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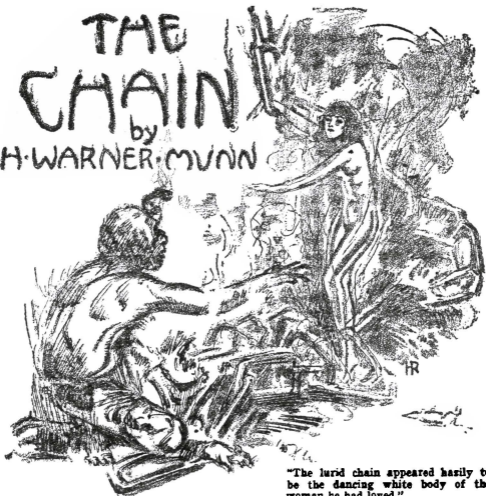
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THE CHAIN

by
H. WARNER MUNN



"The lurid chain appeared hastily to be the dancing white body of the woman he had loved."

Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the selfsame spot,
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot.
—Poe: *The Conqueror Worm*.

HIS first sensation, when he groaned back to consciousness, was that of bitter and intense cold. Then, becoming fully awake, he was aware of grinding pains in his body, as though each bone and muscle owned a separate ache. He shivered convulsively and opened his eyes.

It was very dark and he could see nothing around him, but high above there gleamed for a second a lurid,

ruddy glare, which flickered like leaping flames, then vanished—accompanied by a clang of metal, as though a furnace door had been opened and closed.

Puzzled, he listened but could hear no sounds, except a far, faint crackling like hemlock boughs snapping in a fire. His eyes ached with the strain of watching, and he closed them, too weary to move.

Where was he? Surely he must be dreaming in his bed at the castle of Rutzau, owned by his cousin Franz, and yet he seemed to be awake.

Ah, Franz the blockhead, Franz the cuckold; yet Franz the lucky, for

he was fortunate Franz with the beautiful wife!

What a joke it was on Franz, to be sure, that he should thus entertain his wife's lover so unsuspectingly! Perhaps his wits had been addled as well as his body smashed, when Franz had fallen from the cliff two years before. And the cream of the jest was that Franz had never known how the accident had come about, but still believed that the edge of the cliff had crumbled away beneath him!

How could a man be such a fool and live? No wonder that Olga despised her husband now!

The man chuckled at the thought, and sneezed violently. He must be taking cold; how came it that the bed was so damp and—hard?

He rolled over and his hands came in contact with rock, bare, icy and wet. He was shocked wide awake at once. Where in God's name could he be?

Abruptly, horror surged around in the dark and left him trembling.

Rock! Wet stone! Half-forgotten tales from the black history of Rutzau swarmed through his head.

If ever a castle were haunted by ghosts, it should be Rutzau if even a third of the stories that had been whispered about its torture chambers were true. Rumor spoke, with hushed breath and backward-roving eye, of deep pits and rooms cut in the solid rock that formed the castle's foundation; murmured, too, of men that had entered the castle and never returned—as men; told also of others who were not seen again, and guessed darkly at the reason; mentioned tortures under which men prayed to be placed upon the rack instead, regarding it as a pleasant couch in comparison to the bed of pain they lay upon.

Also there were whispers regarding rooms where dwelt the Iron Maiden, ever ready with insatiable crushing embrace for any victim; other rooms where the strappado, thumbscrews and the boot wrung truth or anything

that the master of Rutzau wished to know from lying tongues that would not reply to minor tortures but answered eagerly hoping their reward would be quick death as they underwent the Greater Question.

Too, he had heard of the oubliette, a pit with walls of sheer stone, peopled by the rats, fierce with hunger, to which men were flung living.

Could he be in the dungeons of Rutzau? Did Franz *know*?

He staggered to his feet, swaying with faintness. Again that lurid flare overhead, followed by the ominous clang, as though someone stoked a furnace in the air.

He began to run in the dark, drunkenly weaving from side to side. Almost at once he felt the impact of a tremendous blow upon his entire body and he was hurled backward, striking his head cruelly upon the ground.

Like a dog which has received an unexpected kick, he yelped with the pain and, upon hands and knees, scuttled crabwise backward. Soon he encountered another obstacle with his heels, which resisted further progress, and he stood up, reaching as high as possible with his hands. Nothing projected from the wall, which was smooth and slippery to the touch as his exploring fingers passed over its damp surface.

The wall was gently curved, and keeping his left hand upon it, he set out to follow whither it might lead him. He had taken nine steps when his hand plunged into vacancy and he stumbled.

