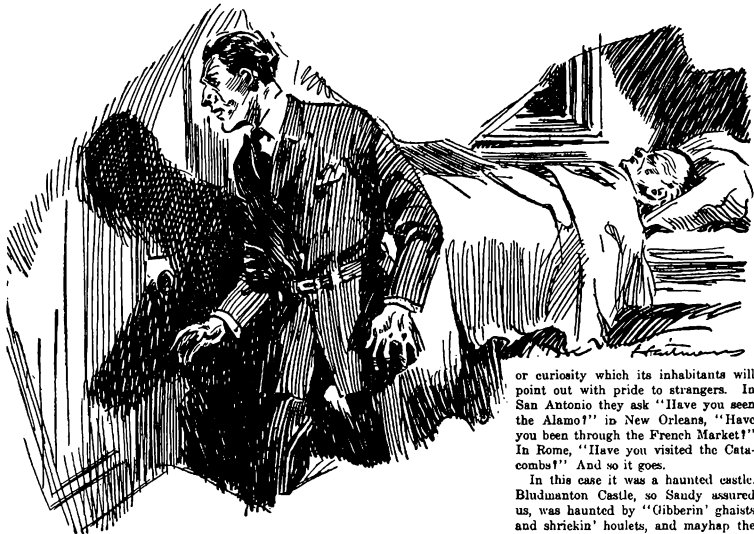


*The Ghastly Secret of Bludmanton Castle
Is Revealed in a Harrowing Way in*

The Cup of Blood

A Condensed Novel

By OTIS ADELBERT KLINE



IT WAS after the close of the World War that Anderson and I decided to tour Scotland afoot.

As my purpose is not to chronicle the details of that trip in toto, but rather to relate the story of how it was brought to a most abrupt and fearful termination, I will state, as briefly as possible, the incidents which led to that fateful and eventful night at Bludmanton Castle.

After two weeks of pleasant tramping and camping, with every night spent under canvas, we were strolling through a quaint little village late one afternoon, hot, tired and thirsty, when Anderson's roving eye spotted a sign that gave

promise of sundry and assorted liquid refreshments of a most inviting nature. Straight for that sign we sped at double quick, eased our packs to the floor of the cool taproom, and were soon washing the dust from our parched throats.

My buddy is quick at scraping acquaintances, and it was not long before he had started a conversation with old Sandy Magruder who sat at the table next to ours. He was not loath to join us in a mug or two of ale, at Anderson's invitation, and we found him exceedingly interesting.

I presume there is scarce a village, town or hamlet anywhere in the world that has not some individual landmark

or curiosity which its inhabitants will point out with pride to strangers. In San Antonio they ask "Have you seen the Alamo?" in New Orleans, "Have you been through the French Market?" In Rome, "Have you visited the Catacombs?" And so it goes.

In this case it was a haunted castle. Bludmanton Castle, so Sandy assured us, was haunted by "Gibberin' ghaists and shriekin' houlets, and mayhap the Auld Nick himsel'."

I was disposed to argue the possibility of there being any such creatures as gibbering ghosts, but Anderson kicked my shins sharply under the table and plied the old fellow with questions that brought out a remarkable legend concerning the ancient ruins.

It seems that, many years before, Bludmanton Castle had been the stronghold of Sir Malcolm Blud, Laird of Bludmanton, a cruel and inhuman monster who was despised and hated the countryside over, both for his servile owing to those above him and his heartless and tyrannical treatment of those about him who had the misfortune to be of humble birth.

Though they hated and reviled their heartless laird, the people of Bludmanton loved and respected his wife, the beautiful and gentle Lady Helen, for many were her acts of kindness to the poor and afflicted, and did she but hear of someone who had suffered through the tyranny of her husband, she would straightaway make amends insofar as her slender purse would permit.

Lady Helen was the daughter of a northern laird, and at the time of her marriage, brought two of her old servants to live at Bludmanton Castle. These servants gossiped, as servants will, and it was not long until everyone in and about the castle was acquainted with the circumstances of her unhappy wedding.

