

Strange STORIES

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$1.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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THE CULT OF THE DEAD

By GABRIEL WILSON

Author of "Balcony of Terror," "Earth-Venus Twelve," etc.



His face became contorted

MY VILLA lies behind a high brick wall, with a tall grilled gate at the entrance to its driveway. It was up this driveway, lined with palms and bordered with flowers, that I saw my young nephew approaching on foot. He had arrived at Port-au-Prince from New York a few hours before to spend several weeks as my guest.

I watched his approach from my doorway with a strange sense of com-

ing trouble. There was something in his laughing, eager face that boded daring and inquisitiveness, two attributes most likely to precipitate disaster among the native Haitians. His grinning abandonment was accentuated by the jaunty swing of the camera hung over his shoulder and a row of pencils standing ostentatiously out of the breast pocket of his coat.

"I've come!" he said gaily, as he swung up my piazza steps. "And I'll

Dark and Terrible Are the Inexplicable Mysteries of Black Haiti—and not to Be Probed Too Deeply by Mortals!

not go until every Cult and Creed of Haiti is registered here—and here!" He tapped his camera and then his pencils; and he winked at me as we shook hands.

That evening, with the eerie night sounds of the tropics floating in our open windows, I warned my nephew uneasily.

"Harry," I said, "you must realize this is not America and you're not dealing with Americans here. This is a strange country, filled with weird cults, superstitions, penalties and mysteries. Only a fool would try to pry into them, unless one uses the utmost tact and caution."

He grinned. "Sure, I know. And tact is my middle name."

"Things get under your skin here, too, Harry, if you play with them," I warned. "Perhaps it's the native's earnestness, their own sincere belief in the existence of these things that are piffle to you and me. I don't know. But I do know I've given them a wide berth."

"Coward!" he laughed.

"Fools rush in," I countered.

BUT the lad's light-heartedness was irresistible. I joined his gay laughter with a chuckle of my own. Then I sobered once more, for mine was a real responsibility.

"If you're set on getting authentic information and pictures, I'll take you to see Dr. Banè. He doesn't connect himself with any cult, but being a native, he has information and influence where I have none."

"Right," Harry agreed. "When will you take me to him? Could we get hold of him tonight? You see I'm keen to get started."

"We'll be off tomorrow morning early," I promised. "But you must keep in line and don't try anything fancy."

He knew what I meant. "You're the boss," he said.

The next morning we went to downtown Port-au-Prince and across from Mohr & Lauren's offices to the office of Dr. Banè. He was there, alone, and expecting us, as I had sent a message to him earlier.

"This is Dr. Banè," I told my

nephew. "Dr. Banè, my nephew, Harry Mason."

They shook hands.

An hour later, I put down the pamphlet I had been perusing and listened and watched the incongruous sight of my clean-cut, ultra-American nephew and the black, quietly intelligent Haitian, with his queer injection of realism into what he was discussing.

Dr. Banè was saying: "This necromancy—the uses which they make of various parts of the corpses—has been verified, of course, a condition which the American government is intent on blotting out."

"Yes," Harry agreed, "I know that. Some facts about their struggle with the natives here have appeared in military reports of the Caco Guerilla uprisings, but the reports were brief. No details. But the little that seeped out, intrigued the public. It's my job to get some real dope about it."

"Well, now let me see what will be of further interest," Banè reflected as he accepted one of Harry's cigarettes. My nephew took one himself and lighted first Dr. Banè's and then his own. Dr. Banè smiled as he puffed it and gave me a sideward glance. I could see he liked the boy.

"Their use of the corpses—" Harry prompted.

"Oh, yes. They rub the grease made from the dead brain upon the edges of machetes and tools."

"Why?" Harry demanded.

"Let's call it a superstition. They believe that in this way the implement will become intelligent—have the ability of thought—and cut more accurately. The same thing applies to the head of the hammer, so that it will know where to strike. And upon the sights of a gun, to insure the bullet of reaching its mark. I know of an actual incident, quoted here by natives.

"The grease from the dead brain had been rubbed on the gun of a young warrior. He was shot in battle. As he fell, his comrades swear they saw his gun, without this warrior's assistance, rise up, aim, and fire. The enemy at whom it aimed, was shot to death, whereas our hero recovered and lived to tell the tale.

"To him, the dead brain upon the sight of his gun, saved his life. For if the enemy had not been instantly killed, the young warrior most certainly would have received a fatal shot from his adversary, who was closing in upon him. It all sounds very fantastic, doesn't it? But these things are accepted here without question."

