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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Blue Room

By GORDON PHILIP ENGLAND

*The story of a haunted chamber and a fatal hoax*

**P**OLLOCK scowled. His long, slender fingers, adeptly manipulating the euchre deck, betrayed a degree of nervous tension. He wished that Creighton and Duquette, at the table opposite, would hold their tongues. Ever since the two had entered the 77 Club half an hour before, they had been chattering like magpies. And the tommyrot they were spouting hindered him from concentrating upon his game of solitaire.

But, despite Pollock's wishes, the conversation at the other table continued unrelentingly.

The big, blond Englishman bent forward, his steel-blue eyes boring the fascinated black ones of the swarthy-faced little Frenchman. His voice was solemn:

"Yes, Duquette, I used to doubt, myself—but that was before I leased Doom Manor. After living there awhile, the

most pronounced skeptic would be convinced."

Duquette nodded sober agreement.

"True, *mon ami*. I myself was skeptical until I saw your so-horrible Blue Chamber. But, after viewing it, and studying the records, only a fool would remain incredulous. *Moi*, Joseph Napoleon Duquette, I am no coward. Without fear of contradiction, I assert that I am as brave as the next fellow. Yet—name of a green monkey!—I would not sleep in that room—not for all the wealth of India."

Creighton blew a reflective smoke ring.

"And I don't blame you. A pity for Adams that he couldn't have been as discreet! Sad case, Adams. I really almost hated to take his money, after what happened. But a bet's a bet."

"Yes, certainly. Besides, Adams will

not miss the two hundred pounds. He is still in the sanitarium, is he not?"

Creighton flipped his cigarette stub into an ash-tray. His voice grew reminiscent:

"He must be; I haven't heard of his being released. When we found him he was a raving maniac. You could hear his screams from within the cottage, quarter of a mile away. I have always believed it was after the sixth shot that he went mad."

Duquette twirled his wax-ended black mustache.

"Ah, yes. And his automatic was empty, you say?"

Creighton made a silent sign of affirmation.

"But of course," Duquette shook his head gravely, "to attempt to shoot an apparition is the height of imbecility. For against a specter, you comprehend, bullets are useless."

"Of course. But Adams was a skeptic, you know. More—he was a dead shot. He had absolute faith in his ability as a marksman. And—to do him justice—he must have kept his nerve well up until the last. Six of the bullet holes in the wall are within a small radius, at about the height of a woman's heart. It was only the seventh, last shot, that went wild. That is why I think it was after the sixth that he cracked."

"Doubtless you are correct. Well, as you remarked, *mon ami*, it was a sad business. At least, however, Adams' fate has had a salutary effect upon other unbelievers. No one has taken you up on the bet again, I understand."

Creighton's laugh was scornful.

"No fear. No one would have the nerve."

**B**Y NOW Pollock was distinctly annoyed. Suddenly, he threw down his cards and sprang to his feet. He

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strode wrathfully across to the other table.

"Look here," he began hotly, "I couldn't help hearing your conversation. Now, let me introduce myself. I'm Jimmy Pollock. And I kick every black cat out of my way, walk under ladders regularly, smash thirteen mirrors a year just for luck—and spill salt at least once a week. What I mean, gentlemen, I don't believe in disembodied spirits, apparitions and such balderdash. If this chap Adams you were gassing about shot seven times at your dashed spook and registered seven misses, he must have been a rotten shot. There never was a ghost yet that a bullet wouldn't kill!"

Creighton and Duquette exchanged significant glances; then the former addressed the interrupter frigidly:

"Let me be sure that I understand you, my friend. You say you are a skeptic. A disbeliever in returned spirits?"

Jimmy Pollock thrust out his hard, lean jaw aggressively.

"Ghosts are bunkum!"

"A large statement, and one you'll find it difficult to prove. Well, put up or shut up!"

"Eh?" Pollock blinked at him.

"Put up or shut up," repeated Creighton. He drew a hand from his pocket and threw down on the table a two-hundred pound note. "If you're ready to back up your boast, cover that. My friend Duquette here will hold the stakes."

Pollock drew out his own billfold. He extracted a matching note and fingered it tentatively.

"What are the terms of the bet?" he rasped.