It was said that this marriage to a man more than twice her age had not been of her own choosing, for she was only eighteen at the time and Sir Malcolm well past fifty, but was forced on her by her father when it had been offered him as the only alternative to foreclosure for a certain debt he owed the Laird of Bludmanton, and could not pay on account of reduced circumstances.

A loveless marriage is, at best, a tragic thing, but when there is added to it the despair of a hopeless lost love, then it is indeed a calamity. It seems that this was the case with Lady Helen, for there were whispers of a young theological student who had won her affection some time before the wedding, and on whose account she had been sternly rebuked by her father. Not that she ever showed it, either by word or action, for she was a true and faithful wife; ever submissive to the word of her laird and keen to please him in all things. Despite the secret sorrow that clutched at her heart she went about silently and uncomplainingly, gradually growing paler and more frail, until at the end of a year she was but a shadow of her former self.

It was about this time that the aged minister of the parish died, and a younger man who had but recently taken orders was sent to fill his place. As the Lady Helen was continually engaged in her ministrations to the suffering and needy it was natural that she should often meet the young minister in the homes of his parishioners, and while she did her best to alleviate their physical wants he supplied them with spiritual comfort.

It was but natural, too, that when through illness, she grew unable to leave the castle on her errands of mercy, she should request the young minister to act as her agent in distributing charity. In this capacity he became a frequent caller at the castle, and as the laird was much

away, the busy tongues of malicious gossip were soon wagging with hints of a clandestine romance which at length reached the ears of the master.

Sir Malcolm flatly refused to believe these idle rumors at first; that is, until he learned that the young minister was one and the same with the theological student who had won her girlish love. This changed his views, and transformed him from a trusting though stern husband, to a crafty, unscrupulous fiend.

Thereafter, he spied continually on the doings of his wife, at the same time taking great care in order that she might not suspect she was being watched. But her conduct was above reproach at all times, and had it not been for a single unfortunate incident it is probable that he would have given over his spying, and perhaps taken no small amount of vengeance on her slanderers. But as luck would have it, she was taken with a giddiness one day when the young minister was present and would have fallen to the floor in a faint had he not caught her.

The maidservant, who was in the room at the time, was sent for restoratives, and it was during her absence that the suspicious laird appeared in the doorway. At sight of his young wife in the arms of his supposed rival, who did not note his presence, as his back was toward the door, he turned and strode to his room with clenched hands, and a look on his face that struck terror in the hearts of those servants who chanced to meet him.

He kept to his room all that night, and the next day sent the Lady Helen to visit her father, saying that he was going to repair and remodel the castle. When she had started on her journey to the north he rode away alone to be absent for more than a month. He returned with a gang of foreign workmen, and ordered everyone from the castle while the remodeling was in progress, so it was done with absolute secrecy.

When the work was finished he personally conducted the foreigners to Edinburgh and put them aboard ship with their passages paid back to their own land.

On his return, he sent for the Lady Helen and gave a great feast in honor of the reopening of the castle. Guests were bidden from far and near, and for the first time in many years, the tenants were given the freedom of the place. Sir Malcolm, his wife, and the young minister were all present at the banquet in the early part of the evening, nor was their later absence noted until nearly twelve o'clock, at which time the laird put in an appearance, looking pale and haggard.

The Lady Helen and the minister were seen no more that night, nor were they ever seen afterward.

Gossip had it that the two had eloped, but there were whispered rumors among the servants that the jealous husband had made away with them in some secret recess of the castle. There was a lackey who swore that, on passing the master's room at eleven o'clock on the night of the banquet, he heard the scream of a woman in mortal terror. The maid who put the room in order the next day told of finding a great crimson bloodstain on the rug, and under one of the chairs, a silver goblet on which blood had dried and caked.

That the laird had taken some terrible revenge on them seemed proved beyond any shadow of doubt, though there were none who dared denounce him openly, or even to question him in the matter.

On the noon following the night of the banquet the laird had a stroke that sent him into a wild delirium. The old doctor who attended him said he had not long to live, and his nephew and heir, Sir Eric Blud, was summoned. As Sir Eric was in Aberdeen at the time, three days elapsed before his arrival.

