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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"It was the strangest and perhaps the oldest deck in existence."

The Devil Deals

By CARL JACOBI

An odd and curious story about a fatal game of cards, played with a most peculiar deck containing neither spades, hearts, diamonds, nor clubs

THE MAN accosted Sargent at the intersection of Charing Cross and Oxford. He was tall, with a long black rain-cape, an oddly-shaped alpine hat, and a cane. He said:

"I beg pardon, sir. But do you play cards?"

Sargent turned up his collar against the drizzle and shivered. For an hour he had known he was being followed. From Russell Square to the British Museum to Dyott Street, while fog swept steadily in

from the Embankment, he had gradually increased his pace, aware of the muffled steps behind.

"Cards?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

The man extended a claw-like hand. "I am Doctor Paul Losada. You have perhaps heard of me . . ."

A little shock darted up Sargent's spine.

". . . And you are Basil Sargent, the man who won thirty thousand pounds at

Monte Carlo, who broke the bank at Wang Tau's in Singapore, playing *main-po* three years ago. In short, you are, unless I am mistaken, the most well-informed person on games of chance in London at the present time."

"I am Basil Sargent, yes," Sargent replied coldly.

"Then, *Señor*"—the stranger's pallid face seemed to swirl uncertainly in the fog—"may I ask a favor of you? I live but a short distance from here. Would you do me the honor of coming to my apartment? My wife and I are looking for a fourth at whist. But more than that, I have something I would like to show you, something which I believe you will appreciate more than anyone else."

"And what," Sargent asked uneasily, "do you wish to show me?"

A gleam leaped into the man's black eyes. "A deck of cards, *Señor*, bearing neither hearts, clubs, spades, nor diamonds—the strangest and perhaps the oldest deck in existence."

Sargent was expecting another answer, and his relief in not getting it left him cold for a moment. For a long time he stood there in silence. Then he smiled. Losada, eh? Inez Losada's impossible husband. The man must take him for a fool.

But why not? The situation which, to a less handsome, less confident man, might have loomed dangerous seemed only amusing to the gambler.

"I'll go," he said.

Rumbling down Charing Cross, their cab turned right at Old Compton Street and headed into Soho. Doctor Losada's residence was on Rupert Street, a huge stone pile that seemed to shrink back despondently in the shadows.

THE doctor led the way down a gas-lit corridor to a door on the second floor back. Inside, he disappeared for a

moment, then returned, followed by a man and a woman.

"My wife, Inez," he said. "Her brother, Ricardo."

Sargent bowed. "I have met the *Señora* once before," he smirked. "Wasn't it at Covent Garden?"

She was black-haired and strikingly beautiful, and there was a ghost of a smile about her reddened lips as she replied:

"Perhaps. I go to the opera frequently."

Doctor Losada opened a card table, placed four chairs around it.

"We will begin with whist," he said. "But first let me show you the cards."

He opened a small ivory box, took out a deck and spread it on the table top.

Sargent stared.

For twenty years as a professional card sharp he had earned his living by his wits. For twenty years he had wandered from city to city, winning games of chance by his own trickery and cunning, taking fortunes from the gullible. But never had he seen a deck like the one before him.

As Losada had said, the suits were distinguished by neither hearts, diamonds, clubs, nor spades. The two black suits were snakes and harpies, with a knave, a queen, a king, and ten pip-cards, including an ace. The two red suits were the same, except that their markings were spiders and moonflowers. In spite of the cards' apparent age, they were in remarkably preserved condition.

But most unusual of all was the joker. The very presence of this card seemed to constrict Sargent's lungs with a feeling of suffocation. Blackly marked on a white surface, it showed a small skull, a death's-head.

"Where did you get them?" Sargent asked, looking up.

Doctor Losada smiled. "The pack was

sent me by a friend in Seville. As it happened, they were almost lost before they arrived."

"Lost?"

"They were sent by plane," Losada explained. "The pilot was stricken ill, en route to Croydon, and the ship crashed. Only part of the mail was recovered."

Losada now took the deck and shuffled it. "High card deals," he said, motioning Sargent to draw.

Sargent drew the knave and laid it down before him. And then a curious coincidence occurred. Losada's wife, Inez, drew the queen. Losada took the king. Knave, queen, king in direct rotation. Ricardo's card was a low number.

Losada cut and began to deal. A moment later play started. The game was a close one, and for a while, although there were no stakes, Sargent's old interest held him to each move. Gradually, however, other thoughts began to invade his brain, and he took and lost tricks mechanically.

