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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Curse of the Valedi

By CAPTAIN S. P. MEEK

An eerie tale of the dark powers that are said to infest the slopes of the Carpathian Mountains in Rumania—a story of vivid action and many thrills

DUSK came on rapidly after the sun sank behind the Carpathian Mountains. A long-drawn-out wolf howl sounded in the evening air. The driver of the diligence crossed himself, his lips muttering in prayer. Egide, my borzoi, growled softly, the hair along her spine bristling. The priest, my only traveling companion, sat in the far corner of the vehicle, telling his beads with monotonous regularity.

"Are we close to Reczankof, Father?" I asked.

He came to with a start, making the sign of the cross in the air with his finger.

"Aye," he replied in his halting French, which was our only common language. "We are close, and even closer to the fires of hell. An hour will find us in one—or the other."

He shuddered as the howl of a wolf sounded again, and clicked his beads with feverish intensity. I longed to shake him. Earlier in the day Father Paul had talked freely enough—until he learned that I was going to Valedi Castle. Then he had looked at me strangely and lapsed into silence, muttering to himself in Rumanian. His few remarks had been vague and enigmatic.

The wolf howled again—closer—and Egide growled in answer. The driver crossed himself again and flogged his tired horses. The diligence lurched drunkenly along the rough, deep-rutted road.

"Are the wolves dangerous around here?" I asked.

The old priest's voice came through the gloom with almost a spectral quality.

"The works of evil are never idle, but the grace of God is everywhere. *Benedicite nomine sanctissime.*"

The driver gave a hoarse shout of fear. I stared out, then shrank back into the corner of the diligence. From the dense woods at the edge of the road, two burning red eyes, glowing with a lurid flame, were watching us. They stared for a moment, and then a wolf howl rose, only a few yards away. A low growl came from Egide's throat.

The horses squealed in terror and broke into a run, threatening to overturn the clumsy vehicle. The eyes kept opposite us despite the best efforts of the horses.

The priest pressed forward. A crucifix was in his hand, raised and extended toward the eyes. A torrent of Latin poured from his lips.

The eyes moved closer, suddenly paused, then retreated slowly. The diligence rounded a turn in the road, and the eyes disappeared.

"Reczankof!" cried the driver in relief, pointing to lights which twinkled a mile ahead. The priest sank back into his seat.

"We are safe," he said quietly. "Here no evil thing may come."

A shiver ran up my spine. I had seen wolves, lots of them, and heard them howl, but this was different. There was something of an ancient evil in those eyes, and in that blood-curdling howl.



"The gray disappeared, and a white form loomed up through the darkness."

"What was it, Father?" I asked.

But the priest had sunk again into pre-occupation, telling his beads and muttering his never-ending prayers. I sat back and gave myself up to thought.

Could those eyes have anything to do with the telegram which had summoned me into the Romanian Carpathians? I thought of my light-hearted classmate at Bordeaux, Boris Valedi. It was not like him to be frightened; yet that telegram had breathed fear—mortal fear.

He had often told me of his ancestral castle, which he had not seen since his father's death years before, and of his uncle and cousin who lived there. It was wild country, he told me, with excellent hunting, and that summer we had planned to visit it. I had lingered in Bukharest while he had gone ahead. Then came that frantic telegram, a summons I had obeyed instantly.

Boris was right about the country. It had been getting steadily wilder ever

since I had left the train at dawn and entrusted myself to the primitive vehicle which went for a stage. I devoutly hoped that Boris had received my wire and would meet me at Reczankof.

I WAS doomed to disappointment. Only the innkeeper and a dozen roughly dressed peasants greeted us in the inn yard. As Father Paul appeared, he became the center of an excited circle. He spoke solemnly and there was a general crossing of themselves among the crowd, and low murmurs of fear.

The innkeeper pointed questioningly at me. As the priest explained, I heard the word "Valedi" often repeated.

"How far is it to Valedi Castle?" I asked in French.

There was silence until Father Paul answered. Evidently, he alone understood French.

"An hour's drive," he said.

"Then I'll go on tonight," I said. I didn't like the looks of that inn. Neither did Egide, who pressed close to my side. Besides, if Boris needed me, I had no time to lose.

There was silence when the priest translated my speech. He turned back to me.

"In the morning, one will guide you," he said, "but tonight none will stir from the village."

"Why not?" I demanded angrily.

