

Weird Tales

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The CELADON VASE

by John Murray Reynolds



"Ah, Madonna," he said slowly, "you come too late. Ser Nicolo will break no more vases."

THERE was but little light in the chamber of Messer Lorenzo Fiorelli, though a summer sun bathed the Emilian plain in a clear, ambient light and the snow on the peaks of the distant Apennines sparkled like sheets of quartz. It was always dim in that chamber, for Messer Lorenzo seemed to prefer to work in a murky twilight. Perhaps there is something about alchemy that prospers better in the shadows, but more likely it was but a survival of old habits—for the alchemist had once been a sorcerer and astrologer of note.

There had been a time when all Italy rang with the praises of one Sextus Sapientus, who practised necromancy, astrology and similar questionable arts in a dark and gloomy house in one of the lesser quarters of the Most Serene Republic. There

were few in Venice who did not pass through the heavy door of that house at one time or another, seeking either the subtle poisons dispensed by the learned mage or the equally subtle charms and amulets or—and these most frequent of all—news of what portents were held by the stars. Rumor had it that even the Ten themselves were not above consulting the mage upon occasion, and since he always assiduously denied this fact it is probably true.

Sextus All-knowing, to quote the name he had so modestly taken, had prospered greatly. Partly it was because he avoided dabbling in politics or other matters beyond his sphere, partly because he was chary of selling poisons and notably successful in the dispensing of love potions, and partly because he saved and used his money with wisdom worthy of a true

Venetian. The years had turned his dark hair white and impaired his hearing, but they had also brought him a sizable fortune. Now, under his true name of Lorenzo Fiorelli, he dwelt quietly in his Villa Sequestra on the outskirts of Ravola and gave his time to certain obscure studies.

Darkness had been an essential accompaniment of his earlier practises in that it put his patrons in a proper state of mind to view wonders and hear prophecies. It was alchemy that claimed him now, those delicate and subtle processes that attempt to transmute baser metal into gold, and old habits led him to choose a shadowy chamber that had but one small casement for his laboratory.

Messer Lorenzo sat at a table beneath this one window, writing busily on a broad sheet of parchment. He was robed all in black velvet, even to the skull-cap that covered his bald pate. The fur that bordered his robe and lined the broad sleeves was of the same sober color. A heavy gold chain circled his neck and carried a pendant that hung low on his chest—but this pendant was not the cross that might be so worn by a devout Christian. It was a strange and rather sinister symbol that gave a slight feeling of discomfort on close inspection. Though he had retired from the practice of magic, Messer Lorenzo was still a rather discomfiting man.

Long shelves lined the walls in the tapestried room, shelves stocked with a vast and disorderly array of phials and flasks, of coffers and chests, of retorts and crucibles, of strange bronze instruments for reading the stars and innumerable musty manuscripts. All the gear that had been essential to the magic of Sextus Sapiens was here, and all the adjuncts of that alchemy into which the mage now delved. Dust was thick on all things save those that had been recently used, for none of the servants ever entered this room. In fact, a lackey discharged from service at the

Villa Sequestra swore that he had heard Messer Lorenzo converse on the friendliest terms with his Satanic majesty in that very cabinet. The smell of brimstone had pervaded the house for a sevennight thereafter, said the lackey.

In one dim corner of the room a charcoal fire smoldered under a glass retort, the squat body of which glowed redly like the distended belly of a gigantic spider. A dark liquid simmered in the retort, and at intervals a drop fell from the end of the long neck into a waiting beaker. Evil things were spoken of those brews of Messer Lorenzo, and it was even hinted that—for a price—he would temporarily forget his resolutions to deal no more in magic.

Across the room was another spot of color where a second brazier of charcoal burned redly under a small crucible supported on a triangle. A lantern hung beside it and a prism concentrated the rays of this last and flung them through a purple screen down on to the shining substance that gleamed within the crucible. The mage had certain theories relative to the beneficent effect of colored light upon the process of transmuting metals.

On a small table by the door stood the most prized of the few artistic treasures the mage had collected—a tall vase of the finest celadon ware. Graceful and fragile, delicate and possessed of rare beauty, it had been given in gratitude for certain services by one too high-born to be mentioned. It was kept in this chamber lest one of the house lackeys break it.