"The same as with Adams," explained Creighton. "You will arrive at Doom Manor at eleven next Friday night. It will be, I may mention, Friday the thirteenth. But, of course, as you are not superstitious, that little item won't inter-

est you. You will, upon arrival, accompany me to the Blue Room, and after you have examined it thoroughly I shall lock you in. There will be a portable telephone connected with Jasmine Cottage, and Duquette or myself will be ready to answer a call at any time. You will have no light except the moon-rays filtering in through the iron-barred window. If you like, you can keep that window partly raised, so that if you start to scream as Adams did, we can hear you at the cottage.

"I'll give you a .45 automatic containing seven cartridges. If you remain in the room overnight without calling or phoning for help, and come out at six next morning alive and well, you win the wager. If, however, you summon assistance, go off your head, or are found dead, you forfeit your stake. . . . Well, how about it? Are you game?"

Pollock thought for a moment. Creighton noticed his hesitation. He laughed contemptuously.

"Oh, of course, if you're afraid——"

Pollock cut in sharply: "Afraid? Don't make me laugh. Of course I'm not."

He slapped down his note upon Creighton's, then added another. "If you're not afraid yourself, Creighton, cover that. I'd like to get back what you took from poor Adams, as well. . . . Right! Now, bring on your spook!"

**A**T FIVE minutes to eleven on the following Friday night, Creighton and Duquette stood on the porch at Jasmine Cottage staring down the drive. Creighton broke the silence:

"You think he'll really come?"

Duquette nodded with conviction.

"Oh yes, he has nerve enough, I think. . . . Everything is prepared?"

"I think so. . . . Oh look, car lights! That must be our friend now."

Then Creighton uttered an exclamation.

"Oh yes, I forgot. The automatic. I put it away after filling the magazine this afternoon, you know—in the top left-hand drawer of my desk. Better run up and get it, while I welcome our ghost-hunter."

"*Bon*. I will join you at the manor-house."

So while Creighton went out to greet Pollock, the little Frenchman hurried up to his friend's room for the pistol. Without troubling to snap on the switch, he felt his way across to the desk, opened the drawer, and took out the automatic. With a grunt of satisfaction, he pocketed it.

Bounding down the stairs, Duquette hastened up to the manor-house, where he found the other two men awaiting him.

"Well," said Creighton, "I think we are ready. Shall we inspect the room immediately?"

"Suits me." Pollock was laconic.

Creighton silently led the way up some stairs. At the end of a corridor lay the Blue Room. He snapped on the single light.

"Well, here we are," he observed briskly.

Pollock glanced about him. The room—a fairly large one—contained a large four-poster bed, beside which was a small stand holding the telephone. Upon a side wall opposite the bed hung a hideous full-length picture depicting a bloody-handed spectral figure in the act of strangling a child. This horrible painting might have shaken the nerves of the superstitious, but to the skeptic appeared merely disgusting.

"The johnny that perpetrated that atrocity," he remarked caustically, "must have had a bad case of the D. Ts. . . . I suppose the books go with it."

As he spoke, Pollock stepped across to a well-filled, built-in book-case. He glanced carelessly at a few of the titles. All were decidedly suggestive. *Uncanny Yarns, Tales of Wandering Spirits, The Headless Cavalier*—and the like.

At random Pollock pulled out a book (it was *Bedtime Tales*) and opened it. The first words to catch his eye were these:

The screams continued for some minutes, while the terrified servants battered frantically at the heavy oaken door, then died into a faint but no less horrible gibbering. When finally the domestics broke in they found their master squatting in the chimney-corner mouthing imbecilities. So white had grown his hair—raven-black an hour before—that they scarcely recognized him. But it was his forehead that held their attention most. Across it was the imprint of a woman's blood-stained hand. It——"

Pollock snapped the book shut and returned it to the shelf. From behind him sounded the lugubrious voice of Creighton:

"Perhaps, Mr. Pollock, you are unacquainted with the history of the Blue Room? Doom Manor, so tradition says, was owned five hundred years ago by Sir Austin Fairholm. The knight married a girl named Ann Fenriss, whose mother was reputed to have been a witch. On her wedding night Ann, in a fit of insane jealousy, strangled Sir Austin as he lay asleep; then, cheating the hangman, hanged herself inside this clothes closet." Creighton pointed to a gaping empty doorway at the farther end of the room. "If you will step inside, you will see the large steel hook in the rafter overhead. It was from that that they found the body suspended."

