

*Like Poe's Raven, the Parrot  
in This Story Was a Bird of Doom*

# THE DEVIL BIRD

By HAL HALBERT



**P**ERHAPS you who read this story, you church-going, God-fearing people, will not understand a man of my stamp. I have always been of the earth earthy. I have believed in neither God nor the Devil. It has been my belief that when one dies he is dead and fit prey for the worms—nothing more.

I have been a gross materialist. I have believed that religion and God are a panacea invented by the ruling classes to keep the people contented. But a strange and terrible happening has come into my life to make me doubt my philosophy. Perhaps there is a just and avenging God, after all.

My name is Arthur Blum. Only three years ago I was a respected citizen of a certain Southwestern city. I held a responsible position in a flourishing commercial establishment. I was doing well, but not well enough, I thought. I became discontented. The crux of it was I didn't think I was paid enough to reward me for my services, which were valuable and arduous. The owner of the business was a crabbed commercial shark with a pious Sunday face and a shriveled weekday conscience. His name was Julius Perriott.

He would not raise my wages; and so I set out to rob him. I was the cashier.

I filled out the checks and he signed them with a flourishing, intricate signature of which he was very proud.

I practiced writing the signature and I became so expert that I could duplicate it. Any bank teller will tell you that an involved signature is easy to forge. The rest was easy. I took money as I needed it, charging on the books to various accounts. I was shrewd. I stole in small amounts, here and there. But the inevitable happened. I cashed a check for one hundred dollars, charging it to advertising. Before I could destroy the canceled check he saw it and became suspicious. An audit fol-

lowed and I was arrested. I had covered my tracks well, but not well enough. I was given a three-year term in the state penitentiary.

Did I do wrong? Yes, according to the customs of ordered society; but I did no wrong according to my philosophy of life. I merely was not efficient. I got caught. Old Perriott robbed and swindled his customers every day. But he was more efficient than I was. The customers did not catch him. He got away with it. He robbed his employes with pittance wages. Some stole sneakingly while others starved—nobly perhaps. I alone tried to strike back with vigor, but he was too much for me.

I didn't harbor any great hatred for him. He was a man after my own heart. I should have done the same thing in his place. But something, as I have said, has happened that has served to put a great doubt in my mind as to the wisdom of my materialistic philosophy.

I served my term and came out an expert broom maker; but I had no idea of making brooms. Deep down in my heart, I think, there was a hatred for the smug society that had robbed me of the bright years of my youth. I proposed to make it pay. I would take of its wealth. I would gamble my liberty, even my life, against its hoarded property. If necessary, I would strike to take my share.

I WAS released from prison on the first day of September. Two days later I dropped off a freight train as it slowed into the yards of a big southern town that abuts on a wide and muddy river. You can understand that I was a bitter and desperate man. I had come to rob, plunder and to steal.

The bluecoated policeman, who looked at me perfunctorily as I passed, would have served his employers well had he shot me down. But he only looked at me with his searching professional stare, while I endeavored to shake my cheap clothing into a semblance of respectability. All the while I was making my way across numberless tracks toward the river front. From plans made long before, I had definitely fixed in my mind where I wanted to go.

I reached a dirty street upon the river front. It was an ugly neighborhood. I could see the muddy river moving toward the sea not fifty yards away. Before me was a sign reading:

**PERRIOTT and SON**  
Jewels, Curios, Antiques

It was a dingy sign, but I well knew that immense wealth was concealed in

that building before me. Here old Perriott, connoisseur and miser, collected his jewels and antiques from the five continents and the seven seas.

As I stepped into the shop a premonition of evil seized me as if a hand were clutching my throat. My spirits dropped to the zero point. It was the lowering atmosphere of the place, I think. The dirty, dingy shop seemed to exude an aura of gloom.

I caught a glimpse of an ancient spinning wheel doddering on its last legs. A clutter of curiously wrought brass vessels gave off a somber sheen. I started nervously as a tall grandfather's clock solemnly intoned the hour of six in the evening. I shrugged my shoulders vigorously in an effort to shake off the unaccountable depression. And from the dark meaningless lumber of articles at the back of the shop appeared a stooped little man. A faded black skullcap was drawn down on a long oval head and from beneath this covering a few straggly gray hairs struggled to escape.