THERE was no sound in the room except for the faint bubbling liquid in the retort and the scratching of Messer Lorenzo's quill as it traveled over the parchment, and then light footsteps sounded in the hall. The door swung open and a woman entered.

Young she was, and comely, with

her dark hair held in a jeweled net and her slim waist circled by a broad and richly ornamented girdle. Her scarlet dress seemed to illuminate the chamber with a radiance of its own, yet yielded nothing in warmth to the soft whiteness of the bosom it left revealed. Less than a third the age of her learned spouse was Donna Beatriz Fiorelli and as full of the joy of life as he was old and serene. She had been accounted the most beautiful of all the maidens of her native hamlet, but she had possessed no dowry and her parents had welcomed a marriage to the wealthy if somewhat antique alchemist. For Messer Lorenzo had decided that a wife was needed to ease his declining years.

"Messire!" said Donna Beatriz from the doorway, and then sighed. Her lord's hearing had grown far worse since they had been wed, until now he was as deaf as the bronze image that squatted on the table beside him. With a slight shudder—for this room always affected her unpleasantly—Donna Beatriz crossed the thick carpet with her lithe, quick tread and laid her hand on his shoulder. He looked up with that slight start common to the deaf.

"A woman called Fulvia who keeps a wine shop in the city is without and desirous of seeing you."

Messer Lorenzo had become adept at the reading of lips and could thus understand the speech of one directly before him. He now made an impatient gesture of one thin, bony hand.

"What does the woman want?" he said in his cracked voice which was void of all intonation.

"It seems that she has a child—a son—who has been stricken with some inflammation of the bowels and is near to death. She desires some remedy of you."

Messer Lorenzo looked longingly at the fair sheet of parchment upon which he had been writing and ran his thumb along the edge of his quill as though testing a knife.

"Let her go to some chirurgeon in the city," he said impatiently. "I have no time for such trifles."

Donna Beatriz shrugged her slender shoulders; it was clearly to be seen that the life or death of an unknown boy was of little moment to her.

"I suppose it was your great repute that brought her." She started to turn away but he stopped her with a gesture.

"Tell the woman to catch a rat alive, split its paunch open, and place it across the boy's belly with its head to the right—this last is important. The rat is naturally foul, and will draw into itself all the foulness of the disease."

The mage returned to his writing and Donna Beatriz carried the message to the woman Fulvia. She then passed out into the broad gardens which circled the villa, pacing the lawns and hedge-bordered walks with the slow tread of one who thinks on weighty matters. Her scarlet dress was a brilliant spot of color against the green of the hedges, and the jewels on her girdle sparkled in the sun. By a miniature lake upon the glassy surface of which two snowy swans floated in joyful reverie she paused to watch the approach of one who quickened his stride when he saw her.

It was Messer Nicolo d'Urvanti who traversed the gardens with so sure a step, he who was secretary to the mage. Lithe and debonair, it is small wonder that the secluded Donna Beatriz found pleasure in his company. An adverse critic might have said that Ser Nicolo's eyes were a trifle too close together and that his mouth was not that of one who is to be greatly trusted, but then—the sages have often warned against hasty judgments.

Something quick and eager about his stride warned her, and Beatriz held up a restraining hand.

"Take care, Nicolo; remember that

the window of my lord's chamber looks upon this part of the garden."

With all due dignity he paced at her side until they reached a secluded bower across the garden. The next instant she was in his arms, her head thrown back, her lips eager, her eyes half closed, her hair slipping from its nest and forming a sable mantle across her shoulders. From the alacrity with which Messer Nicolo took advantage of this condition it was manifestly not the first incident of the sort. However, it is scarcely just to think too harshly of the lady. She had seen but little of life, and this Ser Nicolo was a master of the *ars seducta*.

WHEN the sun was an hour lower Nicolo stood in the laboratory aiding his master in an experiment. Donna Beatriz appeared in the door and paused on the threshold, noting how the glow of the charcoal illumined the intent faces of the two men. For an instant the hand of the younger lingered in the beam of light that focused on the crucible—in the weird purple radiance it was like the hand of a corpse. Beatriz shuddered, and moved across the room to take a seat in the high-backed chair close to the casement. Finally the mage grunted and straightened up.