Of all the servants in the household, there was but one with the courage to sit up with the raving master at night. Old Steenie MacDonald had been long in the service of the Lairds of Bludmanton, and he vowed that even the Old Nick himself should not turn him from his duty.

What Steenie saw or heard in that accursed bed-chamber, no man ever knew, but it was said that he came running from the room about eleven o'clock that night, struck dumb with horror, nor did he ever speak after that.

Servants who had occasion to pass through the hallway went by that door as fast as their legs would carry them, and told of hearing the sobbing and moaning of a woman, mingled with the cursing and raving of the laird, although everyone knew he was alone in that great room.

When Sir Eric arrived he went straight to the master's room, without heed to the tales concerning it, saying he feared neither man nor devil, and that if a sick man could withstand the power within that room, an able-bodied man with sword and pistols should have nothing to worry over. It was near the hour of eleven when he stepped to the bedside, while a group of curious, fearful servants covered just outside the door.

Upon his arrival, the laird ceased his cursing and raving and greeted him with a feeble handshake. Though he was

gasping for breath, he managed to make himself audible, even to those who stood without the door.

"You come in the nick of time, nephew," he said, "for I have not overmuch of the breath of life left in me, and there are a few things I must tell you. My entire estate, personal and real—land, moneys, everything—goes to you at my death. I have but one request to make of you, and that is regarding the disposition of my body. In the great storeroom at the end of the keep is a strong-box which you will open, and in which you will find a leaden casket. Seal my remains in this casket and place it, without service or ceremony, in the tomb which I have caused to be built beside the chapel tower."

Scarcely had he spoken these words when the chapel bell began solemnly to toll the hour of eleven, and the piercing shriek of a woman in dreadful anguish rent the air. At this instant the old laird fell back dead and the young laird gripped his pistols and backed toward the door, for the cry had come from inside the room and it was plain to be seen there was no woman present.

There followed the muffled sounds of sobbing and moaning, and loud knocks and raps were heard on the ceiling, the walls, and the floor. The servants beat a hasty retreat, and Sir Eric was not slow to follow.

The next day he carried out the orders of the deceased, and, in doing so, met with a strange and unexpected adventure, for just as they were lowering the leaden casket into the tomb the lid fell shut with a loud bang and the frightened pall bearers let go their straps which were hooked to rings in the coffin.

The young laird ordered them to open the tomb and recover the straps, but when they raised the lid, both casket and straps had completely disappeared. They concluded it was the work of the devil himself, for the interior was of solid masonry without crack of a size to admit even a sword-point, and neither laird nor retainers would have more to do with Bludmanton Castle.

They left in a body that day, every living soul, and found temporary shelter in the homes of the tenants until the young laird completed his new stronghold, which he built nearer the village.

WE WERE on our fifth mug of ale when Sandy finished his story.

"And you say the castle has not been inhabited since?" asked Anderson.

"The place hasna housed ilha human being this day," replied Sandy, "but mony's the tale of hunters and way-

farers wha, passing the castle at nicht, ha' heard fearsome sounds an' blood-curdling shrieks fit to raise the dead."

"I had a consuming curiosity to see that old ruin," said Anderson.

"Let's go out and look it over," I suggested.

Anderson set down his mug with a crash.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "We'll go out there and camp for the night! It will be a rare adventure. Think of the sport of camping next to a ruined castle full of spooks! Maybe we can catch sight of one, or perhaps hear it, wail."

"My cart is outside," said Sandy, warmed by the ale he had consumed. "I'll take ye ower an' ye man view the ruins before sundown, but heed the advice of auld Sandy Magruder an' pitch your tent elsewhere. For me, I wadna spend the night in the lee o' Bludmanton Castle for a' the siller in the banks of Edinbrough."

We shouldered our packs and followed the old fellow outside to where a lean, rangy, mangy horse stood, hitched to a dilapidated jaunting-cart. The vehicle creaked alarmingly as we clambered aboard, and away we went, rumbling and rattling along the dusty road.