"They fear the evil things that hunt by night when the moon is full," he answered, and turned away.

And that was all I could get out of him. I raged and insisted, but to no avail. Then the thought of those red eyes came to me, and my insistence became weaker. I resigned myself to wait until morning, and ordered supper.

I ate in solitary state at the table, Egide at my knee. The group of peasants watched me eat, casting curious, half-

frightened glances at me from time to time. There was silence in the room, and when Egide yawned audibly, they started and crossed themselves, muttering in their beards. I looked around for Father Paul, but he had vanished.

When I finished my meal, I signified by gesture that I was ready to retire. The innkeeper hesitated, then crossed himself, took up a candle and led the way. Egide followed, nor did I reprove her. I was more than willing that she share my room that night.

My room was up under the eaves, with windows facing the road. The innkeeper set down the candle and left quickly, with no backward glance. I started to make ready for bed.

From the forest came the distant howling of wolves. Then suddenly, from not more than a mile away, came an unusually penetrating howl. Egide growled savagely in answer. Shivers ran up my spine as I remembered those weird red eyes along the road.

I wondered at Boris' failure to meet me, but the explanation was simple enough. I had followed my wire closely, and probably the diligence was carrying it. If so, it would not arrive at Valedi Castle until morning. Satisfied with that explanation, I threw myself on the bed.

Sleep proved hard to come at. The distant howling of wolves continued, and at intervals came that peculiarly penetrating howl which always elicited a savage growl from Egide. I rose and stared long and earnestly at the forest, half expecting to see those red eyes glowering at me through the darkness. At last tired nature asserted herself, and I slept.

THE inn presented a different picture in the bright sun of early morning. It had appeared wild and sinister by torchlight the night before, but now it showed as a picturesque little place, lo-

cated in a valley between towering mountains of undoubted majesty.

The innkeeper greeted me cordially. I was momentarily taken aback by his change of attitude, but I realized that the darkness must have affected him as well as me. I smiled cheerily and indicated my readiness for breakfast.

While it was being prepared, I asked for Father Paul. The innkeeper comprehended my gestures and waved his hand toward the forest in a wide arc, evidently telling me that the priest had gone about his parochial duties. However, he had not neglected me, for after breakfast a guide appeared with horses, including a pack-horse on which my bags and gun-cases were strapped.

A few miles from Reczankof we turned into a side road through the forest. For half an hour we rode silently; then my guide reined in his horse.

"Valedi," he said, pointing.

Two miles ahead, set on a towering crag which overlooked the surrounding country, was a massive pile of rock. Even in its semi-ruinous condition, which was more apparent than real as I found when we approached closer, Valedi Castle was impressive. In the Middle Ages, doubtless it had been the stronghold of a robber baron, but now an air of desolation clung to it, as though it were a place men shunned.

My guide was palpably nervous. He crossed himself repeatedly, and but for the gold-piece I showed him, I think he would have returned to Reczankof and left me to find my own way. However, his nervousness did not affect me, nor Egide, who trotted along at my horse's heels.

We climbed the last steep approach and rode through the gate into the castle courtyard. A tall, florid-faced, heavily built man in the prime of life came forward to meet me.

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"Monsieur Harrison?" he asked.

I admitted my identity as I dismounted. He advanced to meet me, but before our hands touched, there was an interruption. With a deep, low-throated growl, Egide sprang. The stranger leaped back, and I roared at the borzoi. She turned in midair and struck the man with her shoulder, almost knocking him down. I dashed in and caught her by the scruff of her neck, then looked up. Instinctively, I almost released her.

The man was crouching in an animal-like attitude, his lips drawn back in a snarl and his strange white teeth gleaming through his jet-black beard. In his eyes was a lurid flame, like that in those eyes I had seen the night before. As he realized that I was watching him, he straightened up. His eyes were instantly veiled and his mouth straightened.

"Your dog is vicious," he said.

"She seems to be," I answered apologetically. "Down, Egide!"

The borzoi slunk down at my heels. The stranger came forward again with outstretched hand.

"I am Count Dmitri Valedi, lord of this poor castle and a few hundred barren acres of woods," he said smilingly. "It is a pleasure to welcome you. My nephew will be desolated that he failed to meet you, but when I received your message a few hours ago, I sent my servant to summon him. May I act as host in his absence?"

