, Mozaffar of Murcia, having been supplied by the ameer, his master, with a numerous band, both horse and foot, marched swiftly upon the castle of Count Guillermo de Nuñez. Count Guillermo and the greater part of his fighting men were absent in the service of the king, and mighty was the terror among the people of the castle, and mighty was the eagerness of the enemies of God, who thought themselves sure of an easy victory. At this ex-

ceeding peril, Doña Jacinta, the wife of Count Guillermo, hastened with her daughters to the chapel and implored the aid of St. James.

"The prayers of the pious are strong, for, when the infidels were yet distant from the gates, a whirlwind came upon them, and they were never seen more. Neither man nor beast of them has since been discovered anywhere, but all doubtless burn in hell, whither the hand of Almighty God has hurled them.

"Wherefore, it has been ordered that the place shall henceforward be known as the Castle of the Miracle and that offerings shall be sent yearly to the shrine of Compostella, that this great mercy of Heaven may never be forgotten."

"A pretty fable," was my comment, "worthy to be placed beside any of the tales of the reconquest."

"I have often wondered if it is a fable," said the nobleman. Observing my incredulous look, he went on, "Don't misunderstand me. I believe I am as free from superstition as any man. But, Señor Hawthorne, are you not aware that, in our own time, there have been instances where persons or objects have disappeared in full sight of witnesses and in a manner which defies explanation? Einstein's work has thrown some light on the problem, and perhaps science may eventually answer our questions. One theory, often set forth, is that, as we live in a universe of three dimensions, so there are other universes based on different numbers of dimensions. They exist around us but in planes invisible to us. Occasionally, a part of one of these universes, how or why no one can guess, coincides temporarily with a spot on the earth. Then take place those sudden exits from our world to which I have referred and the entrance of strange beings and materials from out of the unknown.

"Other hypotheses have been

brought forward to explain these same phenomena, but they involve too much mathematics and physics for me to go into them.

"Now, it is not impossible that something of this sort happened to the assailants of Milagro, although one must admit that there is no other case on record where so large a number of persons disappeared at one time."

"Brr," I said, feigning a shudder, "you give me an uneasy feeling. I shouldn't care to fly off into another dimension."

"Don't worry," laughed Don Ramon. "By the laws of probability, there is scarcely more danger that such will be your fate than that you will be knocked on the head by a meteor."

THE conversation had drifted into other matters, when we were interrupted by one of the servants.

"*Señor*," said the man, addressing the count in Spanish, "there is a crowd coming up the road."

"Tourists, likely, though—thank God!—this section is rarely troubled by the creatures."

"The *señor* may be right, but, from the dust they are making, there must be rather more of them than I had judged there were people in—begging the *señor's* pardon—in all this miserable province."

"Bah, Pablo! You are fresh from Madrid and have doubtless mistaken a shepherd and his flock for a crowd. Learn to use your eyes to better advantage and remember that, if you do not like the province, I am not interested in the fact."

I had gone to a window and now interrupted the dialogue. "The man is right," I said. "I can make out a number of people and horses, about two miles distant, I should judge."

Don Ramon picked up a pair of field-glasses and stepped to the window. "*Caracoles!*" he ejaculated.

after a long look. "Take the binoculars, Señor Hawthorne, and see what you make of it."

I moved the glasses along the long array which was winding up the valley. Horsemen, in steel caps and shirts of mail and carrying shields, swords, lances, and bows, moved at the front and rear of the column and galloped here and there along the flanks. Infantry and pack-animals trudged in the center. Amidst the baggage I counted fourteen long and heavy ladders. Toward the front was carried a black flag, bearing a red design. The party must have numbered six or seven hundred men, many of whom were negroes.

"Were we anywhere near Hollywood, the capital of filmdom," I ventured at last, "such a sight would not be difficult to explain; but here—! Perhaps some of your friends in Madrid, knowing your enthusiasm for things medieval, have arranged a pageant to surprize you. They must have felt rich, if they hired that multitude."