We followed the road for perhaps four miles, then turned into a narrow lane which led through a dense, shadowy wood. As we bumped round a bend in the narrow lane an imposing structure came into view—imposing despite its crumbling towers and skeleton turrets, its broken machicolations, and its age-shattered merlons and crenels. It was built partly on a sloping hillside and partly on the level floor of the valley, and our winding road took us directly past the postern gate, against which a rotting ladder stood, to a spot on the hillside directly opposite the drawbridge, whence bubbled a spring of clear, sparkling water.

"A weel," said Sandy, leaping from the cart with remarkable agility for his years, "as your General Pershing said at the tomb of LaFayette, 'We are here!'"

"An ideal camping spot," exclaimed Anderson, and simultaneously we leaped to the ground, asking Sandy to show us about the castle and point out the different places he had mentioned in his story, but he flatly refused.

"I woudna venture in that ill-fair'd, glaiest place for a' the grund i' the parish, an' if six purpose be in your minds, I rede you beware, for though ye man ha' been braw sodgers an' fought the enemy to a standstill, bear in mind that man has enemies that canna be overcome wi' bullets an' bayonets."

"If you refer to His Satanic Majesty and his imps," said Anderson, smiling, "I, for one, am quite willing to take a chance, having fought with the Devil Dogs and alongside the Ladies From Hell."

"Yes, let Beelzebub come," I said, "and bring a few of his foul fiends with him. As for ghosts, I am curious to hear one shriek. Certainly there could be nothing more interesting than a creature without lungs or vocal chords that can shriek."

Sandy turned away sorrowfully. "Puir misguided lads, ye ken not that of which ye speak so lightly. I ha' nae doot ye'll be made to pay heavily for every word, and as I see you are na disposed to return wi' me, I must be gangin, for the nicht will soon fall."

Upon his firm refusal to accept any pay for his services we thanked him heartily and bade him a cheery good-by as he rumpled off down the winding lane.

I began to unroll the tent, but Anderson stayed my hand.

"Wait, Art," he said, "I have an idea."

I looked up inquiringly.

"There is no need of our putting up the tent tonight," he went on.

"So that's your idea, is it? You'll stretch your hat-band all out of shape with one of those ideas of yours, yet. For my part, I'm going to sleep under canvas. I smell rain in the air and—"

Anderson looked slightly aggrieved.

"If you'll have the goodness to hear me out and not jump so all-fired hastily at conclusions, perhaps you will change your mind. Who said anything about sleeping in the open? I was about to suggest that we sleep under a roof."

"You mean in the castle?" There was a note of something—let us call it anxiety—in my voice, that betrayed an inner repugnance at the idea of which I had not been objectively aware.

"Of course, if you're afraid—"

"Who's afraid? You big stiff, I think you're scared yourself."

He laughed. "Here we are, daring each other like a couple of schoolboys. I know perfectly well there is nothing to fear in that old castle, and so do you. It may save us a good wetting. Have you noticed that heavy bank of clouds on the northern horizon? There's a big storm coming and we're sure to get soaked out here on the hillside, tent or no tent."

"Well, anyway, let's cook our bacon and eggs before we go in," I said. "I'm so hungry my stomach thinks I went off and left it."

"Oh, come on. We can do our cooking inside. There'll be plenty of fire-

places, and I don't think we will have any trouble finding fuel."

We picked up our bundles and, with Anderson in the lead, walked gingerly over the shaky, sagging drawbridge. The deep moat was nearly empty of water, as the lower embankment had given way, but a tiny stream trickled far below us, fed by the hillside spring. We passed through the bailey and thence to the inner court, where the *click* of our boots on the worn flagstones rang weirdly back from the surrounding walls. My companion looked about him with the air of one to whom the exploring of feudal castles was an everyday experience and made for a tall, arched doorway at our right.

"The family quarters of the laird should be in this part of the building," he said.

Dogged by the hollow echoes of the empty building, we crossed a corridor, passed through a huge room, evidently a banquet hall, entered a second corridor, and passed many doorways, into each of which Anderson peered. At length he entered one, larger and more pretentious than the rest, and I followed.

"I believe this is the master's bedroom," he said, casing his pack to the floor. "Faugh! How musty it smells, and there's dust and dirt everywhere. Let's spread the tent on the floor in front of the fireplace. That will give us a clean place to eat and sleep, at least."