HARRY leaned forward. "That's the brain," he said in a low voice. "What about the rest of the body—the hands and feet and arms?"

"They make *ouangas* of them. In other words, charms, used for various purposes.

"So that's what a *ouanga* is," Harry said softly. "I wondered. I read about them in a book back home. It called them a charm, used for both good and evil."

"Yes," Dr. Banè agreed. "The *ouanga* is their chief weapon—for good or evil. Naturally, there are many incidents involving them, gossiped among the natives. One of them I know will possibly interest you."

"An *ouanga* used for evil?"

Dr. Banè smiled again at Harry's swift, punchy question.

"No," he said. "Let this be a time it was used for good. The young woman who had had the charm placed about her neck at one of the meetings of the *Culte des Morts*, was leaning over about to pluck some berries. Suddenly she felt a jab, as though someone were nudging her. Then another. She stood up, startled, for there was no one in sight. Again the jab. It was in the back of her neck. A warning?"

"She was superstitious, and suddenly she remembered she was wearing a *ouanga*, supposedly sent her from her dead father in return for the good she had done him by leaving food and water for him at his grave. A dead hand, severed at the wrist, was strung on the *ouanga* at the back of her neck; and it seemed as though one of its fingers had nudged her, trying to warn her of danger."

Dr. Banè paused to light a cigar as he stared at Harry.

"And that was all?" Harry asked.

"No, that wasn't all. The young

woman had become alert with this realization. She looked swiftly about. Then, behind some shrubs a few feet away, she saw the evil face of the man who had murdered her father, and who had never been apprehended. She let out a scream. The brutal man crouched, started toward her. She was helpless here, far from other humans, with nothing but the birds and the beasts to hear her cry.

"The murderer was upon her now; he clapped his black hand to her mouth, his other hand held her in an iron grip. He was facing her, struggling to draw her against him. In horror she looked down at her breast where it seemed that her *ouanga* there was moving. A portion of a human wrist and forearm was strung on the *ouanga*. Its bone, six or eight inches long, was blunt at one end, but it was splintered at the other into a sharp point.

"The bone lay flat against her chest, but now as the murderous man clutched her to him, distinctly she saw the dangling *ouanga* bone turn itself outward, so that it was horizontal between them. Its blunt end pressed against her, and as the murderer's arms drew her close, she heard him scream. He had been stabbed to the heart by the sharp-pointed bone, and he fell dead at her feet. Her magic weapon, needing neither her brain nor will to guide it, had saved her life. She went screaming hysterically to the small town and told her tale. It was one of a great number, very similar."

A strange silence followed this gruesome anecdote. Harry sat staring before him, lost in thought for the moment, weighing the possibilities of these mysteries of Haiti. At last he said:

"I had thought that, for evil purposes, they included the poisonous leaves of the machineel tree. But this is quite different."

DR. BANE smiled. "Don't take it too seriously. We're only quoting the tales of ignorant superstitious natives." Then he sobered. "But, of course, we have no way of being sure one way or the other. It might be ex-

ceedingly dangerous for you to attempt to verify, or discredit, what I've been telling you. These things are best allowed to remain with those who comprehend and seek them. But for you and me—let them remain mysteries in which we dare not delve except superficially.

"You would get no more actual facts than I have given you. And if you forced yourself into one of these meetings, you would have to believe that you would be dealing not only with these superstitious natives, but possibly with the Unknown. The chances are, one way or another, you would not live to put it before your readers."

Why had Dr. Banè said this? What had prompted him to fear for Harry, just as I had feared? Was he reading the man, or the future, or was it some mysterious instinct which warned him for the reckless, inquisitive young man's safety? I did not know. But the fact he had felt as I felt, put me doubly on my guard for Harry's protection.

"This cult is little known. Perhaps there is no other man here who could tell you these things, other than its members," he added.

"What's the name of this particular cult?" Harry asked.

"*Culte des Morts*: Cult of the Dead. Papa Nebo is its oracle, delving in deep matters in which I have no interest and yet at which I dare not laugh."

"But I must have the pictures," Harry said, almost as though he were speaking to himself. "Gosh, what a scoop for me. And I could write it. There'd be warmth, a feeling behind it."

I coughed and yawned. This thing had gone far enough: it was beginning to give me the creeps. Dr. Banè saw that I wished the interview terminated. He stood up, and Harry rose and faced him.

"These pictures," Dr. Banè said solemnly, "cannot be obtained, either by you or me. I advise against trying it, most emphatically. This cult assembles at night only. In the daytime this Papa Nebo is a black man, mild, impersonal. His picture would do no

good, and the danger to yourself might be extreme."

