

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

A MAGAZINE of the



BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME IV

NUMBER 4

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1913, at the post-office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$4.50 a year in the United States; \$5.00 a year in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in our possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. Copyright, 1924, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company

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The CASE of the RUSSIAN STEVEDORE

by Henry W. Whitehill



IN MAKING this public statement of the facts, as I know them, in the matter of the death of Dr. Dinwoodie, I am actuated only by a desire to set at rest the many rumors which have been current since his horrible murder. The sad event was in itself sufficiently mysterious, but the wild and exaggerated speculations to which it gave rise are absurd.

My testimony at the coroner's inquest was so garbled by the newspapers that I hardly recognized it, and each reporter added his guess at the solution of the mystery to make it even more puzzling. It is to correct the many misstatements contained in the published versions of my testimony that I have prepared this brief resumé of the facts known to me. I include the queer incident of the Russian stevedore in the hope that it may suggest a clue to the mystery to some mind more analytical than mine. While I am morally certain it was his form I saw and his voice I heard, I may be mistaken. I confess that I can see no reasonable theory which will connect him with the doctor's death except the agitation shown by each at mention of the other. It is certain that in some way they were linked with each other long ago, but what the connection was I have no

idea. And if the Russian was responsible for his death—how? And why?

Dr. Augustus Dinwoodie, as everyone who reads must know, was probably the most famous surgeon in the world at the time of his sudden retirement. His wonderful work in plastic surgery—the surgery of replacing bones, of reconstructing tissues and, in some cases, entire organs—made him even before the war undoubtedly the most talked of man in his profession. No one can forget the furor created when he grafted an entire new cranium upon an idiot who had suffered from congenital malformation of the skull. The war gave him his opportunity. That American surgical wizard who replaced features, made new faces, even replaced parts of missing limbs, in the reconstruction hospitals in France has become almost a legendary figure.

About eighteen months ago, while still in the prime of life to all appearances, Dr. Dinwoodie was attacked by a mysterious ailment which neither he nor his many professional friends seemed able to diagnose. His bodily health seemed unaffected, but a strange nervous fearfulness beset him. He suddenly withdrew from his medical practise and secluded himself

from almost everybody. He was haunted by a desire to be away from other people, to be alone, to seek out far places, distant from men and civilization, a desire so intense that it amounted nearly to insanity. Of all his friends, I think I was the only one he cared to have about him. And that is why he came with me to my shooting camp up in the Maine woods.

Even there, miles away from the nearest human habitation, with no person about save the old guide and me, the fear was still upon him. I cannot describe just how he acted. The only way I can express it is that he acted as I imagine a man would act who had committed a great crime and feared discovery and pursuit. He appeared to be continually on the lookout for someone in our rambles in the quiet forest, his ears strained to hear an approaching footstep, his eyes upon every tree or hollow, as if he half expected an accuser to step forth and confront him. The least unexpected noise startled him beyond measure. And once, when I stepped into his bedroom to awaken him, I saw that he slept with a big automatic pistol within reach at his bedside.

In every other respect he appeared perfectly healthy-minded. He was the most brilliant conversationist I ever met, and his fund of experience and anecdote was extraordinarily wide. Many a night I sat until the heralds of daybreak surprized us, a fascinated listener while the doctor talked. But of the cause of his fear he never spoke.

THE Russian came into the matter in this wise: some five weeks or so after we had gone up to my Maine place I was called back to New York by a peremptory telegram to help straighten out a tangle that had arisen about one of our steamboats. It had been chartered by a group of foreigners for some purpose or other—I forget the exact details—which appeared to be perfectly legal and ethical, so

far as the papers showed, but just before she sailed, the boat was seized by the government as a filibuster. The boat and my troubles with the government have nothing to do with Dinwoodie's story except that I went down to the dock as she was unloading and saw the Russian.

I was watching the stevedores unloading when my attention was drawn to four men who were carrying a big case which, it turned out, was loaded with rifles. To be more exact, I was attracted by one of the four; for while three of them grunted perspiringly at one end of the case, the fourth easily held up the other. I was talking to Clancy, the wharf boss, at the time I pointed out the man with a question.

"A half-crazy Roossian, he is, I guess," replied Clancy, "at least his name sounds Roossian to me. An' he's as strong as anny four other dockwallopers of the bunch. I think he's a nut—an idjit or somethin' of the kind."