There was a small quantity of partly burned fuel in the fireplace which we scraped together, and soon had a fire crackling. Then it was agreed that I should prepare our evening meal while Anderson went out and scouted for more wood.

When I had the coffee perking and the bacon sizzling, I walked about examining the room in the flickering firelight, for the murky twilight was already merging into darkness, and the windows at either side of the fireplace, far from providing any light, appeared like dull, gray patches set in the wall.

The most striking object in the room was the great canopied bed, in which, if the tale were true, the Laird of Bludmanton had slept his last sleep. It was apparent that the hangings were of rich material, even through the thick layer of dust that covered them. They were caught back at one side, and the disarrayed bedding confirmed Sandy's description of the hasty exit of Sir Eric and his retainers. The other pieces of furniture were, three chairs, a beautifully carved table and two massive chests. As to the room itself, it had a beamed ceiling, paneled walls hung at intervals

with faded tapestry, and a rough plank floor that creaked dismally when trod upon, covered with a filthy, moth-eaten carpet.

I returned to the fireplace, set out our tin plates, cups and eating utensils, broke the eggs into the hot bacon-grease, and went out to call Anderson. I hallooed loudly in the hallway—and was answered by my own echo.

"What can be keeping him?" I wondered.

He should have returned within ten minutes, at least, for it was but a short walk to the courtyard where there was wood a plenty, and he had been gone a full twenty-five minutes. I made my way down the dark hallway, crossed the banquet-room, and, after threading the outer corridor, stepped through the arched doorway into the courtyard. Anderson was not in sight.

"Jack!" I called loudly, "O, Jack!"

A startled owl flew noisily from a niche behind me as I listened in vain for an answering cry. I knew that if Anderson were within hearing he would reply, so was sorely puzzled and not a little alarmed. He was of an inquisitive nature, and there was no telling what might have happened to him. I crossed to the postern gate, fully expecting to see him lying at the bottom of the moat, but my pocket flash-light revealed only the weed-grown banks, the mossy walls and the shimmering, gurgling streamlet at the bottom.

It seemed that there was nothing for it but to explore the castle from top to bottom, and I set about the task with a gloomy foreboding of danger which I found impossible to shake off.

After looking into every room and corridor on the courtyard level, I mounted the treacherous steps of a rickety turret and began a systematic search of the towers and battlements, flashing my light into all dark corners and over the steep walls at points where I thought it possible my impetuous friend might have fallen.

As I stood on the topmost battlement of the great tower, the thunder storm, which had been muttering ominously for some time, struck with considerable violence. Sheet after sheet of rain swept over me, drenching me to the skin. Forked lightning played about tower, turret and minaret, and the floor trembled under my feet at each terrific crash of thunder.

I leaned to the temporary shelter of the black tower room and, while the storm raged furiously without, attempted to dispel the threatening inner clouds of foreboding regarding the fate of my friend, by shedding the light of reason

on them. I had examined every foot of floor space in the castle, or near it, without trace of my lost companion!

Most assuredly he had not run off and left me, for Anderson was not that sort. What, then, had become of him? I could think of but two possible solutions: either he had gone back to our rendezvous and, finding it untenanted, was at present searching for me, or somebody or *something* had made away with him.

As the latter proposition seemed preposterous, the logical thing for me to do was to return to the master's bedchamber and wait for him.

I clambered down the wind-shaken turret, fought my way through the swirling torrents of rain in the court, and with the aid of my flash-light, reached the room without further incident. Anderson was not there, nor was there any sign that he had been there. The bacon and eggs were burned to a crisp, the coffee pot had boiled dry, and the fire was reduced to a heap of dull, red embers.

Placing the blackened cooking utensils on the hearth, I piled the remainder of my scanty stock of fuel on the glowing coals, fanned them to a flame, and stood close to dry my damp clothing. All thought of hunger had left me, my mind being completely occupied with the mysterious disappearance of my chum and the disquieting situation in which I found myself: alone in a great, dark, musty medieval castle, untenanted save by owls and vermin, and popularly supposed to be the abode of shrieking, gibbering ghosts.