We left a few moments later and returned to my villa. I must say its normality and quiet were in strong contrast to our visit with Dr. Banè. I had left his office with an unpleasant, slightly foreboding sense of being too close to an ugly reality: a side of the life here in Haiti, both incomprehensible and revolting, yet casting its shadow of possibility and crowding mystery.

I felt also, in a sense, a defilement in even the impersonal discussion of the hellish cults of this devilish island. An almost overpowering impulse was upon me to force Harry out of it all; to forbid him, as his uncle, to even so much as take his camera, should he go off on any pretext from my grounds. He had some facts. Let them suffice.

But I held my peace, merely suggesting that he take Dr. Banè's advice. I took the precaution of ordering Chauvet, my houseboy, to shadow Harry whenever he left the grounds alone.

A week of quiet went by. Harry had discovered in my library, books by Paracelsus, Eliphaz Levy, Frazer, Swedenborg, William James, and Blavatski; a rich field indeed for esoteric research and for anyone interested in comparative religion, folklore, mysticism, and magic. He seemed satisfied in sopping up their contents, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

During the month that followed, he began to discuss these books with me. At first our talks were brief, impersonal. Then they took on a more argumentative turn. The boy's interest was a thousand times increased since his arrival. I realized with a pang that the books had been like fuel to the fire. I wished fervently that he had never read one of them.

AT THE end of the month, he had grown noticeably thinner. The fire and excitement in his eyes were intensified. He would go for strolls without me quite often now, slipping out without my knowledge. Yet Chauvet would come back faithfully and report. It was obvious, from what

Chauvet said, that these strolls were scouting expeditions.

They were innocuous enough until one night less than two months after his arrival in Haiti. I was lying in my bed, tossing restlessly, when Chauvet rapped sharply upon my door, asking permission to see me with all speed. His voice was high-pitched. I could discern an excitement and fear in its shrill tone.

I threw open my door. Chauvet rushed in, breathless. He told me in gasping sentences that Harry had discovered the habitation of Classinia, the Papa Nebo of the *Culte des Morts*. Secretly he had planned to attend a meeting, under guise of being one of the *papaloise*. He had dyed his skin with juices, obtained native garb, and at this instant he was awaiting the arrival of members of the cult to join them and attend their meeting, his camera hidden in the folds of his costume.

There was no question of his danger. In less than ten minutes I was dressed, and Chauvet and I were on our way, riding through the mountains between *Morne Ronis* and *Les Verettes* until we came to a ravine below the trail. There, huddled behind a clump of banana trees, was the habitation I sought.

"Wait here," I admonished Chauvet, "but come if you hear a disturbance."

I had decided upon a brash course. Everyone on this island knew or had heard of good Dr. Banè, and although he was not a member of any cult, he was respected and trusted not to betray them to the American government.

I slid down the slight incline and came to the entrance to the door. A man from within saw me and came to me.

"*Bon soir, blanc,*" he said, eyeing me furtively.

I introduced myself and told him of my interest in the *Culte des Morts*, and of my credentials from my good friend, Dr. Banè. He looked at me with suspicion, wondering doubtless, if this were a trick of the government's to get evidence. A woman appeared in the doorway and he told her in his native tongue, my request. She

gazed at me aggressively, unpleasantly. But a growing panic over Harry, tensed me.

I forced my most amiable manner. I was desperately afraid for him, here in the hands of these crazy fanatics. Or, if you will, these evil necromancers.

The sky was overcast. I felt a few drops of fine rain. In another five minutes the heavens would open and there would be a downpour. Brief, perhaps, but torrential. The flashes of lightning in the distant sky were answered with low rumbles of thunder. All evening there had been promise of this storm. Harry must have grown acquainted with its warning signals. But he was obsessed, as fanatical in his way, as these natives. Dear God, I prayed that he might not reap their vengeance at his brash intrusion into their mysteries!

Finally the black man turned and gave a grudging assent to my request. A sense of awe came over me, for I knew that few, if any white men, had ever witnessed this particular scene. It was not a religious ceremony, nor had it anything to do with Voodism. But it did have to do with the magic workings of the dead!

A shuddering chill crept down my spine as I followed my guide into the hut and down a dark corridor behind it. It was evident that the moment was at hand; the *papaloise* were gathered. Was Harry behind this door we were approaching, ready to risk his life? And if he were, would I be able to control these people and explain to them the lad's harmless purpose, nevertheless an unforgivable affront in their sight to their dead and their magic?

