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The Black Castle

By MARC R. SCHORER *and* AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE black castle high up on the cliff stood solitary and lone, silhouetted against the moon. By day the castle was prominent, but by night, in the full moonlight, it was much more so. It stood in relief; there were no trees, only a few shrubs that grew along the irregular sides of the mountain. To the fore the cliff was sheer, and, topping this declivity, the ominous structure looked malefically down upon the little village of Cheveaux. The village was completely enveloped in shadow, for the moon had not yet risen to a sufficient height to diminish the broad shadow of the mountain. Every soul in the peaceful village was in repose under the pleasing mantle of darkness upon it. The village was like a picture by an artist: all in darkness save a few thin wisps of smoke spiraling from several chimneys and rising until they were caught in the light of the moon streaming down upon the plain from above the castle, then dispersing and vanishing into the crisp air.

In sharp contrast to the calm of the exterior a grim drama was being enacted within the castle. In a large room in one of the turrets of the château the aged Count de Cheveaux sat at a ponderous oaken table. The moon cast a patch of light upon the floor, which, aided by the flickering gleam of the flambeaux in their brackets on the table and the fitful light from the flames of the fire in the grate, served to light up a portion of the room.

The room was almost bare. The walls, save for a coat-of-arms above the fireplace and a faded portrait of an ancient ancestor of the de Cheveaux exactly opposite it, were devoid of ornamentation. The painted figure in the portrait gazed with great dignity at the coat-of-arms as if in approval. The floor likewise was bare of decoration. A few cumbersome chairs situated at the two entrances of the chamber gave the room an atmosphere of heaviness, of gloom. The firelight played upon a great skin stretched out upon the stone floor before the grate, and the gleaming teeth in the head of the pelt shone malevolently. The sputtering flambeaux on the table disclosed the count's pale features and made evident the extreme agitation that held him in its grasp. His face twitched oddly and his hands trembled; he looked as if he were suffering from the palsy. He was writing, but not of his own volition, for his hand moved steadily and unhesitatingly across the parchment upon the table, while his glaring eyes were fixed with fierce intensity upon the lines of writing. There were no sounds in the room save the crackling of the flames in the grate, the scratching of the pen upon the parchment, and the occasional eery sputtering of the flambeaux.

Suddenly the hand quavered and ceased its motion; and the count seized the opportunity to re-read what had been written. His throat became dry and a violent trembling

shook his body as he read the lines his hand had written:

"Monsieur, I am here. I, Armand Champoy. I have come to speak to you tonight through my sole medium, your pen and hand. Does Monsieur remember me? My astral self gazes complacently down upon you. Perhaps, if Monsieur can not recall my name, he can bring to mind an incident of twelve months ago when he so calmly compelled me to dispose of my material self to favor his fortunes? Ah, Monsieur does, I perceive by his agitation! My widow suffers from the cold, Monsieur; my children starve, and I am helpless here. But you, ah, Monsieur, you cower about your fire in company of that simple-minded son of yours. Ah, Monsieur, you *live* life. But then, I have nought to complain about; I am free and can taste no ills; it is because of my mortal widow and my suffering children, Monsieur, that I complain.

"I can not help them, Monsieur. But—I can avenge the wrongs you have done them. The wrongs, Monsieur, that you have done for gold. I can avenge innumerable sins committed for the sake of your fortunes. Does it seem foolish to you, Monsieur, that I should be writing this? That I, an astral, should threaten vengeance? But it should not, for those black blots, those books on sorcery on your shelves have taught you overmuch. Yet you may wonder how I can avenge the wrongs you have done, Monsieur, and I shall tell you."

The hand started to move again and the count followed his pen with his eyes.

"It is simple, Monsieur, so simple. A rare experiment, Monsieur. Simply this: For a twelvemonth I have been gathering knowledge upon varied subjects, and my field is unbounded. Your son, Monsieur, has been a resident of this gloomy castle since he can remember, and his brain is crude and his soul is unrefined. But I, Monsieur, I am strong; my mind excels in all, Monsieur, but I have no body, and also, Monsieur, I seek revenge. My abode is here, here by your side, Monsieur. My solution is this. Day by day, night by night, I will cast my superior power against your son's feeble will. I will drive out his astral body, his soul, Monsieur, and I will enter and possess his body. Then, Monsieur, I will kill you, brutally, unhesitatingly, as you deserve."

The writing ceased, and the count could move his hand at his will. He stared at the mute evidence of the astral. Suddenly he rose, and with an angry snarl he cast the parchment from him into the hungry flames in the grate. He rubbed his hands across his eyes, futilely endeavoring to blot out the words that danced maliciously before him. He clasped his fists and glared angrily into the fire. Slowly he turned, walked toward the main corridor of the castle, and was swallowed up in the thick darkness.