The recess in the wall was not deep, but it was already occupied by a furry body that squealed and writhed under his hand and squirmed when he gripped it, setting sharp teeth into his thumb. He jerked his hand out of the hole, with the creature hanging from his thumb, holding tight with teeth and claws and a prehensile tail that wound snakily about his wrist.

With his other hand he loosened the claws one at a time, which fastened

elsewhere, while the teeth went on gnawing hungrily. Half crazed, he fought the thing that seemed bent on eating him in small mouthfuls, snarling while it chewed. He screeched like a beast when the teeth met through the fleshy portion of his hand and tore a bit away.

With his free hand he clutched the thing by the back and ripped it loose, battering it on the floor until it wriggled no longer; but his furious rage was not satisfied until he had torn it into ragged halves and hurled them, wet and flapping, from him.

He stood, breathing hard in great gasps, and something began to fight with another something not far away in the dark, squealing little wicked cries.

Something ran across his bare feet and he kicked at it, but struck the wall instead. He cursed vehemently and, limping, resumed his journey along the wall. The wall was at his left, the clamor of a bloody quarrel at his right. Yet as he advanced, the row did not lessen with distance, but continued undiminished so that an ugly worm of fear began to crawl in his brain—a thought which he dared not allow himself to dwell upon.

When his hand again entered an opening in the wall and the squabbling over the dead beast was no farther away, he could no longer deny the fearful fact. He was in the oubliette!

For a third time the heights glowed red from an unseen fire, and again followed that solemn boom like a funeral bell tolling dismally one—a long pause—two and three—and from above a shower of small glittering particles rained down—a sparkling hail.

Many went dark before they reached the floor, but others, larger than the rest, shone like fireflies as they fell, and stretching out his hand he caught one in his palm.

With a cry of pain he dropped it.

It was a hot coal, a red ember that stuck to his hand and hissed.

Then through the darkness of the pit, from high in air, floated down a sardonic chuckle. Instantly, without a second's warning, the pit was flooded with light from invisible sources, which revealed to the man, after the first blinding glare had passed, the horror of his prison.

For a hundred feet the walls of the pit rose sheer and smooth, with neither crack nor cranny for a foothold. About four feet from the floor, several openings pierced the rock, and into them were tumbling in a headlong scramble gray shapes as large as cats, round-eared and gaunt, their pointed snouts blood-dabbled from the cannibal feast, and in the center of the floor lay in fragments what had been a huge rat.

High above, a cripple stumped about the edge of the oubliette, and the man below knew it for his cousin, his heart saying gloomily, "Franz knows!"

FRANZ lay down and swung an arm over the pit's edge—an arm that, curiously short, seemed to have been broken in several places and clumsily reset.

Was he shaking his fist? And then the man below saw that Franz was beckoning to him. Faintly fell a word, "Climb," then again, "Climb up the chain," and he saw that from the hidden mysteries above a long beam was swinging out until its end was directly over him.

Upon the metal beam there was fixed a large pulley, over which ran continuously joined links of iron which—now were moving and falling down—down.

Slow-dropping, the end of the chain came nearer until his hands could grip it, and still descended. It touched the floor and stopped, swaying there. As he held to the cold links, he could feel the vibration of the engine that had lowered it.

The links were large and heavy, their openings large enough to insert a hand or foot. He fixed himself comfortably as might be and waited to be lifted from the pit.

How Franz would suffer for this when he got out! Let him taste a little of his own pit, perhaps! And then again from above, the word fell, "Climb," interrupting his pleasant vindictive thoughts.

Perceiving that the cripple did not intend to lift him out, he set his teeth and began to climb the hundred feet of chain. Franz would have his little joke, he thought, but when he got out—an ugly grin—someone else might laugh.

Still he might have to beg for help after all: only half-way up now and he did not feel strong.

Why, he had been climbing for hours, it seemed! Strange he was not already at the top toward which he strained!

He glanced below and nearly fell in horror. The floor of the pit, nearly forty feet across, was carpeted with the masses of the fallen chain. The chain was being lowered at the same speed at which he was climbing! While he looked below he dropped ten feet nearer the bottom of the pit.

Furiously he began again to climb, regained his ten feet, five feet more, and the chain at an increased rate dropped down.

Above, Franz laughed, but it was more nearly a cackle, and the man below felt hope die within him, for he knew that Franz the cuckold was fully aware and mad.

"Climb!" he shouted down. "Climb!"

But the man no longer climbed; holding tight instead he watched the floor come near.

Fifteen feet from the bottom, the chain was loosened suddenly, then caught, and he fell from it. Before he could rise, a heavy length of metal lay across his body, pinning him

down. His flimsy night-garments tore as he struggled loose.