I was not exactly afraid—not at that juncture, anyhow—but I must admit a feeling somewhat akin to fear crept over me as I mentally reviewed the story of Sandy Magruder and subconsciously connected it with Anderson's unknown fate.

I say "subconsciously" because, objectively, I would not admit to myself that there was such a thing as a ghost. I reasoned further, that even if there were such a thing—a denaturalized being, whose body consisted of nothing more ponderable than light, or perhaps vapor—it would be manifestly impossible for it either to make a noise or move physical objects. As to such a being flying off with my companion—absurd!

The fury of the storm gradually abated until it had settled down to a steady, pattering rain, with only occasional thunderclaps. This continued for perhaps an hour, then ceased entirely, and the only audible sound was the dripping of the water from eave and battlement. The comparative stillness was singularly depressing.

My last remaining fuel was reduced to a tiny heap of glowing embers, and I knew these would soon be gone—a matter of a half hour at most. Already the room was shrouded in murky gloom in which visible objects became faint, fantastic outlines.

I saw, or fancied I saw, a slight movement among the draperies of the laird's canopied bed. At the same instant a sound, apparently from a point directly behind me, caused me to whirl like an animal at bay, with every hair on my scalp bristling. It sounded like someone sliding or crawling across the floor, and was obviously in the chamber, yet I saw only the paneled wall and the dusty carpet at the point from which the sound emanated.

I tried to pull myself together.

"Must be rats or some other vermin rummaging in the chests," I thought. "Back up, old boy. Remember, there is no such thing as u—"

My soliloquy was here interrupted by another sound—a sound that chilled the very marrow in my bones. It was distinctly human in character, a deep-drawn, sobbing sigh, as of a person just awakened from a bad dream or coming out from under the anæsthetic after an operation. I seized the rusted fire-tongs and waited breathlessly for someone or something to appear.

The tongs gave me a feeling of security, and I boldly explored the room, peering behind the tapestries and around and under the furniture. With the firm conviction that I had been suffering from an hallucination brought on by auto-suggestion, I went back to the canvas and unrolled my blanket, being by this time completely exhausted and sadly in need of sleep.

From curly boyhood it has been my custom to wind my watch each evening before retiring. Automatically, I twisted the little burr between thumb and forefinger, and glanced at the dial as I did so. It lacked just one minute of eleven. Instantly recollections of old Sandy's reference to the hour of eleven flooded my mind. With them came the old feeling of dread, and a persistent, intuitive conviction that I was not alone in the room. I watched the little hand swiftly ticking off the seconds, with bated breath.

Eleven o'clock came and went without incident. I began to breathe more freely at eleven-fifteen, and was about to remove my boots, at the same time chiding myself for my groundless superstitious fear, when it came—a quivering, blood-curdling cry, half moan, half shriek, followed by low, pitiful groans

as of someone in extreme pain or anguish.

Then I heard the sliding sound again, and loud knocks which seemed to come from the walls and ceiling of the chamber. At the same time my fire went out and I was left in total darkness.

The feeling that gripped me at that moment is difficult to describe. Those who have suffered from nightmare will know what I mean. Briefly, and as nearly as I can explain it, it is as if one were tightly bound with invisible, unyielding bands of the strength of tempered steel. Added to this there is a sensation of deadly fear, more terrible by far than is experienced when facing a tangible, visible danger.

I seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move even a finger. As the unearthly noises continued it seemed that the invisible bands about my chest tightened until breathing was next to impossible.

I made a supreme effort to break the spell, to move, to cry out. The result was a gurgling, inarticulate sound that I would never have recognized as coming from my own throat, a momentary vision of a thousand, scintillating, flashing sparks, and a merciful snapping of the thread of consciousness.

I am certain, as I pen these lines, that there are those who will condemn me for a coward and a fool, but I have resolved to tell no half-truths and to add no embellishments of my own that might serve to play me up as a hero. Comparatively few people have faced the inexplicable alone in the dark, consequently there are but few who can sympathize with me—few who would fully understand the horror of that moment.

To me, there is no fear so terrible as the fear of the unknown. I believe a positive knowledge of immediate death would be mild in comparison to it, and mind you, I had never been superstitious—never admitted, even to myself, the existence of supernatural beings.