MY guide opened the door upon a narrow, long room, very faintly lighted. I caught a glimpse, as I entered it, of a table at the far end, filled with bones, a shovel and pick. All about me, were prostrated natives, moaning, writhing, supplicating their dead. I searched frantically for Harry. I was sure I should recognize his broad shoulders. But there were fully a hundred natives gathered here, and the light was too dim

to discern more than blurred blobs of figures. My guide continued forward, but I shrank back to the wall in the rear, hoping to attract as little attention as possible.

My gaze continued to rove swiftly about. There was a wooden cross in the front of the room, painted like a totem pole and wreathed with a feather boa. Before it were rows of lighted tapers, slender, brown, crudely made candles of the sort placed on graves and in the niches of tombs. But my glance at these things was casual.

There was an increasing alarm upon me, for no one could look upon this sight and remain calm and unaffected. Joined with my fear of these natives' wrath, was the questioning fear of the actual power of the supernatural. Was Harry about to outrage some creed of these dead upon whom these suppliants were to call?

A line of *ouangas* hung on pegs on the wall behind the table or altar. Their grisly parts, consisting of pieces of corpses, were strung in abandoned disorder, one part upon the other. Were these *ouangas*, of which Dr. Banè had spoken, to be used for good or evil?

My forehead was burning. I knew that the malarial fever I had been hoping to avoid, was upon me. I felt weak and ill, and it seemed to me there was a stench here of newly dead flesh. The storm burst, and the rain came down in torrents, thundering upon the roof covering the low-ceilinged room.

Lightning flashes brightened the interior weirdly, giving an outré sheen to the uplifted black faces with rolling eyes and mumbling mouths. The claps of thunder were like the mighty wrath of a vengeful God. Suddenly I felt a cold sweat upon my forehead. God, what I would have given to have been back at my villa with Harry safely returned to America!

In the fitful, murky light my attention was suddenly arrested by the slow progress into the room from a side entranceway, of three figures. The tall central figure, which moved slightly in advance of the other two, was garbed in a soft white skirt. Above it, was a long-tailed black frock coat and

the incongruous crown of a high silk hat. Then I realized this must be the symbolical Papa Nebo, the oracle of the dead whom Dr. Banè had described to us.

As he drew nearer to the altar and its torches, I saw that he was wearing black smoked glasses, making his face gruesomely inscrutable. I shuddered involuntarily at the sight. He came forward, his ebony face gleaming in the faltering light, an unlighted cigar protruding grotesquely from the side of his mouth.

I wanted to laugh; not with mirth, but a frightened hysteria. Things were about to happen here unmentionable, blood-curdling things which would be sufficiently horrendous even if I were only what I was posing as—an on-looker. But I was not a curious on-looker; I was an uncle with a real terror for the safety of my dead sister's son, here to save him from the rage of these writhing, moaning fanatics. Or worse!

Again my gaze swept the prostrated forms before me, and I prayed that the lad had changed his mind and was not here. Yet I knew that I prayed in vain.

THE two figures on each side of Papa Nebo, slightly behind the oracle, were in no particular garb. Both were women.

Papa Nebo came to a stop when he reached the totem pole cross with its grotesque feather boa, and the lighted tapers sent a strange, ephemeral light flickering across the features of this tall and straight black man. It seemed to imbue him with an eerie unearthliness, as he stood so stiff, hands extended, the black goggles glaring his imperviousness at what he was about to do.

The two women separated and went slowly to the pegs behind the altar, and each took down a *ouanga*. I saw now that they were like long, disjointed necklaces of parts of the human corpse. The women handled them with complete unconcern, even as I felt myself go sick at the sight of this mutilation of the dead. The two women came forward and stood, one on each side of Papa Nebo, facing, as

he did, the supplicating blacks before them.

Involuntarily, I drew back closer to the wall. There was no mistaking this scene as it lay before me at this instant; it was the picture of the *Culte des Morts!*

Then there was a snap and a flash of lightning. It was within the room! But almost before the thought formed itself, I knew that it was not lightning. There was a sudden scream of adulatory terror from the swaying, moaning mass of fanatics. The entire mass of blacks started to their feet at the oracle's wail and shrill babble to the waiting dead, those dead who were here and ready to hear the supplications of those who had come to ask favors of them.

And now I saw Harry. He was standing in the folds of a kind of hanging, like a portiere, his camera outside the folds, its light attached on the top and to the side. The lightning, this last flash within the room, had been his, of course, as he took the prized picture!