Creighton's voice sank to a hollow whisper:

"Every night, between midnight and dawn, the apparition is said to appear. If by any chance anyone is asleep in the

bed, the specter strangles him, then hangs itself from the hook, where it remains until daybreak."

Pollock forced a laugh.

"A female strangler, eh? Say, it looks as if I'd get my money's worth."

CREIGHTON and Duquette looked at him solemnly, without speaking. Their expressions were so unpleasant that, in spite of himself, the skeptic knew a moment's uneasiness. He covered his momentary qualms with another laugh.

"Well, if you have finished with your childish exhibits, suppose we get down to business." He drew an official-looking document from his breast pocket. "Here, if you two will just witness to this, please. Nothing like having everything regular, you know."

"Why, what's this?" Creighton took the paper suspiciously. Coolly Pollock explained:

"Oh, just a little formality. Merely a statement of the terms of the wager, and your promise that if my bullets do any mischief I shall not be held responsible. I want you to understand, gentlemen, that if I do see any unknown moving object in this room tonight I will shoot. Any human being who tries impersonating your lady strangler will do so at the risk of his own skin!"

Creighton smiled.

"No fear, Mr. Pollock. I can see that you are a determined—although sadly mistaken—young man. And neither my friend nor myself has any intention of serving as a pistol target. No, no, my dear fellow, if you are visited by an apparition tonight, I can guarantee that it will be a genuine specter. And if you want to blaze away at it, why, go ahead. Your bullets won't have much effect, though, I'm afraid. You can see where Adams' went."

He waved his hand meaningly toward a number of bullet-holes in the wall opposite them. Pollock's gaze followed thoughtfully. He noted that, as Creighton had observed at the London club, the seventh bullet had gone wild. Involuntarily he shuddered, but quickly recovered.

"Well, then, if you'll just sign, please."

"Oh, by all means, by all means." Hastily, Creighton scrawled his signature; then Duquette followed suit. Pollock took back the paper, waved it in the air to dry the ink, then nodded with satisfaction and slipped the folded document into his pocket.

"Thank you very much, gentlemen. Well, I think I'm ready, then. But—hold on a minute. What about that gun?"

"Duquette will give it to you before we leave," assured Creighton. "But first, another small formality. You're not allowed matches, you know, nor other means of making a light. Just to make certain that you haven't accidentally overlooked any such forbidden articles, you won't object to our searching you?"

They searched very thoroughly, finding no matches, but unkindly confiscating an efficient cigarette-lighter; then they stood back, smiling.

"Well," growled the skeptic, "I hope you're satisfied. And now, one question, please. Suppose I shoot this dashed apparition—and kill it? What shall I do then?"

Creighton smiled superiorly.

"My dear fellow, you *can't* shoot a ghost. It simply isn't done, you know."

Pollock's answering smile was unpleasant.

"No? Well, gentlemen, I am a sure shot, and if an apparition shows itself, I will shoot to kill. In the eventuality that I am successful, what am I to do?"

"Oh, in that case," returned Creighton

airily, "you can call us on the phone and inform us. But, if you do, in order to win the bet you'll have to produce your victim."

"Fair enough. . . . Here, what are you doing with that light?"

For Creighton was coolly starting to unscrew the electric bulb.

"Wait!" snapped Pollock sharply. "I want that gun!"

Duquette flashed faultlessly white teeth.

"A thousand pardons, *monsieur*. I had almost forgotten." He drew the pistol from his pocket with a flourish. "A most efficient weapon, complete with a fresh clip of cartridges." He tendered the automatic with a mocking bow.

"Fair enough," repeated Pollock, pocketing the pistol with an air of supreme contentment. "Well, then, gentlemen, I needn't detain you any longer. See you in the morning."

THE skeptic heard the grate of the key in the lock, the click of the bolt, then a sound of retreating footsteps. After that there was nothing but ominous silence.

As he turned to go over to the bed, Pollock's gaze fell upon the picture. With a startled exclamation, he leapt back.

Little wonder the ghost-hunter was startled. The forms in the portrait had undergone a horrifying transformation. Hideous under the electric light, they were a hundred times more so in darkness. An unearthly light seemed to emanate from the picture faces, and the eyes of the ghost strangler glowed like balls of flame.