"And, Señor Hawthorne, the mummers must have camped in the hills last night, for lodgings could not be found for them within a radius of forty miles. Let us go up where we can get a better view of this. Pablo, bring another pair of glasses, then keep at hand, for I may want you."

We climbed a watch-tower and were soon straining our eyes through the binoculars.

A few hundred yards ahead of the advancing throng, a man with an ox-cart had halted beside the road and was waiting excitedly for the parade to pass. Half a dozen riders, urging their mounts to a gallop, came rapidly upon him. Suddenly the peasant started to run, but they overtook him and smote off his head as he ran. I saw the frightful gush of blood and heard the yells of the horsemen.

"Some pageant!" I gasped.

From Don Ramon burst a savage

command. "Pablo, call all the servants together in the courtyard, and be quick, if you value your life!"

In a moment some twenty men had assembled in the designated spot, and Don Ramon, gesturing with a revolver which had appeared from nowhere, was issuing orders.

"Pedro and Pablo, see that both gates are closed. Then to the kitchen and do as Fernando tells you. Run, now! Fernando, you and the kitchen-boy carry all the food you can to the keep and don't forget a case of wine. Smith, to the stables and take Isabella and Ligero to the keep. Yes, lead them into the rooms! Leave the other horses. Take the dogs to the keep also. The rest of you, follow me!"

We dashed to the gun-room, where the count began to distribute rifles and pistols. I was sent to the tower over the study. "Don't show much of your person," was the final warning.

From my post I saw that the men on foot were still distant but that a swarm of riders was now tearing up the slope. As they neared the castle, they swung to the side and began to ride along under the walls, uttering savage cries. I was staring in amazement, when an arrow whizzing past my ear caused me to duck for cover. Angrily, I aimed through an archer's loophole and fired without success at a swiftly moving target. Trying again, I bowled a man from his saddle. Shafts were splintering against the stonework. Above the shouting, shots rang out. So great was the uproar and such the confusion in my own mind that I scarcely know what took place during those minutes.

At length a hand fell on my shoulder. I turned and saw Don Ramon.

"To the keep," he commanded. "The scaling parties will soon be here, and we are too few to hold the outer works."

"In God's name," I cried, as I

followed him downstairs, "who are these people?"

"A proof of my contentions, Señor Hawthorne. These are the vanished Moors of the story."

"Impossible! That crew, if they ever existed, have been dead for centuries, while these are no ghosts, but living men."

"A thousand years in our universe might occupy but the fraction of a second in one of the other dimensions, and it is obvious that our callers do not consider themselves dead. If, as I believe, the miracle has been reversed and the old assailants of the place have come back in the way they went, it is possible that they are not conscious of any interim but still consider themselves good Mohammedan warriors of the year 1211."

WE HAD NOW arrived at the keep, a massive tower over eighty feet in height, which rose from the courtyard in the center of the castle. Standing apart, it overlooked the circle of lower buildings and defenses and was designed as the last refuge of the garrison. It served Don Ramon as a sort of museum, in which were stored many antiquities. We passed through its pointed archway, and the heavy door was closed and barricaded. Here were gathered the count's servants, his dogs and favorite horses, food, drink, and ammunition.

"Better dress for the reception," grinned my host, pointing to several suits of armor. "These may help to keep out arrows."

I fumbled into a helmet and cuirass, but the master of Milagro clad himself from head to foot in steel, exhibiting a skill in so doing that made me suspect that he had often stolen up here to perform the feat. With his eyes flashing from excitement, he looked for all the world like one of the old-time cavaliers of Spain.

"What are you going to do with

that thing?" I asked, for the don had picked up a crossbow and was turning the crank which set the weapon.

He blushed and closed his vizor. "There aren't enough guns to go around, and I have always wanted to shoot one of these instruments."

"I'll bet it won't be the first time," I shot back.

At the instant a servant ran up. "Pepe is not with us!" cried the fellow. "I haven't seen him all morning!"

"Go out and find him," was the order.

"But, *Señor*, they are battering on the gates, and there is already a swarm on the roofs!"