"Something, sir?" he asked ingratiatingly, rubbing his hands together. His voice sounded low and far away to me, as if he were speaking from a distance. I looked at him closely before replying and I was startled by his resemblance to his brother. A little smaller, a little older, a little grayer—that was all. I pulled myself together and handed him a letter.

"I came south, sir, for my health," I explained. "My blood pressure is high and the doctors say that I must live near the sea."

There the letter was, self-explanatory; and there was the flourishing, intricate signature at the end that we both knew so well. It represented me in restrained terms as a frugal, hard-working, honest man—a capable clerk and a competent office man. If there be a God, he'll not forgive me that lie.

He finished the letter and looked up at me with his great dark eyes.

"You would work?" he queried. That was all. No inquiry as to his brother.

I put on an humbly straightforward manner.

"I am but a poor man, sir, and I must live in the lowlands. I have a bit of money saved up, but I would work for my board and a pittance for my tobacco. Perhaps, sir, you would find me useful?"

I caught a gleam of avarice in his eye. Ah! yes, he was a true brother of my former master.

"Come back to the office," he invited, civilly enough. We entered a sort of grilled cage with a bookkeeping desk and a few chairs. It was a dark and

dingy place; but a bright, shining thing of brass, steel and concrete showed that old Perriott knew how to protect his wares by the latest thing in burglar-proof vaults. My spirits immediately rose. I was getting near the treasure.

"Peanuts! Peanuts! Peanuts!" shrilled a nearby voice.

I jumped nervously, and then looked around me in astonishment. Swinging from the ceiling was a wide perch and on the perch a blackish bird balanced himself. He ruffled his feathers and cocked a dark eye in our direction in a most impatient manner.

"Ah! Hungry, Othello?" quavered the old man, eying the bird affectionately.

Perriott fumbled in his pocket, mounted a chair and held up a few kernels to the bird. Othello gobbled them greedily.

"An English starling," explained Perriott. "He's a good bird and never complains unless he's hungry."

I looked at the bird with curiosity and he returned my stare with glittering eyes.

"He's got the devil in his eye," I muttered.

But old Perriott did not hear me, for when I turned back to him he was regarding me with sly greed.

"You may start to work in the morning," he said. And he named a wage astoundingly low.

My heart hardened within me, but my voice was becomingly grateful.

"Very well, sir," I said humbly. "I'll be here."

I WAS put to work in the office, sometimes aiding in the shop during the infrequent rushes. The customers came from all over the United States, from Canada, and even from Europe itself. They were mostly pseudo-connoisseurs, collectors of various kinds and curious hunters. They bought medieval mirrors, the worn household gods of famous men, documents signed by history-making statesmen, and many other things that I knew not of.

But the most precious of Perriott's wares were his jewels. He claimed to have a great emerald that once was warmed on La Pompador's bosom and a ruby that had graced the hilt of the Black Prince's sword. I don't know about such things, but the glimpse I caught of the jewels when old Perriott opened the vault made my heart beat with excitement and joy. There were rare emeralds, pearls and diamonds from every clime. There were amethysts and

rubies in antique settings, opals, agates, turquoises, garnets—their brilliance imprisoned in that impregnable vault.

I was not ordinarily allowed to go near the vault when it was open. He unlocked it, brought out the books himself and then closed it and whirled the dial. It became an obsession with me to get into that vault, but the old miser carefully hid the twirling dial with his body. Yet my opportunity came.

One morning he came hurriedly into the office to get the famous emerald to show an impatient prospective customer. He began to whirl the dial preparatory to working the combination. Othello was on his perch, rocking to and fro.

"Peanuts! Peanuts! Peanuts!" he began to scream.

The old man was intent on his task, but his attention was distracted by the bird and he looked up impatiently.

