

WEIRD TALES *The Unique Magazine*

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Published monthly by THE RURAL PUBLISHING CORPORATION, 325 N. Capitol Ave., Indianapolis, Ind. Application made for entry as second-class matter at the postoffice at Indianapolis, Indiana. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States; \$3.50 in Canada. The publishers are not responsible for manuscripts lost in transit. Address all manuscripts and other editorial matters to WEIRD TALES, 854 N. Clark St., Chicago, Ill. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and publishers are cautioned against using the same, either wholly or in part.

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VOLUME 1

25 Cents

NUMBER 3

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Ghastly Retribution Befell the Victim of

THE DEVIL PLANT

By LYLE WILSON HOLDEN

IT WAS the last straw! Injury upon injury I had borne without a murmur, but now I determined to revenge myself upon Silvela Castelar, let the cost be what it would. His malevolent influence had pursued me since early boyhood, and it was he who caused every fond hope of my life to turn to ashes before its realization.

Long ago, when we were boys in school together, his evil work began. We were both of Spanish blood, and both, having lost our parents in childhood, were being educated by our respective guardians at one of the famous boys' schools of England.

Nothing was more natural in the circumstances, than that we should become chums and room-mates. However, it was not long before I began to be sorry that I had entered into such close relationship with him. He was absolutely unscrupulous, and soon his escapades won him an unenviable reputation among the other students, although he always managed, by skillfully covering his trail, to stand well with the authorities of the school.

Before many weeks had passed, a particularly heinous outrage, which he had committed, set the whole school in an uproar. It could not be overlooked, and a strict investigation was started.

What was my horror to discover that his devilish ingenuity had woven a web of evidence which thoroughly enmeshed me within its coils! There was no escape; I was dismissed in disgrace from the school, and in disgrace I left England. The notoriety I received in many of the leading papers of the Kingdom made it impossible for me to enter another school or to obtain any honest employment.

I came to America, working my passage over upon a cattle ship. The years that followed were hard ones, but by sober industry I forged slowly ahead until, at last, I had bright prospects of becoming the junior partner in a large business house in Baltimore.

Then my evil genius appeared. Silvela obtained employment in our company, and by his devilish cunning soon made himself well liked and trusted.

Then one morning, a few months after he came, it was reported that a large amount of money had been stolen from the firm. Again a network of circumstantial evidence pointed indisputably in my direction.

I was arrested and brought to trial. The evidence not being entirely conclusive, the jury disagreed, and I was set free; but my career in America was forever blasted.

As soon as I could close up my affairs, I buried myself in the wilds of Australia, where I began life anew. Fortune was kind to me and I prospered. Under another name, I became a respected and honored citizen of a thriving new settlement.

Then the crowning blessing of all came when I won the love of the beautiful Mercedes, a black-eyed, olive-hued immigrant from my old province of Andalusia. Then, indeed, I was at the threshold of Heaven! But how short was my day of bliss!

Four weeks before our wedding day Silvela Castelar suddenly entered our settlement. It is useless to dwell upon that wretched period. Sufficient to say that this hellborn fiend again worked his diabolic sorcery, and Mercedes was lost to me forever.

The report came to me that Silvela, for the first time in his life, loved with a fierce, consuming passion, and that Mercedes soon would be betrothed to him. Then it was that I vowed by all that was holy that Silvela Castelar should pay in full his guilty debt, even though, as a result, my soul should sink into stygian blackness.

WHY DO I write this? Because I take a grim pleasure in telling of my revenge, and because I want the world to know that I had just provocation. I am not afraid. Life or death—it matters little which is my portion now. When this is read I shall be far from the haunts of men.

Silvela Castelar thought I was a fool. It suited my purpose that he should continue to think so. I treated him as a bosom friend, and he, poor idiot, thought I never guessed that he was the instiga-

tor of the ruin which drove me from England, wrecked my business career in America, and in the end left me desolate, without hope of ever enjoying the blessings of love.

So, while we smoked, read, or hunted together, I brooded upon my wrongs, and racked by brain for some method by which I could accomplish that which was now the sole absorbing motive of my life. Then chance threw across my path the instrument of my vengeance.

One day, while I was wandering, desolate and alone, through a wild and unexplored part of the country, I came upon one of the rarest and at the same time one of the most terrible species of the vegetable kingdom ever discovered. It is known as the octopus plant, called by the natives "the devil tree." When I saw it my heart gave a throb of exultation, for I knew that my search was ended; the means by which I could accomplish my purpose was now at hand.

Silvela and I had but one passion in common—an intense love for botanical investigation. I knew that he would be interested when he heard of my strange discovery, and I believed that his knowledge of the plant was not sufficient to make him cautious. On the evening of the next day but one, as we sat smoking, I broached the subject.

"Silvela, in the old days you used to be considerably wrapped up in the study of plant life. Are you still interested?"

"Somewhat," he replied, and then his eyes narrowed craftily. "I exhausted the interesting possibilities of most of the known plants of the world a number of years ago. Lately I have found 'the light that lies in women's eyes' a subject of greater interest."