For some moments Pollock gazed at the ghastly figures in horrified fascination; then, suddenly, he laughed shakily.

"By Jove, that surely fooled me for a minute," he admitted to himself frankly.

"Of course, though, the explanation's simple. Those beauties touched up the figures with some kind of phosphorescent paint. . . . No wonder that poor devil Adams went mad!"

Now that he understood the trick, the picture did not seem so terrifying; so, turning his back upon it, Pollock went over to the bed. He sat down upon it and waited.

Minutes passed. Pollock caught himself listening. Of course any apparently spiritual manifestation this night would be the work of human agencies. On the other hand, there was something he distinctly disliked about the whole atmosphere of the place. He never had fancied such ancient houses much, anyway. A great deal must have happened here since the building had been erected. Could that story about the female strangler be true? Of course it might be. Horrible things of such a nature had occurred in other houses in medieval times, so why not in Doom Manor?

Something stirred and groaned in a corner of the room. Pollock held his breath and waited. Presently he heard a strange, rustling sound. It seemed to come from the clothes closet.

The skeptic drew out his automatic and pointed it toward the empty doorway. But now all was still again.

Pollock clutched his gun tighter and waited. Five minutes passed . . . ten . . . fifteen. But nothing moved again. The ghost-hunter laughed mirthlessly.

"I must have been just hearing things. There wasn't anything."

Then he started. As if to belie his assertion, he heard the thing again. But this time the apparition grew more versatile. After uttering a hollow groan, it clanked a chain.

Then again all was silent. Pollock cursed softly.

"By the lord Harry," he exclaimed,

his voice oddly shrill and tremulous, "I'm going to have a look in that closet!"

Resolutely, Pollock groped his way over to the doorway. Pistol in hand, he stood a few feet from the entrance, waiting for the thing to show itself. But all remained silent as the tomb.

The skeptic waited a few moments longer, then cautiously advanced. Something was in that clothes closet. Either that, or else his imagination had been tricking him. He went closer to that empty, gaping doorway. Still no sound. Then he crept over and peered in. He saw nothing. Growing bolder, he stepped inside the closet and felt about it.

*But the closet was empty!*

THE very emptiness of the place unnerved the skeptic. His groping hand came in contact with the steel hook. Its feel sent an involuntary shudder through him. All at once, the closet seemed alive with horrors from the past.

"Ugh," shuddered Pollock, "I don't much like the feel of this place. Maybe the girl did hang herself here. . . . I'm going back to bed."

He was only half-way there when the thing groaned again. He whirled about and made a rush for the closet, only to find it empty again.

Once more the ghost-hunter retreated to the four-poster. Before long came the noise of the clanking chain, then again that ominous, nerve-racking silence.

Pollock was beginning to feel desperate.

"Look here," he called, trying to make his voice sound stern and authoritative, and feeling miserable; "I don't know who's making that unholy row, but you'd best not let me see you. You poke your ugly spook face out of that clothes closet—and I'll pump it full of lead!"

After that, no further sounds issued from the closet. Half an hour crawled

by, but the thing did not return again.

Pollock began to feel complacent. "That's fixed them," he thought. "They realize I'm a dangerous man and mean business. Well, since they've gone away, I'll see if I can't get a bit of sleep."

Slipping the automatic under his pillow, the skeptic pulled up a blanket over him, and shut his eyes. At first the remembrance of the happenings of the night kept him wide awake, but gradually he grew drowsy. Presently he slept. . . .

Exactly how long Pollock slept he couldn't have told, but suddenly he awoke. His eyes popped open. Horror-stricken, they fastened upon something in the center of the room.

It was a tall, white figure. As it glided forward toward the bed its chain clanked harshly. Then slowly it stretched out its arms. Its long, slender fingers clenched and unclenched, working nervously.

The apparition glided closer. By the phosphorescent glow emanating from the picture, and the pale moon-rays shimmering between the window-bars, the man in the bed could see it with horrible distinctness. Its hands continued to weave the air in that hideously suggestive fashion. Then the creature bent, as if about to spring.

Now convinced that this was not a nightmare but an awful reality, Pollock went into action. His hand slid beneath his pillow, drawing out his automatic. He sat up and pointed it. Although icy fingers of dread seemed clutching at his heart, his hand was steady as a rock.