While he was freeing himself, the chain hung steady without dropping, but when he moved away the swaying thing followed, guided by the patient cunning of the crazed man above.

The rough metal cut his feet as he walked over it, and he wished for shoes. He kneeled down close by the wall, took off his jacket and tore it into strips which he bound about his feet. While he was doing this the chain was coming slowly down, building heaps of metal which overbalanced and fell dangerously near, but not touching him.

Then as he anxiously sought for some retreat from the growing menace, he saw a slight depression in the wall; he *might* fit himself into this and be safe from a direct blow.

He dived for it and as closely as might be he flattened himself into the niche and, scarcely breathing, waited. Perhaps Franz had not seen!

The hope was vain, for the chain swung after him and a broad mound of metal links rose like a titanic mushroom lifting its head before the niche. With the squeal of a trapped animal, he darted from his lair, clawed the chain aside, sprang through the narrowing aperture that was left, and sprawled upon his face.

Before he could scramble erect, something struck his shoulder. The chain was at his side. Already a tremulous pile shook uncertainly above him, about to topple.

He rolled aside as it fell, but not far enough to escape, for an arm was caught. Desperately he pried and struggled to gain away, finally pulling loose at the expense of a torn hand.

While he fought, the chain had withdrawn to the other side of the pit and had filled it high, a terrace like tangled, petrified, disjointed snakes. Now when he stood up, it swung toward him again.

He sprang away; the chain followed as he backed toward the wall. He ran; and then began a strange pursuit, for ever as he fled, at his heels marched like a sentient thing—the Chain!

It poured into the pit, link after link piling upon the others to form vast heaps of metal which would topple and fall. The man wandered helplessly among these metal tentacles that were thrown out, all but crushed by the heavy coils and mounds that swayed erratically all about him.

Again he slunk behind a heap of metal and mouthed and mowed, gibbering at the chain as it sought him out.

To his tortured mind and feverish imagination, the chain, while it swung and created a hill of metal in the center of the pit, took on a new and monstrous shape. It seemed like a metal giant, its blind head above the clouds, swaying rhythmically from side to side and searching for him in the oubliette. Fumbling about with a hundred clanking arms, it stalked him with a dreadful ghastly patience, for the end was sure. And towering mightily before his hiding-place, it drove him forth again and struck him down with a hundred-weight of iron links.

He struggled up once more, clinging to life, bruised and hurt, whining and whimpering now, all pride forgotten. Bitterly he cursed the name of the woman whose fair face had brought him here to walk with Death.

From high overhead came down a malignant sound—the low, quiet tittering of the madman, watching, planning, carefully goading his victim round about the pit. The man below looked up, a curse upon his lips in which the name of Franz was mingled—a curse which gave place to a scream of abysmal terror as he realized the inconceivable frightfulness of the approaching doom.

For several yards from the lip of

the pit, the chain glowed red with heat, and as he watched, the links that now came, following, shone yellow, then white, flaked with black patches of soot on which ran and twinkled tiny racing crowds of sparks in endless chase.

The chain was passing through the roaring furnace above; white-hot and coming down. . . .

It touched the colder links and made a pile which he avoided. It swung around the pit and laid a circle around him; swinging still it formed a narrowing spiral at whose center he stood shivering with the agony of anticipation. It neared him, hung steady, then swung quickly at him like the leap of a python. He shrieked and darted aside.

His feet came down on the glowing links, and the rags around his feet smoked and burst into flame. Weeping, he tore them away and trod the flaming path with naked feet.

That which followed was a matter of moments, but to him it seemed a foretaste of eternity spent in punishment.

THE chain came slowly down, livid with heat and leprously scaled with oxidized metal, pulsating in ripples along its length from the throbbing engine that lowered it to the floor, building shimmering heaps for his tortured climbing.

Stumbling over scorching ridges, he rounded the pit, limping feebly along over the hideous surface that drove him to his doom. Rest impossible, he tottered on his way, hope as dead within him as in any poor lost soul that crosses with treadmill trot some smoking, horizonless plain of hell.

From the walls, cracking with heat, jetted out white puffs of steam, but above their piping whistle there rumbled in the man's crazed brain strange roaring voices, and sometimes he vacuously smiled as he listened to the ravings of a mind in dissolution—and plodded on his way. And

though his eyes were clouded and dim, he began to see visions, and to him the livid swaying chain appeared hazily to be the dancing white body of the woman he had loved.

He turned to follow instead of fleeing as before, but she tripped away lightly, mocking, and he could come no nearer, for the maniac above managed the chain so that his prisoner should not be touched by it, thinking perhaps that he had not yet paid fully and would find Death too dear a friend.

