

m a g a z i n e o f
HORROR

The Bizarre and The Unusual

Volume 3

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, Editor

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The Bibliophile

by *Thomas Boyd*

HIS PASSION, I have reason distinctly to remember, was old books, first editions which he had bound in a manner indicative of their contents. But how long he had been a victim of this lust

I have never found out. This much is certain: he made the bulk of his wealth during our war for democracy, so much money that he must have found it puzzling to devise ways of spending his income.

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He was not what you would call a cultured man, for he had absurdly ungrammatical lapses. Then there was the manner in which he furnished his apartment on Fifth Avenue, not far from the Public Library with its two supercilious looking lions out in front. But the fact that he was a very powerful person gave currency to his speech. His power was not physical (for he was shrunken, stoop-shouldered, and nearly bald); it lay in the hard, brilliant light which shot from his old green eyes.

It is very likely that he took to old books, not from a love of literature, but from an avaricious desire to have a corner on something that was exceedingly scarce; and that this urge came to him after his reaches had reached the peak of their pyramid. Not content with rarity, he made his precious objects still more rare.

As you entered his apartment (he had several rooms with a fine view, from the top floor, of an expensive office building), the pall of nothing but wine-colored plush came over you. The thick hangings before the windows were of that shade and material; likewise the portieres, the huge cushions, the heavy rug, and the fat chairs. Never rising to greet you when you came in, he sat in the most obese of the chairs, his skinny figure arrayed in a wine-colored dressing gown with cord and tas-

sels. It was open across the chest, showing the immaculate bosom of a stiff shirt, the glossy lapels of a dinner coat, and a reddish, scrawny neck.

He had a button near his chair which he used to summon his Negro valet. And he could push this button without your noticing that he had moved. "Evenin'", he would greet you in his rasping, unsteady voice; and before you had got seated the valet would appear with a tray on which stood a decanter and two glasses. It was good liquor and worth going after. Tawny liquor, a proof of what the mystery of nature and the genius of man can do. And as you drank, you felt the butler-valet hovering near, but not too near. He was a huge, sleek-headed man with a blobby nose and massive shoulders. His black eyes were always swimming around in their pools of white as if they would tell of things which his lips were afraid to speak.

Between drinks, the tenacious old devil would show you his books. "See this 'un? . . . Forgot," he would mumble. "Reckon I showed you that", he would end as he removed a first edition of *Elsie Venner* out of the revolving bookcase which stood at his right hand.

Yes, you had seen that one. The binding was rough to the touch and there were two rows of ir-

regular diamonds running along the cover. Very appropriately, it was bound in the skin of rattlesnakes. You also had seen the veritable whaleskin binding of the first edition of *Moby Dick*. And the exotic feathers, artfully placed, which made the cover for *Green Mansions*. You had already mused over the flaming "A" which had been worked into the heavy brocade with which *The Scarlet Letter* was bound. You had also seen the tigerskin binding of an early copy of Blzac's *Passion in the Desert*.

But now and again this ardent old bibliophile had something strikingly new to show you. As when he added *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the silky hide of a coal black cat to his library. Or when he brought out a copy of *The Idiot* encased in Russian banknotes of several generations ago. Those sights (and the liquor) recompensed you for being shown such obvious acquisitions as *Beautiful Joe* in dogskin, *Black Beauty* in horsehide, *The Origin of the Species* in the covering of an ape . . .

What trouble and pains he went to in order that his passion might be satisfied! One evening, after the customary greeting from his armchair and the customary drink

from the glistening decanter, he reached toward his revolving case and his skinny fingers closed over a new volume.

With a gloating laugh and a shrewd, appraising look at the story he said, "You've not seen this one yet— not by a long shot", and handed it over.

There was a curious feel to the book. The binding was a kind of leather, but not recognizable. It felt thin and crackly, and was of a livid gray as if it had faded from black. There was a sort of crinkly quality about it. Also something eerie and offensive. The title page disclosed the words:

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN
 or
 Life Among The Lowly
 by
 Harriet Beecher Stowe

A hurried glance up toward the obsequious valet revealed the fact that either he had lost all resemblance to himself or else that there stood another man, a thin, bent, somnolent-eyed person.

That old man. As the book writhed to the floor he merely sat there and dryly chuckled, with an overtone of ghoulishness. The old — the old — the damned old bibliophile!