"See here," the sound of his own voice startled him, "you'd better scram. I'm a dead shot, I am. Just one step nearer, mister ghost, and you're a dead spook. Dead as a leg of mutton!"

But the ghostly intruder did not appear frightened. It clanked its chain

menacingly, and the long fingers continued those suggestive choking gestures. Again the thing prepared to advance.

Pollock's voice was a hoarse croak:

"For the last time, now. I'm warning you!"

Unheeding, the apparition glided forward.

Pollock pulled the trigger.

A realistic scream ripped the air. The thing sprang upward, then hit the floor with a resounding thud. It lay sprawled in a silent, huddled mass.

Pollock stared incredulously. The thing remained motionless. The skeptic uttered a cry of exultation.

"By the lord Harry," he shouted, "I've killed the ghost!"

Cautiously, he slipped one foot to the floor, then the other. After all, the spook might be shamming. He advanced with still greater caution. He poked the mass gingerly with his toe. It had a horrible feel, soft and yielding.

With a scream, the ghost-killer leapt back. He grabbed for the telephone.

A moment more, and he was ringing the cottage. A Gallic voice answered mockingly:

"Are you there? So, *mon ami*, you have had enough."

"Is that you, Duquette?" yelled Pollock. "Come on over, for God's sake! I've shot the ghost!"

He heard a startled French oath, then the click of the receiver.

Presently came the sound of running feet. The key grated in the lock and Duquette bounced in, a flashlight in his hand.

At sight of the huddled shape on the floor, he recoiled in horror.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he screamed.

Pollock snatched the flashlight from his trembling hand. By the rays of the electric torch he saw what lay there: a white sheeted figure, with a chain about



its waist, and a slit-eyed hood over its head. The upper part of the front of the sheet was ominously red. A trickle of crimson oozed through a hole in the cloth.

WITH hands as shaky as Duquette's own, Pollock pulled off the masking hood, revealing the face of Creighton. The dull, glassy eyes stared up at the ghost-killer unseeingly.

Pollock felt suddenly sick. He reeled to his feet, his face twitching.

"The fool!" he said brokenly. "Why did he do it? I warned that I'd shoot."

Duquette was shaking like a man with ague.

"But it is impossible," he whispered hoarsely. "You cannot have killed him, *monsieur*. The bullets were blanks."

Pollock stared at him in amazement; then his face hardened. He was beginning to understand. On a sudden thought, he turned the light toward the closet. A glance showed him the truth. A portion of the back wall was slid aside, disclosing a secret passage.

"So it was all a trick!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "That conversation at the club was staged for my benefit. You swine planned to treat me as you had Adams, then to fatten on my money."

Then a puzzled look crept into Pollock's eyes.

"But—I still don't understand one thing. Those bullets in the wall. Surely, Adams couldn't have missed *every time*?"

Duquette was still staring at his friend's corpse. He answered mechanically:

"But those were blanks, also, *monsieur*. The bullet-holes? Bah! We fired those

shots *after* we had taken Adams from the room."

Again the Frenchman gazed amazedly at the body. As if to convince himself, he put his fingers to the wound; then, as he felt the blood, sprang back as though struck by an adder.

"But yes. He is dead, of a certainty. Name of a dog, but it is incredible! I myself saw him load the gun with blanks. Permit that I examine it, *monsieur*."

Silently Pollock handed over the weapon. Duquette inspected it unbelievably.

"But yes. These are real bullets. Yet—I saw him fill the magazine with blanks."

Wonderingly, the Frenchman turned the gun over in his hands. Suddenly, his face went white as milk. His legs gave way, and he sat down heavily upon the floor.

Pollock caught him roughly by the shoulder and shook him vigorously.

"Here," he exclaimed, "what's the matter, man? What is it?"

Duquette's eyes held unfathomable horror. When he spoke, his words reflected that expression.

"Listen, *monsieur*. Tonight, before you came, Creighton sent me up for the gun. It was in the left-hand drawer of his desk."

"In the left-hand drawer?" Pollock repeated the words uncomprehendingly.

Suddenly Duquette laughed—a mirthless, hysterical laugh.

"But yes, *monsieur*. . . . Creighton had two .45 automatics of the same make, with only the serial numbers different. This one must have been in the *right-hand* drawer. *In the dark I made the mistake!*"