His polished courtesy overcame the repugnance I had felt at Egide's attack and his reaction to it. My hand met his warmly, and then I gazed curiously. On the third finger of his left hand was a band of massive gold set with a green stone, on which was engraved the Valedi crest, a wolf's head. I had seen that ring, or a similar one, on my classmate's finger. His eye followed the direction of my glance.

"My ring?" he smiled. "It would serve as an introduction were other means lacking. Every male Valedi wears a replica of it. It is the ring of our ancestor who first carved out our heritage here, over a thousand years ago."

"Yes, I have seen one like it," I admitted. "Is Boris far distant?"

"No," he replied pleasantly. "He will return before nightfall. Let me take your luggage."

The peasant had unstrapped my bags from his horse while we were talking, and the Count picked them up. Several of them were heavy, but he swung them up as though they weighed nothing, and led the way into the castle.

"The house of Valedi has fallen on evil days," he said as we passed through the nearly empty outer rooms. "We afford but a single servant. The rest of the revenues go for Boris' education. Pray pardon the poor hospitality I can offer."

I hastened to reassure him as he led me to a comfortably furnished room on the second floor.

"I hope you will be comfortable," he said; "you and your dog who still doesn't seem to like me. I will leave you now to unpack. I will be below when you have finished."

He bowed and turned away. Egide gave a wicked snarl as he went out. I scolded her sharply, although it was not in my heart to blame her overmuch. There *was* something repellent about the Count, despite his polished courtesy.

I felt no desire for more of his company at once, and I spent several hours unpacking my bags and uncasing my guns. It was nearly noon before I descended.

I FOUND no one, and with Egide at my heels, I strolled out into the courtyard. Footsteps sounded from within the castle. I turned and stared blankly.

I knew that Boris had a cousin, but I was not prepared for the vision of beauty which confronted me. But even as my eyes took in her perfect features and her glossy hair, they were arrested by her expression. It was one of fear—haunting fear mixed with a great and overwhelming sadness. It was the face of one who sees a horrible doom approaching, yet is powerless to interfere with the action of fate.

"I beg your pardon," I began awkwardly, but she had no time for politeness.

"I am Valeska, Boris' cousin," she said breathlessly. "I came to warn you. You are in deadly peril of your life—and of your soul. Flee—flee while there is time."

"But what—I don't understand," I stammered.

"Don't argue," she cried passionately. "Flee at once—now—if you value your immortal soul. You must go!" she cried, stamping her foot.

"But I can't, you know," I said inane-ly. "Boris sent for me——"

"Boris——"

The speech froze on her lips as a deep-throated growl came from Egide. I grasped her by her collar before I turned to see the Count smiling at us.

"My daughter, Valeska," he said.

"Yes," I said glibly. "I was telling her of—Paris."

"She is interested, doubtless," he said. "She has never left this wilderness, but when Boris' education is completed, I hope to send her to Paris for a season. Valeska, is lunch ready?"

She nodded silently and entered the castle. The Count looked after her with a pitying expression.

"A sad case," he murmured.

"What do you mean?"

He tapped his head significantly.

"Paranoia," he explained. "She fancies there is a plot to kill her. If she speaks

to you of it, humor her. Denial may drive her into a frenzy. But our lunch is ready."

It was a curious meal. Valeska, poor child, ate almost nothing, nor did she speak twenty words during the meal. Nor was my appetite good, despite the bracing mountain air. But the Count ate enormously, and as I noticed, made his meal entirely of meat, of which there were four kinds on the table. He kept up a running fire of talk. He was a brilliant conversationalist, and there were few subjects on which he could not express an opinion, and an authoritative one.

When we had satisfied our hunger, he turned to me.

"If you are rested, Monsieur Harrison," he said, "we might walk down the road and meet my nephew. He should be returning soon."

Valeska raised her head to speak, but her eye caught her uncle's and the words were never uttered. She rose and left the table, followed by a pitying glance from the Count.

"Would the idea please you?" he asked.

"Immensely," I replied.

"I notice you have guns with you," he went on. "I would suggest that you take a rifle. Wolves are numerous here, and you may get a shot, even in the daytime."

For a moment I was tempted to question him, but thought better of it. Instead I went to my room and donned hunting-clothes, choosing my heaviest rifle. As an afterthought, I added to my weapons a hunting-knife, thrusting it into my belt under my coat. It was a peculiar knife with a long, heavy, curved blade. I had picked it up at an auction in Bordeaux. It was an *arhame*, an old "magical knife," alleged to have belonged to Albertus Magnus himself. Be that as it may, it was of excellent steel and its weight made it a formidable weapon.

