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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

# The Dead Man's Story

By JULIUS LONG

*The unique experience of a man who could live through future events years before they happened in actuality.*

I AWOKE from a sound sleep. I lay deeply ensconced beneath the blankets of my ancient four-poster bed. Only the feeble rays of the moonlight penetrated through the tall, narrow windows of my bedchamber. They outlined four perpendicular triangles of soft light, which stood like buttresses within the walls. The high ceiling hung invisible above me. I had momentarily the sensation that I had been aroused from slumber in some large, old, decaying cathedral of Gothic design.

About my throat were clutched the bony fingers of a murderer. Through the nocturnal gloom I saw the satanic features of a man who seemed oddly familiar, yet uncannily unlike any human being I had ever known.

It was only slowly that it dawned upon my scarcely conscious mind that the face above me was that of Abner, my valet. I wondered why he looked so strange, why he was awakening me in the middle of the night. I began immediately to fear that some calamity had befallen Eloise, my not very loving wife. That she was out this night, I knew, for Eloise was always gone, enjoying herself with whoever would second her escape from the miserable invalid which I was. But I loved her, and feared without cessation for her well-being.

I summoned my somnolent energy in an effort to speak. My laryngeal muscles refused to obey. My voice remained captive in my throat.

With tremendous suddenness, as if to

make up for wasted seconds of semi-consciousness, I realized that Abner was strangling me. I can not say why I had not sooner appreciated the awfulness of his purpose.

Involuntarily, every muscle of my body contracted, almost shaking me from Abner's grasp. As he reinforced his hold, my hands clutched wildly at his wrists. But I was feeble, stricken with a mortal, enervating disease. My efforts were pathetic. I knew with terrible certainty that I was doomed. I could only wait till the anesthesia of death palled upon me, robbing my body of life, at the same time freeing it of pain.

My pain was not that of suffocation. It was not feeling, but reason that told me how I was dying. I felt only the cruel nails of Abner's long fingers, the brittle bones of his ghastly hands as they sank inexorably into my flesh. I struggled not for breath, but to end the pain inflicted by that relentless grip. In my agony the thought flashed upon me that never before had I witnessed a more appalling manifestation of the irony of fate. Here was I, dying by the hand of a strangler, my attention monopolized by the superficial suffering from the wounds upon my neck! I recall with astounding clarity the acute pain caused by the ring on Abner's finger. It was turned inward, obviously to mutilate, and it was worn on his left hand. I had never before known him to wear a ring.

I rebelled against the unreasonableness of the situation. Such a thing could not

be! The entire affair seemed a horrible joke. Was I dreaming? Why would Abner do this thing to me?

It had never occurred to me that he could have had a motive for this crime. I had always been a decent and considerate master. During the twenty years of our association, we had been more like cronies than master and man. It was Abner who had made life supportable to me when Eloise had deserted my bedside to caper with the light folk of her set. It was he who had ever soothed my troubled nerves with his kind solicitude. Had all this show of good feeling been only the sycophantic fawning of an envious servant?

The pain became more intense. It occurred to me that my agony was unnecessarily prolonged. Almost simultaneously, however, I realized that in such a fateful predicament I would be without sense of proportion. Sounds expanded into minutes, and what must have required but a brief and terrific interval seemed to me a leisurely and deliberate act.

Abner's face disappeared beyond a motley of brightly flashing lights of unearthly colors. I became insensible to pain. I fell into oblivion.

**E**VENTUALLY I regained consciousness. But what a consciousness!

My very soul seemed to penetrate into every nook and cranny of that room. A spectator at my own tragedy, I saw myself lying supine in my bed. The murderous fingers of Abner still clutched my throat. He grunted as he tightened his grip in a last squeeze. He but wasted his strength, for I, his victim, was already dead.

For minutes he stood as if in a trance, benumbed by the terrific force of his suddenly released conscience. His murderous

passion spent, he lapsed into the powerless apathy of the exhausted debauchee.

At last his natural hypocrisy came to his rescue. His mind, fed both by impulses from his subconscious thought and cant phrases accumulated through association with mankind, set about to rationalize his conduct. For egoistic and purely inexcusable motives, he unctuously substituted motives of an unselfish, even benevolent nature.

Abner's lips did not move, no sound issued from his throat. Nevertheless I heard the voice of his thought.

"Ah, Andrew Madison," said he, "you are no longer a great financier, a great philanthropist who gives only for profit. Little good will your famous wealth avail you now. You are only a sallow lump of organic matter on the way to becoming dirt. Your soul has gone to hell, Devil take it! I have served God by ending your days. I have even served you, for the disease which has kept you here in your bed would soon have finished you. I have put you out of your misery, and I shall make a neat profit for myself.