"Feed him," he ordered somewhat pettishly, offering me a sack of nuts.

The perch of the bird was directly in front of the vault door. I mounted a chair and stood there pretending to feed the bird while he whirled the dial and threw open the door. In those few moments I stored the numbers safely away in my brain.

I offered my palm filled with peanuts to Othello. But that strange bird fluffed up his feathers and retreated toward his cage, eying me with his head cocked tauntingly on one side. I threw the kernels into the cage and he plunged in after them.

It may have been my fevered imaginings, but somehow I felt that that black imp Othello hated me. He would flutter his wings at me contemptuously and open his beak as if to cry out, but no sound came. He seemed to be continually jeering at me. I grew to hate the bird. Perhaps it was a guilty conscience—if I have a conscience—for all this time I was preparing for the robbery of that vault. I had already taken an impression of the keys to the shop and had tediously filed out their duplicates. I had also traced the intricate meanderings of the burglar alarm and knew exactly where to snip the connection. I was only waiting a favorable time to strike.

The time came one dark and muggy night about ten days after my arrival. A heavy mist rolled over the river and the old-fashioned street lamps were almost obscured by the clinging vapor. My plan was so simple and easy that it could hardly fail to succeed. Old Perriott, a widower, rarely came back to the shop after the evening meal, and

the son, a newly-married man, never. Ten minutes would suffice for me to loot the safe. Wrapping the plunder into a mailable package, I would drop it into a nearby postoffice station, directed to my sister a hundred miles away. I had already written her that I was mailing her some books and that she might expect me soon. Fifteen minutes would see me back at my boarding-house, where I would establish an alibi. The crime would be attributed to some light-fingered Jimmie Valentine. A reasonable time and a good excuse for departure, and I could enjoy the spoils in comfort.

AS I slipped into the shop, my keys working perfectly, the grandfather's clock was tolling the hour of seven in the evening. Its hoarse voice reverberated metallically throughout the building. First I cut the connection of the burglar alarm. Then I made my way carefully to the office, through the eerie shapes of odd furniture, brassware, and the lumber of past ages that made up the stock in trade. A moment later I was flashing my dark lantern on the polished brass dial of the vault. Back and forth I spun it from the numbers in my mind and the *click* of the falling tumblers told me that my memory was good. A final *click*. I turned the wheel and the massive door swung open. I inserted a jimmy between the two inner iron doors and the final barrier fell.

There before me in orderly array lay a Midas fortune. Before the concentrated rays of my electric torch, opals shed their pale radiance, rubies burned, emeralds gave forth their greenish sheen and diamonds twinkled like fallen stars. I did not touch the cash. It was not great and I was after bigger things. I gathered up the jewels, row on row, and laid them carefully in the box by my side. I wrapped the box hastily, but with care, and addressed it to my sister. I was just rising to leave the vault when the opening of the shop door caught my ear. My heart dropped like a weight in my bosom. Some one was coming in the door!

It flashed over me then that it must be old Perriott, for I had looked the door securely behind me. I looked carefully from my covert and saw a light flash on. It was Perriott and he was giving directions to a burly drayman. I remembered a Chippendale wardrobe that had gone out to a customer in the city that day. It evidently had been returned, and old Perriott, fearful of its loss, would not be satisfied until it was safely under lock and key. The drayman grunted and swore over his task, but Perriott was a hard taskmaster and

made him handle it with the greatest care. My heart lightened as I waited for its completion, for I felt sure that old Perriott would go home when it was done to his satisfaction, leaving me to finish my plundering in safety. The drayman with many grunts edged the wardrobe into the niche prepared for it, received his fee and departed. Perriott looked around the shop and turned toward the door.

And then I heard something stirring over my head. There was a rustling on the perch above me, a fluttering of wings, and then a screeching voice turned my blood cold in my veins.

"Peanuts! Peanuts! Peanuts!" yelled the black devil. "Peanuts! Peanuts! Peanuts!"

I have never known whether it was my own movements or the flashing of the light and the bustle in the front of the shop that aroused the sleeping villain. But there he was, an imp of Satan above my head, screeching out my doom.