I could have strangled him where he sat; but a lifetime of trouble has taught me to conceal my feelings. I betrayed no emotion.

"I'll venture that there is one plant which you have never studied at first hand."

"What is that?" he asked, with mild curiosity.

"A plant," I continued, "found only in the most inaccessible places of the earth. Probably it could be seen only

in the wildest parts of Sumatra or Australia, and then scarcely once in a lifetime."

He was now thoroughly aroused.

"What is the family of this wonderful shrub?" he asked. "I have a dim recollection of having heard of it. Let me see—isn't it called—"

"The devil tree by the natives, by others the octopus plant," I broke in. "But I have heard that the name is somewhat of a misnomer. It is said that it is rather a tree of heaven, for it distills a rare and delicious nectar which has a wonderful rejuvenating power. At the same time it intoxicates in a strange and mysterious manner, causing him who drinks to revel in celestial visions of love and radiant beauty. Instead of leaving one depressed, as is the case with alcohol, it is said that the impression lingers, the face grows younger, and he who sips is actually loved by any of the female sex whose eyes look upon him. Indeed, I have heard that if our countryman, Ponce de Leon, had gone to the South Seas instead of to Florida, he would have really discovered the fountain of youth for which he sought."

I looked at Silvela. His eyes were sparkling, and he was breathing quickly; I knew I had found his weak point. His was a dreamy, half-superstitious nature, and my words appealed to him strongly.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Would that I could see this marvelous phenomenon and sip of its celestial juice!"

"It could be done," I replied, hesitatingly, "but it would involve some hardship and considerable danger."

"Did you ever see one of these plants?"

"Yes; not two days since."

Silvela sprang to his feet, with a Spanish oath.

"*Dios mio!*" he cried. "Rodriguez, why did you not tell me? When can we start to find it?"

"Softly," I admonished. "I told you there was danger. Haven't you heard that this devil's plant has been known to gorge itself upon human flesh?"

"The wild story of some frightened native," he scoffed. "Take me to it and nothing shall prevent me from testing the fabled powers of its juices. Stop! Did you not drink of this delicious nectar?"

I shook my head sadly.

"No, I had no wish to try. Why should I seek to become young in body when my heart is old within?"

"You were afraid," he sneered, "afraid of the trailing tendrils of this plant devil."

"Have it that way if you wish," I answered indifferently. "However, if in spite of my warning, you still persist in wishing to see this strange freak of nature, I will do my best to guide you to it; but, I repeat, the way is long and difficult, and you had better leave this cursed thing alone."

"We will start in the morning," he asserted decisively, as he arose to leave.

I said nothing more, but, alone in my room, I laughed like a devil at the success of my ruse.

NEXT MORNING the weather was squally and tempestuous, and I was afraid that the fire of Silvela's enthusiasm would be burning low. But I also knew that opposition would be fuel to the flame.

"I fear we shall have to postpone our journey," I remarked, when he appeared.

If Silvela had any doubts as to the advisability of our starting out that morning, they vanished at once.

"Nonsense!" he rasped. "It is fine weather for our purpose."

"All right, my friend," I replied. "Remember, though, that I advised against going."

"The consequences be upon my head," he rejoined. "Come, let us be on our way."

Our path was strewn with difficulties, and we progressed but slowly. At times the wind howled and whistled across the wild spaces with a sound so mournful that it sent a shudder through me. The heavens were murky, and low, dark clouds raced across the leaden sky as though fleeing from some scene of horror. Great rocks impeded our progress at every step, and their grotesque forms seemed to leer at us evilly as we passed. At length Silvela paused and mopped his brow.

"Come," I exclaimed, "you are tired and exhausted. The day is declining. Let us go back."

Silvela hesitated, and there was an instant in which I was afraid he would take me at my word. Then he straightened, and his chin set determinedly.

"No. We have come far; we will continue to the end. Lead the way."

"So let it be," I returned grimly. "We will continue to the end."

I thought a tremor passed over Silvela's sturdy form and that his face paled slightly, but he turned resolutely and followed me as I pushed forward once more.

It was late in the afternoon when we approached the end of our journey. The clouds had become less dense, and the sun, hanging low upon the horizon,

gleamed through with a sullen glare. The whole western sky bore the appearance of curdled blood.

At length I led the way around an immense rock, stopped, and pointed to the north. There, but a short distance ahead, stood the ghastly plant.

IT WAS, in appearance, like a huge pineapple about ten or twelve feet in height. From the top sprang the broad, dark green leaves, trailing downward to the ground and enclosing the plant in a kind of cage.

Inside these leaves, at the top of its bulky body, could be seen two round, fleshy plates, one above the other. Dripping constantly from these was a golden, intoxicating nectar, the fatal lure that tempts the victim to his fate. Surrounding these plates were long green tendrils or arms like those upon an octopus. A slight pressure upon one of these disks would cause the serpent-like tendrils to enfold the victim in their deadly embrace, while the sweet fluid rendered the poor wretch oblivious to danger until it was too late.