"For years I have waited for this moment. Bit by bit I have learned the combination to your wall safe. Many months more I have waited for you to fill it with negotiable securities. At last you have played into my hands. My hour has come. In a moment I shall have two hundred thousand dollars, all in unregistered bonds. I shall hide them where no eyes will discover them. Who will think of searching the hollow duralumin furniture of your wife's living-room? And if a discovery is made, I shall lose my fortune, but not my neck, for only your wife will be incriminated. I shall take this bloody ring and place it in a drawer of her dressing-table. It is her own ring, the engagement ring you yourself gave her, Andrew Madison! You

did not know that she removed it before she went out to her parties. She always has, Andrew Madison. She has always hated you. She married you only for your wealth. You should have known that, you ugly old fossil.

"She will be tried and convicted for your murder. Of this crime she is innocent, but she well deserves her fate—just as I, your faithful slave, deserve the wealth which will soon be mine. For years I have submitted to your overbearing will, endured the meanness of your petty ways. At last I shall have my reward. Thus is justice brought into the world!"

After this appalling speech (for though his lips did not move, I distinctly heard the voice of his thought), Abner stared idly upon my body. I, too, directed my gaze to the physical remnant of myself. I could not look upon the corpse with that detached indifference which I had so often felt in the presence of the dead. I seemed to retain in my corporeal self a very sympathetic and personal interest, the equity, as it were, of a retired senior partner.

Somewhere in the house there sounded with exaggerated clarity a loud creaking. The rising wind had probably strained a rafter of the roof. Abner started from his reverie, and fear stirred within him. Appreciating his really precarious position, he hastily approached the wall safe and grasped the knob. He knew the combination well and was not long about the business. Greedily he removed the precious bonds which I had had my secretary insert there. He closed the little round door and retreated. After flinging one final, hateful look at my corpse, he left the room.

**I** FELT an impulse to follow him, but found that I could not venture from that body to which I seemed inexplicably

attached. I remained in the shadows of my room, watching by my corpse.

Before very long I was constrained to admit that I was not a very lively companion. I became engrossed in sympathy for my poor carcass, much in the manner of any man who endures solitude for a very long while.

I wondered how soon I should be discovered. I felt very sorry for my neglect.

As daylight intruded into my room, I saw with horror the muscles of my limbs stiffen and tighten. I recognized the appearance of rigor mortis. I noted the lividness which had imperceptibly marred my throat. I turned in disgust from the clotted blood upon the wound made by the diamond ring Abner had worn for the purpose of incriminating Eloise.

Had a body now housed my soul, I would have shuddered, for the very thought of the fate which awaited my wife oppressed me with unendurable force.

All that which Abner had said of Eloise was true. Nevertheless I bore her no malice, but only a feeling of sympathy and understanding. When we were together, as was rarely the case, it was I who felt the guiltier. Though the girl had married me for my wealth and position, though I was repugnant to her sight, I was able to appreciate her dreams and ambitions. I knew that she hoped for my death. What disturbed me more at the moment was the knowledge that others were aware of her attitude. The servants, her friends and her relatives knew of her silent prayer that I should by death free her of my burdensome company. The stage was set for a great and unavoidable judicial error, and I trembled from sympathy for its victim.

Despite the judgment of more sober men, Eloise had brought me more of happiness than displeasure, more of light

than darkness. She was one of those rare creatures whose mere existence is enough to awaken an unselfish delight. Her habitation of my home made life in it endurable. That she was indifferent to me seemed immaterial. She was like a beautiful work of art which does not displease us the less because of its impersonality.

Such was my emotion, my dread.

After what seemed an eternity, Abner himself appeared in the room. He was so thoroughly hypocritical that, despite the absence of witnesses, he simulated all the emotions fitting the occasion. He even managed to achieve a semblance of grief.

There was genuine horror in his voice as he summoned the police with the phone at my bedside. He rushed out of the room.

He reappeared soon afterward, Eloise at his side. Her grief was more sincere than I had any right to expect. An emotional reaction made itself felt within her. Hatred gave way to a sympathy which merged subtly into love. Repentance wrung tears from her eyes. Abner retreated with a delicacy of feeling that was a refinement of hypocrisy.

Alone, her bosom undulating rapidly beneath the soft caresses of her white silken lingerie, Eloise looked down upon my expressionless face and prayed silently for my forgiveness.