"Too late, then!"

From a loophole I saw that, in several places, armed men were clambering over the outer battlements.

"You dare assail my castle, Allah-howling dogs!" thundered Don Ramon. "Back to the other world, you sons of Satan!"

So saying, he discharged his crossbow; the bolt struck through a warrior and sent him rolling down a roof to fall clanging upon the courtyard. A hot fire burst from the keep, but the shooters were far from marksmen and greatly excited. As targets multiplied, hits grew more plentiful. The effect of firearms seemed to amaze our antagonists, but, contrary to my expectations, it only aroused them to greater activity. Arrows began to reply to our bullets and to the bolts of Don Ramon. A formidable force was gaining a foothold in the castle.

Suddenly the main gate gave way, or was opened from within, and a flood of fanatical fighters swept into the courtyard. A bearded horseman, flourishing a long, curved sword and clad in golden armor, directed the mob. With a heavy beam they began to batter the door of our stronghold. Ladders were being brought to set against the lower windows.

A heavy object fell past my station and smashed on the pavement below. It was a carved cabinet, under the wreckage of which now lay several broken forms. The men at the top of the keep were throwing down Don Ramon's most cherished possessions.

"This is desperate," screamed the count at my elbow, but whether he meant our situation or the despoilment of his museum, I know not.

Furiously he cranked his crossbow, leveled, and let fly. The leader on horseback sagged and fell from his saddle, his gold-covered breastplate useless against the short, iron bolt, which had almost the force of a bullet. At the death of the Moor, the attack grew more frenzied than ever.

The gun-barrel scorched my fingers. Pablo lay near me with a shaft through his brain. The fire of the defense grew weaker and weaker, as the archers killed the riflemen. The door would soon splinter under the blows of the ram. Climbers were already mounting, holding their shields above their heads.

Suddenly an automobile siren pierced the tumult, and a big car tore out of one of the buildings. At the wheel was a fellow, who, as I learned later, was the missing Pepe, his face convulsed with terror. He had sneaked away from his duties to take a siesta in the garage and had failed to awake till the horde broke into the castle. To save his life, he made a desperate break for the gateway, but his path was so packed with humanity that he abandoned the design. Spinning the wheel this way and that, with horn screaming and cut-out open, the frantic driver tore round and round the courtyard. Dozens, too appalled to flee, were run down. A few ill-aimed arrows were the sole resistance to the monster. The stampede which began at the car's first appearance lasted until all of the enemy who could run were in

wild flight down the hillside. Pepe finished his work by hurling the vehicle through a stone wall into the kitchen.

Ascending to the top of the tower, I watched the retreat. My brain was beginning to clear, and I could hardly believe that what had happened was true, much less the count's explanation of it.

Suddenly a whirlwind passed along beside the fugitives. It was a small twister, such as might carry away a handkerchief or a straw hat, but—I rubbed my eyes. There lay the same barren and deserted landscape upon which I had looked that morning. The multitude had vanished.

Hastening to the courtyard, I found Don Ramon.

"They're gone," I cried, "swallowed up, every last one of them!"

He showed but little interest. "Señor Hawthorne," he said, "today I have lost a Byzantine cabinet of the Tenth Century, and other treasures of which I can not bear to think."

"To say nothing of half your household and an automobile," was my rejoinder, "but you have certainly added to your stock of medieval weapons. There is enough Saracen armor lying around to fill a dozen castles."

My host shook his head. "Crude, common stuff, all of it, except one fine coat of gold-plated mail, which I unhappily perforated."

SOON afterward I left Milagro Castle, accompanied by the surviving servants, who swore they would no longer remain in that place. We followed a precipitous path over the hills, for none of us had any confidence in the regular road. Perhaps it still led into another universe!

The other day a letter came from Don Ramon, saying that he had cured a number of the wounded warriors, had trained them as servants, and had taught them Spanish. He invited me to come and converse with some men of the Thirteenth Century. The next time I go to Europe, I may accept his invitation.