Old Perriott fumbled in his pockets, half turned toward the rear, hesitated and then came on. I believed that he loved that bird as well as his shriveled heart could love anything. If so, it is certain that that poor, pale ray of tenderness had cost him his life. The desperate thief lurking in the back of the shop was determined not to give up the glowing jewels, not to go back to prison again.

The old man shuffled down the narrow aisle and into the griled office. He pressed the button that flooded us with light. What must have been his astonishment when he saw his rifled vault! What his horror when he saw the fearful being before him clutching an iron bar! I half pitied him even as I struck. But the blow went wild and his lips, shriveled by fear, opened in a bleat of pure terror.

"Mercy, Blum! Mercy, Blum! Mercy! Mercy!" he screamed.

I averted my eyes as I struck again. The screaming ceased, but the memory of that animal cry for mercy lingers with me to this day.

Old Perriott had fallen like an ox under the second blow. There he sprawled, a clumsy, inert thing. Was he dead? I was not sure. But even I had not fallen so low as to strike a fallen man. I listened for an instant to see if the screams had attracted attention, but there was no sound save the lurch of a heavy wagon over the cobblestones outside.

I thought a moment. If by any chance he should revive I were a lost man. There was but one thing to do—put him in

the vault. There the imprisoned air insured that he would not come out alive.

I softly closed the massive door, twirled the dial and looked about me for the starting. I was resolved that he should die. I looked on his perch, in his cage. He was not in the office. He had disappeared.

I let myself stealthily out of the shop, leaving the door unlocked. Fifteen minutes later I joined a laughing group at the boarding-house. The package of jewels was in the postoffice and the jimmy resting on the bottom of the river. I had been gone exactly thirty minutes.

"Where have you been, Blum?" asked one of the laughing group.

"Just having a quiet pipe in my room," I answered easily.

My alibi was perfect.

I RETURNED to the shop the next morning exactly on my schedule. I found the office as I had left it, orderly, commonplace enough in the morning light. Old Perriott had been missed and the son had 'phoned the police. A policeman and a plainclothes man were there. The unlocked door had aroused the son's fear for the old man's safety, but the closed vault and undisturbed stock pre-

cluded the idea of robbery. They were discussing a general alarm.

As for me, I was confident. I had no fear. I was eager for the test to come. For I was certain that I would not even be suspected. I addressed young Perriott.

"Will you open the vault, sir? I wish to do some work on the books."

I watched him collectedly while he whirled the dial. The door swung back. There lay old Perriott. He was lying on his face with one hand toward the door. I had left him on his back.

The consternation was terrible. I alone was calm.

"He has been dead for many hours," announced the officer, his voice appropriately solemn.

My heart felt joyous within me. Dead! Now I knew I was safe.

And then something came stalking out of that vault, a black demonic creature. It was Othello. He fluttered up to his usual perch and ruffled his feathers diabolically. He was staring at me, I thought, and his black eyes glittered with a fiendish light. He opened his beak tentatively perhaps a dozen times, but no sound came. Suddenly he let out a

strident plaint that I will hear to my dying day:

"*Mercy, Blum! Mercy, Blum! Mercy! Mercy! Mercy!*" he screamed, and it seemed to me that his voice was wailing triumphantly.

"*Mercy, Blum! Mercy! Mercy!*" I thought that he would never stop. There he was on his swinging perch, a devil incarnate, screaming me away to certain death.

I fell back, my face ashen, and stared with terror at the bird. A fiend he was from hell itself, screeching out his eternal refrain. I could stand it no longer, with murder in my heart I started toward the bird. The detective stopped me with leveled revolver.

"I arrest you for the murder of Andrew Perriott," he said.

TOMORROW, I die. I read in today's paper of the electric chair newly installed in the state penitentiary. I will be one of the first to rest myself in that deadly seat. But I do not think of that. My mind keeps going back to that black devil, Othello. Whether an emissary of God or Satan, I would die happy could I but once get my fingers around his neck!

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