The Count was waiting for me in the courtyard.

"Aren't you carrying a gun?" I asked.

"No," he smiled. "That is the guest's privilege. One weapon is sufficient to bag any game we see. Ah, here is my daughter."

Valeska had appeared in the castle doorway. The expression of fear had gone from her face, and she approached smiling, with outstretched hand.

"I wish you a pleasant walk," she said.

I bowed over her hand, suppressing a start as I felt a bit of folded paper in it. I brought it away in my own hand without the Count noticing, and thrust it into my pocket.

"If you are ready, we will start," the Count said. "Are you a good walker, Monsieur Harrison?"

"Fair," I answered.

"Then, instead of taking the road, we will go through the forest to a peak which has an unexampled view. From there we can see miles of the road. We will see Boris coming, and judge where to intercept him."

I made no demur, but followed, Egide, who still evinced a strong inclination to attack the Count, at my heels.

IT WAS a beautiful walk through the forest. The Count regulated his gait to my ability, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. The trip to the peak was longer than I had anticipated, but the view was well worth the climb. The castle lay below us, and from it the road ribboned away toward distant Reczankof.

The Count stared long and earnestly.

"Boris is not in sight," he said. "There is no hurry, and you are fatigued with your climb. Let us rest."

We sat on convenient boulders, and the Count began to talk. I think I mentioned that he was a brilliant talker, but that afternoon he outdid himself. I lost

track of time, so engrossed was I, and it gave me a start when I realized that it was late in the afternoon. The peak was still bathed in brilliant sunshine, but the lower valleys were heavy with shadows.

The Count stared again at the road.

"Boris comes," he announced.

Miles away I could see moving specks on the road, which might have been horsemen, but at that distance and in the semi-gloom over the road I could not be certain.

"He will not arrive until after night-fall," the Count said, "so we will meet him at the castle. Shall we start homeward?"

We rose and started down the slope.

"Keep your gun ready," the Count suggested. "We may see game at any moment."

For a mile or more we proceeded cautiously, my rifle in readiness. A thicket of dense undergrowth rose in our path.

"Go to the left," the Count said. "I will take the other side and head anything toward you."

I agreed and we separated. In a few hundred yards, the thicket came to an end. I looked around, expecting to see the Count approaching, but there was no sign of him. I settled myself to wait. After fifteen minutes, I became uneasy.

"Count Valedi!" I called.

There was no answer but the echo of my voice.

Again I called without response. Suddenly I knew the reason. The Count had, for some unknown reason, lured me into the forest, and deliberately abandoned me. Then I thought of the paper which Valeska had thrust into my hand as I left the castle. It was still in my pocket, but in the rapidly deepening darkness, I could hardly read it. I searched my pockets and found the tiny flashlight I habitually carried in my hunting-coat. The battery was still good, and on the paper

I read a single word in French. "Beware!" Timely indeed had the warning been when it was given to me, but useless now.

However, there was no use in crying over spilt milk. The problem now was to reach the castle, to find Boris, and learn what danger threatened him. Luckily I have a good sense of direction, and I had Egide to depend on. Between us we ought to be able to find our way, at least to the road.

"Home, Egide!" I said sharply.

She sniffed the air, then set off in the direction whither my own instinct told me the castle lay. Fortunately the full moon would rise soon, and we would have light of a sort.

For an hour we forged forward. The gloom became intense and I had trouble threading my way through the dense forest. But Egide never hesitated. Suddenly I gave an exclamation of thankfulness. The moon showed through the trees.

We came to a little park-like glade I remembered crossing not far from the castle. We had kept the road, I decided as I stepped into it. But hardly had I entered the open space when there came a sound that made my heart skip a beat. It was the long-drawn-out howl of a wolf, from close at hand. I hastily slipped the safety off my rifle.

Again came the howl, appreciably closer, and the shivers ran up my spine. There was a weird, unearthly quality in the cry that taught me the innermost meaning of the word fear. Nor was Egide exempt from the same emotion. She crouched at my feet, the hair along her spine rigid.

Again came the weird howl, from only a short distance away. I swung my rifle toward the spot. And then it came! I almost dropped my rifle. Low to the ground were those same red eyes, glowing with a lurid flame, that I had seen

the night before. The animal paused a moment, uttering low whines of eagerness, then charged.