I would have given my eternity to have been able to speak to her, to have assured her that I bore her no malice, but only the kindest of understanding.

Eloise was standing there when the police arrived. They prodded her with idiotic questions, they tortured her with insolent innuendoes. Before very long, a detective appeared triumphantly with the ring Abner had planted. Eloise was boldly accused of my murder. She was too much overcome to defend herself, too

startled to comprehend the course of events which was tightening like a noose around her throat. She fell hysterically sobbing beside my bed. The photographers greedily recorded her misery.

An assistant district attorney came officiously into my chamber and made his importance unpleasantly felt by Eloise, over whom he leered like an omnipotent god.

A matron from the jail came and took Eloise away.

As she passed from my sight, out of my vision for ever, an overwhelming anguish, a spiritual pain such as no mortal man has ever suffered, seized me, and I—my spirit—writhed. I could not endure this final forced desertion of my beloved Eloise at the very moment when her heart was opened to me. I sought extinction. Blackness enveloped me.

**Y**OU, my reader, will say that I have dreamed a dream, endured the torture of a nightmare. You may believe that I have been the victim of a frightful hallucination. But you err.

It has been my singular privilege to experience my own assassination in advance of the fact. By some strange circumstance, I have been permitted often to live twice the more significant episodes of my life. It has been as if the needle of a phonograph had slipped upon the record and played a few bars ahead of time, then returned to its original position to play in its proper sequence the melody recorded. Such, at least, is the nearest analogy I can find to describe the phenomenon of which I write.

I have pondered much upon my strange experiences without ever achieving a very satisfactory explanation of their being. Perhaps the mind of man is only a sort of phonograph for the reception of events in their proper order. Some machines

are improperly constructed, and the sequence is occasionally broken. If such be the case, such a machine am I.

I suppose there are some who would envy me my faculty to read into the future. They would like to live twice through the happiest moments of their lives, even at the cost of enduring its most agonizing misfortunes. But they are deluded. "Fortune," says Machiavelli, "is a woman who to be kept under must be beaten and roughly handled." Alas! to me Fortune is only a woman whose blandishments have become uncomfortably familiar. I taste of her favors long before she chooses to bestow them, and her pretty speeches have bored me years before they leave her lips. Far away, she is a beautiful ideal; close up, she is only a vixen with a reproach.

My motive for writing this account of my adventure into the supernatural is to save my beloved Eloise from the fate my ungrateful valet, Abner, has so maliciously planned for her.

You may wonder why I do not send Abner away. I marvel at my own inactivity.

My end is near. I am confined to my bed—my death-bed. I know not precisely when I shall awaken to discover the murderous Abner above me, but I am certain the day is not distantly removed. I feel powerless to alter my fate. "Against this mysterious force rebellion is in vain, for all history proves that men may second Fortune, but can not oppose her; may weave her webs, but can not break them."

Thus I struggle not to alter fate, to postpone my death. I desire only to spare Eloise the legal execution Abner has planned for her. I shall deem myself rewarded if once again I can see love swell her sweet bosom and rout revulsion from her heart. Such is the price of love.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Note by Former District Attorney Wade*

I HAVE submitted the above document in the best of faith. It was given to me by Andrew Madison's lawyers shortly after his murder. It was sealed in an envelope which bore the inscription: "To the District Attorney of D—— County, to be opened by him after the discovery of my body."

I would have dismissed this bizarre yarn as the pathetic drooling of a moribund old man had not the cold and stiffened corpse of Andrew Madison borne silent testimony to his prophetic truth.

After I had recovered the bonds from the hollow legs of the duralumin furniture, I was convinced that I dealt with an authentic description of what had occurred. The subsequent confession of Mr. Madison's valet, Abner, confirmed every last detail of the manuscript.

In short, Andrew Madison did prelive, as it were, the episode of his death and the supernatural life immediately succeeding the event.

I have recently consulted with several eminent psychologists concerning this unusual case. A celebrated member of the fraternity has argued that if Mr. Madison really did live through his future, he would have called to mind his previous experience. When the man was finally murdered, he certainly remembered his previous view of the scene. Yet Mr. Madison, when writing of it, does not mention any such recollection.

The argument is not without weight. However, another psychologist, equally respected for his integrity, has advanced the opinion that Mr. Madison might have become amnesic to his former experience. Thus his story is acquitted of inconsistency.

Mr. Madison's attorneys have prom-

ised to examine his papers to discover if possible the existence of other accounts of his most extraordinary experiences. It is to be hoped that more light will eventually be thrown upon his excursions into the future.

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