The fact that I lay in a cataleptic stupor in that room until dawn possibly saved my life. I am sure that it at least saved my reason.

When I awakened, the rosettes glow of dawn from the two windows shed its soft radiance about the room. The fear-some noises had fled with the darkness. I remembered them as one might remember a bad dream. In fact, when I reviewed them in the light of day it seemed unreasonable to suppose that they had been anything more than a dream.

I was chilled to the bone and resolved first to build a fire in the grate, then renew my search for my lost companion. I knew the wood in the courtyard would be too damp for my purpose, so I

searched some of the nearby rooms, all of which were provided with fireplaces, and found enough dry fuel.

With the fire kindled and my back to the blaze, I stood planning my next move, when I heard a faint, metallic tapping noise at my right. Startled and mystified by this new development, I listened breathlessly while the sound continued. Then, suddenly, I recognized the Morse code! Those raps were spelling "A-R-T H-E-L-P, A-R-T H-E-L-P."

In a flash, I realized that Anderson was in distress and trying to communicate with me.

I quickly traced the sounds to the paneled wall at my right.

"Jack!" I shouted. "Where are you, Jack!"

There was a faint, inarticulate whisper. Then the tapping continued:

"B-B-E-A-K D-O-W-N T-H-E W-A-L-L," it spelled.

I SEIZED the heavy andiron and swung it against the wall, thinking to smash the panel at a single blow, but discovered, to my surprise, that the panel was of steel, painted to resemble wood.

It was badly rusted, however, and soon gave way admitting me to a dark chamber in which I found my companion lying in a semi-stupor, more dead than alive. As I bent to pick him up, I stumbled on the bones of a mouldy skeleton, and noticed that it lay across a narrow dais on which was stretched a second skeleton at full length.

Without stopping to examine the ghastly contents of that grisly chamber I carried my chum to where my blanket was spread before the fire.

"Where are you hurt?" I asked.

He answered with great difficulty in a faint, hoarse whisper.

"Leg's broken—don't know what else. Get me a drink—something hot—and a doctor."

"I'll have some coffee for you in a jiffy," I replied, and, seizing the coffee pot, hurried through the familiar halls and corridors and across the drawbridge to the spring.

After scouring the char from the interior of the pot with a handful of sand and rinsing it thoroughly, I filled it with water and started back, when a familiar rumble greeted my ears, followed by the appearance of Sandy Magruder in his jaunting-cart. He tied the horse to a small sapling and came toward me with a basket on his arm.

"Thought ye might like some fresh eggs for breakfast," he said kindly. "And hoo did ye rest, the night?"

I thanked him for the gift, and explained the predicament of Anderson.

He offered to go to the village for a doctor, and, before leaving, handed me a pint bottle of Johnny Walker.

"Your friend will be needing a nip o' this," he said. "If Dr. MacReady's in I'll be back within the hour."

As he clattered off down the narrow lane, I turned and hurried back to the bedchamber. After a pull at the flask Anderson brightened up considerably.

While I was getting breakfast he found his voice and, despite my protest on account of his weakened condition, insisted on telling his story. His broken limb had grown numb, and it did not bother him so much as might be expected.

"When I left you last evening," he began, "I went out in the courtyard for firewood. The sight of the chapel windows, reflecting the rays of the setting sun, reminded me of that part of Sandy Magruder's story which had to do with the disappearance of the coffin from the tomb which was supposed to be near the place of worship. As I knew you had enough fuel to last for a considerable time, and it would not be dark for a half hour or more, I decided to do a little exploring and, if possible, learn if the story had any foundation in fact.

"After climbing the shaky turret, I made my way to the chapel and, sure enough, there was the marble tomb of the laird with a beautifully chiseled epitaph. I raised the ponderous lid to a vertical position with considerable difficulty, for the brass hinges had corroded and did not turn easily. The tomb was empty, and appeared to be of solid masonry, but I wished to make sure, so lowered myself inside.

"Scarcely had my feet touched the bottom when the lid closed with a loud bang, the floor opened beneath me, and I shot swiftly down a smooth chute of polished wood. When I reached the bottom my right leg crumpled under me, my head struck against something hard, and I lost consciousness.