I stood motionless, paralyzed with fear of I knew not what. A dimly seen gray shape moved silently across the glade toward me. When it was only a few feet away, Egide charged.

With a deep growl, she flung herself toward the skulking form which half rose to meet her attack. I could hear vicious jaws snap, and then the two beasts rolled on the ground, locked together in desperate battle.

The conflict recalled me to myself. I remembered the rifle in my hands and rushed to Egide's aid. I bent over the struggling heap, looking for a chance to use my weapon. Suddenly it came. Egide rolled undermost, and for a moment the wolf was plainly visible in the moonlight.

It took me only an instant to throw up my rifle and fire. The beasts did not move, and I am certain that my aim was true, but as I shot a sharp whimper came from Egide. I had missed my quarry and struck her.

I dared not fire again. Instead I drew the heavy knife from my belt and bent over the combatants, waiting for a chance to plant the blow which would end the battle.

Again the wolf rolled uppermost. I drove the knife at its hairy throat. As the blade flashed in the moonlight, the wolf dodged away and flung up one paw, as if to protect its head. The knife struck bone. A terrific howl of pain came from the wolf. It tore loose from Egide's grip and rolled back. I moved forward to strike again, but the wolf scrambled to its feet and was gone, Egide in swift pursuit.

"Egide!" I shouted. "Egide! Come here!"

There was a sound of renewed battle in the woods, and I dashed toward it,

calling again and again to the borzoi. At last her training triumphed over her hatred for her hereditary enemies. She came to me, carrying something in her mouth. I took the trophy from her, then dropped it with a cry of horror. It was a human hand!

I found my flashlight and examined it. One glance told me to whom it belonged, for on the third finger gleamed the ring I had seen that morning on Count Valedi's hand.

A sudden feeling of contrition shot through me. I had felt bitter toward the Count for forsaking me, but in view of the horrible fate that had overtaken him, my rancor vanished. Probably he had only meant to joke with me—and I had the only weapon. I must find his body if possible.

EGIDE led me into the forest for a quarter of a mile, then came to a halt before a heap on the ground, and howled mournfully. A stench of death and corruption hung heavy on the air.

Flashlight in hand, I bent over the torn remains of what had been a man. Horror and sorrow nearly overcame me. I recognized the form. It was Boris Valedi, the man I had come to aid. There was no mistaking his bloated, half-eaten features. A scar I knew well still showed on his cheek, and on his dead finger gleamed the ring of the Valedis, the wolf crest showing banefully in the light.

A sudden thought struck me. With Boris and the Count dead, Valeska was alone in the castle. It was thither I must hurry.

"Come, Egide," I said sharply. "Home."

My eagerness communicated itself to the borzoi, and she dashed off without hesitation. I stumbled along after her in the deceiving moonlight. Luckily in two hundred yards the wood thinned, and we

were on the road. I turned to the right and ran toward the castle.

We were nearer than I had supposed, for the castle loomed up ahead of us surprizingly soon. I called Egide to my side and approached slowly, cautiously. For some reason, I was not so eager as I had been a short time before.

I crept into the courtyard, my hand on Egide's neck. A white form rose from the darkness and came to meet me.

"Thanks be to the good God," came Valeska's voice. "He returned furious, wounded, and I knew you had worsted him."

"What——" I began but she interrupted.

"Don't stop to talk. Take these." She thrust a pair of old-fashioned dueling-pistols into my hand. "They are loaded with bullets of virgin silver, the one kind that will avail. Your rifle is useless against such as him."

"Boris——" I began, but once more she interrupted imperiously.

"I think I know. Don't tell me now. Seek *him* out and destroy him. You will find him in the lighted room. Stamp out the evil."

"But you——"

"Never mind me. His blood is mine, and on me will the curse descend. When you destroy him, you will destroy my soul, but that matters nothing. Go, and remember, *kill every wolf you find this night. Every one!* Only so can you make my sacrifice effective, and wipe out the curse for all time. Go, go quickly!"

An animal-like howl of rage and pain came from the castle. I hesitated no longer. I thrust one of the pistols into my pocket, and entered, the other pistol in one hand and my knife in the other. Egide, her hair bristling, followed close at my heels.