Did Doctor Losada know him by name only? Had he chosen him for a fourth simply because he desired a person of his reputation to examine his antique deck?

Or was he aware of the clandestine affair between Sargent and the *Señora*, Incz? Did the doctor know that during the many nights his practise took him from his apartment, Sargent had visited his wife in secret?

There was no doubt that Inez was a beautiful woman. Her eyes were large. Her skin was like tinted satin, and her figure, as she sat there, was little concealed by her low-cut gown.

In the center of the table, next to the trump card, the joker still lay, face up. Looking at it, Sargent again got the impression that something about the card was affecting his breathing. It seemed as if an invisible dust fog were passing

from that tiny death's-head into his nostrils.

The game centered down to the last trick. Again that coincidence occurred. Sargent's card was the knave. Inez played the queen, and Losada without the slightest show of emotion took the trick with his king. Once more rotation had been knave, queen, king—with king the winner.

At one a. m. Sargent took his leave. He expressed his thanks and pleasure for the evening. But as he descended to the street, some inner urge prompted him to look back over his shoulder.

Rupert Street lay dark and deserted, with only an occasional street lamp to light the oldish buildings on either side. But directly above the apartment he had just left, a solid, compact cloud-mass hung low in the night sky. He shuddered. For as he looked, it seemed to Sargent that that cloud bore the same design as the joker card of Losada's deck, and that something, dry and smothering like smoke, was creeping down from the death's-head in the heavens into his lungs.

THE telephone in his Bloomsbury hotel woke Sargent early next morning.

"This is Doctor Losada," came the voice on the wire. "I'm sorry to trouble you again, but after you left last night I was unable to locate one of the cards of my deck. I desire very much to keep that deck intact, and I am wondering if you would mind looking to see if it attached itself unnoticed to your clothes."

"Just a minute," Sargent said.

He opened his wardrobe closet, searched quickly through the clothes he had worn the previous evening. In the rain-jacket, in the torn lower hem—sure enough, there was the card, the knave of snakes.

"The card is here," he said into the

phone. "I'll mail it to you at once, doctor."

"Why not bring it yourself, *Señor*? Say tonight at nine, and we can have another game."

THAT night Sargent again stood before the gloomy corridor door of Doctor Losada's apartment on Rupert Street. All day the events of the night before had lingered in his brain, troubling him. Try though he would to fight it off, a distinct sense of terror seemed closing in on him. He felt as if he were gradually being drawn into a web from which he could not keep away, and from which there was no escape.

No response came to his pull at the bell. He tried the latch, opened the door and entered. The apartment was lighted but empty. Then he saw the note on the table.

Señor Sargent:

A thousand pardons, but neither my wife, Ricardo, nor I will be able to be with you at the agreed hour. An urgent matter has come up, requiring our presence elsewhere.

You may amuse yourself, if you wish, until we return, with the cards. They are in the lower right compartment of the wall cabinet.

LOSADA.

Sargent scowled and nervously lighted a cigarette. He turned toward the door. But the desire to view that deck once more became overpowering.

A moment later, hat and coat removed, he opened the little ivory box and took out the cards. In the droning solitude of the room he shuffled and re-shuffled—then mechanically began to play solitaire.

There are many ways to play solitaire. Sargent's game was quite simple. A cross was made of five cards. On the cross, cards were played in *down* rotation without regard to suit. The corner cards finished out the square and were played upon in *up* rotation, according to suit.

The object was to build these corners into complete sets of thirteen each.

Rapidly he played. He was on the verge of winning when he saw that his last card, the queen, could not be played. The king had gone into the discard pile, and he was unable to retrieve it.

He shuffled and tried again. But at the end of half an hour he stood again blocked. In three games, each with the queen in the corner, a king prevented him from winning.

Sargent felt a bead of cold sweat stand out on his brow. Terror, an invisible, nameless thing, seemed to rise from the pasteboards in his hands and close about him like a winding sheet.

Impulsively and for no definite reason he could think of at the moment he swept the cards together, jammed them into the ivory box and placed the box in his pocket. Puzzled at his action, yet lacking the will-power to change it, he took up his hat and coat and went out.

An hour later he was back in his Bloomsbury rooms, nervously downing a glass of brandy. The liquor quieted him somewhat, and he slumped into a chair, picked up a book and tried to read.

