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CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1935

Number 4

Cover Design . . . . .	M. Brundage
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Man Who Was Two Men"</i>	
The Man Who Was Two Men . . . . .	Arthur William Bernal 402
<i>A story of the next sensational development in radio after television</i>	
The Hand of the O'Mecca . . . . .	Howard Wandrei 425
<i>An uncanny story about the weird figures that beset Elof Bocak one night in the fog</i>	
Shadows of Blood . . . . .	Eando Binder 434
<i>A grim story of torture in the cruel days of the Roman Emperor Caligula</i>	
Dear Ghosts . . . . .	Clarence Edwin Flynn 447
<i>Verse</i>	
Lord of the Lamia (part 2) . . . . .	Otis Adelbert Kline 448
<i>A colorful weird mystery-tale of an eery adventure in present-day Egypt</i>	
Dream-Stair . . . . .	Robert Nelson 465
<i>Verse</i>	
The Last Hieroglyph . . . . .	Clark Ashton Smith 466
<i>A grim figure strode like the approach of doom through the houses of the astrologer's horoscope</i>	
The New World . . . . .	Richard F. Searight 477
<i>Verse</i>	
Out of the Eons . . . . .	Hazel Heald 478
<i>A tale of elder magic and a monstrous idol—a shuddery story of primordial evil</i>	
The Aztec Ring . . . . .	John Flanders 496
<i>A story of the grim and terrible conflict that took place one night in a pawnbroker's shop</i>	
The Man Who Could Not Go Home . . . . .	L. E. Frailey 501
<i>A fascinating, human story about the Great War</i>	
An Empty House at Night . . . . .	Cristel Hastings 507
<i>Verse</i>	
Weird Story Reprint	
The Canal . . . . .	Everil Worrell 508
<i>        One of the finest vampire stories ever written</i>	
The Eyrie . . . . .	524
<i>        The readers express their opinions about this magazine</i>	

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43

WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

W. T.—1

401

# The Aztec Ring

By JOHN FLANDERS

*A story of the grim and terrible conflict that took place one night in a pawnbroker's shop*

**J**OSHUA GULLICK the pawnbroker was a hard man to deal with.

All day long women crept into his dingy shop, spread out cloaks and overcoats on his counter and murmured pathetically:

"You can see it's almost new, Mr. Gullick. Can't you give me as much as a pound for it?"

To which Joshua Gullick invariably replied, like a parrot:

"Two shillings."

Then the poor woman would burst into tears and tell a sad story of a husband out of work and little children ill. But Joshua Gullick would repeat his litany:

"Two shillings, or you can take your home for elderly gipsy-moths and run along."

In most cases it was the simple truth that the poor woman's husband was scouring the Gravesend docks without digging up a scrap of a job to pay for the family's bread and tea, and that a poor kiddy or two was coughing and moaning in a foul cellar in Battersea or Whitechapel. And the thing usually ended by the woman's taking the two shillings and dragging herself out of the door. But sometimes she would call back some such bitter prophecy as:

"God will punish you, you skinflint!"

But Joshua Gullick, busy pinning a

W. T.—6

ticket on the newly acquired garment, did not worry a great deal about God.

**O**NE evening a man came into the pawnbroker's shop with a tale of woe which at least was different from the others.

"She can't live another day, and I want so much to put the chain and the little cross back on her neck while she is still conscious. It will be a little bit of consolation—"

Then, with a shudder, he lowered his voice and went on:

"And when—when it's all over—I could bring it back to you."

Joshua Gullick answered very politely:

"Yes indeed, sir, your attachment to your family heirlooms is a real credit to you. But your sister got fourteen shillings on that little ornament, so that she owes me now, with the interest which has accumulated—let's see—two pounds four shillings."

"But I tell you, sir, I haven't a penny—at least not just now—"

"I'm sure you realize," replied the money-lender in the same tone of perfect politeness, "that I am very sorry, especially since I knew your sister well, and honored her for her efforts to support herself by giving piano lessons—but business is business, you know—"

"Listen, Mr. Gullick. I don't know whether I told you that I've just come back from Mexico. You know Mexico is in a terrible way just now. I was getting on very well there and was accumulating a little fortune, when the revolution broke out, and in an hour I was ruined.

