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Contents for July, 1926

Cover Design	E. M. Stevenson	
<i>Illustrating a Scene from "Through the Vortex"</i>		
Through the Vortex.....	Donald Edward Keyhoe	5
<i>Scaring Thrill-tale About One Who Was Sucked Through the Vortex Into a Murky Land of Terrible Beasts and Green-hued Men</i>		
Fettered (Part 1).....	Greye La Spina	27
<i>A Tale of Midnight Horror—Occult Evil that Drew its Chains About Two Men and Two Women in the Northern Woods</i>		
Laocoon	Bassett Morgan	49
<i>Weird Surgery—Great Sea-dragons—the Fate of Chueng Ching the Leper—and the Dread that Fell Upon Willoughby</i>		
Si Urag of the Tail.....	Oscar Cook	57
<i>Terrific Story of a Man-eating Orchid in the Wilds of Borneo—Mystery Tale of Eery Adventures in the Jungle</i>		

(Continued on Next Page)

(Continued from Preceding Page)

- With the Coming of Dawn**-----**Leslie N. Johnson** 67
*Five-minute Story—Dr. Blas Was Firmly Resolved that Never
Would he Allow Himself to be Hanged*
- The Demons of Castle Romnare**.....**Elizabeth Adt Wenzler** 69
The Very Atmosphere of Old Lorraine Breathes Through this Fascinating Story of Ghosts and Dark Magic
- The House of Horror**-----**Seabury Quinn** 77
De Grandin Goes Down Into the Gruesome Cellars Beneath that Abode of Abominations, and Shudders at What he Finds There
- The Dreamer of Atlanaat**-----**E. Hoffmann Price** 91
An Oriental of Strange Thrills—the Lord of the World, and the Fierce Sultan of Angor-lana
- Fear** -----**Cristel Hastings** 101
Verse
- Weird Story Reprints**
- No. 13. The Birthmark**-----**Nathaniel Hawthorne** 102
A Tiny Hand Clutched Georgiana's Cheek, and her Husband Tried to Tear it Out by Means of his Scientific Knowledge
- A Runaway World** -----**Clare Winger Harris** 113
Our Earth, an Infinitesimal Electron in the Vast Cosmos, Is Subjected to a Dire Chemical Experiment
- Salem** -----**Edmund Clarence Stedman** 125
Verse
- The Elixir of Life**...**Marc R. Schorer & August W. Derleth** 126
One Ingredient Was Needed to Compound the Potion Which Should Restore the Duke's Health—And Terribly Did the Duke Pay
- Ghosts** -----**Louise Garwood** 128
Verse
- The Devil-Ray (Conclusion)**-----**Joel Martin Nichols, Jr.** 129
Three-part Serial About a Purple Beam of Light Which Instantly Slew Every Living Thing that it Touched
- The Eyrie** -----**138**
A Chat With the Readers

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The Elixir of Life

By MARC R. SCHORER and AUGUST W. DERLETH

THE swinging lantern at the farther end of the narrow street approached closer and closer the house of Messer Girolani, the magician. The lackey who carried the bobbing light walked swiftly, spurred on by the mutterings of the hooded figure behind him. The night was lighted by the silver moon hanging in the sky, yet but a single moon-beam penetrated the darkness of the strait alley.

Messer Girolani sat alone in the heavily curtained room which he chose to call his *laboratorium*. The multi-colored liquids in the numerous phials about the room were in odd contrast to the black curtains on all sides. On the oaken table well toward the center of the room stood three large retorts, two or them partly filled with a colorless fluid. The only light in the room was that thrown by the fitful fire from which the hungry flames leaped upward and licked the pot suspended from a tripod above them. The weird shadows danced grotesquely on the black draperies. Messer Girolani's shadow, too, was grotesque, for his long nose and straggly beard made it look for all the world like that of Mephistopheles. Messer Girolani's gaze was fixed upon the hour-glass on the shelf above the fireplace. He watched the grains of sand trickle slowly downward, half eagerly, half apprehensively, with the air of one who expected some event of import to occur. The flickering lantern in the street caught his eye and he rose hurriedly and walked directly

to the fireplace, where he stirred the boiling fluid in the vessel.

The dull rap on the heavy door was answered by the soft padding of feet in the passageway. Messer Girolani's Nubian servant admitted the hooded figure and his lackey. There was a swish of curtains brushed aside and the man stood in the room, his hood raised.

"Messer Duca——" faltered Girolani.

"Indeed, it is I, Messer Girolani."

"You are on time, my lord."

"It is my business to make that a point, Messer."

"But, of course, my lord."

"I have no doubt that my order is filled?"