IT WAS two weeks later. The young Count de Cheveaux had acted strangely that day. His father had noticed this, and it impressed him. He pondered long upon it as he sat alone in his chamber. The more he tried not to think of the parchment which he had so vehemently thrown from him two weeks ago, the more he thought of it and associated it with his son's strange behavior. The astral of that Champoy was getting in its fine work, mused de Cheveaux. He could see no way to stop it; for once in his life the Count de Cheveaux was helpless. The thought unnerved him.

One day, some time later, the elder count observed his son watching him covertly through half-closed eyes. He thought at once of Armand Champoy. His son was twirling a heavy walking stick and he had been staring at his parent out of the corners of his eyes. The elder count frowned heavily at his son, but the latter seemed not to notice. However, he removed his gaze and placidly continued to twirl his cane. The incident bothered the count not a little, and soon he went to his library to consult his store of books on the black arts.

The winter slipped by and spring came. The village of Cheveaux was busy as a hive of bees. From the

other side of the mountain towering above the village came the rushing, roaring sound of a great waterfall as it tumbled down the mountainside from crag to crag, from ledge to ledge, until it struck the plain with a great noise and went rushing off to water the fertile fields of the peasants. The birds were nesting, and the early spring flowers were beginning to force their way up through last year's leaves. The snowbanks were almost all gone; only here and there on the sides of the mountain a few were visible, and they too were fast melting under the warm rays of the April sun.

But inside the castle all was not so calm. The old count was pacing to and fro in his library. He was uneasy, and he had good cause to be so, for his books of black magic could not aid him in the predicament in which he now found himself.

A week ago his son had been taken ill. This was after a gradual decline. His illness could not be diagnosed; it seemed as if the patient was overcome by weariness, although he had never exerted himself to any harmful extent. For some time he lay in a coma, then suddenly he emerged and manifested a wish to rise. He had done so, healthier in mind and in body. At any other time it would have been a perfectly natural occurrence, but now the aged count thought continually of Armand Champoy and his threat. His son did not seem the same to him. His actions were so strange, so alien, so utterly foreign to his nature.

The elder Count de Cheveaux was very perturbed over an incident that had occurred during the day. His son had removed a long-bladed stiletto from its rack in the library and had taken it to his chamber. The count knew, because he had watched him, had stealthily followed the youth and observed his every action.

THAT night a storm broke over the castle, shattering the placidity of the little village of Cheveaux, and for the first time the elements were in agreement with the life within the castle.

The aged count's mind was in a turmoil, but one thought stood out above the agitated throng—his son was about to kill him; of that he was sure. That Champoy had succeeded in his evil purpose of possessing the body of his son during his recent illness. And he was brooding, brooding on the dreadful course that presented itself to him as his only alternative.

At length he came to a conclusion, and with guilty steps he withdrew from the room. A flash of lightning revealed him stepping through the doorway, and his hand clutched a stiletto, the companion of the one his son had concealed in his chamber. He groped his way up the stone stairway, and with each step his purpose became firmer. He would fool that Champoy, thwart him at his vengeance. At his son's doorway he paused and clutched the weapon a little tighter. He listened for sounds, but he heard nothing save the regular breathing of his son within. He pushed the door before him and slipped quietly into the room where his son slept.

The count emerged from the doorway, and his hand was empty. Silently he trod down the stone steps, and quietly he resumed his seat in the library. The storm was becoming more violent with the passing of the hours. Idly he picked up the quill before him and toyed with it. He had thwarted Champoy at his own purpose. He smiled exultantly. But these thoughts were rudely interrupted and his hopes were shattered, for suddenly he felt his fingers tighten on the pen, and involuntarily his

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The Black Castle

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hand moved toward a piece of parchment before him.

"So, Monsieur, you think you have thwarted me. Your imagination plays you pretty tricks; you have killed your son because of them. I, Monsieur, have never left the ether, and yet I have my vengeance. But, Monsieur, if you think for one moment that you have escaped your death tonight, you delude yourself, for die tonight you will!"

The count stared at what had been written and a cold perspiration broke out upon his forehead.

Outside the storm raged furiously. The count tore the parchment into pieces and scattered them upon the floor. He ran to the window and shook his fist at the sky and cursed the God who had made him. And, as if in answer to that curse, the clouds parted and a streak of lightning reached out toward him.

From the village below, the people saw the lightning strike the castle. They saw a turret crumble to ruins and come crashing down the steep cliff to the plain, and heard a terrible cry echo and re-echo through the night.

And some affirm to this day that they heard very distinctly a mocking laugh carried along by the wind above the roar of the gale.