"I got back here sick and despairing, pockets empty, not knowing which way to turn to keep from starving. And I found my sister, my poor, gentle little Edith, at the point of death. I know I'll get back on my feet again—"

W. T.—7

Joshua Gullick raised his hands to heaven—a heaven shut off by the green ceiling from which hung a motley crew of gibbeted overcoats, tail-coats, women's cloaks and capes, and costumes of every imaginable variety.

"I am an old man, sir, and I am not in a position to speculate on the future."

"But I swear to you you will live long enough to see me bring back the chain and what I owe you on the loan."

But the usurer shook his head energetically.

"I have told you the amount of the debt, sir. It's two pounds four exactly. And my time is valuable."

The man slowly drew off his threadbare overcoat, but Joshua Gullick stopped him with a gesture.

"The most I could possibly let you have on it would be four shillings, and you would still owe me—"

But he never finished his sentence. His eye had chanced to fall on the man's hand, and he caught the sparkle of a gorgeous stone.

"After all, sir, I have a soft heart, and I should be glad to do you a service if I could. I notice you have a handsome ring on your finger there—oh, yes, I can see that it's only an imitation and that it isn't worth much of anything, but I'm sorry for you and I can't—I want to help you, and I should be willing to make a trade with you. You let me have that ring, and I will give you back the chain and the gold cross—"

As this chaffering went on, it had grown dark. The feeble, whistling, twisting little gas jet did not do justice to the change which had suddenly come over the visitor's face, and even if it had, Joshua Gullick would probably not have noticed it, for he had no eyes except for the ring. It was a beautifully shaped ser-

pent of brown metal, encircling a stone which emitted curious red flashes.

"Pawnbroker," said the man slowly, "you say this stone is worth little or nothing?"

"I'd swear it on a Bible!" cried Gullick eagerly.

"You take your oath to it!" said the man in a strange low voice which to anybody but Joshua Gullick would have been ominous, threatening and terrible.

"I take my oath to it," Gullick repeated fervently.

"Here is the ring," said the man.

Gullick scarcely knew how it happened, but the ring seemed to glide off the visitor's finger and around his own before either of the two had made a gesture. But he did not waste much time wondering, he was so filled with bewildered delight at the unbelievably fine business deal he had just concluded.

THE man turned and walked slowly toward the door, playing abstractedly with the little chain and cross as he went. But before he reached the threshold, he turned back.

"Gullick," he said, "I'm very sorry——"

"Bargain's made!" snapped the pawnbroker.

"Oh, I wasn't trying to back out," said the other. "But I have a feeling I ought to warn you——"

By this time Gullick had begun to notice the strange, suppressed excitement in his client's manner and the savage flame in his eyes. The old man squinted cautiously at the half-open drawer in which lay a big Colt revolver with all seven chambers loaded.

"That ring is an Aztec talisman. When you look at it with a magnifying-glass you can see a row of strange signs inscribed on the body of the serpent. The

inscription reads that if any one ever secures possession of the ring through dishonest means——"

"Sir," growled the money-lender, "do you mean to insinuate——"

"It was in the Mexican mountains, one moonlight night, that I happened to meet the Indian who owned it. He had a bad case of fever. I had a little quinine with me, not enough, I'm sorry to say, to——"

"Sir," interrupted Gullick, trembling for fear something might still happen to separate him from his bargain, "I never cared for stories of adventure. Good-night!"

"But let me tell you——"

"Good-night!"

"Listen to——"

"Good-night!"

"Very well then, if you *will* have it so," said the man, and disappeared in the darkness and the fog.

Joshua Gullick put up his shutters.

"IT's strange," he said to himself. "I can't get the thing off my finger."

Like many of his trade, he was an expert in precious stones. But he had never before seen a jewel like this one. And it was after having abandoned his fruitless investigation and after having decided to put the ring away in his safe, that he made the discovery that it could not be removed from his finger.