"It must have been some little time before I regained my senses. My head ached, and a sharp pain shot through my leg when I moved, so that I cried out in agony. As I was in total darkness I took out my pocket flash-light and looked about me.

"I was in a small, square room three sides of which were built of solid masonry. The fourth side was rusted steel, riveted in the way as to suggest paneling. There was a steel door in the stone wall at my left, which evidently fastened from the other side, for I could

not pry it open. A wooden chute curved down beneath it and straightened out to a horizontal position above the floor. On this, a leaden casket rested.

"Evidently both the casket and I had come through that door, which could be pushed open from above, but could not be budged from the inside. What impressed and horrified me the most, however, was the proximity of two human skeletons, the smaller lying across the larger, which was stretched on a narrow, raised platform.

"I dragged myself to the metal partition, each movement wringing a groan from my lips, and pounded on it at intervals in the hope of attracting your attention. I beat and shouted until my voice sunk to a whisper, without avail.

"At length I grew weak from my exertions and numb from the cold, and desisted. It was then that my attention was attracted to a rusty poniard with a jeweled handle, lying beside the coffin. Above it were a number of scratches which looked like writing. I moved closer and read an explanation of the disappearance of the terrible laird's young and beautiful wife, written by her own hand.

"Briefly, it states that on the night of the banquet, her husband summoned her to his room. In his hand was a huge silver goblet from which he commanded her to drink the health of the young minister. Mystified by this strange request, but ever obedient to the command of her lord, she placed the vessel to her lips—then cast it from her in horror. Instead of wine, it was filled with fresh, warm blood!

"With a demonic grin on his face, Sir Malcolm strode to the wall, and reaching under a tapestry, pulled a hidden lever, whereupon a section of paneling slid upward, revealing her former lover lying on a dais with face pale and drawn. His left arm dangled limply over the edge, and the last of his life-blood dripped from a slash in his wrist to an urn on the floor.

"You have drunk a toast to your lover in his own blood," said her husband. "Now go and spend the few remaining days you have on earth with his filthy carcass."

"He gave her a push that sent her headlong into the aperture, and the paneling closed behind her, leaving her in total darkness. She fell in a swoon that lasted for hours. When she regained consciousness, she groped her way about the place, but could find no exit. Upon touching the brow of the young minister

she found it cold in death. There were food and wine in the room, placed there by her husband to prolong her agony, but she knew she was doomed eventually to die from starvation.

"It was just as the chapel bell tolled the hour of eleven that she placed the cup of blood to her lips, and each evening when she heard the bell at that hour the memory of it brought on prolonged fits of weeping.

"On the fourth night, she heard the cursing and raving of her husband as on previous nights, and also his instructions to his nephew regarding the disposition of his body. She felt that the hour of her deliverance was at hand, and shrieked with might and main, but instead of bringing the young laird and his retainers to her rescue, she frightened them from the room.

"The next day the coffin, which she knew contained the remains of her fiendish husband, suddenly slid into the room, and as all sounds about the castle were stilled shortly after, she rightly guessed that it had been abandoned.

"With all hope of rescue gone, she took the blood-caked poniard which had slashed the wrist of the martyred young minister, and inscribed her story on the side of the leaden casket. She worked in total darkness solely by the sense of touch, as the irregularity of the characters will testify, keeping at her task for two days after her food supply was exhausted in order that future generations might know the truth. At the end she emphatically denied any improper relations with the minister, and commended her spirit to her maker."

SANDY arrived in due time with Dr. MacReady, who set my friend's leg, and helped me to convey him to the cart in which we took him to the nearest village.

The story of our discovery spread like wild-fire, and for several days we were besieged by newspaper reporters. People journeyed from far and near to see their morbid curiosity in that chamber of horrors, which I was more than glad to be away from. A month later we sailed for the United States.

I am writing these lines in the front room of an apartment which Anderson and I have taken in New York City. On the table before me lies a rusty poniard with a gaily jeweled hilt. It has a historic value which far exceeds its intrinsic worth, for through its instrumentality I am able to reveal to the world the ghastly secret of Bludmanton Castle.



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