"It fails again, Nicolo, it fails again! There must be some subtle ingredient or some delicate process that we yet lack."

"Without doubt," answered the other, and then as Messer Lorenzo faced about and walked across the room Nicolo turned swiftly to Donna Beatriz. "In but a little while, my well beloved!" he said in a low voice.

"In but a little while!" she whispered back. Yet there was no need of whispering, for so deaf was Messer Lorenzo that he could not hear a single word. Much of the early love-making of these two had taken place in the mage's presence in this very manner. Then he turned back to

them, and they fell silent lest he read their lips.

"The experiment is ended for today, Nicolo, and I will no longer keep you." The secretary bowed, but as the lady rose the mage added: "But you, Madonna, remain." She and Ser Nicolo exchanged a single glance, and then the latter bowed again and departed.

MESSER LORENZO took the seat across the table from his spouse, resting his clasped hands before him. The skin of his hands was wrinkled and yellowed and the fingers were gnarled and thin, but she knew that their weakness was deceptive and that they held great strength. Her arms still bore bruises from the intensity of his grip when she had stumbled at his side a few days back and he had caught her from falling.

His pale eyes were fixed on her with a steady, unwinking gaze that she found most discomforting. She looked out the window, she strove to appear at ease, but the power of the man ever drew her gaze back to him and she felt that she was unaccountably pale. Suddenly he smote one hand on the table as though reaching a conclusion, then rose to his feet.

"There are things I will show you," he said, and walked over to one of the shelves in the dimmest corner. The tension was broken and Beatriz felt the color return to her cheeks. For an instant she pressed her palms to her eyes.

From the shadows of that far corner Messer Lorenzo brought out a coffer that the donna had never seen before, a bronze casket green with mold and thick with the dust of years. Setting it upon the table and resuming his seat he fingered the carving on the side, seeking some secret spring. As last he threw back the cover. The hinges squeaked like a trapped rat and a musty smell arose from within.

From the casket the mage took out an object wrapped in black velvet.

Placing it on the table between them he gently removed the shielding folds of the cloth and revealed a dagger, a long, keen blade of some strange metal that shone blue in the light from the casement. Intricate, cabalistic designs were lightly traced on both sides of the thin blade, but it was at the curiously shaped gold hilt that Donna Beatriz looked longest. The symbols and designs on that hilt were similar to but even more disquieting than the pendant that Messer Lorenzo wore around his neck, and with a slight shudder she raised her darkling eyes.

"What is it, Messire?"

"It is the dagger of Hassan Sabbah," he answered slowly, "he who is called the Old Man of Mt. Alamout. You will note the peculiar color of the blade, Madonna, and the strangeness of the hilt. Tradition has it that this blade is forged of a metal hitherto unknown to man and has the peculiarity of warning its owner of treachery."

Secure though she was in the knowledge that he could suspect nothing, Donna Beatriz paled slightly. Then she essayed to laugh.

"A quaint conceit! How came you by it?"

"It has been in my possession for some time," and he laid the knife on one end of the table. "Now there is one matter more," and he began to search among the great mass of varied articles contained in the coffer. All were thick with dust and he threw open the window to clear the air.

At last he pushed aside some moldy wrappings and drew out a necklace, a string of wondrous rubies that filled even that dim chamber with the charm of their latent fire. Donna Beatriz uttered a gasp of admiration and the mage shot her a single keen glance.

"'Tis the ancient and sacred necklace of the Amerites," he said. "There is magic in it. And it may only be worn safely by the most

chaste of virgins or the most faithful of wives. 'Take it, my love.'"

Now Donna Beatriz thought little of magic or portents, being of a practical turn of mind. She had been in no way troubled by the mage's claim for that blue-bladed dagger, and she now clasped the necklace around her slender throat without a tremor, but her lord's manner puzzled her. He was also a little disturbing, though she could not tell exactly what it was about him that troubled her. He was again rummaging in the casket when suddenly the door of the room opened.

Nicolo d'Urvanti, booted and spurred, stood in the doorway with his cloak over his arm. Donna Beatriz cast a swift look at her lord to make sure that he still sat with his back to the door, and then smiled at her lover.

"I have two horses saddled and ready at the eastern end of the garden," he said.