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"Well, he don't seem able to talk much," was the answer. "About all he can say in English so you can understand is his name, Gurul, or somethin' that sounds like it. He came up an' asked for a job a few days ago an' I put him to work. The boys didn't like the funny way he talked, so they started to kid him. Big Red Rafferty, over there, used to be the bully of the dock an' he started in to haze this Roossian fer the fun of it. The nut growled at him once or twice an' when Rafferty wouldn't let him alone he piled into him. It took eight of us an' a club to pull him off an' keep him from tearin' Red in two. Since then they let him alone. I'll call him over so you can hear the funny way he talks, sir."

The Russian (I call him that because Clancy did, not that I was sure of his nationality) came over in response to his wave. He was short and

squat, considerably below medium height, and he had the oddest shaped body I ever saw on a man, all trunk, one might say. His legs were so short they ended about where Clancy's knees were, and they caused him to walk with a peculiarly awkward rolling waddle. But his arms made up for the brevity of his legs. They hung from a pair of enormously wide shoulders and were so long they almost touched the planks of the wharf as he rolled over to us.

When he came nearer I saw the most repulsively ugly face I can ever remember looking upon. His nose was wide and flat and divided a pair of tiny, piglike eyes set as close together as the nose would allow. His jaws bulged noticeably, and when he opened his mouth he displayed a set of large, powerful, yellow teeth, which sat in his jaws with a conspicuous slant forward. The lips were thin and tightly drawn over the teeth.

But it was not his features alone that repelled me: it was his skin. It is rather difficult for me to describe it to you. It looked soft, pink, and without a trace of the tan which comes from work in the open air. Except for the light shade it looked like nothing more than the soft yet rough skin that covers a newly healed wound, in other words, a freshly formed scar faded nearly white.

"What is your name?" I asked.

He glared at me sullenly with his pig eyes and growled, "Me Abe Goril."

I wish I could picture that voice to you. The sound caused a thrill of horror to shake me. It brought to mind vague impressions of indescribable evil. It exuded foulness in its very tones. It was hoarse; it was guttural; but it was more. I remember reading one of Poe's stories in which he speaks of a voice as being "glutinous." That is as near as I can come to expressing how that voice impressed me. I suppose it sounds rather

foolish when I say it sounded like a thick, *gummy* growl; but I know of no other word which fits it.

"Are you a Russian?" I asked, as soon as I recovered my composure.

He glowered at me and uttered (I will not call it said), "No un'stan'. Me Abe Goril."

And that was about the sum of our conversation. Most of my questions he did not seem to grasp at all, and I could not understand the greater part of his replies. After a few futile attempts to elicit information, I decided that Clancy was right: the man was evidently not far from an idiot. I waved him back to his work. As he started to waddle away I said to Clancy, "What a queer specimen! I wish Doctor Dinwoodie could see him."

A throaty growl of rage brought me about instantly. The Russian had stopped at my words and was facing me with a snarl of fury on his lips. I was astounded at the change in his face. I hope I may never again see such a picture of hatred and malice as gleamed upon those repulsive features as he took a quick step toward me and barked, "Where doctor? I want see."

"Git out o' this," shouted Clancy as I gave back shuddering. "Git back to your work."

The Russian hesitated and then slowly shambled away. But as long as I remained on the dock I could see him unobtrusively watching me.

Of course, I wondered a good deal about the Russian (as I called him in my mind) and at the emotion he displayed when I mentioned a doctor. But when I returned to the shooting lodge a few days later a greater surprise met me. I told Dinwoodie about the strange character as part of the recital of the incidents of my trip. He uttered a gasp of horror when I described the stevedore and mentioned his name. I shall never forget the unutterable terror that flashed into

his face. He became so ghastly and faint that for a moment I thought he was going to collapse. Before I could spring to his side he had recovered himself and waved me back to my seat. He asked me several questions about the Russian and made me repeat every word of our conversation.

There was something about Dinwoodie's manner that kept me from asking him anything in return. I told him everything I could remember. He told me nothing. But the fear that hovered about him seemed intensified tenfold. He shivered at every sound and his hands trembled when he lifted food to his mouth. In fact, I doubt that he ate a mouthful of supper after my recital. And when darkness came he went from window to window to see that all were fastened, and personally inspected the locks on all the doors. Then he abruptly bade me good-night and retired to his room. I went to bed wondering what lay between the famous Dr. Dinwoodie and the Russian dock hand that could affect each so strangely at the mention of the other.

I REGRET to say that my curiosity was never satisfied. I am inexorably sorry now that I did not insist upon some explanation from my friend. If I had I might have been in a position to prevent the tragedy of last week, or at least to guess at the solution of the mystery. But next morning Dinwoodie, bearing every evidence of a sleepless night, told me he was going to leave. And in spite of my entreaties he did go that afternoon. The guide drove him to the nearest railway station and, so far as I was concerned, he disappeared from sight. For more than a year I heard nothing from him, and when I inquired for him on my return to the city, no one knew where he had gone.