His Magnificence, the Duke di Storza, reached for the embroidered purse dangling from the belt about his doublet.

"I greatly fear, your Excellency——"

The duke waved a jeweled hand and silenced the wizard.

"Come, come, Messer Girolani, you, a magician—what is there for you to fear? Are you not allied with Satan, the root of evil?"

"But, my lord, I have not the elixir completed."

"What, knave, not completed? I am of half a mind to place your head on a pike pole. What is the reason for this?"

"It is because I lack an ingredient, Excellency."

"An ingredient? Blood of Satan! Have I not given you orders to spare

no sum in this matter? What ingredient is it you lack?"

"It is—one that gold can not procure."

"Name it! Play not with idle words."

"The life-blood of a child, Magnificence."

"The life-blood of a child?"

"Indeed, my lord."

The Duke di Sforza pondered a space. At length he glanced up.

"Summon the lackey who admitted me."

"As you say, Excellency."

Messer Girolani vanished between the curtains, but returned almost at once, followed by the silent Nubian.

"Order him to bring here for your use the first child he encounters on the streets of the city."

"You heard, Nara?"

The Nubian nodded and trod softly from the room. Once more Messer Girolani stirred the boiling liquid over the fire. He turned the hour-glass about and faced the scowling duke.

"How long, Messer Girolani, before the elixir of life will be completed?"

"Until the hour-glass drains thrice, Magnificence. The elixir is finished but for the blood of the child."

His Excellency rose and lowered the black hood. He wrapped his cloak about him and stepped into the passageway.

"When the hour-glass drains thrice, Messer Girolani, I shall return."

He was gone and Messer Girolani was alone again, watching the endless stream of sand in the hour-glass.

INCESSEANTLY trickled the sand in the glass. Twice the wizard turned it. Somewhere in the gloomy abode a door closed softly. Impatient and apprehensive, Messer Girolani trod the oaken floor with a step that reverberated through the corridors without. The dancing flames of the fire

increased the gloom by the fantastic shadows they threw about the chamber. There was no sound save the tread of the magician and the crackling fire. At length the draperies parted and the swarthy Nubian entered, a naked child stretched limply upon his great arms.

Silently he laid his burden upon the table. Messer Girolani pointed to a case at the farther end of the room, and murmured a command. The black turned and was lost in the dusk at the end of the room where the flickering light could not penetrate. He reappeared out of the shadows and the fitful flames flashed ominously on the sharp-edged blade he carried. He handed it to his master, and at the wizard's order, he grasped the unconscious boy and moved toward the fireplace. The servant held the body firmly, and with an evil calmness the magician slashed the throat of the still form. The body quivered spasmodically as the red blood spurted from the gash into the seething liquid in the pot.

MESSER GIROLANI reseated himself and stared meditatively into the flames. For a long time he sat thus, pondering. The body of the unfortunate child lay at full length on the table, covered with a heavy cloth. At length the alchemist started up and replenished the fire, and turned the hour-glass. As he turned from the fireplace he faced the Duke di Sforza, who had entered silently. The fire-light flickered horribly on his drawn features.

"Quick, Messer Girolani, the elixir!"

"A space, Messer Duca, a space."

The wizard grasped a goblet and walked quickly to the fireplace. He bent over the pot and dipped out a bit of the life-giving fluid. There was a rattle of coins as his Magnificence cast his pouchful of ducats upon the table. Messer Girolani took it

eagerly and surrendered the elixir. The duke waited a time for the elixir to cool, then raised the goblet to his lips and drained it.

"Faugh! It has a filthy taste, Messer, but if it accomplishes half of what is said about it, its taste is pardonable."

"And that it will, my lord."

"Another goblet, Messer Girolani. I must make haste, for this night has my youngest son escaped his nurse and is now at large in the byways of Milan."

"At once, Excellence."

"What is it you have beneath the cloth upon this table, Messer?"

"It is the dead child, Magnificence. Your love of life has deprived him of it."

The duke drained the goblet. He rose, pulled his cloak about him, and

started for the door, only to halt before the curtain. He walked slowly back and stood before the silent form beneath the cloth. Tentatively he stretched forth a hand, but withdrew it.

"For three hours have we searched for my son, Messer Girolani."

Again he stretched forth a hand, and again he hesitated. Messer Girolani said nothing, but his face betrayed his thoughts. Suddenly, spasmodically, the duke snatched away the coverlet, but his nerveless fingers dropped the cloth as if it were fire. He shouted hoarsely and recoiled from the accusing body. His face blanched. He gave a low moan and stared about for the magician. But Messer Girolani had gone, and he was alone with the mutilated body of his own son, whose blood was the elixir of life.