Scarcely moving her lips she replied, "Await me at the bower of the faun. I will soon come."

Ser Nicolo nodded and turned to go, and as he passed through the door a sudden vagrant gust of wind came in the open casement and swept his cloak in a fluttering arc so that it knocked the celadon vase from its stand and sent it crashing to the floor where it shattered into iridescent fragments. Donna Beatriz gasped, and the mage started so that he dropped the bunch of keys he held.

QUIET returned to the laboratory when Nicolo was gone, and Messer Lorenzo continued to burrow among the odd miscellany contained in the casket, but the woman sat staring at him with all trace of color gone from her face and her hands tight-clenched on the carven arms of her chair. He had jumped when the vase fell to the floor. He had *heard* it fall and break, and if he had heard *that*, then what else might not have reached his ears? What other things

that might not have shattered his iron control, as did the sudden loss of his beloved vase? His pretended absorption in the articles in the coffer did not fool her—it only increased her fear. If his hearing had but just returned he would have remarked it. The fact that he continued the pretense convinced her that he had heard many other things. Like the slow advance of a tide came the conviction that this deafness of Messer Lorenzo had all been feigned from the very first, had been but a trap, and she began to tremble from head to foot with paralyzing terror.

One thought was uppermost in the mind of Donna Beatriz—she must in some way escape from this ghastly chamber and warn Nicolo, who was waiting at the end of the garden. The belief that Lorenzo still thought his mask unpierced sustained her, and with a mighty effort she surmounted her fear—blind and unreasoning and therefore all the more powerful—and arose. The mage did not look up, and with every appearance of casualness Donna Beatriz passed from the room—with her body bathed in a chill moisture and her face like that of one who has seen a phantom. If he had spoken or called as she went her control would doubtless have failed her, but he seemed oblivious to her going.

Down the hall and the stairs and out through the portal of the house itself she held her way, walking swiftly but fearing to appear too hasty. Her spirits lifted a little as she went. Immediate flight was their only course, but at least they might easily put many leagues behind them ere the act was discovered.

Then Donna Beatriz stood in the garden itself, fragrant and pleasant, with the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun throwing long shadows across the smooth greensward. On her left was a long hedge, a mighty wall of green that extended unbroken the full length of the garden to the bower of the faun at the end. As she walked

beside this hedge her new-found courage left her and swift terror again returned, though the garden seemed deserted and peaceful. It was more than fear this time, for it verged on certainty that something—some horror she was powerless to prevent—was about to happen. Faster and faster went her flying feet, till at last she picked up her long skirts lest they trip her and began to run, flitting along close to the hedge like some graceful bird of scarlet plumage.

No one was in sight, but as she ran Donna Beatriz felt a growing conviction that she was not alone. On a sudden thought she bent down and peered through the hedge at the base where the trunks of the bushes made this possible. On the other side of the long barrier, paralleling her course and a few paces ahead, she could see the legs of a man in black—the legs of one who ran with a certain relentless purpose embodied in every movement.

Stark panic gripped her then and she ran like a hunted wild thing, with the hot breath hissing between her parted lips. Perhaps twenty yards from the end she twisted her foot and fell, rolling over on the grass and leaping to her feet immediately though one ankle pained like the scar of a flame.

The delay was but a few seconds, yet she knew that the race was lost. Her eyes grew dull, and even the fact that she knew what she must find did not keep her slender body from sagging as she passed the end of the long hedge and came to the bower of the faun.

A cool cup of greenery it was, with the dark encircling mass of another hedge behind it and the marble faun on its pedestal in the center. The level rays of the sinking sun tinged the head and shoulders of the faun with a ruddy light which seemed to give life to the old marble, but the rest of the bower was bathed in a

soft twilight. On the damp grass at the base of the statue, one hand still quivering but in all other respects as peaceful as though he slept, lay the lifeless body of Nicolo d'Urvanti.

Messer Lorenzo was standing a little to one side, toying with the chain at his neck.

"Ah, Madonna," he said slowly,

"you come too late. Ser Nicolo will break no more vases—nor rules of honor."

Through some chink in the surrounding hedge came a lone, vagrant ray of the sun that struck redly on the gold hilt of the dagger buried in the slain man's heart—a hilt of a strange and discomfoting design with a glimpse of blue metal below it.