This brings me to the happenings of last week. A party of us who are interested in water power sites in

these mountains came up to this little, out-of-the-way resort together.

You may imagine my surprise and delight when almost the first person I ran into at the hotel was Dr. Dinwoodie. Of course, we were more than glad to see each other again. After the greetings were over he told me that he had been a resident in the hotel for several months and had benefited greatly from the mountain air. His room was on the third floor adjoining mine overlooking the lake. We sat late that night talking over old times, but neither of us mentioned the Russian.

The next three days I was too busy to spend any time with him, but we promised ourselves some good old fishing trips (the lake and surrounding region is noted by a few wise anglers) in the trout streams on the mountain side.

We arrived at the hotel on Monday. It was Thursday evening that our business was finished and the company formed. We, the members of the company, had a little supper that night in honor of the event, and I am afraid that we forgot all about the prohibition laws.

About 11 o'clock I went out on the veranda for a breath of fresh air. My head was spinning rather dizzily as I wandered to the side of the veranda and looked at the moonlit waters of the lake.

While I stood there a man went by and turned down the path that leads to the rear of the hotel on the side away from the lake. I got just a glimpse of him in the half darkness when he passed through the light that shone from the dining-room windows, but I was struck by something oddly familiar in his awkward, shambling gait. Had I been perfectly sober I might have recognized him. As it was, I wondered vaguely who he could be, but soon dismissed him from my thoughts and went up to my room. I am quite sure my head had

no more than touched the pillow before I was fast asleep.

IT SEEMED to me that I had been asleep but a few minutes when I was suddenly awakened by the sound of voices in the room next to mine. I was only half awake at first: the heavy, dazed awakening of a person who has been drinking; and I lay for some time wondering what had disturbed me. Then I heard them again. I knew the tones; the thick, guttural, rolling tones unlike any other I had ever heard; but for the life of me I could not place them. I tried lazily to clear my mind, but could not arouse myself sufficiently to do so.

Then I heard Dr. Dinwoodie speak. Even in my dazed condition I could recognize the entreaty in his voice. He appeared to be vehemently pleading with some one. I heard him repeat several times, "But I made a man of you. You were a beast and I made a man of you." I am quite sure those were the words, because I wondered sleepily what he could mean.

Then I heard the first voice again. There was a continual rumbling of sound, but I caught only a word or two: "pain," spoken several times; then: "knife," and twice: "kill," the latter in an indescribable, shrill, yet guttural tone, which was almost a scream. It rasped my sleepy nerves and brought me to a sitting posture, shivering with repulsion.

In a flash I was wide awake. It was the unforgettable voice of the Russian stevedore. The shambling figure I had seen in the night from the porch below was the same I had watched waddling across the dock in New York.

At the same instant an appalling, blood-curdling shriek burst from the doctor's room. It was Dinwoodie's voice, but it had lost all semblance of human utterance; it was just stark terror and horror and dismay trans-

lated into tone. I sprang from my bed and rushed into the corridor. Other heads came out of opened doorways, and several men in night clothes, as was I, joined me before Dinwoodie's door. I tried the knob. The door was locked. From within the horrid screams, mingled with the sounds of furniture being smashed and bodies thrashing about in a struggle, came to us together with what sounded like the infuriated snarls of a wild animal. Suddenly the sounds of the struggle ceased and we heard a strange noise like a fist pounding upon a muffled bass drum, followed by a harsh, rumbling roar in that gummy voice I have tried to describe to you. Then dead silence.

By this time the hotel was awake. Several of us threw ourselves against the door and broke it in. The room looked as if a hurricane had swept through it. The furniture was smashed to bits and scattered in all directions. The floor, walls, even the ceiling, were sickeningly bespattered with blood. In the midst of the wreckage lay the pieces of Dr. Augustus Dinwoodie. I mean just what I say: pieces. He was literally torn to tatters, every limb wrenched from the trunk and the whole body horribly dismembered beyond description. You will remember that at the inquest the physicians said I was wrong in suggesting the Russian committed the murder because no human strength could possibly have accomplished what we saw.

Otherwise the room was empty. The side window was wide open, but outside it is a sheer drop of forty-five feet to the stony shore of the lake, with only a flimsy lightning rod on that side of the building. No human being could have escaped that way. And no one came out through the only door, which led into the hallway. We found the bloody imprint of an enormous hand upon the window sill. And that was all.