Silvela stood for a moment silently looking at the strange plant at which I pointed.

"It is an uncanny sight," he muttered, and a shiver ran over his body.

"Uncanny it is, indeed," I replied. "I, for one, have no desire to make a closer acquaintance."

"You were always ready to show the white feather," he derided scornfully.

I did not openly resent this; I could bear insult for a little while longer.

"Silvela," I said, "Let us leave this dreadful plant alone. I implore you to return with me now. You have seen this horrid thing, why should you care to test the legendary power of the fluid which it distills?"

"Because I love," he replied in a dreamy voice, "and I wish to be loved beyond all men. If it be, indeed, the fountain of youth, what danger can deter me from sipping its miraculous juice?"

"Then I will say no more. Drink, then, of the fabled wonders of this tree of destiny, and may all the joy and all the happiness to which your life entitles you, come to you as you drink the nectar that drips in golden drops from its heart."

Silvela darted a quick look at me from his dark eyes, as though half suspecting a hidden meaning in my words. Then he stepped quickly toward the ominous plant.

"Careful!" I cautioned, "Do not touch the long, green tendrils. There is

where the danger lies, for they might tear your flesh."

Silvela stood for an instant close beside the trailing arms, his eyes glowing with a half insane light. His face was flushed with the passionate fire that surged through his veins. To his susceptible mind I know that it was the crowning adventure of his life. I could tell that his heart was pounding, from the throbbing arteries of his throat. His lips were moving, and I strained my ears to catch the sound.

"For Mercedes!" he murmured, and stepped between the hanging tendrils.

Another moment's pause, and he bent down to the fleshy plates in the heart of the plant and drank long and deeply of the golden juice. Dreamily he closed his eyes, and, leaning forward, I could faintly catch some of the broken accents that came from his lips.

"Ah, love, my only love!" he murmured, "See, beloved, the angel faces—celestial voices coming near—sweet, how sweet—the unearthly light of elysian fields—ah, the heavenly perfume—the surging of the eternal sea!"

With folded arms, I stood and waited. Lost to all else save the delights of his entrancing vision, every faculty, every sense deluded into happy quiescence by the chimerical phantasm, he did not note the tremulous vibrations which ran through the whole mass of the horrible plant.

Slowly at first, and then more quickly, the long, sinewy palpi began to rise and twist in what seemed a fearful dance of death. Higher and higher rose the

dreadful arms, until they hovered over the unconscious form of their victim.

Once I pressed a little too closely, and one of the awful, twisting tendrils came in contact with my hand. I sprang back and just in time for so deadly was the grasp of the noxious arms, that the skin was stripped from my flesh.

Slowly, but surely, the octopuslike arms settled about Silvela's body. One of them dropped across his cheek. As it touched the bare flesh a tremor ran through his frame, and he suddenly opened his eyes.

It was only a moment until he was fully awake to the horror of his position. While he was reveling in dreams of paradise, the grim arms of the death plant had enclosed him in their viselike clasp, and I knew that no power upon earth could make them relax until they opened to throw forth the dry husk—the dead skin and bones—of their prey. Already they had so constricted his chest that he could breathe only in short, panting gasps. His terror-stricken eyes sought my face.

"My God, Rodriguez!" he cried in a terrible voice.

The arms gripped him closer. He gasped out a word, "*Help!*"

"Silvela Castelar," I said, with quiet bitterness, "You are beyond all human aid. I could not help you if I would. Once within the grasp of those awful arms, I would be as helpless as you. Remember at every step of this fatal journey I warned you, but at each warning you grew more determined. Three times you have brought ruin upon me; the

third time you left for me nothing in life, but I was resolved that you should not enjoy what I had lost. Silvela, tonight the debits and credits of your account with me stand balanced. Across the page of the book of life I write the words, "*Paid in full!*" "

He heard me through. Then, as he realized that hope was gone, shriek after terrible shriek burst from his frenzied lips. In his terror and despair, he struggled in a madness of desperation; but every movement caused the embrace of the ghastly arms to tighten upon his body.

With a sick heart, I turned from the awful scene and plunged forward on my homeward path. As I passed around the great rock from where we had first glimpsed the fatal tree, a last heart-breaking wail reached my ears.

"*Mercedes! Mercedes!*"

Like the last cry of a lost soul hovering over the abyss of gehenna, it shrilled in vibrating terror through the air, echoing back from the ghoulish rocks, and then died away into the silence of the approaching night.

A faintness seized me, and I shivered at the touch of the chilling breeze which sprang up as the sun sank, blood-red, below the horizon; and my heart was as cold as my shrinking flesh.

Sunshine or shadow—it is the same to me now. But in recompense for my shattered life, I shall carry with me always, the vision of Silvela's distorted form writhing in close embrace of the devil-tree's snaky arms, in my ears there will ever ring the echo of his last despairing cry of, "*Mercedes!*"