But the print swam before his eyes. Questions unanswerable hammered at him. Knave, queen, king. In all his experience at card playing, never had Sargent seen those three cards turn up in such chronological succession. It was weird!

He stirred restlessly. A curious chill, seeming to emanate from the ceiling above, filled the room.

Could it be possible that there was any significance in those cards? Did, for example, the queen represent Inez, the king Doctor Losada, and the knave himself? But no, such a thought was absurd.

At length Sargent tossed his book aside, undressed and went to bed.

IT SEEMED he had but fallen asleep when he awoke, sat bolt upright, trembling in every nerve and muscle. The room was black as pitch, and there was no sound save the far-away rumble of a distant tram-car. He listened.

Faintly there came to his ears a low rustling, a scraping as of objects brushing against each other in frantic haste. It grew louder, died away.

Sargent leaped out of bed, snapped on the wall switch, flooding the room with light.

There was no one before him. The room was empty. And then, with a start, he found himself staring down at the table.

Ripped from its hinges as if by some internal force, the cover of the ivory box lay open. And Losada's deck of cards! They were arranged on the table in a partly completed game of solitaire. More than that, a chair was drawn up, though Sargent was positive none had been there before.

It was as if everything had been prepared for him to play.

Slowly he moved forward. The corner cards were queens. Three corners had been built to the trey, but the last was still vacant.

Once again that overpowering urge swept over him. A definite psychic power drew him into the chair, moved his hands irresistibly toward the cards.

He began to move through the deck, playing slowly. The game wore on, and a vague horror began to rise within him.

The king! It was his unseen opponent. Like a hunted thing, jeering at his efforts, it remained unattainable in the discard pile.

Suddenly the telephone rang. Sargent lifted the instrument.

"Yes?"

A voice filled with triumph and mockery came over the wire. "This is Doctor Losada. Listen carefully, for what I have to say will be of interest to you.

"Please do not think our recent meeting was a matter of chance. I have known you, watched you for the past four months. I sought you out, not because of your reputation as a gambler—but because of my wife.

"My wife, yes. Did you think your intrigue with her could escape me unnoticed? Ah no, *Señor*. Doctor Losada is not that much of a fool. You have robbed me of the thing I prize most, and I have planned my revenge.

"Are you listening? You are now seated at a table, playing cards. My cards. It is not an ordinary deck, as you have perhaps guessed. It was fashioned by a Spanish sorcerer in the Fourteenth Century.

"Play your game of solitaire, *Señor*. Play with all the skill you possess. The card which represents you in the deck is the knave of snakes. The queen is Inez, my wife. *The king is myself*.

"Watch the king. Your only salvation is to defeat it with your knave. *Adios, Señor*."

The phone clicked, and Sargent sat there, staring. Slowly he forked the instrument, picked up the cards. The words that had come over the wire were etched like fire in his brain.

But suddenly he laughed. Knave was he? Very well, as knave he would steal the queen and laugh in the king's face. With trembling fingers he began to move through the deck. Upon the trey he played in quick succession the four, the five, the six. The discard pile was lessening.

On and on he played. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he mar-

shaled his forces. He was closing in on the king, and he was utilizing all of his skill to accomplish it.

A hiss of satisfaction came to his lips. Remained but one card to be played, and he would win.

And then a wave of horror billowed over him. The king card was moving, rising of its own accord from the discard pile. And as it moved, the card beneath slid out and fell upon the table directly beneath Sargent's gaze.

The joker!

He had forgotten it. Now as he sat staring at that leering death's-head that same horrible sense of suffocation seized him. His throat closed tight; his eyes bulged. It was as though an invisible poisonous miasma was floating from that painted skull, crawling into his lungs like

a bulbous thing alive. He was choking. Choking . . .

He screamed and lurched to his feet. Gasping, he tore at his throat.

The joker card seemed to leave the table, to float before his eyes. He clawed at the rug, sucked wildly for air.

But gradually and relentlessly blackness closed in on him, and he felt his life ebb away.

THE *London Morning Post* carried the following item the next day:

An unfortunate tragedy occurred last night in a room of a Bloomsbury hotel. Mr. Basil Sargent, who won lasting fame by his unusual winnings at Baccarat at Monte Carlo, was found dead, apparently of asphyxiation.

Investigations showed that the room's gas fixture had been left turned on.

Police place no credence in the rumor that a man dressed in black rain-cape stole into the hotel and entered the dead man's room some time after he retired.