"My hand must be a little swollen today," he told himself.

And he set about his nightly task of getting ready in a special portfolio the obligations which fell due on the following day.

On the first of next December, I promise to pay to the order of Joshua Gullick the sum of forty pounds——

"Good God! I'm going crazy!"

It was Gullick himself who had uttered this cry. And he had uttered it when he saw the leaping flame devour the note,

which had fallen into the open fireplace  
—*the note which Gullick himself had  
thrown into the flames!*

"I'm mad!" he groaned. "I'm mad! I  
threw it in with my own hands! Oh Lord,  
Lord, Lord!"

A succession of frantic barks. With a  
sure and steady aim, he had tossed the  
whole portfolio into the fire.

He rushed to the grate, and reached for  
the leather case. The flames were already  
curling around it—but with a sudden  
change of direction his hand had shot out  
toward the open safe, and another pack-  
age of notes flew into the flames.

"Mad and crazy! Mad and crazy!" he  
bellowed. "What devil is driving me?"

His hand was fumbling feverishly in  
the drawers of his safe and hurling paper  
after paper into the grate. All at once  
Gullick remembered.

"The ring!"

Ah! the ring clung firmly to his finger,  
buried in the flesh, half hidden under the  
livid, swollen tissue.

"No, no," he panted. "I don't want  
to, I don't——"

He dragged himself across the floor on  
his knees, pleading with his own hand,  
which roved back and forth like a crazy  
wild thing, throwing open account-books,  
tearing out pages, turning keys in locks,  
seizing packages of notes and tickets and  
tossing them into the crackling flames.

Then a furious rage seized him. He  
noticed in a corner of the room the  
hatchet with which he split his little sup-  
ply of kindling.

"I'll chop it off!" he roared. "I'll chop  
it off!"

With his left hand he gripped the  
weapon. But the other hand, the hand  
which was no longer his, tore the dan-  
gerous tool free and hurled it across the  
room.

What a night it was!

**T**OWARD morning Joshua Gullick, ly-  
ing exhausted against his empty safe,  
glared with haggard eyes at the dying  
fire, glutted with blackened scraps of pa-  
per. All at once the terrible hand grew  
active again. It pulled violently at his  
left wrist, forced him to rise to his feet,  
and after feeling around hastily, it took  
possession of a pen-holder.

I, the undersigned Joshua Gullick, declare all  
my debtors free of all financial obligation to me.  
I restore all pledged articles to their owners. And  
I bequeath all my property to the poor of London.  
I hereby declare that no one is responsible for my  
death.

Joshua Gullick stared at the paper.  
Was it he who had written that? He rec-  
ognized his own handwriting, his own  
signature. . . .

His old stubborn shrewdness began to  
come back to him a little. He saw that he  
had not the physical strength to defeat  
the enemy. But perhaps he could outwit  
that ring finger, after all. . . .

There! His faithful left hand had  
tossed the crazy paper into the fire.

The right hand seemed to hesitate for  
a moment. Then it reached for the pen-  
holder again, and the document was  
quickly rewritten. And again—ah!—the  
left hand undid the insane folly of its  
fellow-member.

"Good heavens!"

The sharp claws of the right hand dug  
into the tough flesh of the left. Animated  
with a diabolical fury, the bewitched  
hand fought and struggled with its fel-  
low.

The battle was grotesque, desperate,  
terrible.

Gullick tried in vain to shield his left  
hand behind his back, in his pockets, un-  
der the furniture. The other always found  
it, clawed it, tore it, twisted it, broke the  
joints apart. Gullick suffered agonies of  
pain, and all his spasmodic struggling  
was unavailing.

At last the rent and broken left hand

hung helpless. And very deliberately and carefully, the right hand once more re-wrote the last will and testament of Joshua Gullick. Then, slowly, methodically, it opened the drawer of the counter and took out the big revolver.

Joshua Gullick made no attempt at resistance. His vacant, glassy eyes reflected the yellow gaslight like the eyes of a dead man.

The muzzle of the revolver moved upward toward his temple.