Outside the lighted room I paused, summoning my courage. With a sudden

effort, I threw my weight against the door. It gave, and I staggered into the room.

A sickening stench, a horrible odor as of a wolf's den in midsummer, greeted me. In the dim light of a lantern stood the Count, naked. His body was smeared with blood and dirt, and marks of savage teeth showed on his neck. He was binding up his left hand.

He looked up as I entered, and I felt a sudden weakness. In his eyes glowed the same lurid flame that had marked those of the wolf which had attacked me. I had time to notice no more before Egide launched herself across the room at his throat.

An expression of fear crossed the Count's face. He paused only long enough to catch up a dark furry strip from a chair, then bounded through the open window, Egide at his heels.

I dashed to the window. Streaking across the castle courtyard was a huge gray wolf, with Egide following. Valeska's words flashed across my mind. I raised the pistol and took hasty aim in the moonlight. The ancient weapon belched and a howl of pain from the fleeing wolf told me that my aim was good. It staggered for an instant, then went on, with Egide hot in pursuit.

I dropped the pistol, grasped the lantern and sprang through the window. Across the courtyard I ran, and out into the road. A hundred yards ahead I heard Egide's growls as he worried at something. I ran toward her. She was only a few feet off the road, worrying a prone figure. I cast the light of the lantern on it, then staggered back, a feeling of faintness gripping me. She had the body of the Count by the throat, and was systematically tearing it to pieces.

"Down, Egide!" I cried. She crouched, and I bent over the body. A deadly nausea swept over me. The Count was naked, except for a wolfskin girdle about his

middle. His throat was almost torn out by the borzoi, but the things that sickened me were two. His left hand was gone, severed as though by a blow of a heavy knife, and in his chest was a bullet wound. And I had shot at a running wolf!

I LEANED against a tree, sick and faint, but the end of the horrors of that night was not yet. Another eery wolf howl sounded, close at hand, from the direction of the castle. I turned to face the new menace.

Another wolf materialized from the darkness and launched itself at me; but it had reckoned without Egide. The badly mauled borzoi was still game, and she met the attacker chest to chest and jaw to jaw. In an instant the two animals had grappled and were rolling on the ground. Then it was that I remembered the second pistol, the one I had thrust into my pocket. I drew it and advanced cautiously.

The two animals were locked in a death grip, but in the bright moonlight it was easy to tell them apart. I leveled the pistol at the wolf's head. The distance was only a few inches, and I knew that I could not miss. A sudden expression of almost human panic came into the animal's eyes, and I hesitated. Then came the remembrance of Valeska's words: "Kill every wolf you find this night. Only so can you wipe out the curse."

I pressed the trigger. The weapon went off with a roar, and a shriek of human anguish rose on the air. The wolf shook itself free from Egide's grip and rose on its hind legs. It swayed for an instant, then toppled. As it fell, the gray disappeared, and a white form loomed up through the darkness. I held the lantern forward, and a cry of horror and unbelief burst unbidden from my lips. I had shot a struggling wolf through the head; yet before me, a bullet-hole in her fore-

head, lay the body of Valeska, naked except for a wolfskin girdle about her middle.

My brain reeled. With a cry of horror that rang strange and muffled in my failing hearing, I fell senseless across the corpse.

"YOU did well," Father Paul said gravely.

He had found me senseless that terrible night, brought me to Reczankof, and was nursing me. It was the fifth day after the tragedy, and the first time he had allowed me to talk.

"You did well, my son. Most of what you have told me, I knew. I would have warned you had I been allowed, but what is heard under the seal of the confessional is sacred. I knew not of the death of Boris, although I rejoice in it. Had he lived, the curse would have descended to him, to his eternal damnation.

"It was the curse of the Valedis. For centuries, there has been one werewolf in that accursed race, always the lord of the castle. On the death of Count Dmitri, Valeska, the sole remaining member of the blood, inherited the curse. She lost no time in trying to avenge her uncle.

"She has known for years the fate which awaited her, and she has prayed for death. She would have avoided it by suicide, had I not been forced to forbid her the sin of self-murder. I have hopes that she will be saved, despite the manner of her death. You tell me that she resumed the human form an instant before her soul left her body, and there was time for a repentance.

"She was the last of the Valedis. There is none to inherit either the curse or the castle. The ancient sin is at last expiated, by the grace of God. *Benedicite nomine sanctissime.*"

He crossed himself devoutly.