The man below was growing unconscious of his pain, mercifully believing, with his shattered mind, that he dwelt in happier days, and once he muttered as he stumbled on, "Oh, Olga, Olga! How your kisses burn!"

He thought he had whispered, but the words burst out in a rasping croak and a gush of blood from a half-cooked lung followed and hissed upon the chain.

Nerves have their limits. They can be strained to a certain point, but beyond that they refuse to function, which in a way is merciful. So it was with the man. The breaking-point had been reached and passed, and his suffering was no longer so intense.

Dying on his charred stumps of feet, he hobbled amid the coils of clanking metal that flowed relentlessly down like a slow thread of lava trickling over the lip of the pit. Occasionally the chain swung in an unexpected direction and laid a fiery tentacle across his shoulders, searing anew an earlier burn; or again he heard, through the drumming stutter of the heated blood in his pounding head, the hiss and sharp puff of steam as a white-hot link accidentally pressed against his naked side.

But though he winced and cried out at every motion he was compelled to take, it was more because the cringing seemed by then to be the proper thing, necessary and a part of

the torment, than because of any new agony that he experienced.

He had nearly ceased to think. Now and then, while he reeled and staggered over the loosely shifting heaps that illuminated the pit with a ruddy light, a groan of relief hissed through his baked lips as the dull brain told the crackling body that the end must be very near.

Once he thought he heard a cry far away and not repeated. The voice seemed familiar; it was, in fact, the yell of the maniac who was dancing around the rim of the pit, perilously near but wary of his own trap and shrieking down curses at his enemy.

Only the one sound had pierced to the seat of memory, but it was enough to cause the man to hope again. Perhaps Franz, the merciless, had relented!

He summoned his lagging energies and tried to speak, but the sound that issued from his throat was only a gurgle. Again he tried; it was agony even to breathe; a harsh inarticulate croak, in which were only fragments of words, was the only result, and his deafened ears refused to carry the answer.

Hope died and a more bitter despair took its place. The reaction produced an even keener torture, if such were possible. It was almost as though a lost soul who knew himself to be in the deepest chamber of hell felt the floor drop from beneath him and precipitate him still farther down.

He struggled on beneath the iron flails, through a misty haze of smoke, a fog of sooty vapor from his own smoldering body, a stench hanging around him not merely of burned flesh, but, even more repulsive, the repugnant odor of charred bone; and the demon above forgot to yell in his wonder that life could linger so long in such a mutilated being.

And still the dead man walked and stumbled, mechanically complaining

in inhuman querulous moans, glaring straight ahead, though his eyeballs were seared over with the heat.

The horror could not long continue. Inevitably the moment came when he could not avoid the moving pillar of shining metal.

Blind, hands stretched before him, feeling his way forward, one hand and arm passed by the chain and the other arm upon its other side. Just before his face touched the glowing link he realized his mistake, but not in time to dodge the blow, and the link covered his face like a brand.

For a second, he was conscious of a terrible withering heat, an intolerable piercing glare that beat into his brain like jagged arrows—and then, reason fled. With it passed any sense of pain, and a numbness that felt chill in that place of fire, stole around his heart like a caress.

He crept aimlessly for a few feet on hands and knees, stiffened, rolled upon his side and placed his bleeding head upon his charred arm quite naturally as though he had laid him down to sleep upon soft grasses instead of a bed of fire. Yet so indomitable is the will to live that still one fingerless hand dabbed feebly at the chain for a space, although his brain was dead within him.

And, no longer swaying but descending evenly, the chain dropped upon him, and buried him from sight.

UP THROUGH the interstices of the glowing heap of metal, thick smoke seeped, black and heavy, drifting lazily in the currents of heat that danced in the pit.

The chain cooled and shrank, contracting with now and then a jangle of links slipping into new positions, and a hollow commenced to take place upon its surface.

And as the smoke diminished from this trough, coffinlike in shape, gorgeous colors shimmered along the hollow, melting into new forms and shades like the rainbow hues of oil on water—crimson and green and blue.

High overhead—beside the roaring furnace—the low nervous tittering of a madman!

Then in the myriad cells of water-soaked rock the steam expanded until the pressure was irresistible. A rending shock, and a crack, jagged and growing wider, crept up the walls. The castle quivered to its highest spire.

Still the madman tittered his mechanical laugh.

Then the walls caved in, the furnace dropped into the abyss like a live coal falling from a grate, and the ceiling fell.

The Castle of Rutzau would no longer menace the peasants in the valley. It and the pit of torment were no more.