I would not let my terror take control of me. Did anyone else in this room know what I knew? Or did they think, as Papa Nebo in his prayer appeared to think, that some *dead* enemy had dared intrude into this gathering with defiance and desecration?

I never knew what they thought. I stood trembling against the wall, watching the natives scrambling toward Papa Nebo, listening to his words. The order came from him that they must get to the cemetery and consult with other of their dead, and when he, with one of the lighted tapers held high before him started slowly forward, the blacks backed sideward, leaving a path for him. He went down it, followed by the two women with the *ouangas*. Even with the black glasses, he found his way unerringly.

I looked ahead, to be sure Harry had made a retreat, as Papa Nebo headed for the place I had seen Harry an instant before. I did not see him. The excitement had heightened my fever; the suspense had been too much for me. I felt the floor swaying beneath my feet. My sight blurred.

My hands trembled as I braced my-

self against the wall. I don't know how many minutes I stood there, watching the departing ebony-faced, shiny-eyed blacks, with their mouth-ing moans and supplications as they shambled forward. It seemed an eternity. My strength was ebbing. If only their long line would come to an end, so that I could get to the other side of the portiere and find Harry. He must have seen me from his hiding point and would be watching for me.

At last they were gone, with never one glance at me in my dark recess to the side of the room. I could hear their distant chant as they filed out of the house and down over the hill to the cemetery, the weird sound coming back in waves, mingling with the spatter of the lessened rain and the intermittent low rumbles of thunder.

I KEPT my eyes on the portieres. I tried to start forward, but my legs would not carry me. I slithered to the floor. I watched, with a kind of fascination, the low sputtering tapers, and wondered where Harry could be.

Then my heart suddenly pounded, for there, crawling on all fours, I saw him. At first I thought his camera was about his neck. Then I knew it was not his camera, but a *ouanga!* Who had put it there? Was it one of his jokes?

Why was he in such a posture? I tried to call to him, but my throat seemed to contract. Then I saw that as he pressed forward, he would drop, then struggle up to drag himself further toward the altar.

With a superhuman effort, I mustered my strength. Harry was in trouble. He was unable to stand up. Now he had ceased moving. God knows how I managed it, for my fever was raging, but I got to my feet and staggered toward the front of the room, not far from the altar, where Harry lay. At last my voice came.

"Harry—dear God, what has happened?"

He did not answer. In the distance I could still hear the monotonous chant of the blacks. Finally I was within a dozen feet of Harry. I saw

the *ouanga* about his neck. I did not know whether there were any of the poisonous machineel leaves strung with the mutilated fragments of corpse.

As I reached him, he seemed to go into a brief convulsion and threw himself onto his back. The incongruous black of the juices covered him. His native garb was open at the throat. I stood looking at him, at the sweat on his forehead, hanging there in great sparkling beads. His eyes were open; they met mine appealingly, baffled.

Then my attention was arrested by a hand from a newly-dead corpse, which was strung as part of the *ouanga* about Harry's neck. Was it my imagination, or was the hand moving? I saw the fingers twitch, then start moving slowly, dragging the remainder of the *ouanga* after it. I tried to scream. I stood paralyzed with unbelieving horror. The hand was moving higher! Now it paused at Harry's throat, poised, and sank its fingers into Harry's throat like a pouncing cat. I saw his eyes bulging.

The next instant I was on my knees, tearing at the hand, but it was like steel. I had no power to stop its action. It tightened its grip upon Harry's throat. I heard his gurgling, suffocating efforts to breathe.

I was like a madman now, ripping

at this unholy thing, dragging at it, thrusting the *ouanga* from about my poor nephew's neck and panting with my effort. But the hand clung, strangling the youth to death. His bulging eyes were glazing. His breath stopped. I let out a cry of anguish. My nephew was dead!

I swayed on my knees before him an instant. Then I was swallowed in merciful oblivion. . . .

I was in bed at home in my villa, when I recovered consciousness, with Dr. Banè bending over me. At first I wanted to think it had all been a horrible nightmare, but Dr. Banè's compassionate look convinced me that it had been no nightmare, but stark, tragic reality.

We discussed my poor nephew briefly. His body had been found near me. He had been strangled to death. There was no *ouanga* near him, no hand at his throat. The statement of Papa Nebo was that some frenzied, frightened native might have strangled him, but he would take no responsibility in the matter, Dr. Banè told me.

The Haitian physician and I gazed long and intently into each other's eyes. And I knew that he was not surprised at the facts I told him.

"If only he had heeded," he said. "I told him they were deep matters, at which I dared not laugh!"